

## ABSTRACT

### Quantifier Variance and Interpretive Charity

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The ontological literature contains several ongoing discussions which seem not to be advancing: incompatible theories of what there is are energetically defended, but these defenses do not lead to consensus. Some have suggested that the explanation for this situation is that contemporary ontology pretends to more profundity than it possesses such that in many of these debates what is at issue is not in fact some deep truth about the world, but rather which linguistic convention to use in describing it. Many ontological debates are thus shallow. Eli Hirsch is a prominent defender of this view. He propounds a thesis called Quantifier Variance according to which there are multiple superficially similar languages which are equally good at describing reality, but which differ in their semantics, especially in the meanings they assign their quantifier terms. Speakers of two of these languages might appear to disagree about ontology when in fact they are having a merely verbal dispute. Hirsch further contends that the principle of interpretive charity obliges us to interpret various ontological camps as speaking different of these “ontological languages.” To do otherwise would be uncharitable, for it would be to assign error to some party on clearly insufficient grounds. It would follow that some debates in

metaphysics are shallow, and inescapably so, for we would always need to interpret their participants at talking past one another.

I aim to show that Hirsch's contention is false, and that interpretive charity will not motivate such deflation. My first chapter lays out the interrelated theses of Hirsch's position, including quantifier variance, and holds that even though there is good reason to reject some of these theses, Hirsch still provides a potentially powerful argument that certain debates are merely verbal and shallow, the argument from interpretive charity. It is to rebutting that argument I turn in my second chapter. My third chapter turns to the principle of charity itself, contending that it is doubtful we should accept a principle which would motivate the Hirschean argument. In my final chapter, I develop a semantic hypothesis which facilitates interpretive charity to speakers without quantifier variance.

Quantifier Variance and Interpretive Charity

by

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A Dissertation

Approved by the Department of Philosophy

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2017

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Dedication	x
CHAPTER ONE: Making Deflation Precise	1
1.1 Deflation	4
1.2 Merely Verbal Disagreement	8
1.3 The Significance of Deflation	14
2.1 Quantifier Variance	16
2.2.1 The Importance of MOL to ontological deflation	18
2.2.2 Stating MOL Precisely	23
2.2.3 The Scope of Semantic Variance	27
2.2.4 Conceptual Variance	30
2.3 Expressive Equivalence	34
2.3.2 Difficulty Formulating EE	37
3.1 The Shape of Things	38
3.2 The Shortcomings of EE	39
3.3 Deflation without EE	43
CHAPTER TWO: The Argument from Interpretive Charity	47
1.1 The Argument from Interpretive Charity	50
1.2 What is the Principle of Charity?	53
1.2.2 The Defeasibility of Charity	58
1.3 Which Principle of Charity?	60

1.4 Hirsch's Version of the Argument from Interpretive Charity	61
1.4.2 Refining AFIC	69
2.1 Deficits of the AFIC	70
2.1.2 Evaluating AFIC.2	70
2.2 From Charity to Metaphysical Possibility	73
2.2.2 Reasons to be mistaken about ontology	78
2.2.3 A different way of taking AFIC	80
2.3 Radical Tools for Practical Projects	87
2.3.2 The Desiderata for Correct Interpretation	89
2.3.3. To What Ought We Be Most Charitable?	93
2.3.4. Practical Interpretation	98
2.3.4.2 Shared Language in the Philosophy Room	101
3.1 Conclusion	103
CHAPTER THREE: Whither Charity?	106
1.1 What We Talk About When We Talk About Charity	108
1.2 The Basis for the Constitutive Principle of Charity	110
1.2.2 Radical Interpretation	111
1.2.3 Theory of Meaning	115
1.3 The Content of Davidson's POC	117
2.1 But Is There Really a Constitutive Principle of Charity, Though?	120
2.2 Arguments from the Possibility of Radical Interpretation	122
2.3 Arguments from the Holism of Content	127
2.4 Argument to the Best Explanation	131

2.5 Arguments from Triangular Content Externalism	132
2.6 Empirical Arguments	135
2.7 Taking Stock	139
3.1 The Scope of Possible Error	140
3.1.2 The Scope of Logical Error	141
3.1.3 The Scope of Empirical Error	144
3.1.4 Dependence on Epistemology	147
3.2 Ontological Error and DPOC	147
3.2.2 Acceptable Inconsistency	150
3.2.3 Acceptable Disconnect	153
3.2.4 Generalizing the Result	158
4.1 Conciliatory Options	159
4.2 QV among the C theories	161
5.1 Conclusion	163
CHAPTER FOUR: Simulated Domain of Discourse	165
1.1 Observable Phenomena	168
1.2 Ontological Opacity of Ordinary Discourse	169
1.3 Ontological Malleability of Ordinary Discourse	171
2.1 Explaining the Phenomenon	173
2.1.2 Explanation One: Taking Malleability at Face Value	173
2.1.3 Explanation Two: Limited Domain of Discourse	174
2.2 Explanation Three: Simulated Domain of Discourse	178
2.2.2 Semantics of a Simulated Domain	181

2.2.3 Grouping and Predicating	184
2.2.4 Loose Speech	185
2.3 Ontological Commitment	188
2.4 An Intuitive Appeal	192
3.1 Actual QV vs. Simulated Domain	194
3.2 Theoretical Virtue	195
3.3 The Problem of Language Switching	197
4.1 Summing Up	199
Bibliography	201



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the Baylor philosophy department for all of their support, instruction, and camaraderie during my time there. Thanks also to the members of my committee for their involvement and feedback, and especially to Trent Dougherty for the interest he took in my success. Above all, thanks to Alex Pruss, my director, for guiding me through this project. His careful attention is evident throughout, for he devoted a good deal of it, and I am at many points indebted to his insight.

My family was also a great help to me in completing my work. My wife, Heidi, has been a constant encouragement, and frequently a valuable perspective on my writing as well. My father has ever reminded me of what must be done, and then provided the encouragement and confidence to help me to do it. My mother and brothers, likewise, have supported me greatly along the way. And finally my daughter Gloria, unborn as I wrote, nonetheless did much to motivate this project's conclusion.

*To my first, best, writing teacher, my mother,  
and to my father, who taught me to ponder hard questions*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Making Deflation Precise

“We can say a thing this way and we can say it that way, sometimes; if we can it may be helpful to notice it. But it is no use asking which is the logically or metaphysically right way to say it.”

—J.O. Urmson<sup>1</sup>

When gazing at certain long-standing debates in the recent ontology literature some philosophers are gripped by the conviction that these debates contest nothing at all. Faced, for example, with debates over special composition, the question of when some things compose a further thing<sup>2</sup>, they are convinced they’re seeing great effort and ingenuity being spent to establish nothing at all substantive.<sup>3</sup> One can contest whether there are any composite things until one turns blue, but one will not succeed in saying anything truly interesting or contentious about the nature of reality. The entire discourse is metaphysically shallow—imbued with the pretense of profundity but none of the substance.

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<sup>1</sup> J. O. Urmson, *Philosophical Analysis*, Writing in Book edition. (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 186.

<sup>2</sup> For example, we usually take an attached wooden handle and metal head to compose a hammer. The handle and head each are a part of some further thing, a hammer. However, if I accidentally glue that same wooden handle to my hand, we don’t usually think there is some further thing that I and the handle are both parts of: there is still just myself and the handle, now unfortunately stuck together, but they do not seem to compose a whole. The special composition question is the question of what criterion governs such cases: what condition must be met in order for some things to compose a further thing. See Peter van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Eli Hirsch describes the reaction as an “immediate intuitive feeling.” Eli Hirsch, “Ontological Arguments: Interpretive Charity and Quantifier Variance,” in *Quantifier Variance and Realism* (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 178

Let us call philosophers who take this impression to be accurate superficialists, and specifically ontological superficialists. Much ontological superficialism seems to be motivated by a conception which Matti Eklund has termed “the picture of reality as an amorphous lump.”<sup>4</sup> This is the idea that reality can be comprehended and described by us in many different ways depending on the language and set of concepts we employ. These different ways of conceiving and talking about the world carve it into the pieces which populate our ontology. But, aside our carving, it lacks corresponding divisions of its own. Thus no one of these schemes for carving up the world has a privileged position; in some deep sense each is equally correct and ontology is relative. Some debates which appear metaphysically deep are really just the result of shallow differences in which linguistic/conceptual system people employ. Such debates are thus pseudo-conflicts in which neither side is wrong, and the illusion of deep disagreement is a byproduct of differing linguistic usage.

Call this consequence of superficialism, that certain debates only appear to come to anything substantive, deflationism. Roughly, to be a deflationist about a debate is to take the position that in that debate nothing is actually at issue, either because the involved parties fail to say anything at all, or because they fail to genuinely disagree about the topic at issue. Ontological deflationism is to take such a view of ontological debates.

Though ontological deflationism follows from the ontological relativism just discussed, deflationism is a distinct thesis from ontological relativism and might be

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<sup>4</sup> Matti Eklund, “The Picture of Reality as an Amorphous Lump,” in *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*, ed. Theodore Sider, John Hawthorne, and Dean W. Zimmerman (Blackwell Pub., 2008), 382–96.

adopted for other reasons. It is coherent to grant that there are indeed ontological facts independent of human conception and still deny that our debates about ontology succeed in stating multiple metaphysically substantive theses about ontology. The arguments for ontological deflation I'll be focusing on are not directly predicated on ontological relativism, and are meant to persuade those who do not accept such relativism.

This sort of deflationary view can be traced back to Rudolf Carnap and William James. The most prominent contemporary superficialist arguments come from Hillary Putnam and Eli Hirsch. Hirsch especially has been a forceful proponent of superficialism and deflationism, championing a position which has become known as “quantifier variance”.<sup>5</sup> He takes the position that, in a sense, different groups of people actually speak different languages, languages which employ different sets of quantifiers, and thus languages in which different sentences are true. Failure to appreciate this makes what is, in fact, a merely verbal disagreement appear to be much more substantive. What is more, he contends that deflationism being true of certain ontological debates, due to the presence of quantifier variance, follows straightforwardly from interpretive charity.

I will ultimately show that this Hirschian ontological deflationism is unmotivated, and that interpretive charity has no such force. In this chapter I will lay the groundwork for my argument by carefully examining the content of, and logical relations between, Hirsch's deflationism and the quantifier variance view.

The succeeding two chapters will deal with Hirsch's key argument, the argument from interpretive charity. Hirsch maintains that if one grants certain semantic possibilities then an appeal to interpretive charity offers a decisive reason to accept his

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<sup>5</sup> It is first introduced by that title in Eli Hirsch, “Quantifier Variance and Realism,” in *Quantifier Variance and Realism* (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 68–95.

deflationary conclusions. I will argue that this is not so. Chapter two will deal specifically with Hirsch's primary argument and will show that this argument is, as stated, too weak to establish these conclusions. Chapter three will strengthen this critique by examining interpretive charity itself and showing that it cannot, in fact, motivate the argument for deflation, much less provide strong evidence for the sort of actual linguistic diversity Hirsch posits.

Finally, in my fourth chapter, I will present an alternative of sorts to quantifier variance: a semantic hypothesis that provides similar potential for charitable interpretation as quantifier variance, though in a very different way. The semantic hypothesis I'll develop is more plausible than Hirsch's in several regards. My contention will be that if any charitable semantics is called for then my own proposal ought to be preferred to that suggested by quantifier variance.

In sum, I will make the case that there is no road from interpretive charity to deflation, and that there are superior alternatives to supposing linguistic variation along the lines of quantifier variance.

### *1.1 Deflation*

In this chapter I want to clarify two notions central to contemporary metaontology and to my overall project: deflationism and quantifier variance. Though they are related, each is a distinct philosophical position which needs to be examined and carefully articulated. I'll also seek to lay out the logical connections between them. I'll conclude that some parts of Hirsch's thesis are more tenable than others, and this will determine my focus in subsequent chapters. It will also indicate that quantifier variance is false, but leave open that some of its constituent claims may not be.

I'll begin, in this section, with deflationism. To be a deflationist with regard to a particular philosophical debate is to regard that debate as not actually constituted by substantially differing positions. The debate is merely apparent, or shallow, in that the parties to it do not actually succeed in substantial philosophical disagreement, though they may take themselves to.<sup>6</sup> This failure may be explained in two ways: first, the debaters might fail to signify anything with their competing statements. For example, verificationists in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century held that talk of God lacked meaning altogether. Thus they were deflationists of this sort about debates concerning God's existence. Second, one might accept that disputants make meaningful statements but deny that these statements actually are at odds. Deflationism of this sort holds an apparent disagreement to be merely apparent, a verbal phenomenon. Authors like Hirsch have used the notion of a merely verbal dispute to model this sort of deflation (more on this in §1.2).

David Manley has also termed as deflationism the contention that a debate is genuine but trivially resolvable.<sup>7</sup> The sorts of deflationists I've so far discussed hold what he terms "strong deflation" while deflationists who regard a debate to be substantive but trivially resolvable hold a form of "weak deflation."<sup>8</sup> For my purposes, this

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<sup>6</sup> Some in the literature speak instead of "dismissivism." I don't take there to be any substantial difference in meaning between the two terms, but this vocabulary seems somewhat less widespread. See Karen Bennett, "Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology," in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David John Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford University Press, 2009) and Laura Cecilia Porro, "Dismissivism in Metaphysics : Debates about What There Is and Debates about What Grounds What" (Thesis, University of St Andrews, 2013), accessed October 15, 2016, <https://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/handle/10023/4108>.

<sup>7</sup> And Bennet considers this dismissivism. Bennett, "Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology."

<sup>8</sup> David Manley, "Introduction : A Guided Tour of Metametaphysics," in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David John Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford University Press, 2009).

nomenclature is not useful. It seems misleading to say that one who regards two debaters as making meaningful and genuinely contradictory statements has deflated their debate even if she thinks the debate profoundly silly. And what seems trivial to one may not be trivial to another. So this seems like it should be treated as a distinct phenomenon and labeled accordingly.

At any rate, it is deflation of the second sort I mentioned that is primarily at issue in contemporary discussions of superficialism and quantifier variance. The contention is that deflationism about certain ontological debates follows from charity, and quantifier variance provides the semantic theory which makes sense of, and allows the possibility for, this deflationism by explaining how those debates may be merely verbal.

Hirsch's primary argument (discussed at length in chapter 2) is an argument for this second sort of deflation by means of arguing that debates are easily resolved. He maintains, contra many contemporary ontologists, that it is not at all difficult to determine whether statements made according to various ontological theories are true. Charity forces us to interpret statements in terms of all as true. The upshot is that, since all sides may be easily seen to speak truth, any appearance of disagreement between them on such matters is merely illusory. What appears to be a difference of ontological theory is actually no more than a difference in linguistic usage.

Note that deflationism about one debate can coherently be combined with acceptance of others as instances of genuine disagreement. This is why I have so far offered no specifics about which debates a "deflationist" regards to be shallow: there is no hard and fast answer. One might, for instance, seek to deflate debates over special



composition but deny that the Platonism vs. nominalism debate can be so deflated.<sup>9</sup> Thus deflationism is not a specific position, but a type of position. Deflationism about X, where X is some debate or an issue over which there is debate designates a particular position.

The views often targeted for deflation in the contemporary literature are debates in ontology. Hirsch often speaks in terms of “revisionary ontology.” A revisionary ontological theory is one which holds “[m]any common sense judgments about the existence or identity of highly visible physical objects are *a priori* necessarily false.”<sup>10</sup> It is the disagreements between revisionists and ordinary folk that he primarily is interested in deflating, though his arguments are also directed at, and often illustrated by, disagreements between competing revisionist camps.

Hirsch’s favorite examples are debates about special composition, and debates between perdurantism and endurantism. But while these and other technical issues in contemporary Anglophone ontology are what the discussion about deflation has primarily centered on, there is no in-principle reason why this must be so. Deflationism, and the method proposed to establish it in a given domain, could conceivably apply to many other issues within and without contemporary ontology. Still, because it is a very common target for deflation, a sort of paradigm case, and also an ideally clear case for discussing quantifier variance, deflationism about special composition shall be my illustration of choice throughout.

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<sup>9</sup> As Eli Hirsch, in fact, does. See Eli Hirsch, “Ontology and Alternative Languages,” in *Quantifier Variance and Realism* (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 220–250.

<sup>10</sup> Eli Hirsch, “Against Revisionist Ontology,” in *Quantifier Variance and Realism* (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 101.

## *1.2 Merely Verbal Disagreement*

As mentioned above, deflationism of this sort models the debate it deflates as a merely verbal disagreement. But while merely verbal disagreement is an appealingly intuitive notion, it is surprisingly difficult to spell it out precisely.

Intuitively a disagreement is merely verbal if the parties disagree about the truth of sentences without appreciating that they agree about the underlying matters those sentences are intended to describe. The disputants “don’t really disagree,” they’re just using language differently such that this fact goes unnoticed. Such a dispute can be resolved, often quite easily, if the difference in the two parties’ understanding of the involved language is brought to their attention. It is similarly intuitive that debates characterized by this sort of mere verbalness are “shallow”, that nothing of substance is truly at issue in them.<sup>11</sup>

A paradigmatic example is provided by William James. James describes returning to camp from hunting to find a heated debate afoot. A squirrel was on the trunk of a tree with a man in pursuit. As the man would near the squirrel the squirrel would shimmy to the other side of the tree trunk. The man would follow, and so on round and

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<sup>11</sup> Such disputes are non-substantive in the sense that they do not involve disagreement about the truth values of propositions at the object level. That is all I mean by classifying them as non-substantive. Such debates may well signify a substantive disagreement at the meta level, a difference of opinion about correct linguistic usage or some such. And there may also be situations in which how the same propositions are stated is a matter of some importance. If these facts seem in tension with classifying debates as non-substantive, then my use of the classification should be viewed as somewhat stipulative. I’ll mention some of these other ways a debate might be significant later on, but my primary concern is to argue that contemporary ontological debates generally do involve actually disagreements about what is true.

round. The disputed was over whether or not the man goes “round the squirrel.”<sup>12</sup> James defused the debate with the following speech.

Which party is right [...] depends on what you practically mean by ‘going round’ the squirrel. If you mean passing from the north of him to the east, then to the south, then to the west, and then to the north of him again, obviously the man does go round him, for he occupies these successive positions. But if on the contrary you mean being first in front of him, then on the right of him, then behind him, then on his left, and finally in front again, it is quite as obvious that the man fails to go round him, for by the compensating movements the squirrel makes, he keeps his belly turned towards the man all the time, and his back turned away.<sup>13</sup>

Both parties to the debate affirmed the first description of affairs, and both denied the second. But since that constituted agreement about the matter of their debate they realized they were not disagreeing.

Hirsch glosses the involved notion thus: “an issue in ontology (or elsewhere) is ‘merely verbal’ [and so superficial] only if the following condition is satisfied: each side can plausibly interpret the other side as speaking a language in which the latter’s asserted sentences are true.”<sup>14</sup> This does not advance matters much. For one, it is only a necessary condition, not a sufficient one. For another, it is defective as a necessary condition: plausibility depends on a person’s epistemic situation.<sup>15</sup> But a dispute may be merely verbal even if its participants, in virtue of mistaken beliefs, can’t plausibly interpret their interlocutors in the correct way. So a debate could be merely verbal while

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<sup>12</sup> William James and H. S. Thayer, *Pragmatism*, ed. Fredson Bowers and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1975), 27.

<sup>13</sup> James and Thayer, *Pragmatism*, 27-8.

<sup>14</sup> Hirsch, “Ontology and Alternative Languages,” 221.

<sup>15</sup> I am here appealing to what I take to be true of both vernacular and technical notions of plausibility. See, for example, Nicholas Bunnin and Jiyuan Yu, ‘Plausibility’, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy*, 1 edition. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

failing to meet that condition: the mere verbalness of a debate does not rest on the interpretive perspicacity of its participants, it rests on the *actual* semantic properties of what is said and the *actual* opinions of its participants.<sup>16</sup>

The definition of mere verbalness Hirsch offers is somewhat better. He writes,

I [...] define a verbal dispute as follows: It is a dispute in which, given the correct view of linguistic interpretation, each party will agree that the other party speaks the truth in its own language. This can be put more briefly by saying that in a verbal dispute each party ought to agree that the other party speaks the truth in its own language.<sup>17</sup>

There is a complication here about the role of language in determining meaning. Verbal disputes generally will take place in a shared language. Many hold that the semantic meaning of sentences are dictated by the properties of the language and don't vary with the eccentricities of an individual speaker. Thus, even if a person clearly intends sentence X to mean P, the correct interpretation of X in the speaker's language could be other than P. The speaker does not have a language of her own in which to be interpreted--nor will disputants in merely verbal disputes generally.

Hirsch is aware of this, and he aims for his definition to avoid the complication by stipulating that for his purposes, "the language of side X in any dispute is the language that would belong to an imagined linguistic community typical members of which exhibit linguistic behavior that is relevantly similar to X's."<sup>18</sup> In essence, 'language' in the above definition nominates personal idiolect.

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<sup>16</sup> I take Hirsch's use of 'issue' to mean the same as my use of 'debate' so I am treating the two as interchangeable in this context.

<sup>17</sup> Hirsch, "Ontology and Alternative Languages," 228-9.

<sup>18</sup> 'Hirsch, "Ontology and Alternative Languages," 229 and Eli Hirsch, "Physical-Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense," in *Quantifier Variance and Realism* (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 146-8.

This definition seems only to apply to candid speech.<sup>19</sup> Say I hold that P and have a dispute with a person who holds that not-P. But, either as an exercise or out of dishonesty, we have an energetic dispute where each champions the other's position. I can agree that his statements, correctly interpreted, are true and vice versa. But surely this is not a merely verbal dispute. Perhaps Hirsch does not consider such altercations disputes at all. But, for clarity I'll alter the definition to be explicitly limited to candid disputes, those where the parties argue for the views they actually hold.

Another slight, technical alteration should be made at this point. Imagine a case in which an individual is systematically misspeaking. I've observed such cases: a person has temporarily become muddled, and is using one word or phrase where, ordinarily, they would use another. Let us say such a person is one party to a debate, and it is in virtue of their muddled usage that there appears to be disagreement. This seems to me a textbook example of merely verbal disagreement, but even regarding the misspeaker as using a language extrapolated from his own idiolect we still would correctly interpret him as uttering sentences with false semantic values. So, by the above definition, we ought not count the dispute as merely verbal.

This is remedied neatly by giving a definition of mere verbalness in terms of speaker meanings. Let us say that two parties having a candid dispute are having a merely verbal debate iff, given the correct view of linguistic interpretation, each party will agree that the other party's speaker meaning is true. This both removes the complication of taking an idiolect as a language and accommodates misspeaking cases.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Alex Pruss for pointing this out.

<sup>20</sup> If some worry about the notion of speaker meaning itself then Hirsch's unaltered definition may be preferable. It does not matter greatly to my argument going forward. Though, as a bonus, my altered

A more major alteration might be needed in light of another sort of case: say two people are having a dispute about aliens. Al insists that “Aliens live in our midst” while Bo emphatically denies that this is so. It turns out Al means illegal aliens and Bo means extraterrestrial organisms. But let’s say that, even though he was not talking about it, Al happens also to think that extraterrestrials live among us. Thus Al and Bo are talking past each other, but each would not agree that the other spoke truly even given a correct understanding of his meaning.<sup>21</sup>

If this is an instance of merely verbal disagreement then further changes to the definition will be required to deal with it. I am not confident, however, that what goes on in this and analogous cases really is merely verbal disagreement. It seems rather far from the paradigm. And while a broader definition that encompasses such cases isn’t hard to generate<sup>22</sup>, it seems to add complexity without contributing further clarity to the current discussion. Thus, for my purposes, I’m going to allow such cases to fall outside the definition of merely verbal dispute.

The appeal to the “correct view of linguistic interpretation” seems ambiguous. Either it can mean that we are assuming the parties to believe the truth about how the other is to be interpreted, or it could mean that we assume them to hold a true theory of how interpretation ought to be conducted. The former, but not the latter, would take care of the problem of mistaken interpretive beliefs discussed above.

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version seems to avoid some difficulties developed by McGrath concerning just what the relevant linguistic communities should look like. See §2.2 of Matthew McGrath, “Conciliatory Metaontology and the Vindication of Common Sense,” *Noûs* 42, no. 3 (September 1, 2008): 482–508.

<sup>21</sup> The example was suggested by Alex Pruss.

<sup>22</sup> Further amending the already amended definition, I think something like this would do the job: two parties to a candid dispute are having a merely verbal debate iff, given the correct view of linguistic interpretation, each party’ will agree that the other party’s speaker meanings do not contradict his own.

My guess would be that Hirsch intends the latter.<sup>23</sup> Apparently Peter Markie thinks the same (and raises an objection very like my own above).<sup>24</sup> This might work as a criterion for when we should conclude verbal disagreement is present. As an account of merely verbal disagreement it fails for reasons relating to those already sketched. For instance, since accepting the proper interpretive method is no guarantee of correct interpretive conclusions, it has the consequence that any debate may be merely verbal or not, or each by turns, depending on the interpretive conclusions of the participants. But I am operating from the assumption that some debates really are substantive, so this consequence is not acceptable.<sup>25</sup>

A more satisfactory account is obtained by going with the former options, and giving a definition in terms of what participants would do if they correctly interpreted one another.<sup>26</sup> This change doesn't, however, entirely remove the role of the evaluations of parties to the disagreement in determining whether their agreement is merely verbal. This is an interesting feature. It means, for example, that two parties could be having a merely verbal disagreement even if they truly and substantively disagree, provided they

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<sup>23</sup> One indication of this is footnote 15 of Eli Hirsch, "Language, Ontology, and Structure," in *Quantifier Variance and Realism* (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 197–219, where he makes clear that it is the correct "approach" he is assuming.

<sup>24</sup> Markie's position is mentioned without citation in footnote 6 of McGrath, "Conciliatory Metaontology and the Vindication of Common Sense."

<sup>25</sup> I take this to be commonsensical, and something which most contemporary readers will be ready to grant. In support of this one might point, as Hirsch sometimes does, to differences in behavior which accompany some disagreements. Or one might find support for it by attending to changes in one's own positions over time: I often find that I reject a thing I used to hold such that I substantively disagree with myself at an earlier time.

<sup>26</sup> One might worry that I'm somehow undermining Hirsch in altering the definition. However, I think McGrath is probably right in saying that this sort of alteration doesn't greatly matter to the dialectic in McGrath, "Conciliatory Metaontology and the Vindication of Common Sense," 484. If I define Q as that which I should think is P or as that which actually is P will make no difference in deciding whether a particular individual is Q: either way I will conclude that it is as long as my evidence supports my believing it's P.

are oblivious to the inconsistency and thus inclined to accept each other's declarations as true.

Meanwhile, they may truly be asserting the same thing and yet not be having a merely verbal disagreement because they're disinclined to so view things. Say two adherents of very non-standard logics are debating a point. Correctly interpreted, one of them means to assert  $\langle P \supset Q \rangle$ , the other that  $\langle \sim P \vee Q \rangle$ . On the logical beliefs of at least one of them these are not equivalent, and that participant won't, even on the correct interpretation, consider his interlocutor to mean something true. By the definition Hirsch has offered, then, their disagreement fails to be merely verbal. It is the participants' assessment of agreement, not actual agreement of any sort, that is the criterion for merely verbal dispute.

This is not criticism of the account. I take this odd feature to be in keeping with the commonsense notion of merely verbal disagreement. If two people disagree and yet would concede the truth of what the other was saying if they but understood it, then it seems their dispute is merely verbal. That greater reasoning ability would make them disagree even if they properly understood each other seems irrelevant. Thus I think people may have a merely verbal disagreement without actually agreeing. This oddity is relevant to the discussion in the next section.

### *1.3 The Significance of Deflation*

So to be a deflationist about debate X is to regard the parties to X as participating in a merely verbal disagreement, and so to dismiss X as, in fact, shallow. But one might wonder how strong a conclusion this really is. What sort of superficialism about X really follows from deflationism about X?



Say two parties, Al and Bo, are engaged in a dispute, X, and that I am a deflationist about X. I can conclude that their debate is merely verbal. However, I cannot conclude from this that other debates about the subject matter of X are similarly merely verbal or that the assertions which compose X are insubstantial and mere matters of language. On the definition offered in §1.2, one could have a merely verbal disagreement about anything whatever. And thus one may have a merely verbal dispute or a real dispute about the very same issues. Deflationism about X doesn't even imply that Al and Bo take the same position, or agree in any logically significant sense. It only implies that they'd take themselves to be in agreement under certain conditions.

So deflationism, in the current sense, is a weaker claim than it might at first appear to be. One might argue, as Brendan Jackson does, that Hirsch's definition of merely verbal dispute, and so of deflationism, is too weak to support his superficialist conclusions.<sup>27</sup> Jackson takes deflationism to itself be a stronger position: deflationism about X is to regard the matters disagreed about in X as insubstantial and merely linguistic. To give an account of deflationism as merely verbal dispute would thus be drawing much too strong a conclusion.<sup>28</sup>

Rather than follow Jackson in arguing that a different account is called for, I'll simply take Hirsch's merely verbal disagreement account to be a stipulation of what he means by 'deflationism'. If Hirsch somewhere equivocates on this point it is worth

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<sup>27</sup> Brendan Balcerak Jackson, "Metaphysics, Verbal Disputes and the Limits of Charity," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 86, no. 2 (March 2013): 412–434.

<sup>28</sup> I think it would be better to say that Hirsch argues for several positions, of which deflation is only one. See §2.3.

noting, but I have not noticed it.<sup>29</sup> Instead, I take him and other superficialists to be arguing for something stronger than mere deflationism. In broad outline Hirsch's argument is that the norms governing interpretation will require interpreting statements in certain domains as true. He concludes from this that the apparent debates in those domains are deflated and fruitless. But he can also draw the stronger conclusion that this deflation generalizes to potential debates in those same domains. Debates of certain sorts are just a matter of language not just because they are deflated, but because speech in these domains inevitably comes to the same thing, however it looks.<sup>30</sup>

### *2.1 Quantifier Variance*

Quantifier Variance (hereafter QV) was introduced into metaphilosophical discussion, at least under that name, by Eli Hirsch.<sup>31</sup> Hirsch derived the notion from Hillary Putnam's "conceptual relativism," attempting to isolate one aspect of that position from Putnam's perceived anti-realism which Hirsch repudiates.<sup>32</sup>

In sketch, QV posits a certain sort of diversity in possible languages and maintains that among these possible languages none is uniquely best at expressing the ontological truth about the world. More specifically, think of possible languages which differ from ours in the meanings they assign to quantifiers such that different sets of sentences involving the existential quantifier term are true in each, but do not differ in the

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<sup>29</sup> There is some inconsistency in the characterizations of merely verbal disagreement Hirsch has given in different times. What he says in Hirsch, "Physical-object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense" doesn't seem to quite line up with the more recent account I'm drawing on here.

<sup>30</sup> This argument will be the primary topic of chapter 2. I do not take it to be successful.

<sup>31</sup> Hirsch, "Quantifier Variance and Realism", 69.

<sup>32</sup> Hirsch, "Ontological Arguments: Interpretive Charity and Quantifier Variance", 187.

logical role which those terms serve so that, for instance, ‘Some X isn’t Y’ still implies that ‘Not all X are Y’ in all such languages. QV asserts that there are such possible languages, and that among our language and these possible alternatives none is uniquely good for formulating descriptions of the world.

It’s helpful to differentiate two component claims that make up QV<sup>33</sup>:

*Multiple Ontological Languages (MOL)*: there are possible languages in which the quantifier terms denote different, but relevantly similar, quantifiers to those they denote in our own language.

*Expressive Equivalence (EE)*: out of the class of these languages and our own, no language is uniquely good at describing the world, rather multiple languages have equivalent capacity to express the truth.<sup>34</sup>

In this formulation and hereafter I’ll distinguishing quantifiers themselves from quantifier terms or quantifier expressions.<sup>35</sup> Quantifier expressions are the linguistic sign like ‘everything’, ‘all’, and ‘ $\exists$ ’ while quantifiers are the entities those expressions denote or semantically contribute to statements. “All fish swim” and “Tous les poissons nagent” employ different terms, but the same quantifier.<sup>36</sup> Though Hirsch also makes this

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<sup>33</sup> Perhaps Hirsch intends there to be a third claim. To distance himself from views like postmodernism he has asserted that QV is an inherently realist stance. See Eli Hirsch, *Introduction to Quantifier Variance and Realism* (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xvi and also Hirsch, “Ontological Arguments: Interpretive Charity and Quantifier Variance”, 189. But his explicit accounts of the content of QV give no hint as to why this would be. That antirealists whose positions otherwise seem to entail QV can’t hold it seems like a matter of arbitrary brute assertion. Thus it appears better not to tack realism on to the position and instead to simply point out, as Hirsch more standardly does, that QV lacks any antirealist implications, for instance in Hirsch, “Quantifier Variance and Realism”.

<sup>34</sup> Though Hirsch does differentiate implications of QV along these lines, as in Hirsch, introduction, xiv, the names given to these theses are my own.

<sup>35</sup> Here I follow Stanley Peters and Dag Westerståhl, *Quantifiers in Language and Logic* (Clarendon Press, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Or, at least, so the ordinary view holds. If QV is true there might be some reason to doubt that it is actually so.

distinction, he is apt not to signal it verbally, referring to “quantifiers” when he means only quantifier terms. This can lead to confusion.

In this section I will explore and clarify QV by examining these two theses, MOL and EE, in turn. I’ll begin by looking at how MOL relates to Hirsch’s deflationary project (§2.2.1). I’ll then turn to Hirsch’s statements on MOL and try to more precisely formulate the thesis (§2.2.2). The next two sections will deal with implications of MOL: I’ll show that it implies a more extensive semantic difference between languages than might first appear (§2.2.3), but that it needn’t be viewed as implying conceptual variance (§2.2.4).

### *2.2.1 The Importance of MOL to Ontological Deflation*

The reason MOL is introduced into Hirsch’s meta-ontology is directly related to his deflationism. Recall that he considers a dispute to be deflated if the apparent disagreement of the disputants turns out to be merely verbal. In order to accept such deflation, though, it will have to be possible to explain where a linguistic disconnect between the disputants could cause their apparent disagreement. And providing such an explanation is the typical way of showing that a debate is merely verbal.

Take a commonplace example. Imagine Al and Bo disagree about the truth of the sentence, “Habanero peppers are fruit.” Al affirms this sentence. Bo repudiates it. They argue hotly about the topic for a few minutes until Cy comes along and points out that Al defines a fruit as “the seed bearing body of a plant” while Bo takes the word to denote “a predominantly sweet, edible portion of vegetable matter”. As soon as this is pointed out the disagreement vanishes. Bo knows enough about peppers to realize that they most definitely are seed bearing bodies, and Al is aware that habaneros aren’t predominantly

sweet. Cy's explanation of their differing linguistic usage has revealed their underlying agreement, and thus shown up their squabble as merely verbal.

Hirsch needs a similar account of how the ontological debates he seeks to deflate could be merely verbal, that is, an account of the differing usage between the parties which produces the semblance of conflict. (If no explanation is possible it would constitute decisive evidence that he is incorrect, as he freely concedes.)

But in the ontological cases the task is more difficult than it was for Cy. Take, again, the debate over special composition. Under what circumstances do several entities compose a single entity? The nihilist answers "never", while the mereological universalist answers "always". So one affirms and the other denies the truth of "There are composite objects." What explanation can be offered of how this disagreement is merely verbal?

In the vegetable case, the mischief lay in an ambiguous kind term, 'vegetable,' and verbal clarification easily fixes the ambiguity. Such isn't so in the case of the competing ontological camps. However the predicates are verbally clarified or reformulated, the problem will persist. For example, clarifying 'object' doesn't resolve things because the disagreement persists when 'object' is removed from the sentence altogether: the camps disagree just as strongly about "There is something composite." Another attractive target might be 'composite', but this is even less promising. The parties involved can agree on a definition for the term. And, anyhow, it too can be eliminated without eliminating the disagreement.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Here are some other sentences the two parties will disagree about, "Everything there is is simple" and "Some existing thing has at least two parts."

It turns out the disagreement will arise over highly technical sentences which employ no kind terms or adjectives at all. Say the nihilist and universalist are presented with the thought experiment of a universe containing only two simples.<sup>38</sup> The universalist will affirm, and a nihilist will deny the truth of the following sentence (in that universe).

S1. "There exists x and y and z such that none of them is identical to any of the others."

The statement is so spare that either (i) we must posit a linguistic difference of an entirely different type, say taking one of the parties to mean it literally while the other intends it as a joke, or else (ii) posit a semantic difference in an unexpected place: in the terms associated with the quantifiers, the logical connectives (negation and conjunction), or the identity predicate.

Hirsch rejects (i), leaving only (ii) as a way to explain the mere verbalness of the dispute.<sup>39</sup> So, in order for the dispute in question to be deflated it must be the case that there are similar looking possible languages which differ in the meaning of their quantifier terms, identity predicates, or so on. And it seems we can narrow the possibilities a bit further. The logical connectives can be ruled out since their definitions can easily be represented using truth tables, and these tables may be endorsed by both camps.

The identity predicate doesn't seem promising either, at least not by itself. To explain the disconnect this way would involve attributing to the nihilist either the view

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<sup>38</sup> I've borrowed this thought experiment from Manley, "Introduction: A Guided Tour of Metametaphysics."

<sup>39</sup> Hirsch, "Physical-object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and common Sense," 169. Hirsch, "Ontological Arguments: Interpretive Charity and Quantifier Variance," 183. Hirsch, "Quantifier Variance and Realism," 92.

that one of the two simples was identical to the other, or that one of them was identical to their composite. He'll deny both. And such a view of identity would be too outlandish to go unnoticed—especially by the philosophers who hold it!

We are left with the quantificational terms. These must vary substantively in meaning. That such variance is possible is precisely what MOL asserts. In arguing for deflation, Hirsch is arguing for the actuality of a situation that MOL commits him to the possibility of. Were MOL false, deflationism of the sort he envisions couldn't be true.<sup>40</sup>

Hirsch's explanation of how the above debate is merely verbal will then be something like this. The nihilist speaks a language on which it is built into the meaning of the quantifier term 'there is' that the denoted quantifier ranges over simples. Related terms like 'object' and 'exists' have similar semantic features. To say "There is a composite" or "Composite objects exist" is then an absurdity in virtue of the semantics of the language. Meanwhile the universalist speaks a language where the quantifier terms denote quantifiers ranging over composites as well as simples, and such are within the extension of 'object' and 'exists'.<sup>41</sup>

The universalist understands the nihilist properly if she thinks of him as artificially restricting the domain of his language. His utterance of 'there is an X' should

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<sup>40</sup> Though, as mentioned, Hirsch is ruling out some other hypotheses about the difference in language that might also permit deflationism. I'll say more about those in my third chapter, §4, and in my fourth chapter.

