

3

Minimal Substantivity

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1. Introduction

Ontological debates may be characterized as disagreements about what there is. Philosophers debate on whether there are numbers, propositions, universals, species, genders, and much more. Two of these ontological disputes have sparked significant controversy in recent years. The first dispute revolves around questions of *persistence*, asking how an object can exist through time, undergoing changes while remaining the same entity. An influential account, called Perdurantism, has it that objects persist through time by having temporal parts (Armstrong 1980; Lewis 1986; Heller 1990; Sider 1997). Endurantism, by contrast, rejects the existence of temporal parts, holding that objects are wholly present at each moment of their existence (Haslanger 1989; Van Inwagen 1990; Merricks 1994; Wiggins 2001; Fine 2006). The second debate is about *composite material objects* and it revolves around the question whether these objects exist and, if they do, which ones exist. Nihilists hold that composition never occurs, and that only simples exist (Unger 1979; Wheeler 1979; Dorr 2005). Universalists, by contrast, hold that it is sufficient for two objects to exist in order for them to compose something (Lewis 1986; Van Cleve 1986; Armstrong 1997; Rea 1998). Finally, moderatists argue that composition obtains in some cases and not in others: for instance, only when the parts concur together to form a life, or when they are otherwise connected (Van Inwagen 1990; Merricks 2001; Markosian 2014; Carmichael 2015).

I will refer to these debates as *the Persistence debate* and *the Composition debate* respectively. Also, although for reasons of space my examples in this chapter will draw only on the Persistence debate, I submit what I say could apply, *modulo* relevant distinctions, to the Composition debate too (I will briefly return to it in section 6).

In metaontology, diverging views about the Composition and Persistence debates have emerged. *Ontological Deflationism* holds that these disputes are not substantive. Some deflationists argue that these are merely terminological discussions, to be resolved by reaching an agreement about which linguistic expressions belong to plain English (Hirsch 2005, 2009). Others argue that these disputes involve questions that are either easily answered within a language, or are otherwise unanswerable because asked outside of a language (Thomasson 2009, 2015). Other deflationists yet hold that the competing views are all somehow equivalent (Sidelle 2002; Miller 2005), where this might be taken to entail that we have too little evidence to choose one

ontological view rather than another (see especially Bennett 2009). The opposite approach may be labelled *Ontological Anti-Deflationism*, according to which these ontological disputes are substantive. A *pragmatist-naturalist* Anti-Deflationism along the lines dictated by Quine (1948, 1951, 1960) will presumably say that the Composition and Persistence disputes are substantive insofar as one of the two options should be recognized as more compatible with our best scientific description of the world. More radically, a hardcore *realist* along the lines of Sider (2011) will say that these disputes are substantive insofar as one of the competing options carves reality at its joints better than the other.

It is not clear that either of these views satisfactorily accounts for the status of the Persistence and Composition debates. On the one hand, the deflationist dismissal does not do justice to the following facts: first, that opting for either of these theories implies embracing certain commitments about what *there is*, thus assuming a position about non-linguistic, worldly facts; second, that each party to the debate can cite evidence that is sufficient at least by their *own* lights. On the other hand, embracing a full-blown Anti-Deflationism may not help either, and the Endurantism-Perdurantism debate nicely illustrates this point. First, a naturalist option may not be viable, for it is not clear that, for example, Perdurantism better fits with our current science. Indeed Sider (2001: 80ff) and Miller (2005: 110–13) precisely show that Endurantism can be formulated in a way that is compatible with special relativity, and is therefore not inferior to Perdurantism in this respect. Second, a realist position would be supremely difficult to establish too, since it remains unclear (at least to me) whether it can be successfully argued that there is conclusive, convincing evidence as to which option is more joint-carving. With respect to the existence of temporal parts, indeed Sider admits that he has “no good epistemology of metaphysics to offer” (Sider 2001: xv).

My project in this chapter is that of articulating a position intermediate between Deflationism and Anti-Deflationism. Specifically, I wish to show that a *Minimal Anti-Deflationism* about these debates is defensible, whereby the Composition and Persistence disputes are *minimally substantive*. As I will try to outline it, minimal substantivity is incompatible with kinds of defectiveness like mere verballity and lack of sufficient evidence; however, at the same time it implies no naturalistic or realistic commitments. As such, the notion of minimal substantivity could help restore the ontological respectability of the Composition and Persistence debates, with no need to submit oneself to much more committal views about what it is for a dispute to be ontologically substantive.

Before proceeding, I should say something concerning the relationship between the notion of minimal substantivity that I am about to outline and the main theme of the present volume—namely, what Burgess and Plunkett (2013) call *conceptual ethics* and what Cappelen (2018) calls *conceptual engineering*. I believe the notion of minimal substantivity helps explain how and why some debates that are (either overtly or covertly) about the engineering of some concept are ontologically relevant, even when these kinds of endeavours do not aim at identifying concepts that are naturalistically adequate, or let alone joint-carving.¹

¹ For a proposal alternative to mine, see Díaz-León (Chapter 9, this volume).