<sup>41</sup> One might wonder how whether there are any such quantifiers to denote, I.E. which range over entities in the way I've described. Hirsch seems to think that quantifiers have a domain built in, as it were, and that quantifiers are individuated in part by their domains. Thus, for instance, there would be several distinct quantifier each with the same essential function as the existential quantifier but which differ in their inherent domains.

But one need not follow Hirsch in treating domains as built into quantifiers to follow his examples like this one. One could instead imagine that nihilist and universalist uses of 'there is' include in their meaning something beyond the mere quantifier. Thus, for instance, the nihilist utterance of 'there is' means "there is a simple" (as opposed to denoting a quantifier that inherently ranges over only simples). For Hirsch's purpose it seems to come to about the same thing: the meanings need to differ in the specified way, however the semantics are cached out. This is related to the discussion in §2.2.4.

be understood to mean what she'd express by saying 'there is a simple X' (or something of the sort). The story is somewhat more complex from the nihilist perspective, but he should assign truth conditions to the universalist's utterance of 'there is an X' such that it is true when there is an entity or entities such that X (with the necessary changes being made for predicates, kind terms, and etc. to be predicated plurally). On the proper interpretation of their interlocutors, both sides will then accept that the other speaks truths, Hirsch maintains, so their debate will be deflated.<sup>42</sup>

Before moving on from this section I want to introduce one more piece of terminology. Note that while MOL holds that certain languages which differ in a certain way are possible, Hirsch's deflationary conclusion is that languages which differ in that way are actually in use, that it is, in fact, correct to interpret real groups of real speakers as using them.<sup>43</sup> That is a stronger thesis than MOL and so a stronger thesis than QV. I'll call this thesis "Actual QV."<sup>44</sup> QV could conceivably be true without it implying anything important about actual linguistic behavior. Actual QV could not.

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<sup>42</sup> Hirsch gives an example very like this though instead directed to the disagreement between endurantists and perdurantists in Hirsch, "Ontology and Alternative Languages."

<sup>43</sup> In some places, especially in earlier papers, Hirsch talks not about alternate languages but about alternate precise specifications of English allowed by its vagueness. See, for example, Eli Hirsch, "The Vagueness of Identity," in *Quantifier Variance and Realism* (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 45–67. For my purposes this doesn't seem to make much difference: in either case we're talking about how to understand the speech of an individual or group. Whether the usage we attribute is a specification of English or a different language is of no great importance. I've thus spoken in terms of different languages throughout since it seems simpler.

<sup>44</sup> On this I'm following the phrasing in Hirsch, "Quantifier Variance and Realism," 80. Although at the time he was primarily talking about extensions of a vague language rather than the differing languages of different groups. See footnote 40.



### 2.2.2 Stating MOL Precisely

So MOL is a thesis about possible linguistic variety. The deflationist seeks to argue that a debate is merely verbal. Doing so requires offering a conciliatory semantic theory, one which interprets both parties as agreeing. If MOL is true, it provides a useful option for this conciliatory semantics.

But what exactly does MOL hold? Recall that above I stated it thus.

*Multiple Ontological Languages (MOL):* there are possible languages in which the quantifier terms denote different, but relevantly similar, quantifiers to those they denote in our own language.

But this is not an ideally precise formulation. (In what ways do the meanings of quantifier terms differ between these languages? In what way does it make sense to talk about denoting “different quantifiers”?) Nor, for that matter, are better definitions forthcoming in the literature. Hirsch’s definitions are useful but a bit too quick, and other formulations tend to follow Hirsch’s fairly closely.<sup>45</sup> In this section I’ll flesh out this characterization.

In his earliest explicit treatment Hirsch quotes Putnam as saying “[T]he logical primitives themselves, and in particular the notions of object and existence, have a multitude of different uses rather than one absolute ‘meaning.’”<sup>46</sup> He then explains,

Putnam seems to be saying that the quantificational apparatus in our language and thought—such expressions as “thing,” “object,” “something,” “(there) exists”—has a certain variability or plasticity. There is no necessity to use these expressions in one way rather than various other ways, for the world can be

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<sup>45</sup> See, for example Manley, “Introduction: A Guided Tour of Metametaphysics,” 18 and Bob Hale and Crispin Wright, “The Metaontology of Abstraction,” in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David John Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford University Press, 2009), 181-2.

<sup>46</sup> Hilary Putnam, “Truth and Convention: On Davidson’s Refutation of Conceptual Relativism,” *Dialectica* 41, no. 1-2 (June 1, 1987): 71.

correctly described using a variety of concepts of “the existence of something.” [...] The doctrine of quantifier variance may be philosophically unsettling.<sup>47</sup>

In “Ontology and Alternative Languages” he states the same idea more succinctly.

The key [...] is what I have called elsewhere “quantifier variance”: this refers to the possibility that quantifier-like expressions in different languages may have different semantic functions; they may contribute differently to the character of sentences.<sup>48</sup>

(Initially, as the above remarks illustrate, Hirsch’s usage made it seem that QV only included the thesis I am calling MOL. Thus elucidation of one works as elucidation of the other for the time being.<sup>49</sup>) So the claim of MOL is that possible languages can differ specifically in the meanings they assign to quantifier terms, as well as to the entire complex of related expressions like ‘refers’ and ‘object’ which together Hirsch calls the “referential apparatus”.<sup>50</sup> (Hirsch seems to follow the Quineans like van Inwagen in taking the notion of existence to be adequately given by the meaning of the existential quantifier.<sup>51</sup>)

But it is not just any difference in the meaning of quantifier terms that is envisaged.

[One might mistakenly say] “If all you’re saying is that expressions like ‘there exists (something)’ can have different meaning in different languages, that’s completely trivial. The expression might be used to mean ‘Hello’, for instance.” The non-trivial question, however, is whether the expression can have different

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<sup>47</sup> Hirsch, “Quantifier Variance and Realism,” 68-9.

<sup>48</sup> Hirsch, “Ontology and Alternative Languages,” 239.

<sup>49</sup> It is in a still later formulation that Hirsch adds what I’ve titled EE as an explicit element of QV, though he’s defended EE throughout.

<sup>50</sup> Hirsch, “Objectivity Without Objects,” 41.

<sup>51</sup> Peter van Inwagen, “Being, Existence, and Ontological Commitment,” in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David John Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford University Press, 2009).

meanings in different languages while still retaining the general formal role of a quantifier expression, that is, roughly put, the formal role described in quantificational logic.<sup>52</sup>

MOL asserts that possible languages may differ in the meanings of their quantifier terms while yet having the same “formal meaning” in the sense just given.<sup>53</sup> So it asserts that there are languages which differ in the meaning of quantifier terms like “some are” and “all are” but where the logical relations between quantified sentences remain invariant from our own: ‘Some X isn’t Y’ still implies that ‘Not all X are Y’; and existential introduction still works, for example. This is what was meant by saying that quantifier terms might express different quantifiers: the quantifier terms in a possible language differ in meaning from those in our own while being such that the same deductive relations between sentences still hold.

Some critics have contended that whether the meaning expressed by such a term is a quantifier is a substantive question. Thus while there might be languages like those Hirsch describes, the quantifier terms in those languages will fail to express quantifiers.<sup>54</sup> As Hale and Wright put it, “The quantifier-variantist owes us two things: he needs to explain why the allegedly different quantifiers which can all be expressed by the words ‘there are’ are all *quantifiers*; and he needs also to tell us how they *differ* in meaning.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Hirsch, “Ontological Arguments: Interpretive Charity and Quantifier Variance,” 188.

<sup>53</sup> Hirsch, “Ontological Arguments: Interpretive Charity and Quantifier Variance,” 188.

<sup>54</sup> To see this case made, see Theodore Sider, *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*, 1st edition. (Oxford: New York: Clarendon Press, 2002), xx, Hale and Wright, “The Metaontology of Abstraction,” 182-4, and Alexander Pruss, “Quantifiers, Quasi-Quantifiers and Ordinary Language” (presented at the California Metaphysics Conference, University of Southern California, January 2014).

<sup>55</sup> Hale and Wright, “The Metaontology of Abstraction,” 182.

Whatever the merits of this point about quantifiers, Hirsch means for the first question to be entirely beside his point, and doesn't need an answer for his purposes. He writes:

A second misunderstanding is to suppose that quantifier variantists must be committed to viewing the quantifier expressions in the different ontological languages as being similar in meaning in some deep and controversial way; otherwise, why even call them 'quantifier expressions'? [...] I need to emphasize that I attach no importance to claiming any similarity beyond this formal-syntactic similarity.<sup>56</sup>

Is this similarity sufficient for quantifier-hood? No matter, if the quantifier terms in the languages MOL postulates don't express quantifiers then at least they express something "quantifier-like."<sup>57</sup> That is all Hirsch intends to claim.

More broadly, Hirsch isn't concerned with specifying the semantic contribution of individual terms since he's primarily interested in entire alternative languages. His claim is that languages with vocabulary and syntax sufficiently alike to, hypothetically, make them difficult to distinguish in contexts of use can nevertheless be such that different existential sentences are true in each. He calls languages related in this way alternate "ontological language."<sup>58</sup> He then offers as a characterization of QV, "there is no uniquely best ontological language with which to describe the world."<sup>59</sup> All he needs be

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<sup>56</sup> Hirsch, introduction, xiv.

<sup>57</sup> Eli Hirsch, "Comments on Theodore Sider's Four Dimensionalism," in *Quantifier Variance and Realism* (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 125.

<sup>58</sup> Hirsch, introduction, xii. Here and elsewhere Hirsch introduces what he means by "ontological language" by ostension, usually after developing an example like the one I gave at the end of §2.2.1 of the universalist and nihilist languages. I've generalized from his usage.

<sup>59</sup> Hirsch, introduction, xii.

committed to with regard to individual words is that their semantic contributions are the sort needed to make such a language possible.<sup>60</sup>

The following thus seems like a more adequate statement of MOL.

*Multiple Ontological Languages (MOL)*: (i) there are possible languages which would look very like our own in use and in which quantificational terms signify entities which have the same formal role as quantifiers (ii) but in which, due to differing meanings of words especially quantifier terms, different sentences about what ‘there is’ or what ‘exists’ are true.

I take this to be a more accurate statement of the thesis than the one I began with.

### *2.2.3 The Scope of Semantic Variance*

It is worth noting that the alternative ontological languages MOL posits would not differ solely in the meanings of their quantifier terms or other quantificational apparatus. The semantic differences would be much more pervasive. Hirsch writes, “The idea of ‘quantifier variance’ is not meant to imply that in different ontological languages only the meanings of quantifier expressions vary; obviously the truth conditions of singular sentences must vary from one ontological language to another.”<sup>61</sup>

To explore the scope of this semantic variation imagine alternative ontological languages E and L where E is English, or some specification thereof<sup>62</sup>, and L is a language which differs in the meaning it assigns the existential quantifier expressions in the way posited by MOL. What other semantic differences must exist between E and L?

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<sup>60</sup> Hirsch grants that the alternate ontological languages must have compositional semantics. See Hirsch, “Physical-object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense,” 158-9. Presumably this is because they must be possible languages for humans to learn and use, not just possible in the abstract.

<sup>61</sup> Hirsch, introduction, xii.

<sup>62</sup> I simply mean here to rule out and ignore the possibility that English itself is vague about the meaning of its quantificational vocabulary.

Many quantifiers are interdefinable, for instance  $\exists$  and  $\forall$ . If the formal roles of quantifier expressions are to remain the same in the two languages, as *ex hypothesi* they are, then this will mean E and L differ in the meanings they assign not just to existential quantifier expressions, but in the meanings of all expressions such that these interdefinability relationships could be maintained. In addition to universal quantifier expressions, this will also encompass numerical expressions.<sup>63</sup> So E and L differ in the meaning of their mathematical vocabulary too.

The semantic differences extends to all predicates as well. It follows from our hypothesis that at least one existential sentence has a different truth value in E than in L. Let's say, for now, that means the following.

(ED): In one of the languages, but not the other, there is a true sentence  
 'Something is P but nothing else is', for some appropriately stipulated P.

The speaker of that language can name that which, by their lights, falls in the extension of P, so that it's true to say in their language 'N is P'.<sup>64</sup> Now think of the predicates in the language as broken into pairs, where each pair is made up of the predicate *Q* and the predicate *non-Q*. For every such pair of predicates one will produce a true atomic sentence when applied to N. None of these sentences can be true in the other language because N, not being in the domain of the language at all, also is not in the extension of any of its predicates. It seems that predicates which differ in extension cannot be

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<sup>63</sup> Because, for example "There are two cows" is entailed by "There's a cow, and there's another cow." Formally  $\text{Two}(x)P(x)$  is equivalent to  $\exists x \exists y [P(x) \ \& \ P(y) \ \& \ x \neq y]$

<sup>64</sup> Wouldn't it have been much easier and briefer to say "In one language N is a referring term and in the other it is not"? Certainly, but it also commits us to something problematic. Whether a term refers depends on whether it designates an item that exists. Thus to say that N refers is to say that N designates an item that exists. But I don't want to be committed to that: what exists isn't language dependent, and N may not exist. What *is* language dependent is which existential sentences are assigned true meanings. Repurposing the old chestnut a bit, how many referring terms does a dog have if you call its tale a referring term?

identical in meaning. Thus the semantics of one predicate in every one-place predicate pair differs between the languages. And the predicates in each of these pairs are trivially interdefinable: to be red is to fail to be non-red, and so on. Thus if one member of each pair differs both members differ. Thus every one-place predicate in E is assigned a different meaning in L.

This result can easily be generalized to relations by constructing statements in which N is every relatum of a relation. So E assigns a different meaning to every single predicate than does L. Especially worth noting is that this includes the identity predicate.

I'd like to generalize what I've shown about E and L to all alternative ontological languages. But one thing stands in my way: (ED) needn't be true for all pairs of ontological languages. It might, for instance, be the case that the existential sentences which two ontological languages assign different truth values to always deal with matched pairs of entities such that we can't easily pick one out and slap a name on it. To quote Max Black, "You talk as if naming an object and then thinking about it were the easiest thing in the world. But it isn't so easy."<sup>65</sup>

This doesn't prevent my point from generalizing though, it just makes my argument a bit more complex. Instead of the simple atomic sentences I used above, I'd have to make a case in terms of a more complex sort of sentence like 'The Ns are P' where N is some appropriate count noun. Similar variations on the above argument can be formulated to deal with other unusual apparent disagreements. The conclusion about predicates will be the same. So what can be shown about E and L can be generalized to alternate ontological languages in general.

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<sup>65</sup> Max Black, "The Identity of Indiscernibles," *Mind* 61, no. 242 (1952): 157.

So if two languages vary in the meanings of their quantified expressions per MOL then there must be much more extensive semantic variation between them as well. Such languages would, in fact, differ radically from one another in, at least, the semantics of their quantificational and mathematical vocabulary and their predicates. In light of this perhaps the name “quantifier variance” is somewhat misleading since the variance is all-encompassing.

The scope of this semantic difference will be important in later chapters. But, also, the failure to appreciate this aspect of the thesis seems to have led to several critiques of QV that don’t really connect. For example, Hale and Wright argue that languages which differ in the way MOL proposes are incoherent because existential claims in one would be derivable from existential claims in the other.<sup>66</sup> Say  $\exists^1$  and  $\exists^2$  are the existential quantifier terms in two ontological languages. Then, they argue,  $\exists^1 xA(x)$  would entail  $A(t)$  by existential instantiation, and  $\exists^2 xA(x)$  by existential introduction. In contradiction to the starting assumption, the same ontological sentences must be true in both languages, they conclude. But they err in not specifying which language the atomic sentence  $A(t)$  belongs to. Since ‘A’ will differ in meaning between the languages at least one of the two entailments is false.<sup>67</sup>

#### 2.2.4. Conceptual Variance

Hirsch doesn’t draw any clear distinction between QV and conceptual variance. He moves back and forth between the thesis about possible linguistic variation I’ve called

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<sup>66</sup> Hale and Wright, “The Metaontology of Abstraction,” 183-4.

<sup>67</sup> Or, at least, the sentence cannot be assumed to be true. It could *happen* to be true in virtue of the meaning of a specific predicate A, but that isn’t of much use to them.



MOL and claims about variation in possible conceptual schemes. I've given some indication of this already, in the quote at the beginning of §2.2.2 for instance. Elsewhere he writes, "It therefore seems natural to follow Putnam in treating relevant variations in the meaning of such expressions as 'there exists something' as yielding an altered quantificational apparatus and an altered concept of the existence of something."<sup>68</sup> Or, again, "If the quantifier-like expressions in different languages can be governed by different semantic rules, then this implies that the speakers of these languages have in some sense different concepts of *existence*."<sup>69</sup>

On the basis of the close implication relationship he sees between the two, Hirsch sometimes speaks as if quantifier variance and conceptual variance are interchangeable theses. In this I think he is mistaken. I suspect the implication relationship doesn't hold for several reasons. For one, what would it mean to have a different concept of existence? What would make it *the*, or even *a*, concept of *existence*? This seems closely related to the problem of what would make the alternate meaning of a quantifier term be a quantifier. It is not hard to imagine saying 'existence' to express some other notion; it is very hard to wrap my mind around that other notion also being a concept of existence.

But even if we simply posit some conceptual variance rather than variance in the concepts of existence, the implication still doesn't seem to hold. I think I can imagine languages which differ in the manner posited by MOL and yet whose speakers do not employ different concepts. It seems to me that there are various ways for words to

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<sup>68</sup> Hirsch, "Quantifier Variance and Realism," 71.

<sup>69</sup> Hirsch, "Comments on Theodore Sider's *Four Dimensionalism*," 131. Italics are retained from original.

signify the same concepts. This leaves room for two languages to differ substantially in their semantics but not at all in the concepts of their speakers. Here is an example:

Take two languages E and L, again letting E work more-or-less like actual English. L differs from E in that it has no singular terms. A referring term picks out a certain object in the world. But the terms of L which fill the same syntactic role as the referring terms in E do not, they instead pick out a pair of objects in the world. Other sorts of terms are adjusted accordingly. Thus a sentence of the form 'N is P' would express the proposition  $P_1(N)$  in E, but would express  $P_1(N_1) \ \& \ P_2(N_2)$  in L. 'Something is P' would express  $\exists x P_1(x)$  in E, but in L would mean  $\exists x \exists y P_1(x) \ \& \ P_2(y)$ . And so on.<sup>70</sup>

L is plausibly the sort of language posited by MOL. E and L have a similar syntax. The formal roles of quantifier terms can be preserved from E to L, and truth values of some existential sentences will differ. So if L isn't the sort of language MOL posits it could only be because in use the difference between it and E would be too stark. That would strengthen, rather than undermining, my point: though the differences between E and L are great and include the semantics of quantifier terms, it is not clear that their speakers need differ at all in their concepts. Sentences in the two languages will express propositions with the same constituents, including the same quantificational

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<sup>70</sup> This example seems perfectly possible to me. Matti Eklund, however, suggests a principle that would make it impossible: "for any atomic sentence of the form 'F(t)' of any language, that sentence is true only if the object referred to by 't' is in the extension of the predicate 'F' " (Eklund, "The Picture of Reality as an Amorphous Lump," 388) This would not be true of L. Does this mean sentences of L cannot be true?

I suspect that Eklund had nothing like my example in mind, and that my example actually serves as a counterexample to his principle. Eklund indicates that he derives the principle from Tarski's theory of truth. The problem with this is that a Tarskian truth theory is an account of what it is for sentences to be true *in a particular language*. A Tarskian theory can't tell us what truth is in-general. On this point see Donald Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," *The Journal of Philosophy* 87, no. 6 (1990): 279–328. One thus can't generalize features of the Tarskian truth theory of our own language to all true sentences in all languages. Presumably the Tarskian theory of truth in L would be rather different, and would allow for true atomic sentences in which predicates were attached to non-referring terms.

constituents. Though I want to avoid committing myself to concepts as propositional constituents, this seems like a very good reason to think that no conceptual difference for the speaker of L is implied.

So it seems that MOL can be true without any conceptual variance. And the only reason I can see to identify conceptual variance with QV is that MOL somehow entails it. I've now presented a good reason to think that it does not. Thus I see no reason to identify the QV thesis with conceptual variance, and suspect that Hirsch has been imprecise in so doing. At any rate, if the QV thesis can be stated without incurring the additional commitment of conceptual variance, all the better for it. I've argued here that my statement of MOL does just that.

It might turn out to be the case that the semantics of certain of the languages Hirsch or other deflationist want to postulate can only be explained in terms of conceptual variance. Or, somewhat weaker, it could be that conceptual variance provides the best theory of the semantics of some such language. But that this is so would need to be shown in a specific case. I see no good reason to saddle the QV thesis, in general, with a commitment to conceptual variance.

I am not confident this suggestion would be congenial to Hirsch. It may be that, following Putnam, he views conceptual variance as a key part of what he's doing. I am merely suggesting that the linguistic variance he posits does not suppose it, and that he needn't suppose it to make the case for deflation which will be the subject of my next chapter.

### 2.3 Expressive Equivalence

Recall above that I said one of Hirsch's formulations of QV was "there is no uniquely best ontological language with which to describe the world."<sup>71</sup> MOL is the thesis that there are multiple ontological languages for use in describing. But in addition it is being claimed that none of these languages is best, where best is intended to denote "metaphysical merit." Hirsch suggests that QV is a "corollary of Urmson's dictum" that is J.O. Urmson's contention that,

[I]f two sentences are equivalent to each other, then while the use of one rather than the other may be useful for some philosophical purposes, it is not the case that one will be nearer to reality than the other. [...] We can say a thing this way and we can say it that way, sometimes; if we can it may be helpful to notice it. But it is no use asking which is the logically or metaphysically right way to say it.<sup>72</sup>

The idea is that multiple ontological languages are equivalent in just this regard: there are real differences between them, but in their ability to state the ontological truth they are on a par. Each is able to state the relevant truths. None is able to do so in a way that is metaphysically or logically more correct. Thus QV is expressed by MOL and EE together:

*Multiple Ontological Languages (MOL)*: (i) there are possible languages which would look very like our own in use and in which quantificational terms signify entities which have the same formal role as quantifiers (ii) but in which, due to differing meanings of words especially quantifier terms, different sentences about what 'there is' or what 'exists' are true.

*Expressive Equivalence (EE)*: out of the class of these languages and our own, no language is uniquely good at describing the world, rather multiple languages have equivalent capacity to express the truth.

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<sup>71</sup> Hirsch, introduction, xii.

<sup>72</sup> Urmson, *Philosophical Analysis*, 186.

Why assert EE; what work is it doing? There seem to be at least two answers. First, recall that Hirsch's argument for ontological deflationism rests on interpretive charity. Two parties appear to disagree about what exists. MOL provides for a hypothesis on which their disagreement is merely verbal (as discussed in §2.2.1). But what should convince us that this hypothesis actually represents the correct linguistic understanding of the participants? It is that this interpretation of them is uniquely good at satisfying the requirements of interpretive charity: by interpreting them as speaking alternate ontological languages in which their ontological assertions are true we can ascribe to them the least error and irrationality.

However, Matthew McGrath has contended that a key component of interpretive charity is "charity to expressibility", that is, roughly, that people much like oneself will not have languages which prevent them from expressing commonplace facts.<sup>73</sup> Thus, if a language is "expressively deficient" it will be uncharitable to attribute it to speakers. And, McGrath argues, many of the languages Hirsch would have one use to interpret speakers are expressively deficient. This weighs against Hirsch's claim that ascribing such languages to people is maximally charitable. Thus, McGrath maintains, Hirsch cannot claim that his favored interpretation clearly surpasses in charity the more commonplace one which interprets speakers a common language.

EE, then, serves as a way of answering McGrath's objection. If the various languages which serve as hypotheses about how to interpret speakers are expressively on a par then charity to expressibility does not tell against any of them. Hirsch's argument from charity may proceed unobstructed.

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<sup>73</sup> McGrath, "Conciliatory Metaontology and the Vindication of Common Sense," 492.

There is also a reason for the superficialist to defend EE apart from particular arguments for deflation. Hirsch's aim in arguing for ontological deflationism is to show that certain ontological debates are fruitless and getting at nothing of substance about the world. Hirsch wants revisionist ontologists to acknowledge this fact, take their Wittgensteinian medicine, and go and sin no more.<sup>74</sup> Now say he demonstrates deflationism to be true of some ontological debate. The parties to the debate must grant that something is off about their discourse, that in fact the semblance of disagreement only resulted from differences in linguistic usage, and yet they may insist that there is still a substantive debate in the vicinity. These unrepentant revisionists might reframe the debate at the meta-level: instead of which statement is true at the object level (which turns out to depend on which language you are speaking) the real issue is which language one ought to speak. Perhaps some language more closely mirrors the structure of reality than others, or simply is far less expressively deficient. What, they might debate, is it correct to say about ontology in the language that is metaphysically superior? And a number of ontologists, prominently Theodore Sider, do take this line.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> From Hirsch, "Against Revisionist Ontology," 97: "These attacks on common sense [from contemporary ontologists] amaze me in part because I think they are so badly misguided, but also because when I entered the profession of philosophy during the heyday of the so-called ordinary language movement, I think almost no one would have predicted that before the end of the millennium—even given some predictable end-of-millennium madness—the existence of tables would again be called into question. I think most of us assumed back then that philosophers like Moore, P.F. Strawson, Austin, and Wittgenstein had once and for all established the undeniability of our most basic common sense beliefs—or, if not 'once and for all,' at least for more than ten years. We were, as it now appears, overly optimistic."

<sup>75</sup> For Sider's view see Theodore Sider, "Ontological Realism," in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David John Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford University Press, 2009), 384–423, and Theodore Sider, *Writing the Book of the World*, Reprint edition. (Oxford; Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). For others making similar moves see McGrath, "Conciliatory Metaontology and the Vindication of Common Sense," and Cian Dorr, "What We Disagree About When We Disagree About Ontology," in *Fictionalism in Metaphysics*, ed. Mark Eli Kalderon (Oxford University Press, 2005), 234–86.

EE is meant to block this sort of position. It leaves open various ways in which one ontological language might be superior to the others, but is meant to foreclose any metaphysically relevant ones. Some ontological languages are in essence notational variants of one another, different systems for saying the same things.

### *2.3.2 Difficulty Formulating EE*

Note that EE, as stated, is not general enough for its intended purpose. A minimal condition that would make EE true is that there are two ontological languages tied for metaphysical preeminence. Call these two A and B. This condition is insufficient to preclude the relevant ontological languages from having a clear hierarchy.

Let's say that, per MOL, that there are languages such that in one the assertions of compositional nihilist are true and in the other the mereological universalist's assertions are true. EE does not imply that the compositional nihilist language and the mereological universalist language are on a metaphysical par, for it may be that they are not A and B. Given EE one may still be metaphysically preferable to the other. Similarly, ordinary English might turn out to be metaphysically inferior to all revisionist languages.<sup>76</sup>

It is also possible the statements of, say, mereological universalism are true in both A and B, and thus that mereological universalism is a thesis we ought to endorse in all the best ontological languages. This is a way of pointing out that EE doesn't specify the range of ontological languages that will be tied for best. A and B may be almost entirely similar, similar enough that they don't differ in their assignment of truth values to almost all sentences. So even if EE were true, it could still be fruitful to ask what the

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<sup>76</sup> By "revisionist languages" I simply mean the languages I've introduced that render those revisionist positions true. I do not grant that revisionist ontologists *actually* are speaking different languages.

statement of the ontological truth is in the best ontological languages. For the vast majority of statements there could be a determinate answer.

In short, EE is too narrow. It needs to state that the relevant languages, the languages that would render various ontological positions taken in contemporary debates true, are on a metaphysical par. I can think of no easy way to achieve this generality. To say that all metaphysical languages are equally good is almost certainly too broad. The claim needs to be that specific languages are among the “multiple languages” mentioned in EE, and it seems that which of them are needs to be argued for on a case-by-case basis. Just note that what Hirsch needs EE to claim, and what he argues for, is a stronger claim than EE as stated.

### *3.1 The Shape of Things*

So far I’ve explored two key elements of the superficialist philosophy of Eli Hirsch, deflationism and Quantifier Variance (QV), the latter being divisible into two constituent commitments, Multiple Ontological Languages (MOL) and Expressive Equivalence (EE). In this section I will lay out what the significance of those elements will be to my project going forward.

For a start I do not think MOL and EE are equally likely principles. MOL seems plausible. I see no compelling reason to reject it; and the sorts of languages it posits seem imaginable. Also MOL has not really been attacked in the literature.<sup>77</sup> In light of this, I’ll treat MOL as true going forward. On the other hand EE seems very dubious. I’ll survey some problems with EE which appear decisive in §3.2.

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<sup>77</sup> I am unaware of any paper explicitly arguing for the denial of MOL as, apparently, is Hirsch. See Hirsch, introduction, xv.



If EE is false then QV is false for EE is one of its constituents. However, in §3.3, I'll contend that this doesn't really undermine Hirsch's deflationism and argument for Actual QV. I'll lay out how this will be dealt with in my remaining chapters.

### *3.2 The Shortcomings of EE*

In general, Hirsch's rational for EE is as follows.

[T]here are many possible selection functions, many possible perspectives on 'the existence of objects,' which all are adequate for truthfully describing the same fact, the same 'way the world is.' None of these schemas is, therefore, metaphysically privileged; none of them qualifies as somehow presenting the uniquely 'absolute truth,' the 'strict and philosophical truth.'<sup>78</sup>

Hirsch holds that some alternate ontological languages are such that neither can describe any fact the other cannot, and this is sufficient to establish that these languages are metaphysically on a par.

Two sorts of attacks on EE may be distinguished in the literature: challenges to the sufficiency of this condition, and doubt as to whether this condition is actually fulfilled. The first is developed at length in the recent work of Theodore Sider. He contends that some languages are better than others in virtue of having a structure which better matches the metaphysical structure of the world. To cite an oft used analogy, some languages "cut at reality's joints" more successfully than do others. Thus, contrary to Urmson's dictum quoted above, sentences which are equivalent in the sense of stating the same truth may yet be better or worse metaphysically in virtue of structure.

Hirsch denies that such a notion of structure makes any sense. The world doesn't actually contain, he insists, facts which are structured in the way our declarations about

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<sup>78</sup> Eli Hirsch, "Sosa's Existential Relativism," in *Quantifier Variance and Realism* (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 142-43.

the world are. And he does not see why we should be concerned about speaking a language which has the right structure in this sense.<sup>79</sup>

Whether Sider is correct or not, there are compelling reasons to think EE false that do not appeal to structure and instead operate on Hirsch's own terms. Both Matti Eklund and John Hawthorne have made strong cases to this effect.

Eklund asks just what the ability to describe the same facts actually comes to.<sup>80</sup> It cannot be synonymy of terms for while that might be sufficient for the conclusion it doesn't hold between the languages. Due to the semantic differences developed in §2.2.3 the ontological languages will not consistently provide synonymous terms. For similar reasons, it also cannot be ability to express the same propositions. It could be that two ontological languages have this ability, but it will not be a general feature of the class.

Take as an example the universalist and compositional nihilist languages I characterized in §2.2.1. In the hypothetical language of the nihilist 'there is an X' means <there is a simple X> and so on. Meanwhile the universalist's language has no such restriction. So when the universalist says 'there is an X' presumably the proposition she expresses does not involve simplicity.<sup>81</sup> The nihilist language lacks the ability to express any such proposition. It might be able to formulate a much more complex one that would be true in the same situations, but simplicity would show up in its meaning. Something similar can be seen to be true between the various ontological languages Hirsch wants to posit.

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<sup>79</sup> Hirsch, "Language, Ontology, And Structure," 217-18.

<sup>80</sup> Eklund, "The Picture of Reality as an Amorphous Lump."

<sup>81</sup> This presumption is defeasible. Alex Pruss points out that the proposition she expresses could be <There is a simple X or there are simples arranged X-wise>. This does not seem to significantly alter the case for Eklund's purposes though: now he can make essentially the same argument vis-à-vis the apparatus of plural quantification or the plural predicate rather than simplicity.

At the other extreme are relations that can hold between ontological languages, but are too distant to support the conclusion of equal metaphysical merit. For example, that two languages can formulate statements which are empirically equivalent seems too weak. It is generally accepted that empirical equivalence still allows for important differences in the merit of theories.<sup>82</sup> So the statements of those theories needn't be on a metaphysical par either.

But it is not at all clear how Hirsch might meet this challenge to find a middle way. His own attempt seems to fall on the distant side. He contends that “the essence of language is the distribution of a set of characters over a set of syntactically structured sentences.”<sup>83</sup> A character is a function from contexts to sets of possible worlds, an intension.<sup>84</sup> As mentioned above, Hirsch maintains that such “coarse-grained facts” or “unstructured facts” are all that is really needed to properly describe the world.<sup>85</sup> He thus maintains that two languages are on a metaphysical par and have equal expressive ability if neither can produce a sentence with character X when the other cannot.

But this relation seems too distant for reasons which will be familiar to many from discussions of intensional semantics: sets of possible worlds are far too coarse. To give a very stark example, imagine two languages E and L. E has the resources for talking about mathematics that our own language has. L has no numerical terms at all,

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<sup>82</sup> John Hawthorne, “Superficialism in Ontology,” in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David John Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford University Press, 2009), 213-15.

<sup>83</sup> Hirsch, “Ontology and Alternative Languages,” 239.

<sup>84</sup> Hirsch sometimes follows David Lewis in calling these sets ‘propositions.’ See Hirsch, “Ontology and Alternative Languages,” 223-4. I won’t follow him in this, as I’m here using ‘proposition’ to mean something more structured and fine grained.

<sup>85</sup> Hirsch, “Quantifier Variance and Realism,” 78-9, and Hirsch, “Language, Ontology, and Structure.”

only a single term which acts as an expression of a necessary falsehood and another that acts as an expression of a necessary truth. By Hirsch's proposed standard, E and L are on a par with regard to their ability to make mathematical statements: since all such statements are necessarily true or necessarily false one of those two one-word sentences of L will have the same character as any mathematical statement in E. That this does not mean E and L have the same ability to state the mathematical truth is obvious.<sup>86</sup>

Hawthorne offers a number of arguments to a similar effect.<sup>87</sup> For one, he points out the high cost to contemporary metaphysics of accepting such a doctrine about language. On such a view intentionally equivalent statements have the same meaning. But say one employs a hyperintensional operator in one's theorizing, an operator such that various intensionally equivalent expressions in its scope yield different truth values. But *ex hypothesi* intensionally equivalent expressions have the same meaning, they state the same fact. What then can a hyperintensional operator be doing? It cannot be differentiating expressions based on any deep aspect of their relationship to reality, or not solely based on that: to the extent that it is hyperintensional it must be distinguishing them based on superficial linguistic features since there simply isn't any deeper semantic

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<sup>86</sup> This, of course, deals with only non-applied mathematics. I do not see why the point made of this sub-domain can't serve as a counterexample to the principle. But perhaps somebody will insist that mathematical vocabulary can only have meaning in a language that can apply its mathematical terms, and that if E can do this then it will be able to form sentences which characters L cannot imitate.

Here, then, is another example. Say E has rudimentary mathematical vocabulary: natural numbers 1 to 100, an equality relation, and vocabulary for addition and subtraction. L has no number terms, but it has an equality relation, and a mechanism for rigidly designating numbers of things. Again the two languages will come out on an expressive par by Hirsch's standard. Where a speaker of E can say "There are five bananas here" the speaker of L can say "The number of bananas here is dthat(the number of bananas here)." (To get the character right one might have to replace the second occurrence of 'here' with a specific time and place.) And so on, provided there are enough distinguishable things in the world. In this case too it seems clear that E has significantly superior expressive power to L.

<sup>87</sup> Hawthorne, "Superficialism in Ontology," §3.

difference on which to differentiate. This must render hyperintensional operators suspect for metaphysical theorizing.

As examples of the important operators this would deprive metaphysics of Hawthorne offers “it is a fundamental fact that S,” “it is a basic truth about reality that S,” “it is a non-gerrymandered fact that S,” “S1 obtains in virtue of the fact that S2 obtains”, and “the ground of the fact that S1 is the fact that S2.”<sup>88</sup> And this is not an exhaustive list. If one is committed to metaphysical theories that employ such operators, or just disinclined to view them as superficial, it is therefore a reason to reject this linguistic claim.

It seems we need a relation of expressive equivalence between languages stronger than Hirsch’s, but weaker than the options rejected above. But, to quote Eklund, “it is quite unclear what equivalence relation this might be.”<sup>89</sup> And without any promising suggestion, it seems doubtful we should accept EE.

### *3.3 Deflation without EE*

Granting that what I said in the previous section is correct, that there is good reason to doubt EE, what remains of Hirsch’s superficialism? More than one might expect. Recall that above, in sketching Hirsch’s argument for deflationism, EE played no significant role; only MOL was important. The more detailed examination of the argument in my next chapter bears that out. Hirsch doesn’t need to invoke EE to argue

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<sup>88</sup> Hawthorne, “Superficialism in Ontology,” 225.

<sup>89</sup> Eklund, “The Picture of Reality as an Amorphous Lump,” 390.

that sundry ontological debates are merely verbal, and that this peculiarity is explained by Actual QV.<sup>90</sup>

McGrath's charity to expressibility objection to Hirsch's argument is the only substantive link between EE and Hirsch's case for deflation. However, even without EE McGrath's critique does not seem very strong. McGrath contends that it is uncharitable to interpret somebody as speaking an expressively impoverished language. The force of this charity to expressibility is held to be strong enough to counterbalance the charitable concerns invoked by Hirsch and render what the most charitable interpretation is murky.

Hirsch points out that McGrath must suppose it is equally charitable to interpret a person as asserting wrongly in a better language as asserting rightly in a worse one, and that this seems dubious.<sup>91</sup> I agree. As I shall argue in the next several chapters, there is room to doubt many claims about what interpretive charity entails. But McGrath's charity to expressibility seems especially distant from standard accounts of what charity involves. And no sketch of how charity to expressibility derives from a particular principle of charity is provided by McGrath.

If we are going to try and interpret a person as rational or as having accurate perceptions then we'll probably want to accord their language enough expressive ability to make reasonable and accurate statements about relevant matters. But beyond that it isn't clear why we should prefer interpretations that maximize expressibility. And aren't certain deficits in expressibility commonplace, in that experts wielding technical vocabulary can state truths that ordinary speakers cannot? It does not seem surprising

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<sup>90</sup> In keeping with my definition above I'm using Actual QV to mean that languages, or idiolects, that differ in the manner MOL holds to be possible are actually in use by real speakers. On this usage EE is not part of Actual QV. Thus there is no contradiction in holding Actual QV to be true and QV to be false.

<sup>91</sup> Hirsch, "Language, Ontology, and Structure," 202.

that people should lack the ability to express precise claims about matters distant from their experience or concern. But thus it does not seem that charity to expressibility past a certain minimal threshold should much constrain interpretation.

So, if Hirsch's argument from charity were successful apart from charity to expressibility, considerations of expressibility would not provide a strong objection to it. Thus, even if EE is false, Hirsch has developed a potentially forceful argument that deflationism is true of many contemporary ontological debates, and true invariably of revisionist attempts to correct the ontology of ordinary speakers. One might be able to sidestep this case meta-linguistically; but if one wants to maintain that what goes on in professional ontology is more or less continuous with the beliefs and language of ordinary speakers, as I do, then this argument threatens to render revisionary ontological theorizing pointless.

It is to this argument, then, that I turn. My second chapter will examine Hirsch's argument from interpretive charity in detail. I'll maintain that the argument is flawed, and provides no compelling reason to accept deflation or Actual QV. One of the problems I'll highlight with the argument is a lack of clarity about just what charity is and what it enjoins.

This leads to my third chapter in which I'll argue more narrowly that the principle of charity, as standardly conceived in contemporary metaphysics, doesn't provide any compelling reason to favor the interpretations Hirsch considers most charitable. In part, I'll show, this is because one ought to doubt whether there really is anything corresponding to the principle of charity Hirsch invokes to support his argument. The primary arguments for such a "constitutive principle of charity" come from the semantic

theory of Donald Davidson, and so I shall examine that principle. I'll show that the principle itself lacks compelling support, but also that even if it were true, it would not have the implications Hirsch is claiming.

Finally, my fourth chapter will develop a semantic hypothesis about the ontological language of ordinary speakers as an alternative to Actual QV. My proposal accommodates some of the general concern for interpretive charity to ordinary speakers and permits deflation of debates on a limited scale. But it is a theoretic improvement on Actual QV.

My overarching aim will be to show that contemporary ontology, even of the sort Hirsch terms revisionary, can be viewed as a substantive project largely continuous with ordinary speakers' use of language. One can pursue analytic ontology in one's native tongue, and interpretive charity poses no threat to the enterprise.



## CHAPTER TWO

### The Argument from Interpretive Charity

“[P]hilosophers have every right to say things that ordinary people, unversed in philosophy, do not understand, but they should try to avoid saying things that ordinary people do understand and regard as absurd.”

–Eli Hirsch<sup>1</sup>

The QV thesis holds that there are possible languages which differ in such a way that speakers of those languages would appear to disagree about fundamental ontology when in fact they do not. But this mere possibility is of little use in arguing for deflationism. It’s possible that ontological disputes are genuine disagreements despite the fact that under different circumstances very similar looking disputes would be merely verbal. The deflationist proponent of QV seeks to establish that Actual QV is true, that actual groups of speakers employ languages which differ in the way QV maintains to be possible, and thus that the debates between these speakers actually are merely verbal.

But what reason do we have to think such linguistic variation is actually present between various ontological camps, or between ontologists and ordinary folk? When presented with contemporary literature on metaphysical questions, it doesn’t seem uncommon to have the feeling that one is observing insubstantial disagreement.<sup>2</sup> Eli Hirsch provides an illustration:

Look at your hand while you are clenching it, and ask yourself whether some object called a fist has come into existence. As shallow ontologists the first thought that must come to mind when we ask this question is this: *There can’t be anything deep or theoretical here.* The facts are, so to speak, right in front of our

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<sup>1</sup> Hirsch, “Sosa’s Existential Relativism,” 137.

<sup>2</sup> Manley, “Introduction: a Guided Tour of Metametaphysics,” 1-2.

eyes. Our task can only be to remind ourselves of relevant ways in which we describe these facts in our language.<sup>3</sup>

In such a case there may seem to be nothing to disagree about; as Hirsch put it, what facts there are seem entirely apparent. (Anecdotal evidence suggests that many non-experts have similar reactions, at least initially.<sup>4</sup>) If, then, there continues to be apparent disagreement it will be felt that it cannot be occasioned by disagreement over those facts. It must be a matter of words, a merely verbal conflict. As discussed in my prior chapter, Actual QV provides a linguistic theory to explain away the apparent disagreement.

But many philosophers do not seem to have such a reaction, or have been so long convinced that the issues they deal with are genuine that they no longer find such persuasive. Nor is an isolated reaction to a single ontological question a good guide to the merits of other metaphysical topics. Those unmoved by the deflationist suspicion will justly request something more.

The primary argumentative strategy for deflationism, the argument from interpretive charity, reflects the gut reaction well. In this chapter I will examine the merits of the argument from interpretive charity in depth since I take it to be the primary discursive support for Actual QV. There are other broad sources of support, such as an antecedent commitment to common sense ontology<sup>5</sup>, but the argument from charity is the best developed and most influential argument in the contemporary literature. Eli Hirsch has been the primary proponent of this argument and I'll address his rendition, but my

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<sup>3</sup> Hirsch, "Quantifier Variance and Realism," 90.

<sup>4</sup> I am thinking here mostly of the responses of philosophy students first presented with these ontological positions.

<sup>5</sup> Hirsch mentions his sympathy for common sense ontology in various places. This allegiance provides a more straightforward route to the conclusion that ordinary ontological views are true. And see the end of §1.4 for a quick sketch of an argument from that to deflationism.

critiques will apply more generally to the sort of strategy his argument represents. The argument for deflationism from interpretive charity is not a successful approach.

As the name reflects, the argument relies centrally on the principle of interpretive charity. Its contention is that in order to treat certain ontological disagreements as genuine one must interpret two sets of speakers as using important terms univocally. However, any such interpretation will violate the principle of charity. Instead, on the interpretation which charity requires, both groups of speakers will be seen to speak truly, and thus to agree. That the apparent debate is merely verbal and thus shallow logically follows.

In §1 I will examine the structure of the argument itself as Hirsch and others lay it out. In §2 I will turn to criticism of the argument, specifically focusing on the nature and role of interpretive charity. I'll argue that interpretive charity, in the form of the principle of charity, does not adequately support the premises of the argument from interpretive charity. I'll arrive at this conclusion in two different ways. First, in §2.2, I will argue that the use of charity in Hirsch's formulation of the argument may be taken in two ways resulting in a dilemma: either the premises of the argument are subject to counterexample, or one of them introduces a problematic circularity. Second, in §2.3, I'll show that the sort of localized interpretive charity the argument from interpretive charity depends on provides entirely inadequate grounds on which to argue for particular semantic conclusions. In short, as an argument for ontological deflation, the argument from interpretive charity fails.

### 1.1 The Argument from Interpretive Charity

I will now sketch the general outline of the argument from interpretive charity, using as source material primarily formulations provided by Eli Hirsch and Daniel Korman. I'll clarify what the principle of charity at issue is in §1.2 and §1.3, and look at Hirsch's formalized version of the argument in detail in §1.4.

Hirsch presents his argument as an attack on “revisionary ontology” defined as any ontological position which holds that “[m]any common sense judgments about the existence or identity of highly visible physical objects are a priori necessarily false.”<sup>6</sup> Thus defined, Hirsch treats all major philosophical positions on special composition—compositional nihilism, compositional universalism, and sparse ontologies in-between—as revisionist ontologies.<sup>7</sup>

Hirsch's argument is essentially this:

It is widely acknowledged that a central constraint on interpreting a language is a “principle of charity.” Suppose we have two candidate interpretations for a set of sentences that fluent speakers of a language would typically be prepared to assert (or assent to). If one of these interpretations implies that the speakers are correct in asserting these sentences, and the other interpretation implies that they are incorrect, then the principle of charity imposes a presumption in favor of the first interpretation. Revisionists seem to flout this presumption, overriding it for no apparently good reason. Given a set of commonsensical ontological assertions, revisionists seem to perversely insist on interpreting these assertions in a way that makes them incorrect, even though it seems perfectly possible to interpret them in a way that would make them correct.<sup>8</sup>

Hirsch also provides a formalized version of his argument, but before turning to it let's examine the general structure. Note that this is really an argument schema rather than an

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<sup>6</sup> Hirsch, “*Quantifier Variance and Realism*,” 101.

<sup>7</sup> There is room to doubt that he is correct in this. Some ontologists have maintained that the ordinary folk don't actually dissent from their ontological views, even if this compatibility is difficult to detect. This point will become more relevant in my third and fourth chapters.

<sup>8</sup> Hirsch, “*Against Revisionary Ontology*,” 98-9.

argument, as the set of sentences isn't provided. The focus is on the assertions of ordinary speakers. The conclusion of Hirsch's argument is that some sentences ordinary speakers would be inclined to assert but which seem at variance with revisionist ontology are (actually, literally) true. Thus the argument can only be as forceful as our confidence that this is the case, and that confidence is to derive from the principle of charity.

Daniel Korman illustrates the argument from charity with a filled-out version of the schema which is useful in its clarity.

- (M1) The most charitable interpretation of English is one on which 'there are statues' comes out true.
- (M2) If so, then 'there are statues' is true.
- (M3) If 'there are statues' is true, then there are statues.
- (M4) So, there are statues.<sup>9</sup>

If it is true that there are statues, then it is false that there are not statues. If we interpret the compositional nihilist as asserting that there are no statues he speaks falsely.

Perhaps, though, we should extend similar charity to the statement "There are no statues" in the mouth of the revisionist. Though Hirsch does not spend much time arguing for it, he grants that revisionist ontologists are also speaking truths, at least at the object level. It is their claims at the meta level he rejects, at least by his lights. If both speak truths, then there must be equivocation between the usage of the nihilist and the usage of the ordinary English speaker. Revisionist ontologists can simply acknowledge that they are using a language or dialect different from that of ordinary English speakers. However, if they wish to say that their ontological pronouncements are true in English as it is widely spoken, that is, that the uses of language are univocal, then they are refusing to heed charity in their interpretation of ordinary English speakers.

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<sup>9</sup> SEP: Ordinary Objects, section 7.2

Note also the move from (M1) to (M2). Neither Hirsch nor Korman draws attention to this inferential step but each describes the argument as containing an inference like it, and Korman makes it starker. Notice that reason is given in (M1) to regard some interpretation as preferable. On the basis of that interpretation being preferable, it is inferred that sentences which are true according to that interpretation actually are true.

Preferable interpretations aren't necessarily correct, though. Even if we grant that our criteria for selecting a best interpretation are complete, our information may not be. Thus we might rationally prefer an interpretation which assigned false utterances true meanings. How then should we take the inference of (M2) from (M1)?

One option is to regard this as inductive reasoning: it is not deductively necessitated, but should be granted to be a strong inference. If one accepts (M1) (along with some additional premises about what makes an interpretation superior) it is only sensible that one grant (M2). But that is not what Hirsch or Korman intends.<sup>10</sup> Rather, they mean this inference to be deductive. The principle of charity they are invoking is strong enough that such a deductive inference is intelligible.<sup>11</sup>

(Hirsch uses the language of presumption in the passage above, but I take this to simply reflect a bracketing off of other factors relevant to selecting an interpretation. We merely presume that the favorable interpretation is the correct one until we ensure that no other factor should cause us to prefer an interpretation contrary to charity. If we could be confident there would be no such factors, our selection of an interpretation needn't

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<sup>10</sup> For a particularly overt statement on this, see Eli Hirsch, "Charity to Charity," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 86, no. 2 (March 2013): 435–442. More on this in later sections.

<sup>11</sup> I say only intelligible because I will later criticize this very inference, even granting that the principle of charity as they envision it pertains. That argument must wait for §2.

remain presumptive. Hirsch seems to think this bar can be cleared. This is made explicit in Hirsch's more formalized version of the argument which I examine in §1.4.)

It thus seems prudent to here examine what is meant by "the principle of charity."

### *1.2 What is the Principle of Charity?*

Philosophers tend to omit important complexities when invoking "the principle of charity." That name is often invoked without disambiguation as if it designates a unique principle. But it is used, even by philosophers, to designate many members of a family of principles. In this section I'll briefly examine these principles and introduce some useful distinctions.

The members of this family of principles are united in enjoining that when interpreting others we select interpretations which maximize some positive attribute of the meanings we assign, i.e., we interpret others charitably. However the positive attribute to be maximized, the rationale for the charity, and the strength of the enjoining all vary between versions.<sup>12</sup> Thus, here, I want to map the dimensions along which such principles differ and clarify my own language going forward.

Usually, principles of charity enjoin interpreting utterances or beliefs in such a way that they have a maximum of either truth or rationality. Other versions have suggested the maximization of related attributes such as Timothy Williamson's formulation which involves maximizing knowledge<sup>13</sup>, or Richard Grandy's "principle of

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Feldman, "Charity, Principle of," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London ; New York: Routledge, 1998), 282-85.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, 1 edition. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

humanity”<sup>14</sup> which would have us maximize the resemblance for the meanings of our own projected beliefs and utterances in the situation of the speaker.<sup>15</sup>

It’s worth stopping for a moment to examine the notion of maximization employed here. Of course the greatest degree of truth or rationality which could be accorded is always complete truth or total rationality. But principles of charity do not require adopting interpretations which attribute that. Rather, they enjoin maximizing given other constraints on acceptable interpretations, among which tend to be commonly accepted features of human language like finite vocabulary and compositionality, and other theoretic constraints like simplicity. The maximization enjoined by a principle of charity is thus one among many constraints on interpretation. And its weighting relative to others will depend on the version.

These variations in the property to be maximized—in what “charity” is taken to be—will produce different interpretive choices. For example, Donald Davidson famously used a principle of charity which enjoined truth maximizing to argue that general skepticism is untenable. (If we were mistaken about the world in the way general skepticism entertains, our thoughts and beliefs would have to be interpreted in a way which violated the truth maximizing of that principle. But, Davidson reasoned, whatever the correct interpretation of human linguistic behavior is, it has the property of

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Grandy, “Reference, Meaning, and Belief,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 70, no. 14 (August 16, 1973): 439–452.

<sup>15</sup> I follow others in my talk of “maximizing truth”, “maximizing rationality”, etc. However, note that there is an important lack of parallelism here. Truth is being attributed to meanings, rationality to persons. If parallelism were precisely maintained then I’d refer not to “maximizing rationality” but to something like “maximizing the proportion of expressed or believed propositions which the person being interpreted would be rational to accept”. Similarly, Williamson’s principle would have us maximize something like “the proportion of expressed or believed propositions which when believed by the person being interpreted would constitute knowledge”. Thus the way of describing principles commonly used is more shorthand than schematic.



interpreting it as by-and-large expressing truth.) But such an argument would have no impetus if only rationality were being maximized, as we could attribute great rationality to agents while still thinking them mistaken due to bad epistemic circumstances.

There is also significant variation in the rationale for charity. I'll distinguish four major reasons for interpretive charity. This fourfold division may turn out not to be exhaustive, but it neatly organizes every principle of charity I've encountered in philosophical literature and conversation.

First, some think that interpreting charitably is part of being fair or courteous; such a principle of charity is based on ethical considerations.

Second, some advocate charity based on pragmatic concerns. We should be charitable, the reasoning goes, because we are thus more likely to discover truths. For example, assigning the most plausible meaning possible to the position of your dialectical opponent may make you more likely to discover strengths of positions other than your own—and this is true even if the interpretations you assign are ultimately incorrect.<sup>16</sup> These first two sorts of principles, in my experience, are often commended to students of philosophy by their teachers.

Third, one can base a principle of charity on general interpretive accuracy. For example, we will be most likely to assign the correct meanings to utterances if we assign them meanings that are compatible with a speaker's rationality because most of our interlocutors are by-and-large rational. Both this and the second, pragmatic, rationale for charity are heuristic; but they appeal to different epistemic benefits. The principle of charity could still be advocated on a pragmatic basis even if it turned out to provide less

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<sup>16</sup> See Feldman, "Charity, Principle of," 283.

accurate interpretations. Not so if it were advocated on the basis of increasing the odds of assigning meanings correctly.

Fourth, one could posit a principle of charity which is not a contingent rule of behavior at all but a constitutive aspect of semantic meaning. By “constitutive aspect” it is meant that charity is essential to semantic meaning: no utterance or thought can possess semantic value which does not accord with an interpretation conforming to charity. To deny that a subject was properly interpreted in accordance with charity would be to deny that that subject was speaking or thinking meaningfully at all. Charity is thus part of the metaphysical account of what it is to be meaningful.

When charity is invoked in modern literature on philosophy of mind, language, or metaphysics it is typically this fourth sort of principle that is intended.<sup>17</sup> N.L. Wilson, the coiner of the name “principle of charity” proposed a principle of this sort,<sup>18</sup> as did Donald Davidson whose influential work on language seems to be responsible for popularizing the notion of a principle of charity.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, though, outside of the metaphysics and language literature it is less clear that this fourth sort of principle is intended by many invocations of charity. In his

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<sup>17</sup> For example see Christopher Gauker, “The Principle of Charity,” *Synthese* 69, no. 1 (October 1, 1986): 1–25; Grandy, “Reference, Meaning, and Belief”; Hirsch, “Against Revisionist Ontology”; David Lewis, “Radical Interpretation,” *Synthese* 27, no. 3/4 (July 1, 1974): 331–344; and Williamson, “The Philosophy of Philosophy.”

<sup>18</sup> N. L. Wilson, “Substances without Substrata,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 12, no. 4 (1959): 521–539.

<sup>19</sup> That is not to say that the idea originated with Wilson and Davidson. Davidson himself credits Quine with the idea, though not with the title. And I suspect many older principles with similar content can be found if we do not look solely for constitutive principles. For example, there is something that looks very like a principle of charity, though not labeled by that name, in the Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraph 2478: “[e]veryone should be careful to interpret insofar as possible his neighbor’s thoughts, words, and deeds in a favorable way”. Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II*. 2nd edition. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 594.

encyclopedia article on the topic Richard Feldman mentions ethical versions of the principle and articulates the rationale for a pragmatic one as of value to critical thinking.<sup>20</sup> In classroom and discussion settings I've often seen the principle of charity invoked (though seldom articulated) and it generally seems regarded as a matter of courteous etiquette.

A number of logic textbooks suggest some principle of charity, usually in rather vague terms. Stan Baronett's *Logic*, for example, has this to say about it: "Principle of Charity: We should choose the reconstructed argument that gives the benefit of the doubt to the person presenting the argument."<sup>21</sup> The talk of doubt seems to indicate that a constitutive principle is not what Baronett has in mind. Paul Herrick's *Introduction to Logic* explicitly grounds the principle of charity in the conjunction of "human kindness" and pragmatic concern to find the strongest arguments that might convince us, thus ethical and pragmatic versions of the principle.<sup>22</sup>

Or take this account of charitable interpretation of historic texts from Yitzhak Melamed:

The logic of charitable interpretations is rather simple. Suppose a Past Philosopher (PP) makes a statement S. We believe that S, read literally, is clearly unacceptable. Since we appreciate PP as a great mind, we cannot believe that he or she could have uttered such foolishness. Thus, instead of ascribing S to PP, we ascribe S', which is different from, and sometimes even utterly opposed to S.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Feldman, "Charity, Principle of."

<sup>21</sup> Stan Baronett, *Logic*, 2 edition. (Oxford University Press, 2012), 100.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Herrick, *Introduction to Logic*, 1 edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 26.

<sup>23</sup> Yitzhak Melamed, "Charitable Interpretations and the Political Domestication of Spinoza, or, Benedict in the Land of the Secular Imagination," In *Philosophy and Its History: Aims and Methods in the Study of Early Modern Philosophy*, 1 edition, eds. Mogens Lærke, Justin E. H. Smith, and Eric Schliesser (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 260.

Melamed, perhaps with some irony, here aims to characterize the thought of a variety of authors who invoke charity in the interpretation of historical philosophers. It seems that the rationale he envisions is of the third sort: charity is likely to yield correct interpretation, for it is unlikely that persons of such brilliance would assert falsehoods of certain sorts.

I say all this to emphasize that not everybody hears the same thing when the principle of charity is invoked. This ambiguity is problematic and apparently widespread. And, as I will continue to develop in the next section, the differences between the versions matter a great deal. It is thus vital that in a given instance it be clearly established which sort of principle is being invoked so that confusion about what follows from it can be avoided.

### *1.2.2 The Defeasibility of Charity*

It might seem odd that I class the rationale for a principle as a feature of that principle. Couldn't the same principle be held on different grounds? Perhaps, but the final feature of the principles I want to examine is their defeasibility, and this is partly determined by their basis. By defeasibility I mean under what conditions one can forego assigning interpretations with the preferred feature (truth, rationality, etc.) even if one grants the principle. In other words, in what cases is charity partly or fully outweighed by other constraints on interpretation?

It is easy to see how defeasibility is related to the basis. A principle with a moral basis might be superseded by a more weighty moral reason, and a pragmatic principle by other pragmatic or moral concerns (it might be more important in some situations to interpret correctly than to find the best arguments, for instance when interpreting legal

testimony). Or, if the principle of charity is a heuristic generalization then it should be treated like any generalized belief and weighed against more specific information you have in particular circumstances. One presumes adult Americans can read, but one does not continue presuming Bob the adult American can read once he's averred his illiteracy.

Only the constitutive view of a principle of charity would require charity to be applied without exception, on pain of not interpreting the object as meaningful at all. On this account charity is part of the metaphysical account of what fixes meaning. This would make charity unavoidably a weighty desiderata of theory selection, potentially outweighed only by other elements of that same account of meaning, and potentially not even by them depending on the account.<sup>24</sup>

Having mapped out the variation in principles of charity there is still the terminological difficulty provided by the definite article: all the various principles discussed in this section tend to be referred to as "the principle of charity". As I pointed out above, there is a problematic ambiguity here. And it will not help to say that "the principle of charity" is whichever principle actually applies, for there is no logical obstacle to holding multiple principles of charity, perhaps with different rationales, true at the same time.

But let us say one accepts that some kind of interpretive charity is constitutive of meaning. Then it does make sense to refer to the principle which states this relation,

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<sup>24</sup> Davidson's account of constitutive charity, discussed at length in my next chapter, establishes a threshold for charitable interpretation. No evidence would be sufficient to show that a speaker did not come up to this threshold—it is a necessary feature of any acceptable interpretation. If no such acceptable interpretation can be found, then the speaker cannot be meaningfully interpreted. Theories which could accord a higher degree of charity would also enjoy an advantage over those that do not, but this advantage could be outweighed by other desiderata. (See §2.3.2)

whatever it turns out to be, as “the constitutive principle of charity”.<sup>25</sup> I will adopt this usage in what follows.

### *1.3 Which Principle of Charity?*

Recall that the reason for examining principles of charity was to clarify what is going on in the argument from interpretive charity. Specifically, the argument involves moving from the claim that “the principle of charity” necessitates favoring a certain interpretation to the claim that this interpretation is a correct one.

The authors are invoking the constitutive principle of charity. The argument employs a Davidsonian maneuver. It is being claimed not only that an interpretation with certain properties is preferable, but that the correct interpretation must have those properties. Hirsch puts it thus.

The principle of interpretive charity implies, roughly put, that it is metaphysically impossible for your assertions to be stupider, crazier, or less rational than your (actual and potential) linguistic behavior dictates. You are in this respect innocent until proven guilty. This form of metaphysical grace is, according to the principle, constitutive of linguistic meaning.<sup>26</sup>

What it is for utterance X to have meaning Y just is for the interpretation which best meets certain criteria to assign value Y to utterance X. One of those constraining criteria is a principle of charity, what Hirsch called “the principle of interpretive charity”. Thus if every interpretation which is compatible with that principle of charity, every interpretation which maximizes appropriately, has the property of interpreting X as true,

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<sup>25</sup> Though the nomenclature in this section is my own, calling the relevant principle constitutive is not. See for example, Hirsch, “Charity to Charity,” 438, and Donald Davidson, “Thought and Talk,” in *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 168.

<sup>26</sup> Hirsch, “Charity to Charity,” 438.

then X is true, and the move from (M1) to (M2) (assuming a few things about the criteria for interpretations) is deductive.

So, to recap, the basic structure of the argument from interpretive charity is as follows. Ordinary speakers tend to assert something. In light of the constitutive principle of charity we must interpret them as asserting a truth, and thus the something asserted must be true. It is misguided to argue that the thing asserted might be false for you are entertaining a metaphysical impossibility.

Of course this is a very rough outline. In §1.4 I will examine in detail Hirsch's more formal version of the argument. But this sketch is enough to allow me to trace my critique. I will argue that specific versions of the argument are flawed in that they misuse the constitutive principle of charity. The precise formulation of the principle is contested, but I can still make a general case that the constitutive principle doesn't do the needed work.

(Even broader and more fundamental doubts about constitutive charity as it figures in the argument make up my third chapter. There I suggest there is insufficient reason to suppose any such principle is true.)

#### *1.4 Hirsch's Version of the Argument from Interpretive Charity*

I've examined the general structure of the argument from Interpretive Charity. I now turn to Hirsch's more detailed working out of the argument. Again, note that what is being discussed is actually a schema for generating arguments, not itself an argument.

Specific arguments are constructed, using the Schema, by replacing O with some appropriate statement of commonsense ontology.<sup>27</sup>

(AFIC)

1. Typical fluent speakers of the language assert (or assent to) the sentence O.
2. Therefore, there is the charitable presumption that, on the correct interpretation of O, speakers have good reason to assert O, so that O is not *a priori* necessarily false.
3. There is nothing to defeat this presumption.
4. Therefore, O is not *a priori* necessarily false.
5. Therefore, it's possible that O is true.
- [6. Therefore, it's actually the case that O is true.]<sup>28</sup>

To follow the reasoning it will be helpful to construct an example. To do this we will need to choose an appropriate value for O. That is trickier than it might seem. For now, take O to be “There are tables”; this is an example Hirsch provides himself.<sup>29</sup> It's imperfect, for reasons that will be discussed below, but it will be useful for illustrating how the argument works. This sentence will be rejected by compositional nihilists, but affirmed by practically any English speaker who is not a student of philosophy (fulfilling 1).

(One might think that ‘the language’ as used in (1) was meant to range only over natural languages like English. Hirsch's emphasis on common sense approaches and ordinary English speakers throughout his writings adds to this impression. But note that Hirsch implicitly extends similar charity to ontologists as he does to ordinary English

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<sup>27</sup> The block quote I gave from Hirsch in §1.1 spoke of sets of sentences. The formalized argument here treats sentences individually. This inconsistency is retained from Hirsch. It would be trivial to modify AFIC so that O ranged over sets of sentences rather than individual sentences. And it might actually solve some problems to do so, as will be discussed below.

<sup>28</sup> Hirsch, “Against Revisionist Ontology,” 103. (I have altered the formatting of the argument very slightly to avoid placing variables inside quotation marks. I do not take these changes to alter the argument in substance.)

<sup>29</sup> Hirsch, “Against Revisionist Ontology,” 105.



speakers: he thinks both speak truly. Elsewhere, as in “Ontology and Alternative Languages”, it is made clear that he regards this sort of charitable reasoning to be required even in the interpretation of some ontological camps by others.<sup>30</sup> Thus ‘language’ should be read as ranging over all languages, where Hirsch is willing to be fairly granular about what counts as a language—granular enough that sub-dialects of “ontologese” qualify.)<sup>31</sup>

Premise 2 is to follow from 1 by a principle of charity. Charity, Hirsch reasons, commits us to presuming an interpretation on which O is not *a priori* false.

Further, there is nothing to defeat this presumption. This need not always be true. Hirsch concedes that the presumption would be defeated by the impossibility of a semantics that would allow for the charitable interpretation.<sup>32</sup> Were none available, the presumption would be defeated. So, in my example argument, 3 will only be true so long as an appropriate semantics is available, else even the would-be deflationist couldn’t

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<sup>30</sup> Hirsch, “Ontology and Alternative Languages.”

<sup>31</sup> One might suspect a circularity here. Hirsch’s argument pushes us towards saying that certain speakers who we might otherwise have presumed to speak a common language actually do not. At the same time, generalizations about groups of speakers of the same language provide the support for (1). This seems to assume the very thing to be shown, at least in some cases.

For instance, imagine equally sized non-overlapping sets of people who speak, ostensibly, a common tongue. Call them A and B. A and B are distinguished only by the inclination of A speakers, but not B speakers, to assert S. If we treat the people in A as speaking a different language from those in B we may be able to construct a first premise following the AFIC schema by replacing O with S. The argument produced could show B persons must charitably interpret A persons as speaking a different language, and *vice versa*. At the same time, if persons in both A and B are assumed to have a common tongue we could not make the same argument since if O were replaced with S the first premise would no longer be accepted.

I think this isn’t ultimately a problem for two reasons. First, even if this critique applies when groups are in question, the AFIC schema would still work if applied to individuals and their idiolects. Lone speakers would not need to be divided into language sharing groups. But, second, the argument can be reformulated to remove the difficulty. One could nominate the group that is inclined to assert O not in terms of sharing a language but of sharing a common linguistic behavioral profile.

<sup>32</sup> Impossible, that is, in light of other accepted constraints like compositionality.

avoid interpreting “There are tables” as other than an *a priori* falsehood. Hirsch readily concedes as much.<sup>33</sup>

Since there is nothing to defeat that presumption, “There are tables” is not *a priori* false. This is to be inferred from 1-3 in virtue of the nature of the principle of charity Hirsch is appealing to. As discussed above Hirsch invokes the constitutive principle of charity such that charity must constrain any correct interpretation. A defeasible consequence of charity is stated in 2, and 3 states that there is nothing to defeat it. Thus the consequence is true: O is not *a priori* necessarily false according to any best interpretation. So, since charity constrains meaning, O really is not *a priori* necessarily false.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, it is *a priori* possible that O is true. Hirsch’s language of “*a priori* necessity” and “*a priori* possibility” is to be cashed out in terms of metaphysical modality. He elsewhere clarifies that “[a] priori arguments of [the sort ontologists employ] for claims of metaphysical necessity constitute one kind of ‘a priori necessity.’”<sup>35</sup> It is the corollary sort of possibility Hirsch here intends. If “There are things with more than one part” is *a priori* possible, then “There are things with more than one part” is not false as a matter of metaphysical necessity, discoverable *a priori*. “There are things with more than one part” must instead be a metaphysically contingent proposition to be accepted or rejected on the basis of *a posteriori* empirical considerations.

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<sup>33</sup> Hirsch, “Ontology and Alternative Languages”, and Hirsch, “Charity to Charity.”

<sup>34</sup> Actually, it goes unremarked by Hirsch that the consequence is a dilemma: either O is not *a priori* necessarily false or the persons we are interpreting cannot be regarded as meaningfully speaking. But so long as we grant that ordinary English speakers do meaningfully speak this omission creates no difficulty.

<sup>35</sup> Hirsch, “Charity to Charity,” 439

Finally, Hirsch makes the admittedly questionable step from the epistemic possibility of O to its actuality. He explicitly acknowledges that this step is subject to challenge (hence the brackets): it may be that “There are tables” is rejected on empirical grounds. Hirsch’s presumption, though, backed by some argumentation, is that his revisionary interlocutor will acknowledge the empirical evidence in favor of commonsense ontological statements in the absence of compelling reason to think them *a priori* impossible. 1 through 5 have shown the revisionist not to have such reasons, consequently the truth of O, assuming a suitable O, should be granted.<sup>36</sup> For example, van Inwagen, “would probably agree that, if it’s possible for a table to exist [...] then a table does in fact exist.”<sup>37</sup>

Part of the difficulty here stems from Hirsch’s choice of example. The above claim about van Inwagen is surely mistaken: van Inwagen accepts the existence of living composite objects, thus he could countenance the possibility of a table without altering his views on real ones for he could allow for the possibility of living tables.<sup>38</sup> (He does countenance the possibility of living hammocks!<sup>39</sup>) “There are tables” is a problematic choice for O because it is not purely *a priori*: that there are no non-living composite entities is *a priori*, but that tables, if there were any, would be non-living composites is *a*

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<sup>36</sup> Hawthorne challenges the claim that contemporary ontologists, in general, rely on *a priori* reasoning as Hirsch suggests in Hawthorne, “Superficialism in Ontology.” Hawthorne’s contention and Hirsch’s response are discussed below.

<sup>37</sup> Hirsch, “Against Revisionary Ontology,” 103. Though this serves to elucidate the involved reasoning, Hirsch is actually mistaken on this specific point about van Inwagen. More on this below.

<sup>38</sup> This is assuming that there are no living tables now. I am not sure how confident we should actually be about this. For example, people have allowed themselves to be used as tables as part of play, and some have a fetishistic fascination with people serving as furniture. So there is at least an outside chance that a living table exists at any given time!

<sup>39</sup> van Inwagen, “Material Beings,” 126-7.

*posteriori*.<sup>40</sup> The possible truth of such an O is compatible with the metaphysical judgment that implies its actual falsehood.

The move to (6) becomes more straightforward if we select an O which is accepted on entirely *a priori* grounds. Hirsch's example O could be changed to "There are tables (which aren't alive and have many parts)." But this creates a different problem—(1) is now false. This sentence has likely never been uttered by anyone prior to the drafting of this paper. It certainly wasn't commonly asserted or assented to. And while we might judge it is a thing people would say under certain conditions, charity is due primarily to actual speech and behavior, so it is not clear that the argument would then have the needed force.<sup>41</sup>

The upshot of all this is that an appropriate value for O is difficult to find. Hirsch does not seem to have appreciated how difficult. It must avoid the theoretic pitfall of his own example without being too exotic. Perhaps one could use sentences which are less overt in their existential commitments, for instance "The Eiffel Tower is in Paris" – though this may not work contra the nihilist if he holds that the Eiffel Tower is alive in some possible world. This is another instance of the problem of cleanly separating the *a priori* from the *a posteriori*.

I suspect that the most workable answer will be to slightly alter the argument so that O is a set of sentences rather than a single one. For example, it might be "Dolls aren't alive," "Barbie dolls have small parts," and "There are Barbie dolls at Target." In

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<sup>40</sup> Thanks to Alex Pruss for pointing this out to me.

<sup>41</sup> Hirsch does maintain that some charity is due to foreseeable potential utterance, specifically towards people's tendency to retract certain statements. He calls this "charity to retraction." He may be right. But my point here is simply that the argument shouldn't rest entirely on merely potential utterance. On charity to retraction see footnote 71.

order to grant the truth of all sentences in the set one will need to concede the existence of non-living composites. And so to grant that all the sentences in the set being simultaneously true is possible is to grant that the existence of non-living composites is possible. Similar sets will presumably be devisable for use in arguments aimed at other ontological claims. This seems workable and in keeping with the thrust of Hirsch's argument. If one must be charitable to each sentence of this sort, then the requirement ought to extend to collections of such sentences. And, as I discuss in section 2.3.2, interpretive charity is supposed to apply to total verbal behavior anyway, not to some sentences in isolation.

Virtually everywhere that Hirsch talks about this argument less formally he does appeal to sets of sentences. In "Quantifier Variance and Realism" he suggests that our evidence upon which we should accept that speakers use language X is that they assert those sentences a speaker of X would assert, and deny those a speaker of X would deny.<sup>42</sup> In "Against Revisionist Ontology" he begins "Suppose we have two candidate interpretations for a set of sentences that fluent speakers of a language would typically be prepared to assert (or assent to)."<sup>43</sup> And this seems like a better approach because, as I'll discuss later on, charity must be applied to verbal behavior in its entirety, not just to bits of it. It is thus unclear to me why he did, or should, rely on charity to a single sentence in his formalized rendition of the argument.

At any rate, I think this is a technical problem for Hirsch's formulation, but not an important objection. Perhaps some sentences are available to act as O but, if not, the problem seems easily eliminable along the lines I've sketched and it seems plausible that

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<sup>42</sup> Hirsch, "Quantifier Variance and Realism," 92.

<sup>43</sup> Hirsch, "Against Revisionist Ontology," 98.

this is what Hirsch intended anyway. I'm going to proceed as if appropriate values for O are available, with the caveat that some alteration to the argument may be necessary at this point.

Hirsch believes that arguments instantiating this schema are useful to challenge the pretensions of revisionist ontologists of every stripe to correct ordinary English speakers. Simply choose an O which is commonsensical yet deemed false by some outlandish revisionist theory and, so long as a charitable interpretation is available so that premise 3 can be defended, the argument will show the chosen statement to be true (or at least possibly true) in the mouths of ordinary speakers. And, if this is the case, the disagreement with the ordinary speaker is not a matter of "deep" metaphysics but of "shallow" semantics. The disagreement is merely verbal, as is the debate between one revisionist camp and another, since both must concede the ordinary speaker to speak truly.

Hirsch also thinks that, once we concede that the face-value ontology of ordinary talk is true but note the obvious arbitrariness of the categories it involves, we will be inclined to pluralism regarding ways of speaking about the constituents of reality. To think otherwise would be to treat the concepts employed in ordinary ontological judgments as privileged, which would be peculiar given their nature. So, "[t]he only way to accept our common sense ontological judgments at face value [...] is to give up the 'absolutist' idea that there is somehow a uniquely correct referential apparatus that must show up in any language capable of stating the objective truth."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Hirsch, "Objectivity without Objects," 44.

### 1.4.2 Refining AFIC

Before proceeding, I'd like to make a refinement to AFIC. The second premise of the argument as I laid it out has an internal logical structure which I want to draw out. It first states that there is a charitable presumption that speakers have good reasons for asserting O, but then concludes something further which does not follow trivially, that O is presumably not *a priori* necessarily false.

To show the structure of what is going on here I'm going to break (2) up. It will be replaced by three premises.<sup>45</sup>

- 2.a Therefore, there is the charitable presumption that, on the correct interpretation of O, speakers have good reason to assert O.
- 2.b If speakers have good reason to assert O then O is not *a priori* necessarily false.
- 2.c Thus there is the charitable presumption that, on the correct interpretation of O, O is not *a priori* necessarily false.

(2.a) and (2.c) are both contained in (2). (2.b) is just the minimal premise needed to tie them together. Hirsch does state that this is his reasoning in multiple places. It is helpful to have (2.b) explicitly stated in the argument since further sections (§2.2) will devote a lot of attention to it.

With that clarification here is the schema for Hirsch's argument from interpretive charity:

(AFIC.2)

- 1. Typical fluent speakers of the language assert (or assent to) the sentence O.
- 2.a Therefore, there is the charitable presumption that, on the correct interpretation of O, speakers have good reason to assert O.
- 2.b If speakers have good reason to assert O, then O is not *a priori* necessarily false.

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<sup>45</sup> I find that Daniel Howard-Snyder has had very similar thoughts about this argument. He proposes dividing (2) into two premises for the same reason. See Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument From Charity Against Revisionary Ontology," n.d., accessed October 20, 2016, <http://faculty.wvu.edu/~howardd/hirsch.pdf>.