The engineering of concepts like GENDER, RACE, WOMAN, BLACK, MARRIAGE may belong precisely to this category. Indeed, as Barnes (2014: 337–8) points out, the philosopher may even assume from the start that these concepts track social constructions, where this by no means entails either (i) fundamental joint-carving; or (ii) reduction to facts described by the natural sciences.² If these enterprises are to be accepted as still ontologically substantive, the relevant notion of substantivity needs to be free from the above metaphysical preconceptions. This is where the notion of *minimal substantivity* can help: it can shed light on a way in which these tasks of conceptual engineering can be regarded as ontologically substantive, even when the purpose of the engineering itself is neither joint-carving nor naturalistic adequacy.

Last, the present contribution may also itself be viewed as an exercise in the engineering of the concept MINIMAL SUBSTANTIVITY. I realize this concept is far from belonging to our ordinary repertoire; consequently, I see myself as trying to articulate a novel notion rather than as trying to ameliorate a pre-existing one. My hope is that of offering a useful conceptual tool, which will help trace finer-grained distinctions and sharpen our philosophical understanding of the status of some disputes about what there is.

2. The Minimum Requirement for Substantivity

As already mentioned in the Introduction, I believe a *Minimal Anti-Deflationism* is available in logical space: Ontological disputes are substantive in (at least) a “minimal”, yet interesting sense. My goal is to bring out, and elaborate on, this sense.

For purely operative purposes, we might begin our inquiry by considering what it is that we require, at a minimum, from a full-blown substantive dispute. This consideration will guide us in the process of unearthing and delineating a notion of minimal substantivity.

It seems to me the minimum necessary (and by no means sufficient) requirement for a genuinely substantive dispute to obtain is that it is *not verbal*, that is, such that the disputants are not simply talking past each other:

[*Substantivity*] If an ontological dispute is substantive, then it is non-verbal.

With this formulation in mind, let us ask: Do ontological disputes meet this necessary, minimal criterion for substantivity? There is a story, due to Eli Hirsch, according to which they do not. Hirsch’s view has it that a verbal dispute is such iff each side ought to agree that, on the most plausibly charitable interpretation, the other side speaks the truth in its own favoured language (cf. Hirsch 2005, 2008a,b, 2009, 2011).³

Let us examine what Hirsch would say with regard to an ontology dispute such as that between Endurantism and Perdurantism. Suppose that Emma the endurantist

² It could be pointed out that social constructions are the subject of *social sciences*, which count as “sciences” in the Quinean methodology. Even conceding this, it would still seem possible to deem these questions as substantive in a lesser sense. The present proposal offers a way of bypassing such issues of ranking.

³ Other influential accounts of verbal disputes are offered by Chalmers (2011); Jenkins (2014); and Balcerak-Jackson (2014).

utters: “There is a tree in front of us”, while Percy the perdurantist rebuts her claim: “No, there is a sequence of temporal parts of a tree”. In order for Emma to regard what Percy says as true, charity requires that she interprets him as speaking a perdurantist version of English (call it P-English), where “there is” ranges over a domain of objects that includes temporal parts (this is very rough⁴ but details can be glossed over for present purposes). Symmetrically, Percy should interpret Emma as speaking an endurantist version of English (E-English) where “there is” ranges over ordinary objects, but not over temporal parts. If this happens, each speaker is uttering something true in their language, but they are not contradicting each other: the dispute is merely verbal.

One could question that charity considerations should demand that each side regards the other as saying something *true*. After all, regarding the other side as saying something *reasonable* (although, for all one knows, false) would seem enough in the way of honouring charity, and it would not require concluding that the adversary is speaking a different language.⁵ So, the proponent of the Hirsch strategy owes an explanation as to why they would so heavily insist on attributing to the interlocutor true, rather than merely rational beliefs.

I think the following argument could be invoked to this end: in general, charity enjoins us to attribute to our interlocutors the best doxastic state they could find themselves in given the information available to us.⁶ Unless there are defeating considerations, the best such doxastic state is one that involves a reasonable, true belief. Therefore, if the subject is in a position to regard an interlocutor’s belief as reasonable and true (and Emma and Percy are in such position), and instead regards it as merely reasonable, but for all one knows also false, one is not being fully charitable. If this argument is sound, and unless ontological disputes are shown to give rise to defeating considerations,⁷ then assuming Emma and Percy wish to be fully charitable, they should consider each other as speaking truly in different

⁴ There is a complication here: Emma rejects the existence of temporal parts, so it would be incoherent for her to believe that the quantifier ranges over temporal parts. Addressing this point, Hirsch (2009: 249–51) seems to allow that Emma fails to subscribe to a Tarski semantics for P-English, even though she subscribes to a Tarski semantics for E-English. More accurately, Emma can believe that in her own language (E-English), truth depends on reference, but need not accept that this holds *for every possible language* (including P-English). So Emma can consistently believe that in E-English, the truth of “Fa” depends on the singular term referring to some object—which cannot be a temporal part—but need not accept that, in P-English, the truth of “Fa” depends on the singular term referring to an object which could be a temporal part. She can simply believe that the truth of “Fa” in P-English depends on such-and-such being the case, where “such-and-such” is a description issued in E-English.