- 2.c Thus there is the charitable presumption that, on the correct interpretation of O, O is not a priori necessarily false.
3. There is nothing to defeat this presumption.
4. Therefore, O is not a priori necessarily false.
5. Therefore, it's possible that O is true.
- [6. Therefore, it's actually the case that O is true.]

## *2.1 Deficits of the AFIC*

The argument schema I have characterized above in §1.4-1.4.2, AFIC.2, is the formal version of the primary deflationist argument on offer in the contemporary literature. I do not think AFIC.2 succeeds. In this section I will discuss several reasons why it does not. These will take the form of two broad critiques: the appeal to charity in (2.a)-(3) is either unsupported or circular (§2.2); and the mechanics of radical interpretation are not appropriately appealed to in the real, practical interpretation of our interlocutors (§2.3). Ultimately, I will conclude that the strategy represented by the Argument from Interpretive Charity isn't a viable one.

### *2.1.2 Evaluating AFIC.2*

Let us now turn to the parts of AFIC.2 to see where critique ought to focus. Premise (1) seems the least contentious. It should be possible to find an appropriate value for O which renders (1) uncontroversial and appropriate to what Hirsch aims to do with the argument.<sup>46</sup>

Premises (5) and (6) seem, if not uncontentious, then at least of little interest. One could construe Hawthorne as challenging the argument at this point when he suggests that many contemporary ontologists do not take themselves to have *a priori* access to

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<sup>46</sup> As I discussed in §1.4 this may turn out to be true only if the argument is altered to allow sets of sentences instead of a single sentence to serve as O.



reasoning which establishes their favored theory. He maintains they are “content, rather, to defend [their views] on the grounds of broad theoretical virtues like simplicity, reasonable conformity with common sense, elegance, and so on.”<sup>47</sup> This could be understood as undercutting the inference of (6) from (5). Hirsch responds by suggesting that Hawthorne means something different by *a priori* than he does.<sup>48</sup> I think Hirsch’s point is well taken. Given what *he* means by *a priori*, ontologists generally are depending on such reasoning: they employ arguments which appeal “not to sensory experience or empirical facts, but to reasoning, understanding, and intuitive insight.”<sup>49</sup> Taken this way, Hawthorne’s intended counterexample actually seems to support Hirsch’s contention. And the real thrust of (5) is that the arguments ontologists rely on to support their revisionism are undercut. (If there are specific revisionist positions of which this is not so then AFIC-style argument may not apply to them. But it does seem true of my example case, special composition, and of a number of other positions.)

One major attack on the argument challenges premise (3). Theodore Sider has suggested that there are indeed considerations which are weighed against charity in selecting an interpretation. Specifically, he maintains that the candidate meanings for linguistic components such as quantifier terms are constrained by the objective structure of reality.<sup>50</sup> If this is true, then it may be the case that no acceptable interpretation exists which charitably attributes truth to O. (3) would be false and there would be no way to derive (4).

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<sup>47</sup> Hawthorne, “Superficialism in Ontology,” 217-18.

<sup>48</sup> Hirsch, “Ontology and Alternative Languages,” footnote 3.

<sup>49</sup> Hirsch, “Ontology and Alternative Languages,” footnote 3.

<sup>50</sup> Sider, “Ontological Realism,” and Sider, *Writing the Book of the World*.

Another large critique is launched by Hawthorne which focuses on no specific element of the argument. Instead, Hawthorne argues by analogy that something must be wrong with the argument: if it succeeds in the cases Hirsch proposes to apply it to then it ought also work in a variety of cases where its conclusion would be unacceptable. Hawthorne enumerates examples of disagreements which “everyone but verificationists will concede” are substantive. Among his examples are a dispute between people who agree that phenomenal facts are fixed by physical ones and agree on physical ones, but disagree about which organisms experience sensation, and a dispute between physicists about empirically equivalent quantum mechanical theories.<sup>51</sup> If the argument from interpretive charity works to deflate ontological disagreements as intended then there seems to be nothing to prevent the argument from deflating these disagreements as well. This sets up a *reductio ad absurdum*: if the argument is accepted then something uncomfortably close to old-school verificationism must follow.<sup>52</sup>

I sketch these partly to distinguish my own project here from these others. I want to focus specifically on the role charity plays in this argument, and challenge that it exerts anything like the force Hirsch claims. This is compatible with, but separate from, both of the aforementioned critiques. Though I will also touch on the subject of what other constraints might override charity, Sider’s structure is not one I’ll be further examining. And my critique of the appeal to charity in AFIC.2 turns out to complement Hawthorne’s

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<sup>51</sup> Hawthorne, “Superficialism in Ontology,” 214.

<sup>52</sup> Hawthorne doesn’t interact with AFIC/AFIC.2 in detail, but with the general strategy the argument represents. In order to directly apply his criticism to AFIC.2 one might treat sets of people like those who accept an Everettian approach to quantum mechanics as discrete linguistic communities, or one might just adjust the argument as suggested in footnote 31.

concerns. That is, Hawthorne's *reductio* suggests something is wrong and I hope, in this chapter and the next, to offer some explanation of what it is.

My critiques will focus on (2.a) – (3), the portion of the argument directly dependent on the principle of charity. Charity, I'll maintain, simply can't support such strong presumption.

## 2.2 From Charity to Metaphysical Possibility

(2.a) though (2.c) together compose the linchpin of AFIC.2, the point where charity is leveraged to make claims about the actual meanings of utterances. (2.a), that speakers have good reason to assert as they do, is claimed as the direct upshot of the applicable principle of charity. (2.b) links the having of good reason to not making certain mistakes: not asserting things the metaphysical impossibility of which is *a priori* detectable, i.e. which are *a priori* necessarily false.

If this reasoning is successful it must be because the having of good reason is a strong enough condition to preclude making the type of error in question. Hirsch lays this thought out in the following passage.

[I]t is generally understood that charity in linguistic interpretation has more to do with *rationality*—with *good reasons*—than with truth. People are expected to make empirical mistakes if their sensory data are limited—it may in fact be positively *irrational* for them not to make such mistakes—so that an interpretation of language that ascribes such mistakes to people may be compatible with, or even required by, the principle of interpretive charity. Revisionary ontology, however, as this is understood in the present discussion, has nothing to do with sensory data. If revisionists interpret the ontological assertions of common sense as *a priori* necessarily false then, assuming there are other available interpretations, this does *prima facie* violate the principle of charity, since people are not normally thought to have good reason to assert what is *a priori* necessarily false.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Hirsch, "Against Revisionary Ontology," 99-100. Italics retained from the original.

The principle of charity obliges us to treat subjects of interpretation as robustly rational. They may be found to be in error when their empirical data is misleading. We may ascribe error in cases where there is empirical data to lead the subject astray and also in cases where our hand is forced due to the available interpretive options. But to interpret an assertion as expressing falsehood when it is both *a priori* and there are charitable alternatives violates this presumption of charity.

Taken on its face this seems very doubtful. Consider, for instance, a math student who is told by her teacher that there is a largest prime number. She lacks both the background knowledge and mathematical acumen needed to know that there is a proof to the contrary. That there is a largest prime is *a priori* necessarily false; yet she seems to have good reason to assert it for she has good reason to believe it. Her having of good reason seems insufficient to preclude her accepting something *a priori* necessarily false.

(A brief aside about belief and assertion: when we discuss charity about what is asserted we are also discussing charity about what is believed. I know of nobody who would recommend adopting an interpretation on which assertions were charitably interpreted in a way mismatched with the beliefs that motivate them—at least on the basis of a constitutive principle of charity. And regardless, the accounts of charity Hirsch appeals to explicitly are meant to apply to the content of thoughts as well as utterances. Thus I may be somewhat loose about whether belief or assertion is at issue.)

Perhaps some narrower sense of “good reason” is intended such that (2.b) is not overturned by cases like the above. The success of AFIC.2 thus depends on threading this needle: finding a sense of “good reason” strong enough that it warrants the inference in (2.b) and yet which isn’t too strong to be presumed on the basis of charity. (For

instance, if having “good reason” were taken to involve complete logical consistency among an agent’s beliefs then there would no longer be a charitable presumption that agents had it.)

Hirsch does not clarify his sense, though. What we are to presume about an agent’s reasons is treated as fairly intuitive, following from the relevant principle of charity. It would make sense, then, to examine that principle of charity to see what epistemic achievements it enjoins ascribing to agents.

Here too, though, we run into a lack of specificity. Hirsch says that “2 comes out of the widely accepted principle of interpretive charity”, failing to acknowledge any ambiguity in that title.<sup>54</sup> Earlier he remarks that charity is “widely acknowledged” to be an important constraint on interpretation and briefly sketches what he means. But his specific characterization of the principle is limited to the following.

Suppose we have two candidate interpretations for a set of sentences that fluent speakers of a language would typically be prepared to assert (or assent to). If one of these interpretations implies that the speakers are correct in asserting these sentences, and the other interpretation implies that they are incorrect, then the principle of charity imposes a presumption in favor of the first interpretation.<sup>55</sup>

This doesn’t seem to be an account of charity at all, just a sketch of something Hirsch takes it to require. The real work of characterizing charity seems to be left to the many works cited in an adjacent footnote (footnote 5). And, even taken this way, it is unclear how we should take this sketch as it isn’t equivalent to the characterization of charity as presuming people to have “good reasons.” There will be many cases in which presuming them to have good reasons would most naturally incline us to assign an incorrect sense to

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<sup>54</sup> Hirsch, “Against Revisionary Ontology,” 104.

<sup>55</sup> Hirsch, “Against Revisionist Ontology,” 98-9.

their words—for instance when we note that their circumstances furnish good reasons for some false belief and only poor reasons for its denial.<sup>56</sup>

Hirsch's citations also fail to adequately clarify. He points to W.V. Quine, Donald Davidson, and David Lewis.<sup>57</sup> But each of them gave a somewhat different account of charity as component of broader, and also differing, accounts of interpretation. For instance, a major component in Davidson's proposed principle is ascribing true beliefs about the observable world whereas Lewis would have it that charity is understanding subjects as believing and desiring what we would believe and desire in their circumstances.<sup>58</sup> Quine's position offers no explicit principle and appears non-equivalent to either of these.<sup>59</sup> Hirsch's own position, that charity "has more to do with rationality [...] than with truth", might place him closer to Lewis,<sup>60</sup> but my point is just that no clarity on the matter at hand is forthcoming.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> We could easily imagine this contradiction is merely apparent by taking "correct" to mean something other than true. My point is not that Hirsch is contradicting himself, it is only that Hirsch does not make clear what he means.

<sup>57</sup> See footnote 5 in Hirsch, "Against Revisionist ontology," footnote 10 in Hirsch, "Physical-object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense," and footnote 4 in Hirsch, "Ontological Arguments: Interpretive Charity and Quantifier Variance." The first two are identical. All cite the same three authors.

<sup>58</sup> For a detailed exploration of Davidson's principle see my third chapter. For Lewis' proposal see Lewis, "Radical Interpretation."

<sup>59</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Mansfield Center, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2013).

<sup>60</sup> Hirsch, "Against Revisionary Ontology," 99.

<sup>61</sup> Though Hirsch does not say exactly what he takes the principle of charity to hold, he does standardly list three distinct applications of the principle he thinks should figure in our interpretive choices: conceptual charity, charity to retraction, and charity to perception. See Hirsch, "Physical-Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense," and Hirsch, "Ontological Arguments: Interpretive Charity and Quantifier Variance." Since I am trying to keep my response as general as possible, I have not dealt with these three by name here. However, I have at some point addressed each. My remarks in §2.2-2.2.2 directly apply to conceptual charity; see also my third chapter §3.2.2. For charity to retraction see remarks made in §2.2.3 and especially footnote 71. Considerations of charity to perception are discussed in my next chapter, §3.2.3.

In my next chapter (§3) I will argue that constitutive principle of charity argued for by Davidson, who is the primary articulator of the arguments that there is any such constitutive principle, will not do the work that Hirsch requires. Davidson's constitutive principle allows for too much individual error: it allows agents to be too irrational and their beliefs to be too mistaken for it to support Hirsch's contentions about what errors can't be made. If it were clear that this were the principle Hirsch meant to employ then perhaps that would be decisive. But, since it isn't clear what principle Hirsch is employing, in this chapter I'm going to address his argument without making assumptions about which formulation of the constitutive principle of charity he is committed to. While this makes it hard to address my objections very specifically, it does not prevent sketching why Hirsch cannot thread the needle.

There are simply too many clear cases in which people are mistaken about matters of *a priori* necessity. One might find fault with my above example because it involved a non-*a priori* source of evidence in the form of testimony. The conclusion was thus not truly *a priori*. But that feature is dispensable. Consider instead the following puzzle.<sup>62</sup>

**HOW MANY SQUARES ARE THERE?**

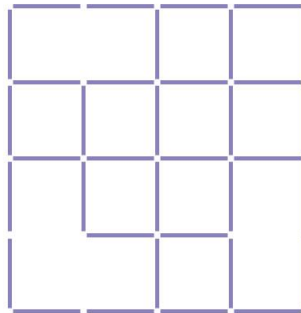


Diagram 2.1

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<sup>62</sup> The answer, by the way, is XVI.

Any enthusiast of this sort of puzzle is used to watching people give the wrong answer. But surely this cannot be attributed to bad empirical data—what there is to know is right there. And there is no testimony to mislead; if people comprehend the shape and the question then their reasoning seems entirely *a priori*. (And, taking as given that this is a matter of Euclidean geometry, all false answers are necessarily false.) This is confirmed by the reaction of people whose mistake is pointed out. They often respond that they “should have seen it” for they had all they needed to do so. Yet still, sometimes with great conviction, they botched the count.

Or think of naïve set theory, or the conceptual analysis of knowledge prior to Gettier. It is now generally acknowledged that both contained crippling flaws discoverable *a priori*. Yet many very intelligent people accepted them and we must assume that at least some had good *a priori* reasons for doing so.

We should not accept (2.a) - (2.b) if it means denying cases like the above. And it is not clear to me what sense can be given them that avoids this consequence. The fact is that mistakes about *a priori* necessity are simply too commonplace for us to claim that the charity we must accord to all speakers rules them out.

### 2.2.2 *Reasons to Be Mistaken about Ontology*

Let us say that Hirsch cannot thread the needle, such that (2.a) - (2.c) is unsound irrespective of what is substituted for O. Even given that, perhaps the case could be made that some instances of the AFIC.2 schema would still be strong arguments on the basis of specific considerations having to do with the explanation of errors. Let us say that the chosen value of O has to do with matters about which it is difficult to explain being in error due to the truth being readily apparent—matters quite unlike the mathematical and



spatial examples I offered in §2.2. If in such a case we grant that a person has good reason to assert O it might provide a compelling reason to conclude that O is true: it will be difficult to explain their having good reasons to be in error.

Hirsch does indeed consider the matters where commonsense and revisionist ontology conflict to be such that human errors are difficult to explain. He contends that, “if an interpretation abandons some assertions as being false or unreasonable, that interpretation is more credible insofar as we have some plausible way of explaining why people might be expected to make mistakes in those assertions.”<sup>63</sup> This tells against the revisionist because, “revisionists have no plausible way of explaining why people make the mistakes revisionists allege.”<sup>64</sup> So might it be that even if AFIC.2 fails in-general, Hirsch has provided a way to strengthen it in the cases he cares about?

I think not. To support instances of AFIC.2 along these lines would require a compelling reason to think that the truth about ontology is obvious. I can’t see how this could be done without being tendentious. To see how hard the truth is to arrive at seems to involve figuring out what’s true and then judging how hard it was to discover, how distant it is from natural conclusions and first impressions. If the position defended by some contemporary revisionist is the truth then it seems the truth is non-obvious. Why then would a revisionist grant that the truth of the matter was obvious?

Hirsch, at any rate, is unhelpful here. He simply scoffs incredulously at the notion that the facts of ontology could be that subtle.<sup>65</sup> “If there isn’t an object of a

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<sup>63</sup> Hirsch, “Against Revisionist Ontology,” 113.

<sup>64</sup> Hirsch, “Against Revisionist Ontology,” 113.

<sup>65</sup> Hirsch, “Against Revisionist Ontology,” 113-114.

certain sort in front of people why would they have to be as philosophically acute as Trenton Merricks to avoid the mistake of perceptually judging that such an object is there?”<sup>66</sup> Hirsch asks rhetorically. A fitting reply to the unanswered question might be “Because Trenton Merricks is right!”

Without a non-tendentious argument that the ontological facts are obvious it seems quite possible to imagine that, like many other aspects of the natural world, the truths of ontology are difficult to discern and thus that errors about them are easy to explain. The truths sought by both empirical and *a priori* fields of inquiry, from anatomy to linguistics to epistemology to math, have turned out to be difficult to divine and frequently at odds with expectations. A compelling reason is wanted to show that ontology isn’t, in this regard, similar.<sup>67</sup>

### 2.2.3 A Different Way of Taking AFIC

There is a different way of understanding Hirsch’s argument. I’ve been glossing (3) as a condition that is satisfied primarily by there being an appropriately charitable interpretation of O available, and that seems in keeping with the article where Hirsch develops this argument. But elsewhere his statement of his case might provide a different way of understanding AFIC.2 and thus avoid the difficulty I sketched above.

In his 2013 article “Charity to Charity” Hirsch is responding to objections from Brendan Jackson, among them some similar to the above. Hirsch counters:

Jackson objects that rational people can make *a priori* mistakes, even about seemingly simple propositions. That is of course true. It does not follow that

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<sup>66</sup> Hirsch, “Against Revisionist Ontology,” 113.

<sup>67</sup> If AFIC.2 succeeded then it would show common ontological views to be true and so that ontological truths were easy. But AFIC.2 can hardly be invoked to bolster its own premises.

people (rational or not) can possibly make *a priori* mistakes that are not exhibited by the totality of their linguistic behavior. The principle of interpretive charity implies, roughly put, that it is metaphysically impossible for your assertions to be stupider, crazier, or less rational than your (actual and potential) linguistic behavior dictates. You are in this respect innocent until proven guilty.<sup>68</sup>

So, it is not just that a person cannot be mistaken about matters of *a priori* necessity.

Rather, it is that you cannot be mistaken in a way not reflected in your linguistic behavior. Thus,

It is not to the point that people make *a priori* mistakes, for example, in mathematics or chess theory. What is to the point is that these mistakes must be exhibited by people's actual and potential linguistic behavior (most obviously, by their being disposed to retract their mistakes, perhaps in the face of additional evidence; less obviously, by their being disposed to say many things, perhaps in the face of additional evidence, that contradict the mistaken assertions).<sup>69</sup>

This thought does not need to be viewed as structurally altering AFIC.2. Instead, we can take the evidence of error furnished by linguistic behavior to be one of the possible things which could defeat the presumption of charity. (3) denies that there are any such defeaters for O.

Is AFIC.2 saved? It is not, for while this move may avoid one class of objections I contend it does so at the cost of rendering the argument viciously circular. To see why let us examine cases intended to illicit differing intuitions. The first is the case Hirsch himself uses to illustrate his claims about charity, the second is my own.<sup>70</sup>

*Case 1:* Abe notices an apparent inconsistency in Ben's assertions about opening things. When a box or jar is manipulated so that its inside becomes accessible Ben says someone has opened the box. Yet, when the door of a room is altered so that the inside of the room becomes accessible, from a physical standpoint an

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<sup>68</sup> Hirsch, "Charity to Charity," 438.

<sup>69</sup> Hirsch, "Charity to Charity," 438.

<sup>70</sup> While the case itself is Hirsch's its form and wording here are mine. Hirsch develops this at much greater length and with the amusing device that it is phrased in the style of an argument from a contemporary ontologist. All that didn't seem necessary for my purposes here—the case still strikes me as compelling in its significantly shortened form.

indistinguishable phenomenon, he says that the door rather than the room has been opened. But, reasons Abe, opening must have a consistent nature so these types of assertions cannot both be true. He takes this verbal inconsistency to signify a confused theory of opening; Ben should adopt a consistent theory and abandon his inconsistency.

*Case 2:* Cal notices that Deb seems inconsistent in her numerical ascriptions. Under normal conditions her counting of objects matches Cal's and common usage generally. But, presented with special cases (such as the puzzle in diagram 2.1) she will have 16 figures in front of her yet declare that there are only 15. If the figures are differently arranged the anomaly vanishes and she counts 16 figures. Cal postulates that Deb is mistaken about the number of figures in this narrow range of cases such that she asserts falsehoods.

In Case 1 Hirsch thinks it clear that Abe is barking up the wrong tree, and I am inclined to agree with him. I am compelled by Hirsch's contention that Abe is simply failing to extend common interpretive courtesy to Ben and that, if he did extend such courtesy, he'd see that there is no reason to posit a broad theoretic error rather than a mere quirk of usage.

On the other hand, in Case 2 I'm inclined to side with Cal. His observation of Deb's behavior seems like good, if defeasible, reason to think that Deb is, in this narrow range of circumstances, making a mistake and asserting a falsehood.

The question I want to ask is what explains these differing reactions to the cases. What features of Case 1 make Hirsch's contention that ordinary usage (here represented by Bob's usage) cannot be mistaken intuitively plausible? The same contention is not intuitively plausible in Case 2, so an explanation must involve a relevant disanalogy between the cases.

Is it, as Hirsch above suggested, that in one case but not the other the linguistic behavioral evidence supports the presence of an error? Well, if it were possible to be in error about opening in the way Abe supposes, then Case 1 seems to furnish ample

evidence of such an error. Ben's assertions about what is opened do contain inconsistencies. Taken at face value this seems to constitute "being disposed to say many things, perhaps in the face of additional evidence, that contradict the mistaken assertions". So the disanalogy does not seem to be the verbal behavior itself but rather something else, something which makes us here disinclined to take it at face value. In Case 2 we're comfortable treating the same sort of inconsistent ascription as compelling evidence of error.

Perhaps the difference comes from our assumption of another difference not stated in the case: we assume that in Case 2 Deb could easily be prompted to notice and retract her mistaken assertions, whereas in Case 1 Bob could not be. This fits with Hirsch's suggestion that the disposition to retract one's statements is another indication of the presence of error. I am disinclined to hang much on this, though, because there are too many reasons one might retract or fail to retract an assertion. We could imagine Case 1 being set in a college dorm filled with budding but imperceptive metaphysicians where the general tenor of discussion was such that Abe's points would be widely taken as trenchant. Thus, in the face of his arguments, most would indeed be inclined to recant their inconsistent talk of opening. We could imagine Case 2 involved a much more complex geometric puzzle such that pointing out or explaining the counting error is quite hard and most will be initially disinclined to revise their assessment. Neither of these alterations seems like it ought to significantly bear on our assessments of the cases.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> This also serves, in part, as a response to Hirsch's idea of charity to retraction, the idea that we should take the degree to which somebody is apt to retract their statements in light of further evidence (even if they haven't actually done so) as indicative of how acceptable it is to interpret the speaker as in error in asserting those statements. The considerations raised here show one way in which this is misguided: if anything serves this indicative function it is not tendency to retract as such, because many determinants of this tendency are irrelevant. Perhaps some idealized tendency to retract, tendency to retract

Perhaps we instead feel that regardless of actual tendency in one case the party *ought to* be ready to revise and in the other not. I feel that way too. But that still does not explain in virtue of what feature of the cases we have this differing reaction.

Here is my own proposed explanation: the difference between the two cases has nothing whatever to do with indications of disagreement furnished by actual or anticipated verbal behavior. Rather there is something else which makes us credit those indications in one case while ignoring them in the other. Upon reflection, I think this pivotal “something else” is apparent: in Case 1, but not in Case 2, we are antecedently inclined to be superficialists. Put differently, we do not think there is such a thing as a theory of opening about which to be mistaken. People’s theories of the physical world are not distinguished by differing beliefs about what opens as a result of certain understood physical manipulations.

Why do we have this conviction? No doubt that’s a complex question involving psychology, epistemology, and metaphysics.<sup>72</sup> But my point is simply that we have it, and that our having of it, even if un-reflected upon, is antecedent to considering Case 1. This explains why in Case 1 we don’t take the evidence furnished by linguistic behavior at face value. Meanwhile, we come to the analogous Case 2 already convinced of the real possibility of counting errors. And, thus, Case 2 sways us not a whit in the direction of charitably denying such errors.

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if one were being perfectly rational, for instance, would work. But it doesn’t seem like this would be of much use to Hirsch.

Of course for Hirsch to make use of charity to retraction in his arguments for ontological deflationism he also needs an empirical premise: that people are disinclined to revise their ontological positions upon serious guided reflection. It’s not at all clear that this is so either.

<sup>72</sup> Perhaps one could tell a Sider-style story on which we are detecting a feature of reality’s “structure.”

I think my explanation is the best one available, much more successful than anything Hirsch suggests. But if this is the correct explanation then it spells trouble for Hirsch's argument. Appealing to our intuitions about cases like Case 1 to show how we ought to handle disputed cases ends up being circular. Our intuitions about how Case 1 should be handled are driven by a superficialist conviction which entails the very thing at issue in the disputed case. In the absence of this conviction, it would be just as plausible that the disputed case should be treated more like Case 2. Hirsch's argument ends up being subtly circular, leveraging superficilism to argue for deflationism.

Let us turn from these invented cases back to an actual ontological one. The revisionary ontologist notes that ordinary speakers are inconsistent in their assertions about the existence of composite entities. They make assertions about what exists in patterns which seem arbitrary, and which run afoul of other, more general commitments regarding existence which they also seem inclined to assert. The revisionist ontologist concludes that the ordinary speakers are mistaken with regard to existence.

Is there evidence of a mistake in these people's actual and potential linguistic behavior? Taken at face value it seems there is in both of the forms Hirsch describes. Ordinary speakers easily assert things about existence which contradict their assertions elsewhere. Many of the classic ontological puzzles draw out these contradictions. Moreover, it is sometimes possible to get ordinary speakers to revise or retract their assertions, if once they can be motivated to examine and care about the involved intricacies. (Teachers of metaphysics have watched this occur in the case of certain students.) Even the perplexity with which non-philosophers often meet arguments

against commonsense ontology might be taken as a sign of a disposition to retract mistakes.

So, in this broad example case at least, linguistic behavior furnishes ample evidence that mistakes are being made. If it were possible to agree on the facts about arrangement of particles and yet differ in our existential beliefs about medium-sized dry goods, then surely we have a compelling case that the ontologist and the ordinary folk differ, and that in some regard or other the ordinary folk are mistaken. To claim that we have no such evidence, as Hirsch does, seems covertly predicated on denying that such disagreement is possible. He may indeed deny this, and that may indeed justify him in overlooking the evidence of error. But if I don't share his antecedent commitment about the ways in which theories of the world can and cannot differ then he hasn't given me any reason not to take the evidence at face value and conclude an ontological error has occurred.

If I am right about this, then Hirsch's argument could be taken in two ways, both problematic. The first, discussed in §2.2, results in an argument which proves too much. Hirsch employs claims subject to easily available counterexample in the form of readily observable mistakes. The second, discussed in this section, has a premise which depends for its plausibility on an antecedent acceptance of deflation. The reasons to accept (3) actually smuggle in the very deflationist conviction AFIC.2 aimed to support. One only reaches his assessment of the linguistic behavioral evidence if one already shares his superficialism about ontological theories; and it was disagreement over this superficialism that prompted the formulation of the argument in the first place. This is a vicious circle.



Thus, understood in either of the ways I've suggested, AFIC.2 is not successful.

### *2.3 Radical Tools for Practical Projects*

I've argued that AFIC.2 does not succeed due to a failure to show that ascribing error of the relevant sort is actually uncharitable. In this section I want to briefly treat a different, and broader, concern with the argument: is it appropriate to appeal to a constitutive principle of charity as an epistemic guide to how real speakers ought to be interpreted? In this case at least, I'll suggest that the answer is no.

To see why, we must examine the broader theories in which constitutive principles of charity inhere. Charity is here discussed as one of the constraints guiding the project of radical interpretation. Radical interpretation is the (theoretical) project of fixing content to the utterances and mental states of a person based only on physical data: behavior, physiology, etc. The rough idea was first sketched by Quine as "radical translation" but was further developed by others, chief among them Davidson. An account of radical interpretation usually provides a series of constraints which, out of the infinite universe of possible interpretations, jointly select either a single interpretation, or a set of interpretations, as correct. These constraints often are in tension with one another. For instance, a constraint having to do with simplicity is generally included, and it will often not be possible to simultaneously maximize charity and simplicity in an interpretive scheme. Thus different excellences of an interpretation must be weighed against others.

The way in which charity figures in these accounts varies: the pull of charity is sometimes described with one constraint, sometimes with several, and the precise content of these charitable constraints varies significantly. But these constraints always serve to

make interpretations which render the beliefs and assertions of a subject in some appropriate sense preferable to those which do not.

The project of radical interpretation, as conceived by Davidson, Lewis, and Williamson is a metaphysical one. What is sought is not our actual practical procedure for determining what speakers mean, but rather the metaphysical conditions under which a certain utterance or state has a certain meaning—a theory of how the representational is mapped onto the non-representational. Radical interpretation is a device, similar to a thought experiment, for focusing our relevant intuitions.

I have already mentioned that of the three authors Hirsch cites in connection with charity, his own position seems most similar to that of David Lewis. Lewis is overt about the fact that what he is propounding when he talks about radical interpretation is not a method for translating real speakers. If this were not obvious from the fact that he ascribes to his hypothetical interpreter complete physical knowledge of the subject of interpretation, Karl, there is also his explicit statement:

It should be obvious by now that my problem of radical interpretation is not any real-life task of finding out about Karl's beliefs, desires, and meanings. I am not really asking how we could determine these facts. Rather: how do the facts determine these facts?<sup>73</sup>

Davidson says similar things. For instance, he writes that “[t]he point of the ‘epistemic position’ of the radical interpreter is not that it exhausts the evidence available to an actual interpreter, but that it arguably provides sufficient evidence for interpretation.”<sup>74</sup> Clearly, then, we need not regard our actual interpretive position as that of the radical

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<sup>73</sup> Lewis, “Radical Interpretation,” 333.

<sup>74</sup> Donald Davidson, “Radical Interpretation Interpreted,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 8 (January 1, 1994): 121.

interpreter. And, more recently, Timothy Williamson follows Lewis in holding that what is sought is not a set of principles which provide an epistemic method for fixing intentional values to non-intentional states. That, he says, would be “heroically ambitious” when all that is really needed are “correct non-trivial principles about propositional attitudes that somehow link belief and truth, metaphysically rather than epistemologically.”<sup>75</sup>

That is not to say that radical interpretation’s being a metaphysical theory renders it epistemically moot. If we have high credence in a theory, then its intended purpose should not stop it being put to other uses. But I think this should suggest that some caution is appropriate when applying a principle of charity which is essentially of the machinery of radical interpretation to arguments about what we should believe real speakers are asserting. I will sketch several specific reasons for caution.

### *2.3.2 The Desiderata for Correct Interpretation*

Arguments from charity to specific semantic conclusions are apt to be over-simple. Take AFIC.2 as an instance: it invokes a single constraint on interpretation, charity, and applies it to a single statement to presumptively privilege some interpretations over others.<sup>76</sup> It then deals with anything else which might be weighed against charity in a catch-all clause, (3).

3. There is nothing to defeat this [charitable] presumption.

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<sup>75</sup> Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, 261.

<sup>76</sup> As discussed above, perhaps we should view the argument as pertaining to sets of statements instead. Even so, and even if that set is large, it is still charity to a specific aspect of verbal behavior that the argument focuses on.

But how are we to have warrant that (3) is true? We have already examined some issues with premises (3) in §2.2, but here I have something different in mind. Since the relevant principle of charity is part of a broader method of radical interpretation, what is really being claimed here is that a certain interpretation is, presumptively, the one that method will deliver. To say that nothing defeats this presumption would be, among other things, to say that none of the other constraints on interpretation in this case weigh against charity to a sufficient degree that we must prefer a less charitable view.

But accounts of radical interpretation include further constraints which are several and complex. Lewis, for instance, offers four in addition to the two which jointly compose his constraint of charity. Among them is a “principle of generativity,” which says we should prefer interpretations which allow for more simple and uniform semantics, and a “triangle principle,” which holds that the beliefs and desires ascribed to an agent must be largely independent of the language that agent is using. Practically speaking, the great complexity of showing that some interpretation is unique in best meeting these constraints puts such a demonstration out of reach.

Let’s say Hirsch did indeed accept Lewis’ account of radical interpretation. Might the principle of generativity tell against the interpretations Hirsch favors? Might multiple of the other principles in concert pull in a different direction? It seems hard to say, and thus hard to evaluate (3). An argument like AFIC.2 appeals to a single desideratum, saying very little about the others. Merely saying that interpretation X is superior in charity to interpretation Y is a long way from demonstrating that interpretation X is *on the whole* superior to Y.

Further complicating matters is that each of these desiderata is to be considered holistically, to an entire interpretive scheme at once. In AFIC.2 one desideratum, charity, is applied locally rather than globally, meaning that the candidate interpretation is evaluated on the basis solely of how charitably it can interpret one statement when what is actually supposed to be preferred is the interpretation which is most charitable on the whole. It is an open question whether an interpretation which is charitable to that one statement, *O*, will have the greatest overall charity.<sup>77</sup>

A point raised by Daniel Korman demonstrates the salience of this local examination of charity.<sup>78</sup> Korman points out that the set of ontological statements ordinary speakers of English are inclined to assert contains many apparent contradictions. It is these contradictions which lead to puzzles about material constitution, existence, and identity. But, if this is so, it is not clear that charity is best served by interpreting some particular sentence about ordinary ontology as true since this will entail others being false. It might turn out that charity is best served by interpreting some values of *O* as false to allow greater charity elsewhere.

To give a specific example take the following simple version of the old statue/lump conundrum, where ‘Goliath’ names a statue made from unfired clay and ‘Lumpl’ the lump of clay that makes it up.

- (D1) Goliath exists and Lumpl exists.
- (D2) If Goliath exists and Lumpl exists, then Goliath = Lumpl.

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<sup>77</sup> I am dealing here with the argument as Hirsch formalized it. As discussed in §1, elsewhere than in his formalized argument Hirsch often speaks about charity as applied more holistically. And, as will be discussed below, he is aware that this may bear on the success of his argument.

<sup>78</sup> Daniel Z. Korman, “Ordinary Objects,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2011., 2011, accessed December 5, 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/ordinary-objects/>, §7.2.

- (D3) Goliath has different properties from Lump1.  
(D4) If Goliath has different properties from Lump1, then Goliath  $\neq$  Lump1.<sup>79</sup>

Here, Korman suggests, the opponent of revisionism will deploy the argument from charity to defend (D1) an upshot of the ontology of common sense. But ordinary speakers will also be inclined to assert (D2)-(D4), or things to the same effect. And affirming (D1) involves denying at least one of (D2)-(D4) and thus treating it uncharitably. Thus it isn't at all obvious that the interpretation which is charitable to (D1) is most charitable overall.

Even if one doesn't find this particular case compelling, the suggestion is generally applicable. It is our tendency to affirm mutually impossible sets of propositions that motivate many of the revisionist arguments. Thus even assessing which candidate interpretations best meet the constraint of charity will require a much more holistic examination than can be had by considering a single sentence.

John Horden has argued, though not in these terms, that Hirsch's proposal isn't most charitable overall.<sup>80</sup> He contends that while Hirsch's QV proposal might interpret speakers' statements in a charitable way it also requires uncharitably assigning motivations to those same speakers.<sup>81</sup> On the conciliatory semantics of QV everybody would speak truths but, Horden maintains, many of the utterances of ontologists would be trivial. It would be markedly *uncharitable* to assign motivations which would prompt such trivial utterance, as Hirsch must to make sense of the behavior. Hence Hirsch's

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<sup>79</sup> Korman, "Ordinary Objects," §3.1.

<sup>80</sup> John Horden, "Ontology in Plain English," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 64, no. 255 (April 1, 2014): 225–242.

<sup>81</sup> Though charity regarding motives is an issue I haven't discuss here, it is a part of Lewis' account which Horden appeals to.

interpretation is not charitable overall. Whether Horden's argument is ultimately successful or not, this further illustrates how complex it is to defend the overall charity of an interpretation.

I think these considerations furnish good reasons to be agnostic about which interpretation we should actually prefer on the basis of the constraints on radical interpretation. And if we must be so agnostic the deflationary argument from interpretive charity will not succeed. Any successful attempt to use the constraints on interpretation to warrant a particular interpretation is going to need to be a good deal more complex.

While Hirsch does not address my concerns about other desiderata of interpretation, he does anticipate the contention that other charitable concerns will counterbalance those he adduces. In the next section I'll discuss his rebuttal and show that it is inadequate.

### *2.3.3. To What Ought We Be Most Charitable?*

Hirsch terms it a "conflict of charity" when a typical speaker of a language is inconsistent in his assertions thus making charity pull in contrary directions.<sup>82</sup> The question then becomes to what charity is most due since not all statements may be charitably interpreted simultaneously. He anticipates that conflicts of charity may be invoked as outweighing his own appeal to charity and used to argue that ordinary speakers need not be interpreted as asserting ontological truths. He is confident that this objection will fail.

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<sup>82</sup> Hirsch, "Against Revisionist Ontology," 108.

In order to generate the conflict, some commitment of ordinary speakers must be put forward which could not be treated charitably by Hirsch's proposed interpretation.

He expects these commitments to be general principles such as the following.

(TTO): Two things cannot wholly occupy the same place at the same time.<sup>83</sup>

It is held that ordinary speakers hold (TTO). If we accept that commonsense ontological statements are true then (TTO) must be false. Hence the charitable interpretation of ordinary speakers Hirsch advocates will be uncharitable in regarding people as mistaken about (TTO).

Hirsch thinks this sort of thing fails as a rebuttal to his argument due to the primacy of examples over principles. He writes,

It is a standard assumption in general discussions of the nature of language that the linchpin of language-learning and language-interpretation consists of *examples*, especially perceptual examples. Faced with two candidate interpretations, and a conflict of charity, we must therefore choose the interpretation that does best in sustaining people's assertions about examples, rather than the interpretation that sustains some general principles. [...] In a conflict between accepted principles and accepted examples we normally hold onto the examples and qualify or refine the principles.<sup>84</sup>

So, his reasoning runs, if only charity to principles weighs against his charity to specific judgments about ontology, charity to the specific declarations must win out.

I have two points to make in response to this. First, I see no reason to grant that only principles may be provided as the commitments which generate a conflict of charity. If one examines Korman's example in the previous section then one will see that it doesn't invoke any general principle, only specific judgments about a specific case. So it seems that conflicts of charity may be set up without appeal to principles.