⁵ Balcerak-Jackson suggests (2012: 17–18) that the endurantist could regard the opponent’s statement as false in ordinary English because based on a conceptual error, however excusably so, because the matter under discussion is complex enough that the speaker might have committed a mistake along the way without losing her rationality (for a similar point, see Horden 2014: 237–8).

⁶ I take this formulation to be broad enough as to accommodate various ways of spelling out the principle of charity, as formulated by, among others, Quine, Grandy, Davidson, and Lewis, as well as Hirsch himself.

⁷ It could be argued that, if the cost of regarding the opponent as having a true and reasonable belief is positing a linguistic difference, this cost constitutes a defeating consideration. But it is not obvious to me that the cost in the case of Emma and Percy is *so high* as to defeat the requirement for full charity. The issue is at best debatable.

versions of English, where “there is” has different senses. Therefore, ontological disputes seem doomed to be diagnosed as verbal.

In light of these considerations, what could be done in order to save the non-verbality of ontological disputes? One option is to “move one level up”, so to speak: that is to say, to regard the dispute as taking place at the metalinguistic level, and thus regard the parties as advocating each a different “idiolect” as the idiolect that is best to use in that philosophical context. Hirsch seems to hint at similar considerations. Addressing Sider’s idea that ontologists can speak Ontologese, Hirsch writes:

My advice is that [the philosophers who purport to speak Ontologese] should *stick to the meta-level and engage in disputes about which sentences are true in the philosophically best language*, rather than attempting to speak that best language. (2008b: 520, my italics)

In order to secure a non-verbal conflict, moving the dispute at the metalinguistic level would seem to be a viable option. Indeed, this suggestion gains support from some recent developments in the meta-philosophical literature. David Plunkett and Timothy Sundell (cf. Sundell 2011; Plunkett and Sundell 2013; Plunkett 2015) have recently maintained that a great number of philosophical disputes which look merely terminological are instead covertly metalinguistic and concern “a distinctive normative question—how best to use a word relative to a context” (2013: 3). Plunkett and Sundell contend that this metalinguistic, normative question is not overtly expressed, but it is pragmatically communicated, so that the metalinguistic character of the exchange may not be immediately recognizable. Following Plunkett and Sundell’s lead, more than one author has proposed to interpret at least some philosophical disputes as being covertly metalinguistic: Megan Wallace (MS) focuses on ontological debates about ordinary material objects, while Amie Thomasson (2016) considers debates about composition, essence, identity, and persistence, but also disputes about what art is, about free will and determinism, and about the existence of races. In light of what these authors propose, Hirsch’s suggestion could be honoured by envisaging the possibility that these disputes be *explicitly formulated* in metalinguistic terms, thus moving to what Plunkett and Sundell (2013: 6–7) and Plunkett (2015: 836) would call a “canonical dispute”, centred on a literally expressed disagreement about a metalinguistic, normative question.

Going back to the exchange between Emma the endurantist and Percy the perdurantist, the friend of metalinguistic disputes could say that, although the two disputants would seem engaged in a first-order communication about whether or not there are temporal parts, what they are really doing is negotiating the sense of “there is”. This opens up the possibility of making the metalinguistic conflict explicit: In the newly conceived dispute, Emma would be overtly advocating an endurantist (commonsensical) sense of the term, which allows one to existentially quantify over trees, tables, and mountains but not over temporal parts; and Percy would be overtly advocating a perdurantist sense of “there is”, which permits existential quantification over all these objects *plus* their temporal parts.

Let us therefore assume that it is possible to recast first-level ontological disputes as metalinguistic debates. This move has a problematic consequence which needs to be dealt with: once the disagreement has moved at the metalinguistic level, it is *not*

ontological any longer: it is about language, or at least about which semantics for a given language should be chosen. This seems to have little to do with ontological substantivity! What should we say, then, in order to preserve the idea that these are ontologically interesting disputes—at least to a minimal degree?

3. Rescuing the Ontological Significance of Metalinguistic Disputes

In this section, I aim to show that, even if the only non-verbal disputes on matters of persistence (or composition) were metalinguistic ones, not all hopes are lost for those who wish to rescue the “minimal substantivity” of these disputes. This is because the selection of certain linguistic options would seem to enjoy a certain degree of *ontological commitment* once the choice is made. Discussing the best linguistic resources for doing ontology may therefore have downstream ontological implications, to the extent that it may lead us to underwrite certain ontological commitments.