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<sup>83</sup> The name given the principle here is my own, but the wording is Hirsch's, from Hirsch, "Against Revisionist Ontology," 108.

<sup>84</sup> Hirsch, "Against Revisionist Ontology," 109.



What's more, if there is reason to think that people hold principles like (TTO), which Hirsch seems to concede, then it is not because they go around saying as much. As a rule, it is only philosophers that abstract and state principles like that. Ordinary speakers say things like, "Only my coat would fit, so there's nothing else in my bag." So the tidy opposition Hirsch sets up between principles on one side and examples on the other is artificial and won't serve.

Second, I don't grant Hirsch is correct about primacy of examples over principles. His generalization is too simple, and in the cases that matter here I think that the opposite of what he holds is more likely the truth. In general, whether we should be more committed to a principle or a particular example seems like an epistemic matter. It depends on how much confidence we are justified to place in each. If I am briefly appeared to spotted-dog-ly then that is likely a good reason for me to reexamine my casual generalization that there are no spotted dogs. If I am briefly appeared to dog-walking-through-brick-wall-ly that seems a poor reason to abandon my conviction that corporeal beings cannot walk through brick walls. To say that example trumps principle in general simply doesn't carve at the joints.

However, directly contra Hirsch's contention, I think charity to a certain sub-class of general principles actually ought to be weighted more highly than charity to specific factual claims. (In §3 of my next chapter I examine in much greater detail what should be accorded greatest charity according to the constitutive principle of charity. What I argue there is compatible with my suggestion here, though somewhat differently supported.)

Here are several considerations which suggest this weighting. Certain general principles seem particularly resistant to revision. The limiting cases would seem to be the principles we accept as rules of logic. Even if it is possible to disabuse us of them, it could be done only with difficulty. They are so ingrained in the way we process the world that we tend to interpret new information in light of them rather than the reverse (and this tends to be true even when we lack the sophistication to explicitly state our commitment to them).

Perhaps what I've said sounds a bit like Kant's categories. But one needn't accept such a strong thesis as that to recognize that some things are more deeply imbedded in the way we view the world than are others and tend to be reflected in speakers' tendencies to assert. Let's call these principles entrenched. Logical principles are the most stark example, but other sorts of principles seem similarly, if to a lesser degree, entrenched. For instance, principles which seem obvious matters of conceptual analysis are not easily revised, and they tend to determine what evidence will count as warranting what specific factual claims. The general principle that if baseball bats exist they are material objects is, for most, firmly enough entrenched that it would take quite a bit of evidence of the presence of baseball bats where no material object is present for somebody to even consider revising that principle instead of just viewing the evidence as misleading.<sup>85</sup>

So far there's nothing surprising in this. Now let's turn back to charity. Interpretive charity, as represented by constitutive principles of charity, suggests that there is a limit to how mistaken or senseless our thoughts and statements about the world

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<sup>85</sup> For most, though not for all: Robert Koons has entertained a view on which artifacts, and so baseball bats, are social practices. To attribute such a view is not in conflict with my point here. Robert Koons, correspondence with the author, June 23, 2016.

could be. Now imagine two interpretations. One ascribes a mistake about a more entrenched matter, that if baseball bats exist they are material objects, say. The other interpretation ascribes an error about a less entrenched matter, say that there is a baseball bat sitting on the backseat of a particular car. Given just those facts, which interpretation seems more charitable? The answer seems obviously to be the latter, as it ascribes a less systemic and structural error to the speaker. This would still seem true, I think, if we changed the belief in the latter case to be something quite general, such as that there are generally baseball bats in dugouts.

I'm suggesting that the more entrenched a commitment is, in some loosely defined but intuitive sense, the more weight ought to be given to charitably interpreting that commitment in determining what is most charitable on the whole. It is worth noting that Donald Davidson says very similar things. See §3 of my next chapter for a protracted discussion of his position.

Instantiations of AFIC.2 useful to the deflationist are generated by substituting a commonsense ontological claim, or set of claims, for O. In §2.3.2 I suggested that interpreting O charitably will often incur a cost to charity somewhere else: common sense inclines speakers to incompatible sets of assertions. To that I can now add the suggestion that the sorts of things the deflationists would use for O will likely be less entrenched than other items in those incompatible sets. To take an example, (TTO) strikes me as likely more entrenched than many judgments about how specific items ought to be individuated.

So Hirsch seems to be unsuccessful in defending AFIC.2 against the problem posed by conflicts of charity. And, while in §2.3.2 I only argued that such conflicts gave

reason to be agnostic about the best interpretation, I've here given at least some reason to suspect that interpretations which permit charity to the sorts of general principles ontologists frequently appeal to will better satisfy the constraint of charity overall, exactly contrary to Hirsch's contention.

#### *2.3.4. Practical Interpretation*

Difficulties with actually using the framework of radical interpretation to show that one interpretation is preferable to another aside, there is a further concern. It seems that some factors warrant our actual choices of interpretation which are entirely absent from that model.

The way the radical interpretation thought experiment is set up, it is presumed that the interpreter has no prior knowledge of the subject's language. The language is entirely unfamiliar as is the subject, thus language and beliefs must be filled in together from the ground up. Even if there is something instructive about this model, the situation it describes is dissimilar to that which adult English speakers find themselves in when trying to interpret subjects who also, apparently, are speaking English. The difference is extensive prior knowledge of a language which the translator has reason to believe the subject is speaking.<sup>86</sup>

Intuitively this difference matters. Say you ask a random speaker at a bus stop if he has the time. He responds, "It's 12:45." Were we to apply the apparatus of radical interpretation, this would furnish us with no information whatsoever about the speaker's attitude regarding the time. That a speaker uttered "It's 12:45," after receiving a certain

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<sup>86</sup> Or, put so as to avoid abstracting linguistic communities: the difference is extensive knowledge of the idiolects of many members of a community along with the low probability of significant deviation in the idiolects of those not yet observed.

stimulus is far too slight a bit of information to allow us to construct even part of an interpretive theory. All we would have is a single data point about speech behavior—it would need to be joined by thousands more before we could even hope to begin connecting the semantic dots.

But of course this is silly. This one felicitous response, along with our existing knowledge of the probability that others at local bus stops speak a language very like our own, seems sufficient to warrant us in assigning a meaning to the sentence. In other words, if it sounds like our English, we have a good reason to interpret it as English. Unless we want to say that the total semantic agnosticism described above is appropriate, it seems we must concede this. Let us call this tendency to interpret what sounds like our language as having the same semantic properties as our language *the presumption of shared language*.

Granted, *the presumption of shared language* is defeasible and conditional (meaning that we may only turn out to share some of our language with someone and there are circumstances in which we should not so presume). But all that's needed is that it is indeed a reason which properly figures in our decisions about how to interpret utterances.

The significance of this is that it shows something about interpretation in real situations. The question of which interpretation we should accept, call this the question of practical interpretation, isn't straightforwardly reducible to questions of which interpretation best fulfills the constraints provided by our favored theory of radical interpretation. Practical interpretation has other inputs—as we've seen those writing about radical interpretation readily concede!

This is really no more than to point out that selecting an interpretation is not a task fundamentally different in kind from selecting any other sort of belief. Our choices of which beliefs to give credence and which interpretations to ascribe will be a function of our available evidence, which may be of a variety of sorts. Thinking that radical interpretation alone should be our guide would be rather like thinking that information about the movement of individual molecules must alone determine our beliefs about temperature.

To extend the temperature simile, it is certainly true that if we had all the facts about individual molecular motion and the ability to process them it would give us a correct answer about temperature. So here, we may grant that if we had all the relevant facts and could process them we could reach the correct interpretation. But I've already shown just what a tall order this is. We can at best hope for only partial information and some capacity to process it, and in some cases far less. Thus we use other methods. For temperature, we may need to analyze emissions, as we do to establish the heat of stars, or trust testimony, as we do when we form beliefs about the climate of countries we've not visited. For interpretation, too, we have recourse to other sorts of evidence.

What I've called the presumption of shared language is just a single example to illustrate that there are other sources of evidence germane to the work of practical interpretation. It isn't a full enumeration, and I'd be hesitant to try to give one. But it seems that our theories of human psychology and behavior must be centrally involved, as must our beliefs about how information is disseminated in society and how linguistic usage differs across social groups. In particular instances many more specific sources will be relevant.

This shows that arguments like AFIC.2 which try to leverage interpretive concerns into conclusions about what actual speakers mean will need to be evaluated in light not only of factors relevant to radical interpretation, but also factors involved in practical interpretation. The one will not just trivially coincide with the other. After all, Hirsch is proposing an actual interpretation of the words of actual groups of speakers.

#### *2.3.4.2 Shared Language in the Philosophy Room*

What of the case at hand, where AFIC.2 is used to challenge the revisionist? Well, given that they come from the same linguistic communities, use the same grammar, etc., the presumption of shared language gives me some reason to accept that both revisionary ontologist and ordinary speaker are speaking the same language as I am. The question, then, is not just whether the evidence furnished by other considerations (in this case interpretive charity as an element of radical interpretation) points towards linguistic variance, but whether that evidence is strong enough to defeat this contrary pull. §2.3.2-2.3.3 suggested that this evidence from linguistic charity is actually rather doubtful, and this section shows that I am rational to consider the counter-evidence when selecting an interpretation.

It is hard to precisely assign strengths to these pieces of evidence. But it seems fair to say that the success of AFIC.2-style argument looks increasingly doubtful in light of this. AFIC.2 is too simplistic. To make the same sort of case compelling would involve making a vastly more complex argument for the superiority of some interpretations than Hirsch has anywhere suggested.

There is a special worry about the move I'm making as applied to philosophers, though. Some might be inclined to suggest that there is much besides charity to defeat

the presumption of shared language in the case of analytic metaphysicians (from the point of view of an ordinary speaker). After all, analytic philosophers are inclined to generate their own specialized idioms, give somewhat arbitrary precisising or stipulative definitions of common terms, and so on. Thus in the “metaphysics room” what is being spoken would appear to be “ontologese” instead of plain, old English.<sup>87</sup>

First, as I said above, the presumption of shared language is just one example of a broader phenomenon. That this example might be outweighed in a given case thus doesn’t undermine the overall point. AFIC.2 and the like would still lack something very important.

But, second, I don’t think we can conclude that philosophers speak a different tongue. Yes, philosophers regiment language and use technical vocabulary. But that is not a good reason to posit the use of a distinct language. Their explicit additions and adjustments don’t include much of their vocabulary and, specifically, they do not standardly precisify the words specifically at issue in these disputes, such as quantifier terms. Anyway, if the difference in usage were a result of an explicit redefinition then there would be no dispute: philosophers would be aware that their usage was non-standard.

So the question is whether the technical vocabulary philosophers explicitly employ should make us expect a much more extensive linguistic difference that is unnoticed. I’d argue it does not. One reason to think so is that philosophers are not alone in employing technical and precisified vocabulary. Many groups that have a specialization do something similar in specific semantic domains. This doesn’t seem to undermine a general presumption of overlap between their use of language and that of

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<sup>87</sup> Terminology from Sider. *Writing the Book of the World*.



ordinary speakers. We expect differences to be localized, and in many cases identified by the speakers themselves. We do not, in fact, expect the differences to include an undetected shift in the meaning of very basic semantic and syntactic components. When we speak to a specialist we still presume by-and-large shared language.

Relatedly, it seems implausible that specialists like philosophers would come to speak a radically different language *wholly without realizing it*. The specialized lingo of a speaker is usually acquired after the acquisition of basic linguistic competency, so changes in usage are likely to require effort and to be noticed. This suggests that differences in usage will be restricted in scope and largely noticed by their adopter. So it seems like an unwarranted leap to infer a general lack of linguistic continuity from a bit of specialized vocabulary and usage.<sup>88</sup>

There may be exceptions as the presumption of shared language is defeasible; but these considerations seems sufficient to say that it should still generally be extended to philosophers.

### *3.1 Conclusion*

I have shown that the argument from interpretive charity as instantiated in the AFIC.2 schema is flawed and unconvincing. I traced the structure of the argument in §1, and then in §2 pursued two major objections, both focused on the argument's use of "the principle of charity": first, I argued that there is no way of interpreting AFIC.2 such that the constitutive principle of charity adequately supports its premises (§2.2). Next I made the case that local considerations of charity provide an insufficient basis upon which to

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<sup>88</sup> John Horden suggests, I think rightly, that how ontologists might come to speak a different language is actually a problematic gap in Hirsch's proposed semantic theory. See Horden, "Ontology in Plain English," 234-5. I discuss this point in my fourth chapter §3.3.

argue for an entire interpretive theory. And, along the way, I sketched why it is important for philosophers to be clear just what they mean when they invoke a principle of charity.

Some parts of my case are narrowly focused on the argument from interpretive charity as Hirsch lays it out, the argument I've called AFIC.2. But we might imagine a better argument from interpretive charity being articulated, something which found a better way to use the push of the constitutive principle of charity to force the acceptance of a deflationary interpretive theory. How much prospect is there of such an argument? Put differently, how general a refutation of this argumentative strategy have I here provided?

What I've done is lay out major obstacles which must be surmounted in the making of such a case. Though my objections in §2.2 are focused pretty narrowly on AFIC.2, they at least suggest the difficulty of such an approach: the challenge of finding an implication of constitutive charity strong enough to non-circularly drive the argument and weak enough to be plausible. But the considerations raised in §2.3 are quite general. Any attempt to leverage charity towards a specific semantic conclusion will have to face the challenges I adduced. Call the argued-for semantic theory S. A strong argument for S from charity would need to (a) argue for the global superiority of S to its competitors in terms of charity. Demonstrating its superiority on a few statements, or even a great many, will be insufficient if there is prospect of compensating losses in charity elsewhere. Moreover, (b) such an argument must show that no other constraints on semantic theory selection intervene, outweighing S's advantages in terms of charity.

Finally, (c) the argument would need to deal with our actual sources of evidence for interpretive theories, not just those inhering in the theory of radical interpretation.

Nothing in (a)-(c) seems to present an in-principle insurmountable challenge. But (a)-(c) together show the great burden such an argument must heft. That burden might yet be lifted, though. And even if it doesn't "pull hard enough" I've done little to challenge the claim that interpretive charity pulls in the direction of deflationary semantics, or that deflation provides strong support for Actual QV. This would leave constitutive charity as a potential reason to accept deflation, even if not an independently compelling one, and the argument from interpretive charity as an at-least-potentially-viable strategy for establishing Actual QV.

But I will not leave things there. My next chapter will foreclose any even moderately compelling support for deflation being provided by constitutive charity on the grounds that one should neither accept a constitutive principle of charity nor take it to have the needed force if one does. And it and the next chapter together will foreclose deflation being treated as a sufficient ground upon which to accept Actual QV.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Whither Charity?

The argument from interpretive charity is an insufficient basis on which to conclude that ontological deflation or Actual QV is true. My second chapter makes this case at length. Still, I there don't challenge a key claim of Eli Hirsch's argument for Actual QV from charity: that deflation generally, and Actual QV more specifically, provides part of the most charitable interpretation of a certain category of utterances and beliefs.<sup>1</sup> However, it may be doubted that this is so. It is worth posing the question.

My second chapter developed difficulties of arguing for the general preferability of any interpretive scheme based on localized charity of the sort the argument from interpretive charity appeals to. Maximizing charity on one domain turns out to be a flimsy basis on which to adopt an entire interpretation. And yet, it would still be *a* reason to favor that interpretation, at least given certain principles of charity. This leaves open the possibility that it might still be made the basis for an argument for a deflationary interpretation, and for Actual QV.

I intend now to sever the connections between charity, ontological deflation, and Actual QV. I will argue that charity, understood along Davidsonian lines as a constitutive principle of charity, provides no even moderately compelling reason to think speakers can't be mistaken about ontological matters. Thus interpretive charity provides

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<sup>1</sup> I use the language of being "part of" because the thesis of Actual QV is a long way from being a complete interpretive scheme, and there are many different complete interpretive schemes which would entail the truth of Actual QV. However, going forward, I do not always rigorously distinguish between Actual QV and interpretations which entail it. I have tried to avoid this awkward elocution except where it really matters.

no significant support for deflation. And, even if deflation were true, I will show that this would not establish Actual QV.

This case will be made in three parts. First, I will argue that the Davidsonian principle of charity itself is unmotivated. After characterizing the principle and the general philosophical framework in which it fits in §1, I'll examine the available arguments for the principle in §2. (That this allows me to say I am working on meta-meta-ontology is not my primary motivation, I swear.) There is, I'll show, no generally compelling reasons for accepting that the principle is true, and thus no generally compelling argument can be based on it.<sup>2</sup>

Second, in §3, I will examine what this principle of charity would demand if it were true. I'll argue that it still would do little to motivate the adoption of a deflationary semantics such as actual QV. The motivation for adopting a deflationary semantic theory is to provide a theory on which speakers may be interpreted as not disagreeing about ontological matters. Charity is taken to require interpreting them as speaking truly, while some must speak falsely if they genuinely disagree with others. But I'll show that this is not so: there is actually ample room, on the Davidsonian principle of charity, for error about matters ontological.

Third, in §4, I will show how even if, contra the argument thus far, one granted that a principle of charity pertains and precludes ascribing error thus motivating a deflationary semantics, it still isn't a strong argument for Actual QV. The features of Actual QV which are supposed to make it especially charitable are actually shared by a number of other semantic proposals. Thus, the argument used to support Actual QV

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<sup>2</sup> By no generally compelling argument I mean no argument which does not rest on premises I take to be themselves held by very few and in need of argument in their own right. There is no compelling argument that employs premises typical contemporary philosophers could be expected to grant.

actually only lands it on a par with other semantic theories, and judgment about which to prefer would have to be made on some other basis. Short this further argument Actual QV should not be accepted on the basis of interpretive charity.

So my argument will be a series of “even ifs”. Davidson’s principle of charity is unmotivated. But, even if it weren’t, it would not motivate deflation. And, even if it did motivate deflation, that wouldn’t constitute a good contrastive reason to accept Actual QV.

### *1.1 What We Talk About When We Talk About Charity*

In my previous chapter I punted on questions regarding what formulation of the constitutive principle of charity is actually correct. Since Hirsch’s invocation of the principle is rather detail-light, I attempted a response in kind. But if I’m to make a case predicated on the nature of the principle, then I must be more detailed about what that nature is.

As my second chapter pointed out, there is not just one principle which goes by the name “the principle of charity.” I am here concerned with a constitutive principle of the sort first suggested by Donald Davidson. I shall call this the Davidsonian Principle of Charity (hereafter DPOC). By this I mean a principle which is constitutive (in the sense discussed in my last chapter), and is characterized in a way sufficiently close to the way Davidson characterized the principle he articulated (as I shall discuss at much greater length below).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Specifically the DPOC is characterized as placing requirements on both how much truth one must ascribe to an subject’s beliefs and how much rationality one must ascribe to the agent, in keeping with the principles of Correspondence and Coherence respectively (discussed below in §1.3).

Why focus on this principle to the exclusion of others? First, because this is a principle my interlocutor explicitly appeals to.<sup>4</sup> Second, because this principle seems to be the only one that enjoys much argumentative support. That a constitutive principle of charity pertains at all isn't *prima facie* obvious. The reasons for supposing there to be one derive from Davidson's work on semantic theory. Others have made the case for various alterations to the Davidsonian formulation, but these generally take as a starting point that something very like the DPOC pertains, and thus themselves inhere in the Davidsonian framework. Where any reason is forthcoming for the supposition that a principle of charity is true, it points back to Davidson's philosophy of truth and meaning. There simply doesn't seem to be another game in town.

I'll first try to characterize how Davidson arrives at his version of the principle of charity (hereafter POC). But Davidson's rationale for accepting it is, at the very least, unclear and difficult to formalize. There are many interpretive issues and ambiguities surrounding Davidson's reasoning. Peter Pagin, for example, suggests that there is not a clear answer to the question of why Davidson thought his POC should be accepted.<sup>5</sup> Pagin draws several possible rationales from Davidson's corpus which *may* be meant to establish the truth of DPOC. And for none of these is it straightforward to construct a formalized argument which has as its conclusion the truth of DPOC.

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<sup>4</sup> As my previous chapter mentions (§2.2), Hirsch actually appeals to three somewhat different constitutive principles of charity: Quine's, Davidson's and David Lewis'. His own statements and use of the principle seem most in keeping with Davidson or Lewis. And, per my next point, Lewis offers no argument for the existence of any principle of charity whatever. He simply characterizes one, in dialogue with Davidson, apparently taking for granted much of the Davidsonian apparatus such as radical interpretation. See Lewis, "Radical Interpretation." And, finally, Davidson's formulation seems most congenial to Hirsch's aims.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Pagin, "Radical Interpretation and the Principle of Charity," in *A Companion to Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernie Lepore and Kirk Ludwig (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 225–246.

I cannot hope to address all these interpretive ambiguities here. Instead I will sketch the broad sweep of the reasoning which brings Davidson to DPOC in §1.2, and the specifics of the principle he arrives at in §1.3. With this in hand I will turn to the narrower candidate arguments for the DPOC without attempting to finally adjudicate between them. (Since my goal is metaphysical rather than exegetical, the question of which argument Davidson intended to be primary does not seem of great importance. Thus I shall also consider arguments which he never suggested.)

### *1.2 The Basis for the Constitutive Principle of Charity*

It will be useful to divide Davidson's reasoning into two parts: radical interpretation (§1.2.2) and the broader theory of meaning to which it connects (§1.2.3). This division is my own and merely adopted for convenience.

Davidson wrote about these topics extensively over the course of decades. Naturally, my brief overview will not do justice to the nuance and diversity of his statements. On one point especially this limitation is worth pointing out: here I present a view typical of Davidson's later career in that it explicitly invokes content externalism and his notion of triangulation. These elements were either absent or not yet explicit in Davidson's earlier work where he first articulated and argued for DPOC.

This development of his ideas over time has led a number of Davidson's commentators to treat his content externalism as inessential to the rationale for DPOC. They may well be right in this, and their suggestions as to the rationale will be dealt with extensively in §2. But I've here opted to include the externalist element as it both seems



to provide for a cohesive theory and to accurately reflect Davidson's later thought on the subject.<sup>6</sup>

### *1.2.2 Radical Interpretation*

Davidson uses the concept of radical interpretation as a thought experiment to guide thought about interpretation more generally. Interpretation, in this context, is the process of coming to understand the language of a speaker. Davidson models this as the adoption of a theory of truth for that speaker, a theory which will assign truth conditions to a potential infinity of sentences using something like the recursive apparatus of Tarski's famous truth theory. Such a truth theory will have as a consequence an infinite number of statements with the form of Tarski's T-schema: 'X' is true iff Y', where X is a statement in the object language and Y is a statement of the truth conditions of X in the metalanguage<sup>7</sup>, infinite because it includes the truth conditions not just of actual utterances, but of potential ones as well.<sup>8</sup> On Davidson's view having a correct theory of this sort for a speaker allows one to understand that speaker's utterances, or at least their literal meaning.<sup>9</sup> He writes, "A theory of truth links speaker with interpreter: it at once describes the linguistic abilities and practices of the speaker and gives the substance of

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<sup>6</sup> It seems clear that by the 90s content externalism was intimately bound up with charity in Davidson's thought. See, for example, Donald Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: New York: Clarendon Press, 2001), 205–220.

<sup>7</sup> Davidson suggests amending the T-schema to allow for tenses and the context dependence of meaning, thus producing something more like 'X' is true at T in C iff Y' where T is a time and C a context. But Davidson himself sometimes elides these details for ease of presentation, and I've here followed him in this.

<sup>8</sup> Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," 310.

<sup>9</sup> Davidson acknowledges that, above and beyond such a theory, an awareness of the intended "force" of an utterance is necessary. But he thinks this resists any theoretic regimentation. See Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," 312.

what a knowledgeable interpreter knows which enables him to grasp the meaning of the speaker's utterances."<sup>10</sup> (Neither party need have an explicit propositional knowledge of the theory. An awareness of its predictions is sufficient.<sup>11</sup>)

Radical interpretation is conceived as the project of conducting this interpretation without any prior information about the beliefs or linguistic practices of your object—without yourself speaking his language, without access to a speaker who speaks both your language and his, without a manual to translate between your languages, and etc. All the interpreter has access to is the behavior, including linguistic behavior, of the interpretive object. Davidson's notion of radical interpretation takes inspiration from Quine's similar idea of radical *translation*, but Davidson distinguishes the two because his interest is explicitly semantic. Quine's radical translation only requires matching object language sentences to equivalent sentences of the metalanguage, not to truth conditions, and though there is a close relation between the two projects, radical interpretation must more explicitly reveal semantic structure.<sup>12</sup>

Radical interpretation is meant to be an instructive abstraction, not necessarily an accurate portrayal of how interpretation really takes place. Davidson is explicit on this point. Radical interpretation is a way of focusing thoughts about the conditions under which interpretation is possible.<sup>13</sup> (It is worth noting that for Davidson, from the standpoint of radical interpretation, it is a person, not a language, which is interpreted. The available data on usage are furnished by individuals, and there is no assumption that

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<sup>10</sup> Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," 311-12.

<sup>11</sup> Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," 312.

<sup>12</sup> Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," 319.

<sup>13</sup> Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," 324-25. Though Davidson adds that it should not be assumed that the process he describes is not practicable. See his footnote 67.

idiolects will resemble one another in some predictable way. Thus throughout, when I refer to an interpretive object, I mean the person being interpreted, and when I refer to an object language I mean that person's language and not that of their linguistic community.)

The major obstacle for the interpreter in a radical interpretation scenario is determining the content of several interrelated factors simultaneously. If the belief of the object could be independently determined then this would be a powerful tool for establishing the meaning of utterances (and thence for abstracting general semantic patterns). On the other hand if the meaning of the object's utterances could be independently pinned down it would provide a fairly straightforward avenue to establishing his beliefs. But neither of these is possible for the radical interpreter who must consequently find a way to assign the entire interrelated complex of beliefs and meanings holistically, without one part or the other held fixed.

What Davidson does think the interpreter can ascertain from behavior is assent to and lack of assent for sentences in the object language (and potentially not just the binary of assent or its absence, but degrees of acceptance as well<sup>14</sup>). This, along with the circumstances in which the sentences are uttered or assented to, provides the basis from which the interpreter must reason. But the obstacle still remains: even if a speaker holds statement X to be true, X cannot be matched to things believed to determine its meaning if beliefs aren't known and the object's beliefs cannot be determined unless the meaning of X is known.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," §III.

<sup>15</sup> The by-and-large sincerity of speakers is often assumed both in Davidson's own writings and in the related literature. I've followed that here.

Davidson says that constraints on possible interpretations are what will allow escape from this “circle” of inferential dependence. He appeals to two. First, there is the Principle of Coherence, which “prompts the interpreter to discover a degree of logical consistency in the thought of the speaker”.<sup>16</sup> Put somewhat more formally, “it is a constraint on possible interpretations of sentences held true that they are (within reason) logically consistent with one another.”<sup>17</sup> By taking account of patterns of assent and dissent and assuming they conform to a broadly rational pattern the interpreter can begin to determine the logical structure of the language, finding logical constants: connectives, quantificational elements, and so on.

Second, the interpreter appeals to the Principle of Correspondence, which “prompts the interpreter to take the speaker to be responding to the same features of the world that he (the interpreter) would be responding to under similar circumstances”.<sup>18</sup> Note that not only must object and interpreter agree but their agreement must involve speaking about the same feature *of the world*. This is intended to be factive: they aren’t responding to the same feature of the world if nothing actually in the world is that to which their utterances correspond.

The Principle of Coherence gives formal structure to the interlocked beliefs and statements of the object, and the Principle of Correspondence can be used to give matter to that form. By working from the correlation of the object’s pattern of assent and dissent to sentences in specific circumstances the interpreter can generate a theory of content for a subset of sentences in the object language. Along with Coherence this can be used to

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<sup>16</sup> Davidson, “Three Varieties of Knowledge,” 211.

<sup>17</sup> Davidson, “The Structure and Content of Truth,” 320.

<sup>18</sup> Davidson, “Three Varieties of Knowledge,” 211.

generate a complete theory. And enough of the predictions of the theory, the T-schema sentences, can be compared to the evidence of actual usage in the object to evaluate whether the theory is adequate. Thus radical interpretation is achieved.

Together the Principles of Coherence and Correspondence compose Davidson's Principle of Charity. The significance of the principle of charity is apparent: it is the condition which allows radical interpretation to proceed. (The name "principle of charity" is taken from N.L. Wilson, though the specific content and significance given to it there differ significantly.<sup>19</sup>)

### *1.2.3 Theory of Meaning*

Davidson holds that intentional states can only exist under certain intersubjective conditions. His argument is that the mark of the intentional, straightforwardly illustrated by belief<sup>20</sup>, is its ability to be mistaken, to be mismatched to reality.<sup>21</sup> This, he maintains, means that beliefs can only be had by agents who have the concept of objective truth; it can be seen to be an essential part of the concept of belief that it is the sort of thing that could match the way the world really is or fail to do so. "Having a belief demands in addition appreciating the contrast between true belief and false, between appearance and reality, mere seeming and being. [...] Someone who has a belief about the world—or

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<sup>19</sup> Wilson, "Substances without Substrata."

<sup>20</sup> Davidson thinks belief is "central to all kinds of thought" and that other propositional attitudes require the presence of certain beliefs. See Davidson, "Thought and Talk."

<sup>21</sup> I am glossing over a complication here. In some of Davidson's discussions of this issue he makes clear that he thinks desires, intentions, and etc. must be discovered along with beliefs. This leads to a further complication in the method of radical interpretation, and the involvement of methods borrowed from work on decision theory for the isolation of preferences. However, it doesn't really alter the broad outline of his view which may be why he himself sometimes offers a simplified version which focuses on belief. In either case charity functions in much the same way. For discussion of this added complexity see Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," and Donald Davidson, "A Unified Theory of Thought, Meaning, and Action," in *Problems of Rationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 151–66.

anything else—must grasp the concept of objective truth, of what is the case independent of what he or she thinks.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, no creature without the concept of objective truth can have intentional states.

But the concept of objectivity, Davidson maintains, can only be obtained from communication with others. Put baldly, “[t]hought depends on communication.”<sup>23</sup> His argument for this point is related, at least broadly, to Wittgenstein’s private language argument.<sup>24</sup> The idea seems to be that a creature, on its own, may react to its environment, and even react to different elements of it differently. But there can be no concept of its reactions being appropriate or not because there is nothing against which to measure them. They can no more be correct or incorrect than a balloon is correct or incorrect as it expands and contracts with temperature and pressure. “[O]nly communication with another can supply an objective check.”<sup>25</sup>

This, in turn, is because there is no ground on which to say which element in the causal chain leading to the reaction is that which the reaction is about. The aboutness of a response can exist only from the standpoint of an interpreter. For aboutness is grounded, at core, in similarity of response such that similar responses are about that distal stimulus, or type of distal stimulus, which frequently leads to them:

[The criterion of similarity of responses] cannot be derived from the creature’s responses; it can only come from the responses of an observer to the responses of the creature. And it is only when an observer consciously correlates the responses of another creature with objects and events of the observer’s world that there is

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<sup>22</sup> Davidson, “Three Varieties of Knowledge,” 209.

<sup>23</sup> Davidson, “Three Varieties of Knowledge,” 209.

<sup>24</sup> Davidson, “Three Varieties of Knowledge,” 209.

<sup>25</sup> Davidson, “Three Varieties of Knowledge,” 209-10.

any basis for saying the creature is responding to those object or events rather than any other objects or events.<sup>26</sup>

So the picking out of an element in the causal chain, a phenomenon Davidson terms “triangulation”, can take place only when a second creature is added to the scenario. The second creature provides a vantage point from which to assess regularities in the pattern of response of the other and to judge whether some particular reaction fits with those regularities. This correlating is what brings propositional content to mere reactive behavior, and with it the possibility, and the concept, of error. Each provides this perspective to the other. And thus it is only in this intersubjective context that beliefs of any sort can exist.

So all mental content is predicated on the two creatures communicating, Davidson maintains. And it must be communication which allows for the fine-grained identification of intentional states so that these may be matched to truth conditions. This granularity will only be possible through the use of language. Thus, linguistic communication is, on Davidson’s view, a necessary condition for possessing any intentional states whatever, and charity is the condition for linguistic communication.

### *1.3 The Content of Davidson’s POC*

In the above I moved quickly over the formulation of the principle of charity in order to illustrate its role. But what exactly does it state? There is some ambiguity on this point. And the issue is further clouded by Davidson’s changing usage over time. I am following the later Davidson in distinguishing two principles under the general heading of “the principle of charity”. Earlier, though both elements were still present in Davidson’s account of radical interpretation, what Davidson called “the principle of

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<sup>26</sup> Davidson, “Three Varieties of Knowledge,” 212.

charity” seemed mostly to have to do with what he later termed the principle of correspondence.

Turning first to the Principle of Coherence, it limits an interpreter to the adoption of interpretive schemes which assign beliefs that are “(within reason) logically consistent with one another.”<sup>27</sup> Here Davidson follows Quine in saying interpreters must impute logical structure to their objects to have any hope of interpreting them.<sup>28</sup> This sets up a threshold of logical coherence potential interpretations must meet. But where that threshold lies remains fairly vague. It falls short of complete logical consistency, as it surely must since human agents often hold, and assert, contradictions. I’ll have more to say about this later in §3.1.2.

Davidson tends to characterize what he eventually called the Principle of Correspondence in terms of maximization or optimization. One is to prefer that interpretation (or those interpretations) which best succeeds at ascribing truth to the statements of the speaker. For example:

The general policy [...] is to choose truth conditions that do as well as possible in making speakers hold sentences true when (according to the theory and the theory builder’s view of the facts) those sentences are true.<sup>29</sup>

Or, again,

This is accomplished by assigning truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our own view of what is right.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Davidson, “The Structure and Content of Truth,” 320.

<sup>28</sup> Quine, “Word and Object,” chapter 2.

<sup>29</sup> Donald Davidson, “Belief and the Basis of Meaning,” in *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 152.

<sup>30</sup> Donald Davidson, “Radical Interpretation,” in *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 137.



“Optimization” is the term Davidson ends up preferring to “maximization” as a description of what pattern of belief attributed is to be preferred. Davidson rejects “maximization” along with the notion of straightforwardly maximizing truth for two reasons. First, because beliefs or statements are not countable and so numerical operations on them are not intelligible. But, second, and more importantly for my purposes, because what is sought is not the interpretation which ascribes the most true belief, but that which ascribes the appropriate true belief: where mistakes are expected the better interpretation will ascribe false beliefs.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to the comparative constraint of optimizing truth, Pagin points out that Davidson’s POC includes an absolute constraint as well. As he puts it, “*acceptable* theories must not only be best, they must also be *good*.”<sup>32</sup> This is usually seen not in Davidson’s statement of the principle itself, but in his argumentation backing it up. For example:

What justifies the [interpretive process constrained by charity] is the fact that disagreement and agreement alike are intelligible only against a background of massive agreement.<sup>33</sup>

Content is ascribed to the utterances and attitudes of the object on the basis of shared, true beliefs. It is only in light of this basic coincidence of beliefs that the rest of the content of the object’s speech can be inferred and understood. Thus, without it, there could not be interpretation.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Davidson, “Radical Interpretation,” 136.

<sup>32</sup> Pagin, “Radical Interpretation and the Principle of Charity,” 233.

<sup>33</sup> Davidson, “Radical Interpretation,” 137.

<sup>34</sup> For further discussion of this argument see §2.3.

So DPOC states that the correct interpretation is that which meets a threshold with regard to both the coherence and the truth of what it ascribes, and is most successful in optimizing the ascribed truth. This condition is constitutive of meaning: no object who cannot be thus interpreted can be taken to be speaking. A more precise formulation than this is not forthcoming. (Though Davidson does give more content to the notion of optimization. I'll discuss this when I address the limits of Davidsonian charity in §3.1.3.)

### *2.1 But Is There Really a Constitutive Principle of Charity, Though?*

In the current literature concerned with quantifier variance I'm a bit surprised that a better attested position isn't simply, "Well, that's an interesting thought, but Davidson was wrong about the POC." I suspect it ought to be. My short and much simplified account of the constellation of Davidsonian ideas which provide the rationale for the POC ought to be enough to suggest a variety of reasons why his conclusions would not be universally accepted. Also, his stance is widely challenged in the secondary literature actually concerned with Davidson. Kathrin Glüer, for instance, says of the DPOC that it is "not at all easy to see whether it can [be justified]—a completely new tack on the issue seems to be required."<sup>35</sup>

I wonder if some haven't lost sight of the arguments which really underlie the POC and thus an argument like Hirsch's. (Or, perhaps, this response is common enough but doesn't seem worth contributing to the QV literature.) At any rate, one would expect to see many reject the argument from interpretive charity on the ground that the relevant principle of charity simply isn't true, or that its truth hasn't been convincingly established. In this section I'll survey the reasons why I think this response should be

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<sup>35</sup> Kathrin Glüer, "The Status of Charity I: Conceptual Truth or A Posteriori Necessity?," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 14, no. 3 (September 1, 2006): 338.

widely represented, and the inadequacy of available arguments for Davidson's constitutive POC.

What arguments are available for DPOC? A somewhat frustrating fact about Davidson's writings on the POC is that no truly explicit, formal argument for it is ever given.<sup>36</sup> When one zooms out, as I did in sections 1.2.2-3, one can see the broad sweep of Davidson's thought and perhaps appreciate how the principle fits into this broader structure. Those who have a general sympathy for this grand Davidsonian conception may thus be provided some reason to accept the truth of the principle. But that doesn't seem sufficient, especially for those who lack antecedent sympathy for said Davidsonian conception.

For our purposes we need to ask not just whether there is some reason to accept DPOC. Let us say that the deflationist argument from charity is sound save for DPOC. It appeals to the DPOC to give the lie to what initially appears to be an observable fact: that philosophers and ordinary speakers disagree about, for instance, special composition. We surely have some reason to accept our *prima facie* construal of things. So if the deflationist argument from charity is structurally sound, either we have sufficient reason to accept the DPOC to outweigh the linguistic appearances, or else the linguistic appearances actually provide a counterexample to DPOC. Compelling argumentative support is needed.

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<sup>36</sup> For a survey of possible arguments see Glüer, "The Status of Charity I: Conceptual Truth or A Posteriori Necessity?"; Pagin, "Radical Interpretation and the Principle of Charity"; and Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig, *Donald Davidson: Meaning, Truth, Language, and Reality*, 1 edition. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005). The enumeration of options found in these works guides much of what follows.

## 2.2 Arguments from the Possibility of Radical Interpretation

One plausible attractive argumentative strategy, and one which it might appear Davidson uses himself, would be to argue for DPOC from the possibility of radical interpretation. The connection between the two would be that DPOC is somehow required for radical interpretation. Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig suggest that such an argument plausibly represents a strategy found in Davidson:

- (LL1) Interpretation from the standpoint of the radical interpreter is possible.
- (LL2) If interpretation from the standpoint of the radical interpreter is possible, then the POC is true.
- (LL3) Therefore, the POC is true.<sup>37</sup>

Note the scope that the premises will need to have for this argument to work. The existence of one situation in which radical interpretation could succeed is sufficient to make interpretation from the standpoint of the radical interpreter possible. And this would show that the things DPOC entailed about *that particular speaker* were correct.<sup>38</sup> But Charity is supposed to necessarily characterize any possible semantic content. It is a universally quantified claim: all speakers must be interpreted thusly. So the argument needs to show that the entailments of DPOC are true of every speaker. Our premises would thus need to be stronger, not just stating that radical interpretation was possible, but that it was possible of any speaker.<sup>39</sup> Explicitly then, (LL1) should read,

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<sup>37</sup> Lepore and Ludwig, *Donald Davidson: Meaning, Truth, Language, and Reality*, 204-207. I am using their wording, hence talk of “the POC” should be understood as referring to what I’ve titled DPOC.

<sup>38</sup> Notice, though, that this would not mean DPOC was accurate, even if its claims were limited to that particular speaker rather than universal. DPOC predicts certain patterns in the semantic properties had by utterances and mental states. But those patterns could conceivably be present contingently rather than present by metaphysical necessity.

<sup>39</sup> It need not be possible of every language, or of every instance of speech. Davidson is quite explicit in “Radical Interpretation Interpreted” that he thinks there can be languages or codes which defy any attempt at interpretation. But the speakers using those languages or codes still must be interpreted and some subset of their utterances understood else they could not count as speakers at all.

(LL1) Interpretation of any possible speaker from the standpoint of the radical interpreter is possible.

A major problem with this argument seems to be the difficulty of providing justification for the premises which does not render the argument circular and vacuous. Beginning with (LL1), we would need good reason to think radical interpretation universally possible that was not itself predicated on assuming POC. One promising approach would be to make a transcendental argument based on our actual situation: we may assume that we really succeed in communicating. If so, radical interpretation must be possible, for we begin from the position of radical interpreters (as children, or when faced with a truly foreign tongue). Jerry Fodor and Ernie Lepore suggest that something like this is going on in Davidson.<sup>40</sup>

But neither is this Davidson's strategy, nor does it provide a sound argument. In his reply to Fodor and Lepore, Davidson emphatically denies making any such argument.<sup>41</sup> He insists that he does not hold that real humans occupy the position of radical interpreters. And, as Fodor and Lepore argue, it is doubtful that we do, in fact, ever occupy such a position. Innate instinct and linguistic theory plausibly always provide us with something more to go on in interpreting than is had by the theoretical radical interpreter.

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It is not clear to me that even this intensional adequacy is sufficient to back the claim of being constitutive. It seems that constitutivity likely requires a stronger sort of necessity. But I'm not going to worry about this here.

<sup>40</sup> Jerry Fodor and Ernie Lepore, "Is Radical Interpretation Possible?," *Philosophical Perspectives* 8 (January 1, 1994): 101–119.

<sup>41</sup> Davidson, "Radical Interpretation Interpreted."

Perhaps (LL1) might be argued for on some other ground. The strength and nature of Davidson's argument are not especially clear,<sup>42</sup> but it does seem that Davidson intends the possibility of radical interpretation to derive its support from the inherent publicity of language. He writes,

[W]hat has to do with correct interpretation, meaning, and truth conditions is necessarily based on available evidence. As Ludwig Wittgenstein, not to mention Dewey, G. H. Mead, Quine, and many others have insisted, language is intrinsically social. [...] meaning is entirely determined by observable behavior, even readily observable behavior. That meanings are decipherable is not a matter of luck; public availability is a constitutive aspect of language.<sup>43</sup>

Thus all language must be interpretable on the basis of precisely that information which the radical interpreter has at her disposal. Radical interpretation must be possible. Glüer describes Davidson as here holding "a weak but very basic behaviourism about meaning".<sup>44</sup> This behaviorism may itself be doubted. Glüer argues that it is not clearly at odds with forms of semantic externalism currently popular, but neither is it clearly continuous with them.<sup>45</sup> And recall that Davidson is describing a method of attributing contents to mental states as well as meanings to utterances. Thus one inclined to countenance beliefs which do not issue in readily observable behavior would have to reject such a view. If it is possible for a being to exist for a short duration in which it takes little observable action and yet have beliefs, then Davidson's behaviorism must be false.

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<sup>42</sup> See Lepore and Ludwig, *Donald Davidson: Meaning, Truth, Language, and Reality*, Chapter 11, §2.

<sup>43</sup> Donald Davidson, *Truth & Predication*, ed. Kevin Sharpe, 1st edition. (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 56.

<sup>44</sup> Glüer, "The Status of Charity I: Conceptual Truth or A Posteriori Necessity?" 354.

<sup>45</sup> Kathrin Glüer, "Critical Notice: Donald Davidson's Collected Essays," *Dialectica* 61, no. 2 (June 1, 2007): 275–284.

Lepore and Ludwig worry that the only way to justify the supposition that speakers are necessarily radically interpretable will be to show that it “fall[s] out of our concept of a speaker that his beliefs are about the conditions that prompt them,” which would obviate the argument from the possibility of radical interpretation.<sup>46</sup> The defense of the first premise would need to appeal to a link between beliefs and their causes so strong that one could derive DPOC from the nature of that link, without even introducing radical interpretation. (What would be needed sounds like Davidson’s content externalism. Using this to argue for DPOC will be discussed in §2.5.)

What about (LL2)? As several commentators have objected, it is also doubtful that DPOC is a necessary condition for the success of radical interpretation.<sup>47</sup> Methodologically, there are a variety of constraints other than DPOC that might allow the radical interpreter to move from the evidence available to her to an interpretive theory. (There are infinitely many such constraints if we don’t limit ourselves to plausible ones.) The justification for singling out the DPOC as the principle that must be employed can’t be merely methodological, but must instead involve arguing that DPOC is the right constraint to adopt, presumably because the principle is true and thus the interpretation arrived at by using are likewise true. Again, how can this be done without circularity?

Lepore and Ludwig concede this problem with (LL2) and try to meet it by sketching how an independent argument for the superiority of DPOC might be constructed on the basis of simplicity.<sup>48</sup> But they don’t provide such an argument. And,

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<sup>46</sup> Lepore and Ludwig, *Donald Davidson: Meaning, Truth, Language, and Reality*, 206.

<sup>47</sup> See Glüer “The Status of Charity I: Conceptual Truth or A Posteriori Necessity?” and Pagin, “Radical Interpretation and the Principle of Charity.”

<sup>48</sup> Or for something like DPOC. They are entertaining multiple formulations of the principle of charity, and I’ve elided this for simplicity.

leaving aside concerns about arguments from simplicity, there are reasons to doubt that this will work. The DPOC is not *prima facie* an especially simple principle (see §1.3 and §3). And even if something in the ballpark of DPOC is simplest there is vast space of fairly similar principles which might be suggested as alternatives to DPOC, such that it's hard to imagine a compelling case on the basis of simplicity alone that uniquely supported one of them. For example, there are constitutive views which state the relation between meaning and other factors differently. One such is David Lewis', but it is easy to imagine principles which propose somewhat different models of how semantic properties map on to the data available to the radical interpreter. Another way in which principles can vary is their basis. There is room, for instance, for non-constitutive principles which have much the same predictive upshot as DPOC (see §2.6).

Might it turn out to be the case that these other formulations of charity would be similarly useful for making the deflationist argument? If so the existence of alternatives would not matter to my overall argument; whichever POC turned out to be simplest would still provide the needed premise for deflation. This is hard to consider in the abstract, so let's consider an example. Say that the constraint which makes radical interpretation possible were a psychological theory, PT, that was stated without mention of truth or rationality. PT simply provides a predictive model for what humans will generally believe and assert based on what outside stimulus.

PT could do the needed work for radical interpretation without providing the premises needed for a deflationist argument provided the psychological theory allowed for substantial error. Also, one alternate POC version present in the literature, that suggested by David Lewis, may be similar in this regard. It proposes charity based on



ascribing not true beliefs, but consistent belief forming processes that resemble one's own, in other words something rather like PT (though Lewis does require one to interpret subjects as behaving rationally).<sup>49</sup> Massive error is allowable on such a view. I see no reason to expect similar won't be true of many of the alternatives.

Arguments from the possibility of radical interpretation fail due to the lack of independent support for their premises. One who accepted the publicity of meaning might have reason to accept the first premise, but the second would still be problematic, and publicity of meaning of the strong sort Davidson posits is debatable.

### *2.3 Arguments from the Holism of Content*

This section deals with a pattern of argument explicitly offered by Davidson and already touched on in §1.3. This argument holds that some statements and some beliefs can have the content they do only by relating to a complex of true statements or true beliefs.

Error is what gives belief its point. We can, however, take it as given that *most* beliefs are correct. The reason for this is that a belief is identified by its location in a pattern of beliefs; it is this pattern that determines the subject matter of the belief, what the belief is about. Before some object in, or aspect of, the world can become part of the subject matter of a belief (true or false) there must be endless true beliefs about the subject matter. False beliefs tend to undermine the identification of the subject matter; to undermine, therefore, the validity of a description of the belief as being about that subject. [...]

What makes interpretation possible, then, is the fact that we can dismiss a priori the chance of massive error. A theory of interpretation cannot be correct that makes a man assent to very many false sentences: it must generally be the case that a sentence is true when a speaker holds it to be. [...] So in the end what must be counted in favour of a method of interpretation is that it puts the interpreter in general agreement with the speaker: according to the method, the speaker holds a sentence true under specified conditions, and these conditions

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<sup>49</sup> Lewis, "Radical Interpretation."

obtain in the opinion of the interpreter, just when the speaker holds the sentence to be true.<sup>50</sup>

So the idea is that a belief, whether true or false, can be about some aspect of reality only in virtue of an interrelated complex of true beliefs about that same aspect of reality. Its content is fixed by these other beliefs. To give a more specific illustration,

I can believe a cloud is passing before the sun, but only because I believe there is a sun, that clouds are made of water vapour, that water can exist in liquid or gaseous form; and so on, without end. No particular list of further beliefs is required to give substance to my belief that a cloud is passing before the sun; but some appropriate set of related beliefs must be there.<sup>51</sup>

Ascribing error beyond a certain point is precluded because ascribing such error precludes ascribing any specific content to a belief at all. The very act of interpretation involves ascribing many true beliefs. And the publicity of language (see §2.2) ensures that every speaker may be interpreted.

But this argument is problematic in several ways. First, it seems to rely on a kind of descriptivism about mental contents: the content of thought about X is held to be determined by the content of descriptive beliefs a person has about X (in much the same way that descriptive beliefs fix the referent of terms on descriptivist theories of reference). Admittedly this has some intuitive appeal. But even remaining on the intuitive level, it seems to me that Davidson has overstated his case. Taking the cloud example, it seems an ostensive definition would usually suffice for confidence that clouds were at issue. This seems true even in cases where someone held a false and outlandish theory of clouds, sun, and apparent occupants of the sky generally.

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<sup>50</sup> Davidson, "Thought and Talk," 168-69.

<sup>51</sup> Donald Davidson, "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," in *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 200.

Leaving that aside, Lepore and Ludwig have diagnosed structural flaws with the argument.<sup>52</sup> They point out that the condition Davidson sets up for a subject figuring in belief is that one have many true general beliefs about the subject. This is illustrated by Davidson's various examples: clouds are made of water vapor, water can exist in liquid or gaseous form, etc. But radical translation, and DPOC, require regarding specific beliefs about a speaker's immediate environs as true (by and large). Davidson's examples don't seem to preclude those beliefs being in error: his examples focus on conceptual competency, to speak about a thing one must be reasonably clear on its concept. But one could have the appropriate background beliefs needed for conceptual competency and yet have entirely false beliefs about what things are where and when. The error precluded doesn't even seem to encompass some really massive errors, like believing in an external world when none exists.

It might seem that somebody consistently invoking a concept in obviously inappropriate circumstances – say, consistently calling daffodils clouds – gives us good reason to think that person lacks the appropriate general beliefs about clouds. Put more formally, we might think that whatever thought goes along with their word 'cloud' is not actually about clouds. But to reason thus one must presume that a person's perceptual beliefs about their surrounding are by-and-large correct. If they are not, then they could well be correctly grasping what a cloud is but misidentifying them as a result of massively false beliefs about their surroundings. Thus charity about one domain of belief would need to be assumed in order to make this argument work for specific beliefs about a speaker's environs.

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<sup>52</sup> Lepore and Ludwig, *Donald Davidson: Meaning, Truth, Language, and Reality*, 201-02.

This last thought is very close to another argument Pagin identifies in Davidson whereby it is argued that if a word W which we interpret to mean X is systematically used by a speaker in circumstances in which it is clear to the interpreter that X is inapplicable and Y is instead applicable we have a good reason to interpret W as Y rather than X.<sup>53</sup> Davidson writes,

Let someone say [...], "There's a hippopotamus in the refrigerator"; am I necessarily right in reporting him as having said that there is a hippopotamus in the refrigerator? Perhaps; but under questioning he goes on, "It's roundish, has a wrinkled skin, does not mind being touched. It has a pleasant taste, at least the juice, and it costs a dime. I squeeze two or three for breakfast." After some finite amount of such talk we slip over the line where it is plausible or even possible to say correctly that he said there was a hippopotamus in the refrigerator, for it becomes clear he means something else by at least some of his words than I do. The simplest hypothesis so far is that my word 'hippopotamus' no longer translates his word 'hippopotamus'; my word 'orange' might do better.<sup>54</sup>

Once again, I think Davidson overstates the strength of the intuitive pull here. I can think of circumstances in which a person best interpreted as using language just as I do nonetheless would hold the above. Perhaps I am speaking to a child who has been told that oranges are produced from hippopotamuses in the same way raisins are from grapes. It would take a lot more than the above scenario for the plausibility, much less the possibility, of translating 'hippopotamus' as hippopotamus to vanish. (In childhood I once convinced a younger brother that making too much noise would keep the stars from appearing at dusk. But I don't doubt that it was *the stars* that I convinced him had this behavioral quirk.) Also, as above, charity regarding perceptual beliefs seems presumed rather than demonstrated by this argument.

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<sup>53</sup> Pagin, "Radical Interpretation and the Principle of Charity," 243.

<sup>54</sup> Donald Davidson, "On Saying That," in *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 100-101.

But further, as Pagin points out, this falls short of establishing anything like DPOC. Say this sort of thought experiment is persuasive. Then it shows that, “between an absurd and a nonabsurd interpretation, the latter is to be chosen, other (global) things equal.”<sup>55</sup> This still doesn’t get one DPOC, for it doesn’t say anything about what must be done when no nonabsurd alternative is available, nor does it establish that we should optimize between mutually absurd or mutually nonabsurd alternatives.

In sum, arguments from the holism of content, while they do highlight an interesting intuition, are not at all satisfactory as a basis for DPOC.

#### *2.4 Argument to the Best Explanation*

Briefly, Lepore and Ludwig discuss the possibility of an argument of this form:

- (IBE 1) If the assumption that *p* is required in the best overall theory of the nature of human beings and their place in the natural world, then *p*.
- (IBE 2) The principle of charity is required in the best overall theory of the nature of human beings and their place in the natural world.
- (IBE 3) Therefore, the principle of charity is true.<sup>56</sup>

Of course, (IBE 2) is very hard to defend, and Lepore and Ludwig make no attempt to defend it as such. They introduce it simply as a way in which an *a priori* defense of DPOC might be possible.

By the same token, (IBE 2) is very difficult to decisively rebut. Raising two considerations seems sufficient for my purposes. First, there is ample room to doubt that any view entailing DPOC (or something very like it) is thus ascendant. Certainly the Davidsonian scheme in which the principle inheres is subject to major doubts. To offer just one example, Davidson’s views on intentional states seem to conflict with recent

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<sup>55</sup> Pagin, “Radical Interpretation and the Principle of Charity,” 243.

<sup>56</sup> Lepore and Ludwig, *Donald Davidson: Meaning, Truth, Language, and Reality*, 203.

theory in the empirical sciences. Davidson holds that an agent may only have thought if that agent is involved in linguistic communication—“thought depends on speech.”<sup>57</sup> So then no thought could precede language acquisition. But as A.P. Martinich points out, this is at odds with the understanding of pre-verbal children in contemporary psychology.<sup>58</sup> (And, one might add, with fairly ubiquitous intuitions.)

Second, DPOC would only be required for a view if the explanatory work it did could not be done by some other principle. But many of the explanatorily useful upshots of DPOC are equally upshots of other principles. For example, §2.2 mentions the Lewisian formulation, and as §2.6 mentions, a non-constitutive principle of charity could still have a lot of the same implications for human subjects interpreting one another. A view might have specific explanatory needs that DPOC would best satisfy. But merely positing some sort of charity among human speakers would not be enough.

This mode of argument is only persuasive on fairly narrow prior commitments. It thus furnishes no generally compelling argument. Here and in the next section I content myself with showing that reasons to accept DPOC compelling to one not antecedently convinced of unusually favorable premises are not forthcoming.

### *2.5 Arguments from Triangular Content Externalism*

Many of the primary authors on this topic—among them Glüer, Lepore and Ludwig, and Pagin—do not discuss content externalism as a possible source of justification for DPOC. The reason for this seems to be that DPOC was defended in

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<sup>57</sup> Davidson, “Thought and Talk,” 156. That phrase was not used declaratively in the original, but Davidson makes it quite clear that he means to assert it.

<sup>58</sup> A.P. Martinich, “Language and Thought,” in *A Companion to Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernie Lepore and Kirk Ludwig (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 287–299.

Davidson's early work, while the full blown articulation of his version of content externalism came decades later. Thus the latter could not have played an essential role in the reasons for adopting the former.

Still, even if this is an accurate description of Davidson's own thought, it does not imply that DPOC could not derive support from content externalism. And when reading Davidson's later work it seems quite natural to think that it is thus supported. The theory of "triangulation" of content secures the publicity of language discussed above (§2.2). Further, while the content of some intentional states can derive from others, the content of those states which lend content to the others is, on this view, fixed by patterns of correspondence to events and objects in the world. Plausibly this would preclude pervasive error in just such a way as to entail DPOC. (It might also be noted that Putnam grounds something rather like a POC in his version of content externalism.<sup>59</sup>)

Here again I'm going to keep my remarks somewhat brief. It lies outside my project to enter the ongoing debates on the nature of mental content. But that is the first point I want to make: these subjects are debated.<sup>60</sup> And Davidson has asserted a very strong version of externalism. As Duncan Pritchard writes,

[T]his kind of content externalism is very different from the more familiar varieties defended in the literature. This is because the idea is not that particular kinds of contents, such as concerning a natural kind like water, should be

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<sup>59</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 1st edition. (Cambridge Cambridgeshire ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>60</sup> Content externalism of some form is widely held. But even that is not exactly a matter of settled consensus. A recent survey of philosophical opinion revealed just over half (51.1%) of philosophers leaning towards content externalism, with a fifth favoring internalism and the remainder opting for "other." See David Bourget and David J. Chalmers, "What Do Philosophers Believe?," *Philosophical Studies* 170, no. 3 (2014): 465–500.

conceived of along externalistic lines, but rather the more general thesis that there are external conditions for the acquisition of thought.<sup>61</sup>

There is no room on this view for narrow content.

Thus the Davidsonian view is in conflict with a wide variety of commitments, among them contemporary empirical psychology (as mentioned in §2.4). On the philosophical side it is incompatible with views from intentional realism, to many versions of functionalism<sup>62</sup>, to solipsism, to traditional theism.<sup>63</sup> It is incompatible with anything that posits any narrow content whatever, or which regards the having of any intentional attitude as an intrinsic property, or which thinks an isolated creature may have thoughts. And a variety of objections and worries about the argument for triangular externalism and about the view itself exist in the literature, among them that the conditions for possessing mental content end up being circular.<sup>64</sup>

Triangular externalism seems to be at least as contentious a claim as DPOC itself. It thus will not serve as the basis for a generally compelling argument.

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<sup>61</sup> Duncan Pritchard, "Davidson and Radical Skepticism," in *A Companion to Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernie Lepore and Kirk Ludwig (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 525.

<sup>62</sup> Very briefly, any version of functionalism which holds that some mental states are identical to states of functional systems and that the relevant functional systems are biological individuals will be incompatible with the view. The reason is that on the Davidsonian view no mental states can be ascribed to a system that small: two individuals along with a portion of their environs are at least required.

<sup>63</sup> Briefly, because classical theism holds there to be a thinking being, God, who could have existed in isolation, which Davidson's view would not allow. Davidson's view would also make nonsensical the idea of divine deliberation issuing in the act of creation, for prior to the creation of other beings there could be no divine thought.

<sup>64</sup> See Sven Bernecker, "Triangular Externalism," in *A Companion to Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernie Lepore and Kirk Ludwig (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 443–455, and Claudine Verheggen, "Triangulation," in *A Companion to Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernie Lepore and Kirk Ludwig (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 456–471.



## 2.6 Empirical Arguments

Finally, I must discuss the possibility of providing empirical support for DPOC. Davidson himself obviously did not pursue such a strategy, holding the principle to be entirely *a priori*, and denying that the possibility of empirical counterexample was even intelligible.<sup>65</sup>

Still, in a pair of linked papers, Pagin and Glüer argue that an empirical argument offers the best available support for the POC.<sup>66</sup> I do not say the DPOC, for though the argument does aim at a principle like the one Davidson defends, significant differences between the two are acknowledged. More on this in a moment. The argument, forwarded by Pagin, suggests that the phenomenon of widespread verbal agreement can be used to argue for the following principle:

(VB): If there is a reliably high rate of verbal agreement between speakers, then there is a reliably high rate of belief agreement between them.

Verbal agreement here means assenting to and dissenting from the same linguistic tokens; belief agreement means believing and disbelieving the same propositions. Pagin's argument is straightforward: high rates of verbal agreement occurring by chance are staggeringly unlikely. If they do not arise by chance, then they arise in virtue of some relation existing between the belief forming and linguistic faculties of speakers.<sup>67</sup> This relation may be of two sorts: either speakers generally agree in belief and meaning, or speakers generally vary in their beliefs and meanings in such a way that verbal agreement

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<sup>65</sup> Glüer, "The Status of Charity I: Conceptual Truth or A Posteriori Necessity?" §5.

<sup>66</sup> Glüer, "The Status of Charity I: Conceptual Truth or A Posteriori Necessity?" and Peter Pagin, "The Status of Charity II: Charity, Probability, and Simplicity," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 14, no. 3 (September 1, 2006): 361–383. The former mostly does negative work in dismissing ways of supporting the principle while the argument discussed in this section is articulated in the latter.

<sup>67</sup> Here again it is assumed, as is common in this literature, that verbal behavior is sincere, IE it frequently expresses personal doxastic attitudes.

is preserved. The explanation for the former will be much simpler than that of the latter, so the former is to be preferred as a theory.

From here Pagin argues that the conditional should be combined with an empirical premise such as:

(VA): There is a reliably high rate of verbal agreement between speakers of English.

Along with (VB) this yields the conclusion that there is a reliably high rate of belief agreement between English speakers. Any given speaker of English will then have reason to judge the beliefs of any other speaker of English to be mostly true, as they will largely match her own beliefs. A version of POC that takes others to believe largely truth has been reached.

Even if this argument succeeds, it does not get one anything like DPOC though. Pagin repudiates the notion of a constitutive principle, and says instead that the one he's arguing for holds as a matter of nomic regularity. The envisioned laws would, he suggests, derive from the similarities in human psychological makeup which are grounded in the great similarity in human physiology. This significantly weakens the principle—exceptions are no longer metaphysically impossible.

There are also several important differences that Pagin doesn't remark on. First, the principle doesn't give reason to prefer interpretive theories which optimize in the Davidsonian sense. Rather, it would have one prefer theories which assign belief agreement at a rate consistent with the data furnished by linguistic agreement. Second, this version of the principle abstracts away from individuals to look at agreement over linguistic groups. This leaves the possibility of outliers and exceptions in a population: a

reliably high rate is not the same as a uniformly high rate. Meanwhile DPOC applies to each individual and allows no exceptions.

This last point also leads to a problem with the argument: it depends on clear linguistic agreement. In the absence of such apparent linguistic coincidence, it isn't clear how the argument can be made. But in many situations there won't be clear agreement. The radical interpreter dealing with a foreign tongue, for example, will need a counterpart to (VA) to use in his reasoning. But how can he support such a premise when he and his interpretive object exhibit entirely different verbal behavior?<sup>68</sup> It does not seem that he can, at least not using the empirical method he proposes.

Pagin writes that “[i]f the radical interpreter manages to come up with an interpretation of the native speaker that generates a reliably high rate of verbal agreement” then that interpreter also has reason to regard the beliefs of the speaker as mostly true.<sup>69</sup> But given that Pagin earlier defined verbal agreement as holding true or being disposed to assent to the same *sentences* this remark is obscure.<sup>70</sup> Such agreement is not the sort of thing an interpretive theory can generate. So it is not clear how this POC is to be extended beyond those who superficially speak like the interpreter. Perhaps the thought is that the members of various communities provide a sample that can be taken as representative, giving us sufficient evidence to posit a generally high rate of belief agreement among humans.

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<sup>68</sup> I suppose a special case can be envisioned where they have such agreement. But this doesn't seem to show anything interesting precisely because it is a special case whereas the conclusion is supposed to be general.

<sup>69</sup> Pagin, “The Status of Charity II: Charity, Probability, and Simplicity,” 380.

<sup>70</sup> Pagin, “The Status of Charity II: Charity, Probability, and Simplicity,” 368.

But whether this will work or not, the more fundamental issue, for my purposes, is that this argument can only warrant assuming belief agreement to a certain degree, and that degree is set by the verbal agreement actually observed in a linguistic community (or communities). Turning back for a moment to the application of POC which is my ultimate concern in this chapter, imagine how this principle will function. The revisionist ontologist and the ordinary English speaker *do not* evince verbal agreement. That is the whole point—they speak as if they disagree. And that must figure into the data we look at when determining the degree of verbal agreement, which in turn is explained with a comparable degree of belief agreement. Wouldn't insisting that the verbal disagreement could not signify belief disagreement, *à la* the argument from interpretive charity, be beyond the power of Pagin's POC? It seems so, for that would involve requiring *greater* belief agreement than the verbal agreement we observe.

So while Pagin and Glüer's suggestion is intriguing, and may indeed yield support for some sort of POC, it neither is a good basis for the DPOC, nor the source of a POC which will work in its place in the argument from interpretive charity.

We might envision a different empirical argument, one which takes our apparent knowledge of many beliefs and meanings of many speakers as an inductive starting point. Some of the arguments discussed in §2.3 might suggest such an approach (though Davidson himself intended those arguments as an unpacking of the pre-empirical concept of meaning). But we have good reason to expect that several things I said about Pagin's argument would be true of anything which follows this approach. It is hard to see how such a method could arrive at a constitutive principle, since its starting point is data about one specific sort of speaking creature (humans). And, even if a successful case is made,

the principle it produces could not require unintuitive interpretations of speakers.

Apparent disagreements, for example, will be part of our data from which the POC will be derived. To use that POC to dismiss the disagreement as illusory would be, at best, question begging.

Of course, it is hard to dismiss all potential empirical arguments in advance. But no compelling empirical argument for DPOC is available, and none seems forthcoming.

### *2.7 Taking Stock*

I have been surveying the arguments supporting DPOC to be found in Davidson and his commentators. I have suggested that most of these arguments are unsuccessful. A few – the argument from triangular externalism or to the best explanation – could succeed, but only given commitments I take to be contentious, uncommon, and themselves in need of significant support. This stops short of showing that DPOC is false. But it indicates that many philosophers, those who don't share the above mentioned commitments, have been furnished entirely insufficient reason to accept its truth. I am one such. And I suspect many contemporary metaphysicians are as well.

If a person is not justified in believing DPOC is true, then DPOC cannot provide compelling support for ontological deflation or Actual QV. In the absence of a generally compelling argument for DPOC, most would be justified in taking the apparent errors of speakers regarding ontology as a counterexample to the principle rather than the other way around. That is, of course, granting that DPOC precludes the errors. Recall that I wish to claim that DPOC is both unmotivated *and* of little value for establishing deflationism. So I shall now argue that it does not preclude the errors.

### 3.1 *The Scope of Possible Error*

Though there are good reasons not to be, let us say we are convinced that DPOC is true. Does this have implications for QV? In my second chapter I showed that a constitutive POC like DPOC does not straightforwardly imply ontological deflationism, and specifically deflationism about special composition, in the manner required by the argument from interpretive charity. But it could still be the case that the disagreements the deflationist intends to deflate are the sort that are in tension with DPOC. Such disagreements would involve, on at least one side, an error. DPOC places boundaries on possible error. It may be that DPOC renders such errors significantly unlikely, making them the sort of thing we would not expect to see, and thus putting theories that entail them at a significant disadvantage to theories that do not.

Whether the truth of DPOC actually has these implications is a question about the scope of error allowed by the DPOC. If the DPOC is true then what type and magnitude of mistakes are possible for a speaker?

This is a difficult question to address for two reasons. First, it is difficult to give precise answers because Davidson himself is not ideally precise. (See §1.3) But, second, it is difficult because of the nature of the argument I'm making. A natural way to approach the issue would be to use intuitions about what error we must ascribe to actual speakers to help us refine an account of the force of the principle. For example, this is what Timothy Williamson and Olav Gjelsvik do in their respective works to argue that Davidson's account of optimizing must be somewhat reformulated.<sup>71</sup> They argue that the

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<sup>71</sup> Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, chapter 8, and Olav Gjelsvik, "Knowledge and Error: A New Approach to Radical Interpretation," in *Donald Davidson on Truth, Meaning, and the Mental*, ed. Gerhard Preyer (Oxford University Press, 2012), 167-91.

Davidsonian perception-based account (to be discussed below) gets specific cases wrong, and that a knowledge-centric account does better with those cases.

This procedure seems pretty sensible. But recall that I want my conclusions to reflect back on the possibility of the apparent disagreement at the heart of the QV debate. To use the sort of error implied by that disagreement, were it genuine, as one of the specific cases I use to argue about the scope of possible error would render my argument problematically circular. The same will be true if I appeal to any other cases sufficiently similar to that one. In places such examples seem like the only ones available, so I must find ways to give tendentious examples a wide berth.<sup>72</sup>

In the next few sections I'll look at what Davidson does say, and in places suggest plausible interpretations that go beyond what is explicitly given. I'll treat the coherence and correspondence portions of charity separately. I'll then argue that, on a plausible understanding of DPOC it fails to motivate the deflationist position. I'll especially focus on my example case, apparent disagreement about special composition, as instructive. Thus even if DPOC is accepted it provides meager support for QV.

### *3.1.2 The Scope of Logical Error*

Recall that above (§1.3) I characterized one part of the Principle of Charity, the Principle of Coherence, as requiring that we interpret a speaker as having beliefs which are “(within reason) logically consistent with one another.”<sup>73</sup> This is a typical formulation: an assertion that logical consistency must be imputed along with an

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<sup>72</sup> Another method might be made available if I had a particular argument I took to provide the support for DPOC. I could examine that argument to see what exactly it really established. But §2 lays out my failure to locate such an argument. So, here in §3, DPOC largely hovers in mid-air, held aloft by nothing in particular.

<sup>73</sup> Davidson, “The Structure and Content of Truth,” 320.

imprecise qualification. To offer another example, “the policy is to assume the speaker’s beliefs are logically consistent (up to a point at least).”<sup>74</sup> I am aware of nothing that more precisely locates that point; and this leaves a significant lacuna in the formulation of the Principle of Coherence.

We can envision a line with logical omniscience at one end, and the ability to hold transparently contradictory occurrent beliefs at the other. The question is how far along the line in the direction of perfect reason interpretive objects must be assumed to be. Clearly there are many points that would be too far: we are frequently oblivious to logical connection. People often have contradictions in their doxastic system apparent enough that they can be easily pointed out to the person who holds them.

Perhaps this is why Coherence, unlike Correspondence, requires the assumption that the object meet a threshold, but not that the object be regarded as optimal. It is not clear what observable circumstances should be counted as standing in the way of perfect rationality, and thus optimal would lie too far in the direction of perfect rationality.

I’d suggest that a rough boundary can be inferred from the role Coherence is intended to play. Coherence is the mechanism by which the logical joints of the object’s language are to be located. By assuming that beliefs, and so utterances, will conform to a logical structure it will be possible to identify the features of the object’s speech that correspond to predication, Boolean operators, quantificational structure, and so on, even while the subject matter of sentences remains opaque.<sup>75</sup> This can only work if there is a certain logical consistency in the statements a speaker makes. The assumption

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<sup>74</sup> Davidson, “A Unified Theory of Thought, Meaning, and Action,” 157.

<sup>75</sup> See, for instance, Davidson, “Belief and the Basis of Meaning,” 150-51, though this is before the vocabulary of a “Principle of Coherence” was introduced.



throughout is that occurrent verbal behavior largely represents occurrent beliefs, so this will mean a similar consistency in beliefs.

This suggests that the consistency required is a diachronic consistency of occurrent beliefs. Diachronic because the consistency of statements must, by dint of the asynchronous nature of statements, be diachronic. But this raises questions: since people change their minds about many matters, how much diachronic consistency of speech or belief may really be expected? Unlike Quine, who is very concerned about such technical questions and suggests that statements be classified by the interpreter on the basis of their stability between situations, Davidson does not spend much time on these details. But it seems clear at least that one should expect greater consistency over short periods than over long ones and thus consistency within a certain window of time would be a sensible way of taking the constraint. How long this window is does not matter greatly to my present purposes.

Since this is consistency of occurrent beliefs, it need not imply any sort of closure in the beliefs which are possessed. (Though it does place a constraint on what will be thought about certain matters *if* they are thought about.) Also, exceptionless consistency is not required. It seems that by-and-large consistency in assertions made about the matters most frequently spoken about will be sufficient to do the needed interpretive work.<sup>76</sup> Thus no more than a corresponding level of doxastic consistency need be presumed. This allows for both flagrant blunders, so long as they are not too frequent,

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<sup>76</sup> An interesting wrinkle here are findings in empirical psychology which suggest that humans are more successful at correctly drawing logical inferences in cases where they can draw on past experience. This provides a different sort of reason to expect less consistency to be found the further one gets from matters the object regularly engages. See, for instance, Patricia W Cheng and Keith J Holyoak, "Pragmatic Reasoning Schemas," *Cognitive Psychology* 17, no. 4 (October 1985): 391–416.

and a general incapacity for abstruse chains of reasoning. Gross logical patterns in thought and speech are what is needed. This accords nicely with everyday experience.

Since this is the level of logical consistency needed for Coherence to do its proposed job, it is reasonable to conclude that this is the level of consistency Coherence requires.

### *3.1.3 The Scope of Empirical Error*

Moving on to the Principle of Correspondence, matters become more complex. The interpreter must interpret his object as exceeding a certain threshold of true belief and must interpret his object in the way which comes as close as possible to ascribing him optimal beliefs. But, as with Coherence, both the threshold and the optimization are difficult to pin down.

The threshold is characterized by exactly those arguments discussed in §2.3. A degree of error is precluded which would undermine belief content. “[M]assive error” in a doxastic system taken as a whole is thus precluded.<sup>77</sup> But what error would be massive? Nothing beyond a rough answer to this question will be available: we are left to our intuitions about when the content of a belief would be rendered hazy by pervasive error. But, by examining optimization more carefully, we can at least get an idea of what sort of errors go furthest towards doing this.

The notion of optimization at issue is characterized as one which “maximizes agreement” by interpreting the object as “right, as far as we can tell, as often as possible.”<sup>78</sup> But, “[t]he concept of maximization cannot be taken literally here, [...] once

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<sup>77</sup> Davidson, “Thought and Talk,” 168.

<sup>78</sup> Davidson, “Radical Interpretation,” 136.

the theory begins to take shape it makes sense to accept intelligible error and to make allowance for the relative likelihood of various kinds of mistake.”<sup>79</sup>

Which errors are to be considered intelligible is closely tied to epistemology.

Davidson writes,

It is impossible to simplify the considerations that are relevant, for everything we know or believe about the way evidence supports belief can be put to work in deciding where the theory can best allow error, and what errors are least destructive of understanding. The methodology of interpretation is, in this respect, nothing but epistemology seen in the mirror of meaning.<sup>80</sup>

His favored examples are perceptual: we ought not ascribe to our object beliefs about matters which are, from his perspective, visually occluded.<sup>81</sup> But I take it this is simply because it’s an ideally clear and uncontroversial case: in many familiar cases we take beliefs about the external world to be straightforwardly determined by visual experience. Not to treat our object as having beliefs determined in the same way is a step towards making her unintelligible. The same will be true of all the various connections provided by our epistemology. How well our interpretive theory can tolerate believing  $\sim P$  when  $P$  is true will be determined by how tight the epistemic linkage is between  $P$  and the other beliefs and experiences had by our object.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Davidson, “Radical Interpretation,” 136.

<sup>80</sup> Davidson, “Thought and Talk,” 169.

<sup>81</sup> For example, see Davidson, “The Structure and Content of Truth,” 321.

<sup>82</sup> I am being deliberately vague in my wording so that, as much as possible, my explanation will not assume particular epistemic positions. In these contexts Davidson himself talks about evidence, for instance, in a way that implies various things about its nature and role in epistemology. But I believe these particulars to be largely beside the current point.

It is understandable then why Davidson makes no effort to provide fully-precise principles to guide optimization; doing so would be to face “the problem of rationalizing and codifying our epistemology.”<sup>83</sup> But he does offer brief characterizations:

Disagreement about theoretical matters may (in some cases) be more tolerable than disagreement about what is more evident; disagreement about how things look or appear is less tolerable than disagreement about how they are; disagreement about the truth of attributions of certain attitudes to a speaker by that same speaker may not be tolerable at all, or barely.<sup>84</sup>

Or, elsewhere,

General principles are relatively simple to state: agreement on laws and regularities usually matters more than agreement on cases; agreement on what is openly and publicly observable is more to be favored than agreement on what is hidden, inferred, or ill observed; evidential relations should be preserved the more they verge on being constitutive of meaning.<sup>85</sup>

In general, then, it is more permissible to postulate error the further it is from the sensory. Interaction with the outside world must be presumed to produce similar sensations and accurate impressions. The sensory experiences produced under similar circumstances, and the awareness of them, is most immune to error. Direct perceptual beliefs are second; specific errors are conceivable, general ones less so. These primarily provide the shared basis which renders the entire rest of our interpretive object’s belief set intelligible. It is in virtue of this accurate base that error in what is merely inferred, theorized, and etc. can readily be comprehended.

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<sup>83</sup> Davidson, “A Unified Theory of Thought, Meaning, and Action,” 157.

<sup>84</sup> Davidson, “Thought and Talk,” 169.

<sup>85</sup> Davidson, “A Unified Theory of Thought, Meaning, and Action,” 157. Note the contrast between what Davidson says here, and the position Hirsch takes, as discussed in my second chapter, §2.3.3.

### *3.1.4 Dependence on Epistemology*

It might, at this point, seem that the content of DPOC can change drastically along with one's epistemic theory. For instance, take a view like seeming evidentialism on which evidence is an internal thing.<sup>86</sup> The scope of allowable error would then be bounded by the interpersonal variation in seemings, which would be hard for an observer to ascertain. The character of DPOC would be very different from how Davidson described it above.

It's correct that epistemology must play a major role in formulating and evaluating a POC. But I will take Davidson's general epistemology to be baked into DPOC. Only on the suppositions that evidence is primarily external circumstances and that belief is justified by evidence does one arrive at a principle which plays the role in radical interpretation DPOC is supposed to. DPOC must tether beliefs and utterances to the external circumstances of their utterance. Something which couldn't do this, like the POC in the above example, would simply be a different principle.

(This leaves epistemic differences with Davidson as yet one more possible reason to doubt that DPOC is true.)

### *3.2 Ontological Error and DPOC*

The purpose of making precise the bounds of error allowable given DPOC has been to ask whether a very specific species of error is allowed: the sorts of errors ontologists frequently ascribe to non-ontologists (when they aren't too busy ascribing them to one another). Call these ontological errors. We want to know if these are the

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<sup>86</sup> Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

sort of error which, per DPOC, do much to undermine the acceptability of interpretive theories in which they feature.

Of course this class of error is large and diverse, as is the class of ontological theories. The answer to the question I'm posing will be hard to give with true generality. So I will focus on the specific case of errors regarding special composition. These, I'll argue, are quite acceptable given DPOC. And this suggests the same will be true of many other ontological errors.

To give a very brief and simplified thumbnail, theories of special composition answer this question, "When do several things compose a further thing?" There are roughly three main camps represented in the ontology literature: mereological universalism, which answers "always"; compositional nihilism, which answers "never"; and those who hold an intermediate position between those two extremes and hold the class of composite things to be roughly extensive with the class of living things. For simplicity I'll call this latter group organicists. There is also the view of "commonsense ontology" which might be characterized as answering, "sometimes; it's difficult to say just when, but I know a further thing when I see one."<sup>87</sup>

Assume for a moment that genuinely holding substantially different positions, and not just speaking in different ways, about such matters is possible. (This allows us to talk about error and disagreement without constantly qualifying that it is only apparent error and disagreement.) The adherents of any two of these positions disagree. If any one of

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<sup>87</sup> Some have argued that the common view of ontology is not actually in conflict with one or another of the first three views. But, for my purposes in this section, take "commonsense ontology" as a theory which takes our ordinary declarative talk about objects as true more-or-less at face value (since all such conciliatory suggestions involve *not* taking it at face value).

these positions is correct, the adherents of the other three are in error to a greater or lesser degree.

But this disagreement is, in Merricks' expression, not-straightforwardly-empirical.<sup>88</sup> It is not-straightforwardly-empirical in the sense that whichever theory is correct we would expect identical observable behavior in the world around us. These theories make no difference that could be observed with the outward senses. Whether one is looking at a table-dachshund fusion, at a table and a dachshund but no fusion, at atoms arranged table-wise and a Dachshund but no table or fusion, or at atoms arranged table-and-Dachshund wise but nothing further, is not something that merely looking (or smelling, or measuring, or x-raying...) can reveal.

I do not mean here to indicate that one's experience of the world is equivalent to one's sensory stimulation. Due to cognitive penetration, there may be a significant cognitive difference between being appeared to table-ly and being appeared to particles-arranged-table-wise-ly, even if the visual stimulus prompting each experience is identical. *Prima facie*, these experiences may even furnish different evidence as to which ontological views to accept. I needn't deny any of this to hold that the metaphysical issue of whether the particles arranged table-wise compose a table is not-straightforwardly-empirical. Rather, I need merely hold with Merricks that "my visual evidence would be the same whether or not the atoms [...] compose something."<sup>89</sup> On reflection, I should note that my visual evidence is compatible with either metaphysical theory I'm entertaining, and not a useful guide to what those facts are, even if that experience is broken into tables rather than something more elemental.

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<sup>88</sup> Trenton Merricks, *Objects and Persons* (Clarendon Press, 2003) 1.II.

<sup>89</sup> Trenton Merricks, *Objects and Persons*, 9.

Though Merricks does not discuss them, there are views on which my visual evidence might continue to provide some justification for one metaphysical conception or the other even upon reflection, views on which the *prima facie* visual evidence doesn't entirely go away upon reflection. But even on such views, I think, that such evidence is slight and not a useful guide will have to be granted. The position the see-er finds herself in is analogous to that of somebody faced with an optical illusion. Faced with Müller-Lyer illusion lines one may still have some visual evidence about which is longer, but faced with the phenomenon of human unreliability evaluating Müller-Lyer lines, a rational person will have to largely discount their visual experience as a guide. Similarly, faced with human unreliability at coming up with good metaphysical theories, especially at first pre-theoretic blush, the see-er will be forced to largely discount the impression of seeing a table as a guide to whether a table, as opposed to matter table-wise arranged, is actually present.

How does error regarding such not-straightforwardly-empirical matters fair according to the DPOC? I will address this in parts, corresponding to the conditions DPOC imposes: Coherence and Correspondence.

### *3.2.2 Acceptable Inconsistency*

Is error about special composition disallowed by the Principle of Coherence? Of course, the Principle of Coherence, being a purely formal constraint, doesn't preclude any particular belief contents. But it might be thought that ascribing both this sort of error and an otherwise normal doxastic system, one which falls within expected ranges for a person in our society, is ruled out. Put formally:



(CC1): According to the Principle of Coherence we cannot ascribe to an individual the level of logical inconsistency which their having a doxastic system that both fell within ordinary expected ranges and contained error about special composition would entail.

(I realize that talking about a “normal” doxastic system or “expected ranges” is very imprecise. But I don’t think it is problematically so. Such a notion must be in the background any time we talk about what reasoning should and should not compel people in general, as opposed to people we know a great deal about. Moreover, I think such a notion would be needed to make the case I aim to rebut: to argue that it is in general problematic to ascribe this sort of error in virtue of Coherence must involve introducing some premise about what else people, in general, believe. My imprecision simply leaves open what this premise might be.)

The problem with (CC1) is that the truth about special composition appears to be non-obvious. Due to the not-straightforwardly-empirical nature of the positions, no position follows straightforwardly from observation, at least not upon reflection. All must rest on varieties of *a priori* reasoning. And this *a priori* reasoning, as represented in the arguments found in contemporary ontology literature, is abstruse and difficult. If the ontologist is in error, it is due to some mistake in this reasoning that motivates her position; and if the adherent of commonsense is in error, it is likely due to not perceiving the weight of this reasoning. In neither case does Coherence preclude the error.

First, let us assume commonsense ontology is mistaken. This does not seem to require positing a great degree of error where I above said it matters: in the by-and-large consistency of the occurrent beliefs most frequently verbalized. The requirements of Consistency are here compatible with the presence of various non-apparent contradictions. Consistency will permit lack of philosophical insight just as it will permit

lack of mathematical insight. In both cases it is commonly observed that even those in possession of the premises may need guidance and extensive focused reflection before the connection between them can be seen. That a person be thus trained and motivated cannot be a condition on their being interpretable!

Second, if we assume the ontologist (of whatever sort) is mistaken, the case is much the same. Making a mistake about which theoretical option best fulfills the desiderata of a good theory, and can most effectively address the various puzzles which afflict commonsense ontology seems like a paradigm case of an acceptable logical error. To deny that it was would be nearly to insist on logical infallibility.

Someone might insist that one or another of the positions above *is* obvious and *does* follow straightforwardly from some readily available premises. But first, the scrum of smart people currently engaged in reasoning about these issues and failing to come to a consensus suggests this must be overstatement. And, second, such a claim must be predicated on producing such a clear argument. In other words, the argument can't be deflated in advance, it can only be won.

Thus (CC1) is false. The Principle of Consistency furnishes no good reason to think that apparent disagreement about special composition cannot be genuine.

Correspondence furnishes by far the more promising argument for deflation.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> This is an interesting contrast to the claim by Eli Hirsch, discussed in my second chapter, that it is *a priori* error that POC specifically precludes. But on DPOC, at least, this does not appear to be so. DPOC requires optimization of beliefs linked to experience of the outside world, and the closer the linkage the more it precludes error. But for logical reasoning it sets a relatively low bar. Complex, fully *a priori* reasoning may well be where error is most tolerable.

### 3.2.3 *Acceptable Disconnect*

Is error about special composition either disallowed or rendered a major theoretic vice by the Principle of Correspondence? As discussed above, how much an error counts against optimization increases the closer that error is to experience and perception of the external world. How close is error about special composition? This is difficult to answer. On the one hand, the subject about which one is in error is not-straightforwardly-empirical; on the other, many of the beliefs about which one would be mistaken are arguably perceptual beliefs, things like believing “there is a table” upon seeing matter arranged table-wise. Thus ascribing an error about special composition might involve ascribing a great many false perceptual beliefs—exactly the sort of thing Correspondence obstructs doing. It looks as if a case against such error on the basis of Correspondence could be made.

I’ll suggest that the agreement Correspondence requires is more a matter of similarity of a certain sort between perceptual beliefs than it is a matter of strict matching, of believing exactly the same things. To repeat something quoted above, “disagreement about how things look or appear is less tolerable than disagreement about how they are”<sup>91</sup>, and, relatedly, “agreement on what is openly and publicly observable is more to be favored than agreement on what is hidden, inferred, or ill observed.”<sup>92</sup>

To give a simple example of what I mean, take two people walking in the woods who see a rodent scamper across the path. Due to different knowledge and experience one of them sees it as a mouse and another as a vole. But though the perceptual beliefs differ in their particulars, the experience each reports is, in an intuitive sense, very

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<sup>91</sup> Davidson, “Thought and Talk,” 169.

<sup>92</sup> Davidson, “A Unified Theory of Thought, Meaning, and Action,” 157.

similar. This similarity is such that they ought not have difficulty understanding one another, nor conceiving how the other's experiences could be of the same world as their own.

Now imagine these two walkers saw something move across the path, but one said she'd seen a mouse while the other reported seeing a Ford Mustang erratically driven by former president W.H. Taft. Again, their perceptual beliefs differ, but now they also have a much lower degree of resemblance for one another in the intuitive sense mentioned above. It would be hard for the pair to make sense of each other's reports or to square them with the world as each understands it. My claim is that in the first case, but not the second, the walkers' beliefs agree in the way that primarily matters to Correspondence. Correspondence can better tolerate differences in conception than what seem to be out-and-out disconnects in experience.

There are fairly intuitive reasons to think this. Imagine a plant biochemist and I are conversing in a greenhouse. It would not do to insist that a precondition of mutual understanding was agreement in our conception of all we saw. It would not do because it is obviously false: he sees plant leaves as belonging to certain species, as healthy or not, as having certain functions, instantiating certain morphological types, and exhibiting certain tropisms while I see sketchily identified verdure. All this may even be interwoven into his perceptions themselves. To deny that there could be significant differences in, or disparities between, the perceptual beliefs formed would be in effect to deny that our scientific understanding of objects of our perception could advance.

Put differently, a thought's being about something in the external world cannot be conditional on the thinker having an adequate conception of that thing. Even if Davidson

sought to preclude general skepticism, it seems clear that collapsing thinking about and correctly understanding would have been a step too far. At any rate, such a collapse yields absurdities like those sketched in the preceding paragraph. So we should reject an understanding of the Principle of Correspondence that would have this collapse as a consequence, and rather accept one that leaves room for conceptual differences.

Differing views of special composition do seem apt to lead to disagreeing perceptual beliefs. But those beliefs will be like those described in the cases above: differing, but quite similar in that regard required by Correspondence properly understood. The parties to these disagreements differ significantly in conception, but ought still to be able to recognize a high degree of similarity in their respective perceptual beliefs. So it does not seem that the adjacency to perception of disagreements about composition is of the sort that would tend, given Correspondence, to preclude error.

That said, there is still a question of where the threshold is. How much error of this sort is allowable? Davidson's own reasoning indicates that error becomes more unacceptable as it threatens to undermine the intelligibility of the object by removing important portions of the network of true beliefs intelligibility requires. But is error about special composition in danger of doing this?

The best I can do to address this question is to look at the hypothetical case where such errors exist, and point out features which seem relevant to the intuitions motivating Correspondence. Imagine three people who are fairly unremarkable English speakers save that two have been corrupted by revisionist ontology, one to compositional nihilism and one to mereological universalism, such that they now disagree about special composition. (As above, for the moment grant that such disagreement is really possible.)

“There is a table,” says one. “No, there are no tables,” retorts another. “There is a table, and an undetached table part in the shape of Gerald Ford’s face,” says the third. And so on.

Though their statements differ, they still have the resources to generate scrupulously literal descriptions of the world to which their fellows can agree.<sup>93</sup> The descriptions given by the commonsensist will be accepted by the universalist so long as they eschew certain negative claims, claims about what objects there aren’t. Similarly the universalist can secure agreement from the commonsensist by only describing in terms of that subset of his ontology that they share.

The nihilist is the odd one out. Her position is complicated by a dependence on a theory of physics to furnish her with the fundamental components her descriptions must be given in terms of. If she and her interlocutors accept a physics involving matter or particles then she and her fellows can agree about descriptions given in terms of matter, or of particles, and the properties and arrangements thereof. Plural quantification, though a bit unnatural in many situations, is part of ordinary English; and there need be no disconnect at all between the parties about space and time. Thus the nihilist can talk about the “damp wet stuff over there just now” or the “cohering matter located there arranged in such-and-such a shape, so-high and so-wide”.

Admittedly, some physical theories, such as ones which posit a few fields rather than many particles as the fundamental entities, or outright agnosticism about fundamental physics, would make the task of generating descriptions acceptable to the nihilist more challenging. But I needn’t defend the claim that mutually acceptable

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<sup>93</sup> Or, at least, more-or-less agree to. It’s just important that they can agree about these to whatever extent they would have without their odd ontological disconnect.

descriptions can be generated under any theoretic conditions where there exists disagreement about composition—only the claim that disagreement about composition is not itself an obstacle to doing so. And, even in these cases where the describing will be more of a challenge, the task should be possible in terms of regions and the “arrangements of fundamental objects” which occupy them. It will be more laborious, but it is still achievable.

The three can find similar common ground in descriptions of their experiences. They can exchange mutually acceptable literal descriptions of their experience of the world in terms of senses and phenomenology. And chances are they will coincide in many of their evaluative judgments about which circumstances are agreeable and which not. Perhaps they can even agree on some moral matters.<sup>94</sup>

One might think that even if they don’t employ them, these three must differ in what they mean by kind terms.<sup>95</sup> But this needn’t be the case. The universalist shares all the commonsensist’s kind terms, and applies them to the same things. Perhaps he has a few more. But English is very flexible in its set of kind terms with new ones added to its vocabulary yearly; having more doesn’t signify any great divide.

Does the nihilist disagree with the other two on the content of kind terms? There are not good reasons to suppose she does. She can agree on which things would be of which kinds if they existed, on what features are characteristic of a particular kind. Moreover, she can even pick out those things which would be considered to compose an entity in the extension of some kind term according to the others—the things that “would

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<sup>94</sup> The only obstacle would seem to be if the nihilist view turned out to entail a lack of entities for moral properties like culpability or value to attach to.

<sup>95</sup> It might be tempting to think that their disagreement just is a matter of different use of kind terms. But on this point see my first chapter.

be tables” but for the truth of compositional nihilism. (And this enables her to understand what constituents of reality her fellows are designating when they employ such terms, even if she objects to their presuppositions.) Finally, she could even accept the existence of such so long as it was non-composite.<sup>96</sup> There seems to be no better reason to think she differs from them about the meaning of words like ‘table’ than there is to think people who disagree about whether yetis exist must mean different things by that word ‘yeti’.

In sum, if there really were disagreement of this sort it would not prevent there being a great many statements about the outside world the differing parties could agree on. Nor, aside invocation of DPOC in the very way which is here at issue, would it furnish good reasons to think they differed in their vocabulary. Thus, we should expect that the agreement about statements extends to beliefs as well. If one of the three is correct, the error which must be ascribed to the others does not seem like it would remove the shared foundation of countless true beliefs needed, on Davidson’s view, for communication. Intuitively, then, it seems ascribing such error should not be counted as a significant defect in an interpretive theory on the DPOC. Given the ambiguity and vagueness in the requirements of Correspondence, I’m not sure what stronger sort of case one could make.

### *3.2.4 Generalizing the Result*

In the last sections I’ve argued that neither Coherence nor Correspondence stands in the way of ascribing error about special compositions. Largely, I argued, this results

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<sup>96</sup> This is assuming no other metaphysical scruples that would prevent her accepting the possibility of metaphysically simple instances of a particular kind. This worry needn’t arise in the case of the organicist, who’s been left out of my example. He could envision outlandish living creatures, or living creatures oddly used. A tortoise used in a certain way could be, for a time, a table.



from the not-straightforwardly-empirical nature of the mistaken positions (whichever they are). The reasons to accept or reject them are, or at least are largely, *a priori* and abstruse. This makes them the sort of thing that neither Correspondence or Coherence really tells against.

What of my broader thesis, that errors of the sort ontologists *qua* ontologists ascribe will generally be of this sort? My case is simple: ontological errors will generally share the features highlighted above: the positions erroneously accepted will be not-straightforwardly-empirical, *a priori*, and abstruse. This will be true in virtue of the matters ontology, and metaphysics generally, deals with.

Take, for instance, one of Eli Hirsch's favorite targets for deflation: the debate between endurantism and perdurantism. It is just as immune to straightforwardly observational tests, just as dependent on *a priori* argumentation. And, if anything, it is more abstruse than my above example.

This is to paint with a broad brush. As I conceded above it is hard to make an argument that covers all cases. But this is good reason to think that, in-general, DPOC does little to block the ascription of ontological error, and thus little to motivate deflation of ontological disputes.

#### *4.1 Conciliatory Options*

Thus far my argument has been as follows: DPOC cannot motivate deflation because it is itself unmotivated. Even if it were accepted, it still could not, for it doesn't actually exclude the sort of errors it would need to in order to give support to motivate deflationism. In this section I am to add one more 'even if': even if DPOC were true and

could be used to motivate a form of deflationism, that still wouldn't provide an independently persuasive reason to accept Actual QV.

Let us say that my argument in §3 was mistaken and DPOC does give us good reasons to avoid ascribing ontological error. DPOC, then, supports the deflationary conclusion that some apparent disputes about ontological issues must be merely verbal. But does their being merely verbal imply positing Actual QV?

It does not, or at least not directly. If a dispute is merely verbal that means we must come up with a conciliatory semantics for the dispute, an account of what both parties are saying such that their statements do not conflict. Actual QV is a sort of conciliatory semantics. But it is not the only sort; other theories are available. The need for a conciliatory semantics is equally support for all these theories, not just for one.

For example, in *Material Beings* Peter van Inwagen suggests the general outline for a conciliatory semantic scheme such that his organicism will not entail massive error on the part of ordinary English speakers. He proposes that ordinary speakers should be interpreted in a somewhat non-literal sense in much of their speech about what there is. They say, "There is a table" in much the same sense as that in which they say, "The sun set behind the elms." Just as the latter does not actually imply a geocentric solar system so the former does not actually imply the existence of composite non-living objects.<sup>97</sup>

Van Inwagen's proposal fulfills the need for a conciliatory semantics just as well as would an Actual QV theory. Each explains away the apparent error.<sup>98</sup> And it is not

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<sup>97</sup> van Inwagen, *Material Beings*, chapter 10.

<sup>98</sup> Or, at least, much of it. Van Inwagen's proposal is not fully worked out, and it is unclear to me what it would say, for instance, about situations in which speakers specify that they are being literal. Extensions of his proposal which would cover such cases can be envisioned though, perhaps involving various senses of 'literal.'

the only such theory that's been suggested. There are a variety of suggestions having to do with loose speech, implicit domain restrictions, and so on. Thus, if the need for a conciliatory theory is the only thing motivating Actual QV, then Actual QV has a lot of equally motivated competition. Put formally, call *C* the property had by some semantic theories of explaining how apparent ontological disagreements may be merely verbal. DPOC gives us reason to accept deflation, and deflation implies that some theory with *C* is true. But this gives us no contrastive reason to adopt any member of the set of theories that are *C*. Actual QV is one of these theories, van Inwagen's is another.

There might be other considerations which would make some *C* theory preferable. The key point is that DPOC does not do so. To make DPOC, via deflation, provide a persuasive argument for any one of the *C* theories it must be combined with some separate contrastive argument which provides strong reasons to favor one *C* theory over the others. For instance, there may be reasons to think some of the competing theories less likely, less simple, less in keeping with the rest of semantic theory, etc.

#### *4.2 QV among the C Theories*

Daniel Korman has suggested that a general failing of *C* theories present in the literature is that their sole motivation is the desire to be charitable to the folk in the absence of the sort of linguistic considerations that usually inform semantic theory.<sup>99</sup> Major semantic claims are made with nothing more to back them than that they would allow the desired conciliation. This, Korman insists, is a suspect way to theorize about semantics.

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<sup>99</sup> Daniel Z. Korman, "Unrestricted Composition and Restricted Quantification," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 140, no. 3 (September 1, 2008): 319–334. Korman does not use the vocabulary of *C* theories. That is my own.

If Korman is right, this furnishes some contrastive reason to think QV will not be the best C theory. Though he does not consider it among the views he criticizes, his criticism surely applies to Actual QV even more than to the others. Actual QV involves not just proposing that known linguistic phenomena, like loose speech or implicit domain restriction, be used to understand other situations; it proposes a novel phenomenon with regard to the function of quantifiers.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, as my first chapter lays out, the semantic variance it implies is not isolated to a language's quantificational apparatus; it spills over into much of its vocabulary. In effect it involves positing a vast, largely undetectable, semantic difference motivated solely by deflation of ontological disputes.

So Actual QV is not a conservative theory. Depending on the degree to which continuity and simplicity are theoretical virtues Actual QV is a theoretically costly view. And while this may not be a compelling reason to reject Actual QV, it does seem like a reason to think it *more* in need of support, *prima facie*, than some of its competitor C theories.

So even if deflation is accepted, that does not imply that Actual QV is either true or especially likely. To make that case an extensive independent argument about semantics would be required—one good enough to outweigh the theoretic disadvantages of Actual QV.

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<sup>100</sup> If the proponent of Actual QV were willing to accept a maximally inclusive quantifier and also that within the domain of that quantifier were all the things spoken of by the most cluttered ontological theories that might allow modeling Actual QV as a phenomenon of domain restriction, a known phenomenon. Indeed, Eklund argues, though on entirely different grounds, that the proponents of QV should adopt such a position, which he titles “ontological maximalism.” See Matti Eklund, “Carnap and Ontological Pluralism,” in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David John Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford University Press, 2009), 130–56.

This is not, however, the position of Hirsch. And there are reasons why the suggestion would not be congenial to ontological deflationists, among them that it endorses a best description of the world.

### 5.1 Conclusion

I have shown, in a variety of complementary ways, that the Davidsonian Principle of Charity, or DPOC, furnishes no generally compelling reason to accept ontological deflation, much less Actual Quantifier Variance. I've presented three independently defended arguments.

First, DPOC itself lacks a generally compelling argument for its truth. I concede there are certain uncommon prior commitments which might warrant DPOC's acceptance. But outside of those no strong arguments for the principle are available. This means that most philosophers should assign DPOC an epistemic status such that it is not clear why it should be preferred to the *prima facie* linguistic appearances should the two conflict.

Second, if true, I argued that DPOC does little to block the ascription of ontological error, and thus little to motivate the deflation of ontological disputes upon which Actual QV is predicated. It is true that DPOC precludes ascription of error of certain varieties, and weighs against ascribing error of others. But ontological error turns out to be, in general, of a sort that DPOC does not thus block ascribing.

Third, if DPOC does motivate deflation, deflation does not, by itself, motivate Actual QV. What the truth of deflation about ontological disputes actually motivates is the adoption of one of several views with a particular feature, of which Actual QV is only one. To prefer any of these theories would require independent argument. Moreover, Actual QV seems to enjoy theoretic disadvantages compared to the others. So even if DPOC were true and did motivate deflation of ontological disputes this would leave Actual QV still in need of significant backing from an independent source.

In short, the argument from DPOC to Actual QV, via ontological deflation, entirely fails. Ontologists need not look over their shoulder to see whether DPOC is going to reveal their entire discourse to be an exercise in futility. It might be anyway, but if so DPOC sheds no light on the matter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Simulated Domain of Discourse

“F: ...Such as the average weight of an adult rabbit.

L: Blimey, I never knew that!

F: You never knew what?

L: I never knew rabbits had an average weight.”

—*A Bit of Fry & Laurie*, episode 2

Say that even in light of the preceding chapters one feels a strong charitable pull when considering the ontological claims of “the folk”, or that, for whatever reason, one concludes there is something mistaken about reading massive ontological errors off of the surface grammar of ordinary speech. Indeed, many ontologists who have no sympathy for deflation (myself included) also seem loath to simply take the ontological utterances of normal speakers at face value in a way that would render them systematically at odds with their own favored theory.

Such stances require what I’ve been calling a conciliatory semantics, a semantic theory on which some of ordinary speakers’ apparently ontological claims do not carry the commitments a philosopher might suppose them to at face value.<sup>1</sup> One candidate for the conciliatory semantics would be Actual QV, the contention that speakers who appear to speak a common tongue actually are speaking different ontological languages of the sort QV maintains are possible. Actual QV provides a way of interpreting ordinary speakers other than as at odds with revisionary ontology.

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<sup>1</sup> By calling it a “semantic” theory I only mean that it must be a theory of what utterances mean, where meaning is taken broadly. I do not mean that the explanatory work must be done by a theory which is semantic as opposed to pragmatic. I see no reason to suppose *a priori* that this must be so.

But as I pointed out at the end of my third chapter, Actual QV is not the only conciliatory linguistic hypothesis available, and neo-Carnapians like Eli Hirsch are not the only people who have propounded theories to avoid over-glib ascriptions of error to “the folk.” In this chapter I am going to develop my own account: a form of fictionalism about ordinary ontological discourse.

Conciliatory theories do not all do the same work. Consider those like mereological universalists, inclined to accept a larger ontology than ordinary folk appear to. If they are to avoid ascribing error, it will have to be on the basis of a semantic theory that explains how people could believe in objects but appear not to, a theory on which their ontology can be larger than it seems. Meanwhile, an ontologist inclined to a more nihilist view will require an interpretive theory on which people could seem to accept objects they really don’t, a theory on which a speaker’s ontology is smaller than it seems.<sup>2</sup> Actual QV is intended to be able to explain both, while theories positing implicit domain restriction can only explain a larger than apparent ontology.

I have nihilist leanings, and so a conciliatory theory that serves my purposes will need to be one that explains a subject having a smaller than apparent ontology. Call a theory like this “exclusive” since it explains how a person’s talk of certain entities fails to contradict an ontological view which excludes them. Such a view provides exclusive charity, charity to a person whose apparent ontology is over-inclusive. I will make the

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<sup>2</sup> One needn’t be strictly in one camp or the other. One might well have an ontology that both includes things the ordinary speaker does not seem to countenance, and exclude things he does seem to. I simply want to distinguish two explanatory functions theories may have. A single person might require a theory, or theories, with both functions, but many contemporary ontologists will primarily be interested in one or the other.



case that my own view provides a better exclusive theory than Actual QV, that if one is motivated by exclusive charity my view ought to be preferred.

It may be the case that there are superior alternatives to Actual QV for more permissive ontologists as well, a preferable “inclusive” theory; I outlined reasons to think so at the end of my last chapter, and some of the criticism I level at Actual QV here ought to equally tell against it when comparing it to inclusive conciliatory views. But I won’t develop that case any further here.<sup>3</sup>

I am not the first to propose a fictionalist theory of this sort. Van Inwagen<sup>4</sup> and Dorr and Rosen<sup>5</sup> have both suggested fictionalist approaches on which one may interpret the ontological implications of ordinary statements as having an adequacy which falls short of literal truth. “There are twenty chairs in there” should be taken, much like a hyperbolic or metaphorical remark, as communicating something other than the literal content of the sentence—something which may still be true even if the sentence taken literally is false.

This chapter will have two main goals. One will be to develop the involved fictionalist view in greater detail. Clearly a satisfactory hypothesis must say more than simply that people don’t really mean what they say regarding ontology. Towards this end I will propose a hypothesis about how ordinary ontological discourse operates. My hypothesis employs the idea that in many contexts speakers quantify over a simulated

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<sup>3</sup> Because of the way I’ve structured my case, I’d hope that this chapter would still give one who does not accept a nihilist ontology reasons to accept my hypothesis as an interpretive theory. It’s just that my view does little to facilitate inclusive charity.

<sup>4</sup> van Inwagen, *Material Beings*, section 10.

<sup>5</sup> Cian Dorr and Gideon Rosen, “Composition as a Fiction,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Metaphysics*, ed. Richard Gale (Blackwell, 2002), 151–174.

domain rather than an actual one, making much of what they say a species of talking as-if, or a closely related phenomenon.

My other goal will be to motivate my hypothesis. I will argue not only that mine is a superior charitable hypothesis to Actual QV, but also that it provides an explanation for several readily observable linguistic phenomena which are *prima facie* rather puzzling. Thus I will begin by briefly sketching several phenomena which seem in need of explanation. My simulated domain theory will then be developed as an explanation of those phenomena. Finally, I will turn to a comparison of the theoretical merits of my proposal and Actual QV, arguing that my theory improves on QV in explanatory power at less theoretical cost, and also that Actual QV has several important problems that my own theory avoids, chief among them the difficulty of explaining how our own linguistic situation came about if we are to suppose that some of us have mysteriously changed languages without realizing it.

Thus, I conclude, while there may be very good reason to suppose ontological error cannot be straightforwardly read off of the surface grammar of ordinary speakers (among them the plausibility of the linguistic view herein outlined), Actual QV should not be accepted. QV does not provide the best exclusive theory for charity towards the ontological utterances of ordinary speakers. And the view which I shall forward as preferable lacks the deflationary implications for contemporary ontology.

### *1.1 Observable Phenomena*

In this section I'll look at some aspects of the behavior of ordinary speakers. In §2 I'll use this to motivate my hypothesis, but here my aim will only be to describe and make salient these phenomena which, likely, are already familiar to my reader. Each of

the following subsections will point to a phenomenon having to do with the ontological statements of English speakers.<sup>6</sup>

### *1.2 Ontological Opacity of Ordinary Discourse*

It is common for speakers to talk as if the world contains among its constituents individuals or kinds which those same speakers do not hold to be among its constituents. To more clearly state what I mean, say that a person is ontologically subscribed to an entity iff she holds it to be among the constituents of reality, to be an item in her ontology as we metaphysicians might put it. It seems a person intending veracity will often quantify over, point out, describe, name, give explanations in terms of, and so on items to which she does not ontologically subscribe.

This phenomenon is readily observable. People say things like, “The room was full of shadows”, “There are only three differences between them”, “Please give me another chance”, “He wins because he scores way more points than she does”, “the average plumber is over thirty” without ontologically subscribing to shadows, differences, chances, points, or the average plumber.<sup>7</sup> That people talk this way can be seen by observation. Facts about ontological ascription are harder to ascertain and of course vary from person to person. But that people do not ontologically ascribe to

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<sup>6</sup> They may also apply to speakers of other languages. I have good reasons to think they do. But the vast preponderance of my evidence comes from observation of discourse in English. And, since this is a discussion of semantics, it is best to be clear about this.

<sup>7</sup> One might here think of the similar phenomenon of people saying things which seem to presuppose the existence of entities found in works of fiction. But I’ve left these out as I take such discussions of fiction to plausibly be a different phenomenon. One indication of this difference is that when people are challenged as to what they’ve said is “really” or “actually” the case, those making statements about fictions, but not those making the sorts of statements I’m discussing, will often acknowledge that it is not. (“No, of course Cthulhu doesn’t *really* sleep in R’lyeh” vs. “Yes, the room *really was* filled with shadows”) There are complexities to this, as people will also sometimes discuss what is really or actually the case *in* a work of fiction. But they themselves seem aware that in talking about fiction they are not describing the world we live in, and ready to adjust their statements accordingly if pressed.

entities they've thus spoken about can often be discovered from conversation, and is occasionally outright stated (i.e. "Now, there is no average person..." on the heels of describing her properties).

Of course, what falls into this category will vary with the idiosyncratic subscriptions and utterances of each individual. But by talking to people it is not hard to discover some. I have yet to meet any ordinary speaker who did think that the average member of a class of concrete objects was an actual constituent of reality, but I have met many who spoke about 'the average X' just as they would "the woman down the street." Similarly I've heard people insist that "Shadows aren't really things" and say much else besides about shadows (usually to children).

This suggests that there is a kind of ontological opacity to much ordinary discourse, meaning that it is not transparent which items talked about the speaker actually ontologically subscribes to. This opacity is apparently commonplace and generally passes unremarked. That ordinary English speakers are not being fully "ontologically serious" is probably not news, but it is interesting to notice how bald this fact sometimes becomes without any perceived impropriety.

Ontological commitment should be distinguished from ontological subscription. (To avoid their being conflated is the reason for introducing the vocabulary of "subscription.") Ontological commitment is a property of a given theory or discourse, while ontological subscription is a property of an individual, a way of describing his beliefs. Since one could be mistaken about the entities a theory necessitates, and since human beliefs need not be fully logically consistent, one's subscriptions may fail to coincide with the commitments incurred by one's theories and statements.

What I've suggested about ontological opacity thus does not directly bear on any theory of ontological commitment for ordinary language. However, some theories of ontological commitment may bear on the explanation of the phenomenon I will suggest. This will be discussed further in §2.3.

### *1.3 Ontological Malleability of Ordinary Discourse*

Another oddity of ordinary ontological talk is how fluid it can be. It seems extraordinarily easy to induce people to speak as if the world contains new items, often items of novel and unexpected sorts. For example, a lecture on economics can easily induce many to add “economic systems,” “markets,” “demand,” or “market forces” to the count of things which they speak of as if the world contained them. And this is not generally achieved by marshalling reasons to accept that such things exist. Rather, people being given an account, explicitly or implicitly, of how to use a term which designates an amalgam of things they are already inclined to subscribe to is often sufficient. It often seems that it is as easy to get people to accept composites as it is to show them how to use terms that refer to them in sentences.

To illustrate, imagine you are receiving a lesson on biology at a nature center. The veteran naturalist instructing your group says, “Look here,” and points at a tree squirrel chasing a vivid butterfly. “A squirrel sometimes becomes peculiarly fascinated with a single butterfly and will follow it around the canopy for hours,” she continues. “The squirrel and butterfly make up a chasing pair, or a ‘tree-runner.’ See, there’s another one.” You look where she’s pointing, and glimpse a grey squirrel dashing after a vivid orange butterfly. “Tree-runners are common in June and July,” the naturalist explains.

Most people, in this sort of situation, will quickly adopt talk of “tree-runners” into their vocabulary. They will easily and naturally begin quantifying over or counting them, and will use the term to pose questions to the naturalist leading the session, or to point things out to one another. That brief introduction and a bit of pointing will be enough to induce many to speak as if there are transitory entities composed of a squirrel and a butterfly related in a certain way.

Perhaps this is too mundane even to appear odd. But consider, if you had asked a person prior to an economics lecture whether there was some single thing made up of the many individual inclinations to exchange things for some specific commodity I trust the answer would not have been “yes.” You might get a “no”, or some rendition of the “What on earth are you talking about?” familiar to philosophers. (I anticipate the same would be true in my imagined case if you asked ahead of time about things composed of squirrels and butterflies.) But all it apparently takes to convince somebody to speak, and even speak naturally and confidently, about such an entity is a brief explanation of what is meant by ‘demand’ or ‘tree-runner’.

This is not, of course, a phenomenon unique to economics or biology. In various areas it is easy to prompt people to, at least verbally, act as if some constellation of the world’s contents, even if spread-out, varied, or intangible, compose a single entity. The *orbit* of a planet, the *baffles* of a submarine, the *ecosystem* or *climate* of a region, a *kingdom* of animal or plant life, the *UI* of a piece of software, the *directories* on a hard drive, can all be introduced to a person’s working vocabulary with equal ease.

So there is a great deal of malleability in ontological vocabulary of ordinary discourse.

## *2.1 Explaining the Phenomenon*

I have characterized two broad phenomena in ordinary ontological discourse. How are they to be explained? I'll work towards my own hypothesis by examining, and rejecting, several other explanations. I'll then present my own position and, finally, offer some additional pieces of support for it.

### *2.1.2 Explanation One: Taking Malleability at Face Value*

One obvious way to explain malleability would be to posit that it reflects a similar malleability in people's ontological beliefs. People come to believe in new entities, and new classes of entities, as easily as they accept talk of them into their vocabulary. Ontological talk mirrors ontological subscription.

This explanation seems unsatisfactory. For one, the credulity it attributes generally does not seem to accord with what we know of humans. People often are credulous, but when they are presented with something that significantly alters their view of the world they will often balk, or ask for reasons to accept the claim, or at least stop to ponder the alteration to their picture of things. The readiness to adopt new vocabulary I've described seems out of step with this especially because, as pointed out, some of the entities accepted seem like odd, counterintuitive additions to a "common sense" ontology.

It also seems potentially uncharitable to think that people's ontological subscription can be so easily altered. Presumably, beliefs about ontology should be changed for reasons. And while testimony is often a good reason to change one's beliefs, I think it will be seen that the sort of testimony that can alter somebody's vocabulary is often too weak to provide a rational basis for belief in unanticipated classes of objects.

To explain this phenomenon thusly would seem to imply that people very frequently change their ontology for scarcely any reason at all. I say this despite my insistence, in my previous chapter, that humans can be rather irrational within the bounds of charity. Ascribing this sort of arbitrariness seems to go implausibly far.

People do not, I take it, show nearly the same level of malleability when asked to accept entities not composed of concatenations of already accepted bits of the world. If those who don't already believe in them are asked to accept, say, ghosts or spriggans or extraterrestrials they will often show some skepticism, demand reasons, and, if convinced, exhibit surprise that the world contains such things. Perhaps resistance to these items is especially strong as they are *already* classed as “un-scientific.” Yet even in cases specifically derived from scientific findings—things like black holes, bacterial, electrons, or dark matter—there is still some resistance and some surprise. This is very different than the behavior associated with the malleability I've highlighted.

Thus there is good reason to think that in one case, but not in the other, their beliefs about what the world has in it are being significantly altered.

### *2.1.3 Explanation Two: Limited Domain of Discourse*

A better explanation, then, would be one on which ontological malleability is not a reflection of concurrent changes in ontological subscription. Perhaps we could adapt a sort of explanation already present in the ontological literature and say that the observed changes are not a result of changing beliefs but of contextual domain restrictions. We could propose that ordinary speakers hold an ontology much larger than “common sense ontology” to begin with but usually operate under implicit domain restrictions such that much of that ontology is excluded from the domain of discourse. Malleability could then



be explained as shifts in those contextual domain restrictions such that the apparently new entities accepted were actually thing to which the speaker already subscribed.

To give an example, on this view it might come as no surprise that a bunch of spatially spread-out non-governmental companies compose a single entity. Our ordinary speakers already accepted that, they only seemed not to due to a restriction on the domain of discourse which excluded such entities. We could explain this restriction as pragmatic: it didn't seem useful to talk about such things before, just as it isn't to the point to quantify over mold or molecules when asked "Is there anything in the refrigerator?" That has changed when somebody introducing "the private sector" into a discussion and highlights the utility of naming the entity. (Just as in the refrigerator case one could remove the implicit domain restrictions by asking "But is there anything at all, even mold or molecules, in the refrigerator?") This explains the malleability of discourse without credulity and arbitrariness in belief.

But there are reasons to doubt this explanation. For one, it attributes very extensive ontologies to ordinary speakers, ones larger than those of some universalist inclined ontologists. But this does not seem particularly plausible. For one thing, implicit domain restrictions can generally be removed, as illustrated in the refrigerator example above. So these restrictions ought to likewise be removable through an explicit signal that we mean to speak about *absolutely everything*. But think, does it seem at all likely that by so doing we could induce people not already accustomed to speaking of such things to talk about market forces, baffles, or etc.? Even if they don't mention those specific things, we ought at least find, upon lifting the domain restrictions, a staggering

number of similarly unintuitive entities of all sorts to which they subscribe. This does not seem to be the case.

Similarly, as Daniel Korman points out, speakers employing domain restriction will tend to take themselves to have been misunderstood when their remark is interpreted as if it were quantifying generally.<sup>8</sup> If somebody says “There are no beers” she will feel misunderstood by a person who replies, “No beers anywhere in the world?!” (Or, perhaps, be nettled with that person for feigning a lack of comprehension.)

But say a speaker is sitting in front of a table with a baseball bat and baseball on it and says “There is nothing on the table except a bat and ball.” That speaker might well feel misunderstood (or nettled) if you reply in surprise, “No dust? No air molecules?” This suggests she is aware of some restriction on her domain of utterance excluding those items, and perhaps only included objects of ordinary experience. But she will generally not have the same reaction if you respond, “Nothing which is formed from the bat and ball together?” She will likely agree that there is no such thing on the table, and will not show signs of thinking herself misunderstood or you obstreperous. This suggests that she lacks any awareness of a domain restriction on her speech making yours a poor inference. In this ordinary speakers don’t appear to behave like people who are simply not talking about such items due to an implicit domain restriction.

A number of ontologists endorse the idea that the quantifiers of ordinary discourse are standardly restricted to exclude certain entities which those ontologists hold to exist. But that is not the same as holding that those engaged in ordinary discourse already subscribe to all the entities these philosophers do. In characterizing such “restrictivist” positions in general, Korman writes that proponents of restrictivism agree that the folk

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<sup>8</sup> Korman, “Unrestricted Composition and Restricted Quantification,” 321.

lack reason to accept strange fusions.<sup>9</sup> Theodore Sider, for example, is confident that commonly there are domain restrictions in place which exclude strange fusions from the domain of discourse.<sup>10</sup> But nonetheless he holds from experience with his students that there is a process of convincing which must take place in order for people to accept the existence of such fusions whereas, on the view we are currently entertaining, they presumably already would be accepted. So even philosophers who themselves accept very large ontologies and wish to minimize their disagreement with ordinary folk don't seem generally inclined to think ordinary folk already believe in the existence of strange fusions, or some larger class which includes strange fusions.<sup>11</sup>

Another reason to prefer a different explanation is furnished by the phenomena I laid out in §1. So far, I've been focusing solely on how to explain malleability. And, as an explanation of malleability, the implicit domain restriction view has potential. But turning to the other phenomenon I introduced, opacity, implicit domain restrictions are of no explanatory use: the view can explain failing to speak about certain entities one subscribes to, ones which, for the moment, fall outside the implied domain. But it cannot explain speaking as if items exist to which one does not subscribe. That an explanation of X fails to explain Y need not be a mark against it. But it does provide a reason to prefer an explanation which can explain both X and Y (when both are more or less on a

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<sup>9</sup> Korman, "Unrestricted Composition and Restricted Quantification," 321.

<sup>10</sup> Theodore Sider, ed., "Replies to Gallois, Hirsch and Markosian," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 68, no. 3 (2004): 680.

<sup>11</sup> I'm not claiming that nobody holds the position that ordinary folk are already committed to universalism but that the fact is obscured by the implicit domain restrictions they employ when they speak. Eli Hirsch indicates having spoken to some such philosophers, though he doesn't cite anyone. See Hirsch, "Against Revisionary Ontology," 106-07.

theoretical par otherwise). I believe my hypothesis can explain both the malleability and opacity of ontological discourse.

Also, ontological opacity undercuts some of the *prima facie* appeal of implicit domain restriction as an explanation of malleability. Opacity suggests we must regard people as often not speaking in full ontological earnest. If we already must account for people speaking about items they don't really believe in, then we ought to be less inclined to posit that they believe in items just because they can easily be induced to speak about them.

### *2.2 Explanation Three: Simulated Domain of Discourse*

To explain the phenomena I've described, malleability and opacity, I want to suggest something analogous to the limited domain view. On that view, when one speaks with an implicitly limited domain, one speaks in a mode where one can felicitously speak as if the domain of things that exist is much smaller than one believes it to be. I propose that there is a common mode in which one may felicitously speak as if the domain of discourse is larger than one believes it to be. In this mode the domain of discourse may contain both entities the speaker actually subscribes to and fictional entities of a certain sort. Instead of speaking with a limited domain of discourse, one speaks with a simulated one. I'll thus say that speech in the mode I'm hypothesizing has a simulated domain.

I'm suggesting that ordinary people do often speak with a simulated domain, and thus my proposal constitutes a kind of hermeneutic fictionalism regarding the ontological portion of much ordinary speech.<sup>12</sup> Speaking in this mode is a species of speaking as if:

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<sup>12</sup> For the distinction between hermeneutic and revolutionary fictionalism, Matti Eklund, "Fictionalism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2015., 2015, accessed November 4, 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/fictionalism/>.

as if certain entities exist which may not. But I'm not proposing that ordinary speech is completely divorced from actual ontological beliefs. A simulated domain does not make it felicitous to speak as if just anything existed—talk of ghosts, elves, and aliens, from those who don't believe in them, would be just as misleading as ever. It is specifically a fictionalism with regard to composition and constitution: speaking as if some things compose a further thing, or constitute a further thing, whether they do or not. Thus to say "There is a red table" in this mode is to say that the world is as it would be if there were a red table, whether or not there actually is one.

A simulated domain would allow pragmatic concerns rather than ontological ones to determine what things are spoken about as an entity. If it is convenient or useful to conceptually group certain objects, matter, regions, properties, types, abstractions, or etc. together then, in this mode, one may speak as if they compose or constitute a single entity. If many similar groupings are convenient to make, then one may speak as if that which is grouped by each is an entity which is an instance of a single kind. Whatever groupings were functional, or conventional, in a given situation could be adopted.

It isn't hard to see how the simulated domain hypothesis meets the explanatory needs outlined above. If people are speaking in a mode such that phrases which appear to represent entities and kinds may actually not, being instead only speech as if those entities or kinds existed, then there would be no reason to expect people to believe in all the entities they speak in terms of. It would not be at all strange to mention, predicate of, and quantify over "entities" that one doesn't subscribe to.

And, if the groupings are merely pragmatic, it would stand to reason that they would be rather flexible. In one context it might be of use to group together things

which, in another context, it would do no good even to think of. Thus one would expect to see the kinds and entities a person seemed to countenance change from situation to situation. And it would not take much more than the indication that a certain grouping would be of use to give a person reason to speak in terms of a new entity or type. Such changes in ontological vocabulary would be matters of circumstantial convenience, not of ontological belief. In short, if use of a simulated domain were actually widespread then ontological malleability would be a natural consequence.

To be clear, I'm not suggesting that people divide the domain of discourse into entities they believe in and fictions. There may be entities which a speaker is aware of being subscribed to, and others which the speaker is aware are fictions, but this mode also seems to allow one to simply ignore this categorization. This seems like something that would be very useful about such a mode of speech: it would enable one to speak honestly about complex practical matters without having to worry about ontological theory. It seems that most people do ignore questions of ontology, as the modern Anglophone philosopher intends the term, most of the time. Such a person need not decide which of the things they speak about actually exist, and which are simply useful fictions.

A philosopher inclined to think that folk theory should often constrain philosophical theorizing might worry that this simulated domain view allows folk ontological views to be entirely ignored.<sup>13</sup> Philosophers could simply reinterpret folk statements which seemed to contradict their favored theory, or take an attitude of general agnosticism towards folk subscriptions. I want to be clear that this also is not authorized by the view I'm proposing. I am not suggesting that we must interpret ordinary speakers as having no ontological views, nor that we must be consistently agnostic about what

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<sup>13</sup> Todd Buras brought this concern to my attention.

those views are. My claim is merely that discovering those views is more difficult than simply making a cursory examination of surface grammar. (Indeed, my argument about ontological opacity is predicated on being able to discover at least some folk commitments.) Giving an account of how folk views ought to be determined is beyond my scope. But accepting that ordinary speakers often employ a simulated domain of discourse does not constitute a general obstacle to making that determination.

This is how I propose to explain the aforementioned phenomena. I have sketched the view, and how it would operate as an explanation. I'll now develop some aspects of it more carefully.

### *2.2.2 Semantics of a Simulated Domain*

Above I described how a simulated domain operates in terms of what could felicitously be uttered. But that is a less than ideally precise. What is the semantic upshot of the view I'm proposing? What, on my view, are the semantic properties of a sentence with a simulated domain of discourse? How does my suggestion interact with standard semantic theories?

I will continue to hedge, in a sense; but I will make my hedging more precise. Theories of domain restriction on which it is a semantic phenomenon and ones on which it is a pragmatic phenomenon both have their defenders.<sup>14</sup> But it is uncontroversial that statements are often made with an implicit restricted domain of quantification. The effect on what is communicated is understood, and utterances employing domain restrictions are regarded as felicitous, even in the absence of a settled answer to the

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<sup>14</sup> For a survey of available views see Jason Stanley and Zoltán Gendler Szabó, "On Quantifier Domain Restriction," *Mind & Language* 15, no. 2–3 (2000): 219–261.

semantic/pragmatic question. In other words, the general communicative function of limited domain of discourse is clear enough, even if the mechanics of it are debated.

The linguistic phenomenon I'm hypothesizing seems closely analogous to domain restriction—one might call it a kind of domain expansion. And I want to suggest that, similarly, an account may be given of the general communicative function of a simulated domain of discourse which isn't committed to either a semantic or a pragmatic mechanism. That is what I propose to do here.

Still, it is quite possible to characterize the function of domain restriction in formal semantic terms. Whereas, it might seem that doing the same for domain simulation will be very difficult. Semantic models tend to assume a domain of entities, of things that exist, while my hypothesis suggests that the domain may include... well there's the rub. My suggestion implies, for instance, that the sentence "There is a shadow" may straightforwardly communicate a truth even if no shadow exists. Ordinary semantic views take this sentence to express something straightforwardly quantificational:  $\exists x( S(x) )$ , where the quantifiers range over what there is. Wouldn't it require major changes to the logical structure imputed to the sentence, and so to the semantic theory that results in that structure, to accommodate the possibility that the sentence is true even if no item that fulfills the predicate  $S$  actually exists?

But on my proposal the quantificational structure may be left unaltered, and thus semantic theories can be largely unaltered as well. Instead, it is just the supposition that the quantifiers range over what there is that needs to be abandoned. Instead, the quantifiers range over a simulated, fictional domain. The domain over which speakers



quantify is not that of actual ontology populated by all and only those entities that exist but a domain also populated by some fictional entities.

But which fictional entities? Above I suggested that if it is convenient or useful to conceptually group certain objects, matter, regions, properties, types, abstractions, or etc. together then one may speak as if they compose or constitute a single entity. Let us call the fictional entities which would exist if the things thus grouped really did constitute or compose a thing pseudo-entities. My proposal is that the domain of discourse is expanded with pseudo-entities, and that which pseudo-entities it is expanded with varies by context.

The role of context here is analogous to the role played by context in setting implicit domain restrictions. Just as various factors having to do with salience, convention, and etc. determine what is excluded from the domain of discourse, so the same factors also determine which pseudo-entities should be included in it. Thus the speech of economists, by convention peppered with pseudo-entities of use to economists, will employ quantifiers which range over those pseudo-entities, while non-economists usually will not. Though, in keeping with my observations in §1.3, all it will often take to alter the context such that a given pseudo-entity is included will be giving an account on which certain entities compose or constitute a further entity.

Returning to our example sentence, “There is a shadow” would still be translated as  $\exists x( S(x) )$ . But instead of this meaning that there is some entity which is a shadow, it means there is either an entity or a contextually relevant pseudo-entity which is a shadow. Assuming shadows to be among the contextually relevant pseudo-entities of that statement, as they would be in most contexts, that would come to saying that the world is

as it would be if areas unlit due to occlusion of some matter did compose a shadow, and if some entity was a shadow. In general terms, utterances in this mode are true if they would be true in a world where the contextually implicit compositional and/or constitutional suppositions were true—true in a world where the pseudo-entities in the domain of discourse actually existed.

### *2.2.3 Grouping and Predicating*

As I've envisioned it, the things which when grouped will correspond to a pseudo-entity may be of a variety of sorts. Indeed, they would need to be to account for the diversity in the examples I suggested. I take it both concreta and abstracta can be grouped. One may group numbers, types, regions, durations, events, ideas, and etc. Sometimes this grouping is explicit, and what is grouped is described in detail. More often it is implicit, and what is described is left largely intuitive to be filled in by feel and by analogy. But this is common to all our talk of entities—it is rarely accompanied by explicit delineation, and often depends on our natural tendencies to regard things as grouped, or on analogies to other objects with which we're already familiar.

But how do existing predicates function when applied to pseudo-entities? The easiest case to explain would be pseudo-entities which, if they existed, would be concrete and localized, in general resembling paradigmatic commonsense instances of objects. In that case, it is easy to see how the predicates commonly applied to medium-sized dry goods could be straightforwardly applied to the pseudo-entity.

For odder pseudo-entities, in general, I'd suggest that the same dynamics of analogy and metaphor also apply here which allow novel uses of predicates to whatever. In many cases there will also be conventions. What 'big' communicates is different in "a

big dog”, “a big hard drive”, and “a big sale”, and in the latter two cases there are several candidate interpretations even given analogies to more familiar cases (a sale of many items, a sale of items with a large aggregate mass, a sale of items for a large monetary value, etc.). But I take it convention usually settles which of these candidates is most likely to be intended. There is nothing novel here.

I said “in general” above because I do take it that in a few cases rather novel meanings of predicates may be explicitly defined. I am thinking here of my above example of the average plumber. In the case of the average plumber we are very far indeed from paradigm cases of commonsense objects. To predicate height of him (he is male, or at least mostly male), is not straightforwardly like predicating height of an actual person—instead it consists in a precise mathematical function over height in many disparate persons. This is, I take it, simply explicitly stipulated, though through familiarity with the workings of averages it comes to feel natural.

The case of the average plumber also illustrates how diverse and outlandish may be the groupings that produce pseudo entities. I see no reason why what may be grouped should be explicitly bounded. Though, if the reason for grouping things as a pseudo-entity is pragmatic, there may be a degree of un-intuitiveness past which it is of little use to venture, creating a sort of limit imposed by our interests and cognitive abilities.

#### *2.2.4 Loose Speech*

It might seem that my simulated domain hypothesis resembles certain theories metaphysicians have suggested which suppose that ordinary speech in some domain is true in the loose sense in which it is intended but not strictly and literally true. Roderick Chisholm, for example, considers much ordinary talk of identity to be literally false, but

maintains that such talk is generally loose such that the false literal meaning is not intended.<sup>15</sup> Some have seen van Inwagen's account of how ordinary ontological discourse is not generally contradicted by his nihilism as also relying on loose talk.<sup>16</sup> And my account here is similar in spirit to van Inwagen's.

My simulated domain theory resembles a loose speech theory in that it posits a common mode of speech in which utterances do not in fact communicate what they might superficially appear to (and another mode in which they do). But whether speech with a simulated domain actually constitutes loose speech is a difficult question to answer in the absence of a clear definition of loose speech, and also without settling on a semantic or pragmatic account of speech with a simulated domain. I suspect that any pragmatic account would qualify as loose speech on at least some definitions, for it would posit that utterances often fail to convey ontological commitments which are included in their semantic meanings. And since my theory involves not meaning quite what is said some would consider it to involve speaking loosely.

A settled definition of loose speech is not forthcoming, and I have already declined to decide between semantic and pragmatic versions of my proposal. But I do want to contrast simulated domain speech from certain paradigmatic features of loose speech. Consider these examples taken from discussions of loose speech in the literature: Someone says of a friend who seldom calls, "She never calls."<sup>17</sup> (Instances of hyperbole

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<sup>15</sup> Roderick Chisholm, *Person and Object* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1976), chapter 3.

<sup>16</sup> For Van Inwagen's proposal see van Inwagen, *Material Beings*, chapter 10. Korman classes Van Inwagen among the loose speech theorists, while Hirsch considers him to be presenting a different though similar sort of proposal. See respectively Korman, "Unrestricted Composition and Restricted Quantification," 332, and Hirsch, "Against Revisionary Ontology," 106.

<sup>17</sup> Hirsch, "Against Revisionary Ontology," 105

come up a lot.) In attempting to describe the geographical properties of France, someone says, “France is hexagonal”<sup>18</sup> A person who lives a mere block outside Paris proper answers a question about where they live by saying, “I live in Paris.”<sup>19</sup>

In these examples the speaker is well aware of the shortcomings of her utterance as a strict description of the facts, though she likely can expect her interlocutor not to take her statements as such. What is said isn’t exactly right, it is exaggerated or rounded, or it ignores complex details. Paradigmatically, loose speech is, in a certain sense, not entirely in earnest. For this reason, a speaker would typically be willing to admit this shortcoming were her utterance challenged. If an interlocutor responded with a question about whether what she said is *really* the case, she will likely respond negatively as her statement’s shortcoming, even as a representation of her own beliefs, is already salient to her. She’s aware of the looseness of her own talk.

But I think speech in the simulated domain mode I’ve described often is entirely in earnest in the sense in which paradigmatic loose speech isn’t. If an ordinary speaker is challenged on the accuracy of a description of shadows or systems, and isn’t additionally using some form of loose speech like hyperbole, she’ll probably show no sign of being aware of any looseness or inaccuracy in what she’s said. If she is employing a simulated domain of speech then that mode does not seem to share the proneness to retract and revise or the awareness of imprecision that marks paradigmatically loose speech.

If I had appealed to loose speech to help account for the mode of speech I am proposing this could provide grounds for an objection to my proposal, as the phenomenon

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<sup>18</sup> Jason Stanley, “On the Linguistic Basis for Contextualism,” *Philosophical Studies* 119, no. 1–2 (2004): 139.

<sup>19</sup> Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, “Loose Talk,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 86 (1985): 163. Whether loose talk has something specifically to do with France I do not know.

I'm trying to observe lacks features possessed by loose speech.<sup>20</sup> But I see no reason why this should be an objection to my view. If what I've said so far is correct, this makes perfect sense: speakers really do believe that the world is as it would be according to their description of it, given certain compositional facts. And ordinary speakers do not readily attend to the compositional facts, nor realize that that is what an interlocutor is doing. Indeed, this indifference to compositional and constitutional facts, in essence this indifference to ontological issues, seems likely to be the great utility of speech in this mode. Imprecision arising from this indifference thus seems unlikely to be salient to speakers. So under most circumstances speakers would take a challenge to the accuracy of what they've said as a challenge to something they take to be precisely and literally accurate. It usually takes the beginnings of philosophical instruction to get someone to pay attention to the question of when and whether composition occurs, and thus to fully grasp an important sense in which their speech might not be literally accurate to the facts.

Thus simulated domain speech is not like paradigmatic instances of loose speech. It is tight in the dimensions people usually care about, while ontologically uncommitted in a dimension they usually do not.

### *2.3 Ontological Commitment*

If the semantic hypothesis I propose is true, even though it is not itself a theory of ontological commitment, it may have implications for such theories. By the same token, and more useful for my purposes, some philosophical theories of ontological commitment may offer support for my contention.

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<sup>20</sup> Hirsch takes exactly this line against loose speech views in Hirsch, "Against Revisionary Ontology." And Merricks makes similar arguments against van Inwagen's linguistic proposal in Merricks, *Objects and Persons*.

A theory of ontological commitment aims at providing a method to search out which entities the holder of a theory or assertion must logically be committed to. Clearly, if an entity must exist for an utterance to be true then one committed to the truth of that utterance is ontologically committed to that entity. I don't take this to be committing myself to one theory of ontological commitment or another; it's just a further spelling out of what ontological commitment is.

But say we are dealing not with the well-behaved realm of literally true statements, but the murkier waters of actual communication. For example, one might say "What I say next is false, but people used to believe such things. The sun revolves around the Earth."<sup>21</sup> The second sentence is literally false. But in that context it is clear that the speaker has communicated something precisely opposite to the literal meaning. Even if the speaker has spoken in complete earnest, we shouldn't say that the speaker is committed to <The sun revolves around the Earth>.

This lands us in the midst of very tricky issues of semantics, pragmatics, and language. But I want to sidestep that as much as possible and just characterize a sense in which non-literal statements can be adequate to the truth. Say a remark is communicatively true if what it standardly communicates, and is standardly intended to communicate, is true. Tying this back to what was said above about ontological commitment, if somebody is committed to an utterance and an entity must exist for that

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<sup>21</sup> This example may seem artificial. But it is only thus for simplicity's sake. Actual instances of similar speech aren't hard to find, even in philosophy papers: somebody will often adopt the voice of their interlocutor and state a position they themselves reject. Some of the sentences they use may include qualifications like "they think that" or "on this view", but often there will also be simple declarative sentences which omit such and just state a position the author clearly isn't committed to. Many such are found in the prior chapters of this work.

utterance to be communicatively true, then that person is ontologically committed to that entity.

Now, without getting into too much detail, many theories of ontological commitment of ordinary discourse involve paraphrase, or some other step back from the particulars of what speakers have said. Quinean theories, for example, hold that ontological commitments can't be read off of ordinary discourse directly. Rather, a paraphrase of a certain sort must be generated and commitments judged from the nature of the paraphrase. Thus a speaker may speak about entities which nonetheless fail to appear among their ontological commitments since they are not featured in an ontologically committing role in the paraphrase of her remarks.<sup>22</sup>

Or take the view defended by Daniel Johnson on which ontological commitment cannot be read directly off of statements or their paraphrases.<sup>23</sup> Instead, Johnson argues, ontological commitments are to be judged by those entities which appear in the ontological explanations of those statements.<sup>24</sup> Thus, again, it may turn out that discourse commits one to a very different set of entities than surface grammar suggests.

But note what follows about language if a view like Johnson's is the correct one. Say one says "There are shadows in the room," and means it. Per Johnson's view, this need not indicate ontological commitment to shadows: perhaps the ontological explanation of the proposition expressed by "There are shadows in the room" only

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<sup>22</sup> This sentence is of the sort mentioned in footnote 21. I've given no indication of accepting this. And I could turn around and explicitly repudiate it without seeming to contradict myself. But its grammatical form is straightforwardly declarative.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Johnson, "Explanation in Metaphysics" (Baylor University, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> On his view ontological explanation actually only holds between propositions, so technically it would be "entities which appear in the ontological explanations of the propositions those statements express."



involves regions of a surface on which light would shine were it not occluded. Then the statement would only commit one to such regions, not to shadows.

But recall that if an entity must exist for an utterance to be communicatively true then the speaker is ontologically committed to that entity. If Johnson is right, and the ontological commitments of “There are shadows in the room” need not include shadows, then it follows that “There are shadows in the room” does not communicate that shadows exist. The statement must be uttered in some mode such that it isn’t entirely in ontological earnest; if it weren’t, then it would be impossible for its ontological commitments to be thus distant from surface grammar.

And this point generalizes: if an account of ontological commitment like Johnson’s is true, then it must generally be the case that remarks are not entirely in ontological earnest. The same will be true on Quinean view, at least if the paraphrase is supposed to be meaning preserving, and on any other view that allows ontological commitment to differ significantly from the set of entities that seem to be invoked in surface grammar. In other words, any theory of ontological commitment of this sort seems to require there to be a common semantic mode in which talk of entities is not in ontological earnest, and entities may apparently be mentioned, and even quantified over, without the significance being that those entities exist.

That mode need not be speech with a simulated domain. But speech with a simulated domain would meet the explanatory bill. So if one accepts any theory of ontological commitment of the sort I’ve been discussing, it seems to provide an additional reason to be sympathetic to the semantic hypothesis I’m arguing for.

## *2.4 An Intuitive Appeal*

So far I've presented a number of reasons to think that my simulated domain hypothesis is a good semantic theory. But before I conclude this section I want to make one further point which is that it seems, to me at least, that something like my proposal being true has great *prima facie* plausibility.

As a modern Anglophone philosopher, and one with nihilist leanings, I've been trained in my professional writing to adopt a way of talking which does not seem to grant the existence of entities I am unwilling to admit into my ontology. I employ plural quantification, and other unwieldy devices to avoid invoking groups, composites, and so on. In this chapter I have used talk of events, acts of "grouping" in this way.

Meanwhile, my nihilist inclinations notwithstanding, my speech outside of professional philosophical contexts is often filled with unqualified mention of non-living composite entities, and even of the items I've here used as examples of pseudo-entities. I have my doubts about the existence of such entities, and even about the metaphysical possibility of their existence. But it is rather difficult not to engage in such linguistic behavior, and it's only in the most rigorous philosophy that I've ever seen people consistently attempt to do so. Anybody who has attempted to write in this philosophically rigorous mode, at least if they lean towards nihilism, will probably remember some frustration at how difficult and novel it is to resist the quotidian tendency to at least group things as 'grouping', 'constellations', 'arrangements', etc.

The felt artificiality of this endeavor is part of what commends this simulated domain view to me. I do lean towards nihilism. But to force my speech to reflect my ontology, in the sense of not speaking in terms which denote composite entities I am not convinced exist, feels quite alien to my usual linguistic practice. I am struck when I try

to speak like a rigorous ontologist that this is surely *not* the mode in which I ordinarily speak. Though my words seem to function as usual, I seem to have submitted to an unusual constraint on their use.

A wag might counter that this just shows the hopeless confusion of nihilism. Perhaps. But try consistently not speaking of shadows, points (scored in games), or other entities not in your ontology in a discourse that would usually involve them and see if you don't have a similar intuition: not just the intuition that what you're attempting is hard, as rigorous precision often is, but that you are attempting something unusual.

I do not appear to be alone in this. Peter van Inwagen expresses confidence that people “in the ordinary business of life” may speak sentences of the form ‘there are Xs’ and, though there are no Xs, nonetheless say things which are “literally true.”<sup>25</sup> And his justification for the claim is little more than the intuitive similarity between a statement like “There are two valuable chairs in the next room” and “The sun moved behind the elms.” Just as it seems intuitive that the latter does not contradict heliocentrist astronomy so, to van Inwagen at least, it seems intuitive that the former is too “empty of metaphysical commitment” to contradict his revisionary ontology.<sup>26</sup>

So I have an intuitive inkling that it is unfamiliar to usual practice to strictly police the ontology of your utterances such that it precisely matches your subscriptions. Upon introspection, it feels more typical to invoke entities as an easy way of predicating of their constituents or parts with scarcely a thought to actual facts about constitution or composition. This is hardly an iron-clad argument, even if you share my impressions.

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<sup>25</sup> van Inwagen, *Material Beings*, 102.

<sup>26</sup> van Inwagen, *Material Beings*, 106-07.

But perhaps it suggests that the view I've laid out in this section isn't as bizarre as it might first appear.

### *3.1 Actual QV vs. Simulated Domain*

Having laid out the simulated domain hypothesis and the support for it, I'll now turn to a direct comparison between it and Actual QV. This addresses things differently than the previous two sections: there my question was absolute, what is a plausible hypothesis to explain observable phenomena? Here my question is conditional and contrastive: if one does seek an exclusive charitable semantic hypothesis, which should one prefer, Hirsch's proposal or my own?

Each provides a semantic basis for charity. Actual QV does so by positing that groups which appear to differ about matters of basic ontology—nihilists and ordinary folk, say—actually are speaking different languages. Each speaks a language such that what she means by her utterances is literally true in that language. But the linguistic disconnect goes undetected and so is mistaken for disagreement.

The simulated domain hypothesis suggests instead that, while people are in earnest about their descriptions of the world, they generally intend to incur no commitments to the pre-suppositions of those statements having to do with composition and constitution. Thus, short significant further investigation, we must be agnostic about the ontology of ordinary speakers, because it is not well represented in their mode of speech. Even if we accept a theory wildly out of step with the ontology that appears to be presupposed by ordinary discourse, we need not attribute massive error to ordinary speakers.

I'll argue that, if one feels obliged to accept a charitable hypothesis about the semantic discourse of ordinary speakers then simulated domain is clearly preferable theory to Actual QV.

### *3.2 Theoretical Virtue*

I first want to make the case that the simulated domain hypothesis is superior to Actual QV on several grounds of theoretic virtue.<sup>27</sup> The first of these is very simple: the simulated domain hypothesis simply explains more. As far as I can tell, the sole theoretic function of Actual QV is to provide a charitable semantics. The simulated domain hypothesis, on the other hand, explains several phenomena which seem superficially puzzling. Should one accept Actual QV one would still stand in need of an explanation for ontological opacity and malleability, for both these phenomena occur in the behavior of a given individual, they are not aspects of a disconnect between individuals or groups. Even if I accepted that Al and Bo only seem to disagree about ontology due to an undetected difference in language, I am no closer to understanding why Al appears to disagree with himself, nor why Bo seems to change his ontological subscriptions so readily.

Meanwhile the simulated domain hypothesis explains both of these phenomena. It would arguably be a good hypothesis for this purpose even if one accepted Actual QV. So simulated domain has greater explanatory power than Actual QV.

A different way of putting this same point is to say that Actual QV is a semantic theory, a theory about the actual linguistic practice of people, which we have only one positive reason to entertain: that it allows us to fulfill a certain charitable mandate.

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<sup>27</sup> This section expands on, and further focuses, considerations very briefly treated in my third chapter §4.2.

Empirical support from, say, observed linguistic behavior is unavailable almost by hypothesis. The entire point is that identical surface grammar masks a hidden gulf in meaning between speakers.

But one might well be suspicious of an attempt to adduce new semantic facts solely based on metaphysical commitments. Even if one thought the metaphysics very reliable, one might well doubt that something as specific and idiosyncratic as a semantic theory could reliably be derived from something as abstract and general as a strong commitment to charity. Such a commitment seems apt to badly underdetermine specific semantic questions. Surely it would be preferable to find a theory which could fulfill the charitable mandate while also enjoying some empirical support. On this basis one should find simulated domain preferable to Actual QV qua semantic theory. I've shown the plausibility of my hypothesis on independent grounds having to do with observable linguistic behavior. Though I began the chapter speaking about charity, charity plays no part in the arguments sketched in §2.

Simulated domain also improves on Actual QV in simplicity. As I describe in my first chapter, Actual QV is a thesis about which languages actually exist and are used by speakers. There are several ways of describing the complexity costs of this theory. One might be to treat languages as entities, and say that Actual QV thus multiplies entities, but this seems artificial. Rather, I'd like to look at the complexity of the theory itself.

Actual QV makes semantics, in general, significantly more complex. As I discussed in chapter 1 §2.2.3, the difference between the languages Actual QV posits within the community of "English speakers" is not limited to elements like quantifier terms. Rather, two languages of the sort Actual QV posits must differ in the semantic

values of much if not all of their vocabulary. And, while it is not clear how many of these undetectable languages there are, it is clear that there are quite a number: for at fewest there is one to correspond with each of the ontological positions which are to be charitably interpreted as equivalent.<sup>28</sup> Thus, even among what appear to be speakers of a common language, and on top of the ordinary diversity of senses, a semantic theory must contend with the plurality of semantic values that word may possess.

It seems quite clear that simulated domain makes for simpler semantics, for it says nothing about the semantic contributions of individual words. It does propose the existence of a linguistic mode, but, given the discussion in §2.2.2, it does not seem that the alterations to existing semantic theories needed to accommodate that mode are nearly so complex as are those necessitated by Actual QV. We must differently conceive of the domain of discourse, and what it means to predicate of something in it. Appealing to an intuitive notion of simplicity, I submit that this is clearly far simpler.

### *3.3 The Problem of Language Switching*

My previous chapters have been much concerned with the rational for Actual QV, and specifically charity. But I've thus far said very little about what objections may be made to the view itself. In this section I'm going to develop one major objection made by John Horden. Recall that Actual QV involves some "English speakers" speaking a language different from others. The revisionist ontologists, it is held, generally started off speaking English as the majority of his fellows do but then "somehow confused

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<sup>28</sup> And combinations thereof as well. If both differences about special composition and apparent disagreements about endurantism and perdurantism are to be deflated with Actual QV, as Hirsch suggests, then the universalist endurantist and the universalist perdurantist must speak different languages from each other, as well as speaking different languages than any nihilist. Due to the diversity of philosophical views, each stance to be deflated multiplies the number of languages one must posit on Actual QV.

himself into speaking a new language without realizing it.”<sup>29</sup> But no explanation of how this peculiar event comes about is forthcoming, and surely one is called for—a causal story to go with the semantic one. Horden suggests, I think rightly, that how ontologists might come to speak a different language is a rather problematic gap in this theory.<sup>30</sup>

Hirsch in several places states his contention that the shift in language has taken place as the result of becoming confused or muddled. But the details of this process of being confused into adopting a different language are never spelled out. Ostensibly the source of the confusion is the subtle arguments of philosophers. But those arguments, at least the bulk of those made by ontologists, conclude something about what there is, not about what language you ought to speak.<sup>31</sup> Thus the explanation here cannot be an epistemic one, an account of how people come to believe that they ought to adopt a different dialect. They are convinced of nothing of the kind and, per Actual QV, unaware that such a change has taken place.

Horden adds a further wrinkle: to Hirsch’s way of looking at things, the revisionist positions are pretty obviously crazy—or would be could they not be seen to be stated in a language different from our own. In the new language ontologists state obvious truths, just as they state obvious falsehoods in the language spoken by the general public. How, then, could the arguments of the crafty revisionist be at all compelling to one who has not already undergone a linguistic shift to the language in

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<sup>29</sup> Hirsch, “Quantifier Variance and Realism,” 81.

<sup>30</sup> Horden, “Ontology in Plain English,” 234-35.

<sup>31</sup> Sider might be the exception here, as he does argue that we may adopt better and worse languages to do our philosophy in.



which that flavor of revisionism makes sense? Hirsch's view seems to render it even more difficult to explain how revisionists could convince anybody of anything.

As I said, I have looked in vain for details about how this shift occurs. And it does not appear to be an easy event to explain. I have described already the far reaching semantic consequences of the postulated shift. This underscores that the posited linguistic shift is not trivial, it is not the sort of thing that might just happen as a result of trivial linguistic drift or slight alteration of usage. I have also, in my second chapter, outlined reasons why a dramatic shift in language of which the subject is unaware is *prima facie* implausible.<sup>32</sup> So, short some explanation to render the event plausible, it seems we should doubt that such events (repeatedly) occur, and be slow to accept any theory predicated on such occurrences. Actual QV is such a theory.

That Actual QV rests on individuals inexplicably, or at least mysteriously, exchanging their language for another is a good reason to prefer my simulated domain hypothesis which suffers no similar explanatory lacuna.

#### *4.1 Summing Up*

Actual QV is a thesis commended by deflationists like Eli Hirsch as a direct consequence of interpretive charity. In my prior two chapters I showed that interpretive charity, embodied in the principle of charity, exerts no such force on our interpretation. But even if we were moved by charity to adopt some conciliatory semantic hypothesis regarding ordinary ontological speech, the current chapter has now shown why I do not think that theory should be Actual QV.

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<sup>32</sup> Sell §2.3.4.2 of my second chapter.

Instead I've argued that a fictionalist hypothesis on which ordinary speakers frequently employ a mode of speech with a simulated domain of discourse should be preferred, at least by those inclined to nihilism. The simulated domain hypothesis explains the puzzling phenomenon of ontological opacity and malleability found in ordinary discourse. It also has a certain intuitive plausibility, and is further supported on certain theories of ontological commitment. Finally, I offered several contrastive reasons why the simulated domain view ought to be preferred to Actual QV.

Let's say I've succeeded in both rendering the simulated domain view plausible, and in showing it to be a theoretic improvement on Actual QV qua theories that facilitate exclusive charity. What is the significance? At the broadest level, my aim has been to defend a view of contemporary ontology, especially of the sort Hirsch deems revisionary ontology, on which it is both a substantive project and one which is continuous with ordinary speakers' use of language.

My prior chapters show that the principle of charity is no substantial obstacle to such a view. My present defense of the simulated domain view shows that extending negative charity is also no obstacle. One may extend such charity without accepting a deflationary semantic view like Actual QV. On the view I've defended, such charity is compatible with univocity regarding quantificational vocabulary, existential vocabulary, and vocabulary in general. The only difference one need posit between the discourse of ordinary speakers and that of rigorous ontologists is that the ontologists are studiously avoiding speech in a common fictionalist mode. But the philosophers still speak in their native tongue, and interpretive charity furnishes no good reason to think otherwise.

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