3.1. First-Order Issues and Ontological Commitments

Maintaining the focus on persistence debates, in what follows I wish to show that some central arguments that have been proposed by supporters of perdurantism can be reformulated as metalinguistic proposals to introduce some piece of terminology, for example “temporal part”, where this should sanction an ontological commitment to temporal parts. These newly reformulated arguments may be regarded as starting with problems that arise at the first order, that is, where language is *used* to talk about the existence of objects and their properties through time, and as advancing a metalinguistic proposal so as to obviate to these first-order problems. The purpose of these reconstructions is demonstrative: my aim is to show that it is possible to look at specific arguments offered in the literature in the material mode, as it were, in a new metalinguistic light. The reader who already got the gist of the strategy may safely skip the examples.

To start with, we may choose the problem of temporary intrinsics. The first-order problematic statement that needs philosophical consideration may be rendered as follows: “If a certain object *o* changes by being *F* at a certain moment *t* and subsequently being *not-F* at *t + 1*, then *o* has incompatible properties at different times; if this is so, then *o* at *t* is not identical with *o* at *t + 1*.” David Lewis’ (1986) proposal, at the metalinguistic level, could be phrased as follows: let us introduce the notion of “temporal part”. Once we do this, our way of talking at the object-level changes: it is no longer one and the same object *o* to which we ascribe the incompatible properties of being *F* and being *not-F*; it is two numerically distinct temporal parts of *o*, call them *temp-1* and *temp-2*.

As a second example, we may consider the case of arbitrary undetached parts. At the object level, the predicament to be dealt with may be thus expressed: “If Descartes is deprived of a leg at *t*, he then becomes (say) Descartes-minus. Now, it seems that Descartes-minus before *t* is the same as Descartes-minus after *t*; also, Descartes after *t* is the same as Descartes-minus after *t*; and also, that Descartes is the same before and

after t ; it would then follow that Descartes-minus before t is the same as Descartes before t . But this is *not* the case.” The solution proposed by Heller (1990) could be stated as follows at the metalinguistic level. If we introduce the term “temporal part”, then at the object-language level there is no tension between the following statements: “The temporal part of Descartes-minus after t and the temporal part of Descartes after t are the same”; and “The temporal part of Descartes-minus before t and the temporal part of Descartes before t are *not* the same”.

As a last example, let us pick the argument from vagueness in defence of Perdurantism. Here is the problematic inference that needs philosophical attention. If objects gradually go out of existence, it is vague whether they form diachronic units—that is, units that start and cease to exist. This is unacceptable, for it would entail that existence is vague, while existence as expressed through the logical vocabulary is not vague. Sider (1997, 2001) offers a response which, at the metalinguistic level, could look like this: if we introduce the notion of “temporal part” and if we subscribe to unrestricted composition, we avoid vague existence, and consequently also indeterminate statements at the object-language level. For now whatever diachronic sum of temporal parts we consider is a genuine composite object with clear-cut temporal boundaries.

It is important to note that, at least for the advocates of Perdurantism, acceptance of the term introduced seems to imply an *ontological commitment* to temporal parts,⁸ at least in the sense of supposing that temporal parts are in the domain of one’s existential quantifier (Quine 1948: 32; 1960: 242). For it would be odd to just *talk* in terms of temporal parts, while at the same time denying that *there are* temporal parts. The best way for avoiding ontological commitment to temporal parts would be to expunge the term “temporal part” from one’s terminology (e.g., by paraphrasing it away); but since the proponents of Perdurantism do exactly the opposite, it seems safe to say that term introduction also marks (and should mark) an ontological commitment to temporal parts.

To be sure, the perdurantist could introduce talk of temporal parts as a useful *fiction*, where this would indeed imply just speaking in terms of temporal parts while denying that there are any temporal parts. Although this option is available, this is importantly not what authors who identify as perdurantists either do or should do, if anything because the ensuing position could not ultimately count as a form of *bona fide* Perdurantism, but would rather count as a form of nominalism about temporal parts. Otherwise put, if Perdurantists wish to hold a position that they could legitimately describe as *realism* (of some form), a fictionalist move would simply be a non-starter.⁹

⁸ It is perhaps not fully accurate to say that the whole question at stake in a metalinguistic ontological dispute on “temporal part” is *just* whether or not we should introduce the term “temporal part”. For if this were the case, then it seems that by merely conceding that one *could* introduce the term “temporal part”, the endurantist would be committed to temporal parts. To avoid this result, the question at stake should be made more precise, for instance: “Should one introduce the term «temporal part», where this implies that one wishes to quantify over certain entities, thereby ontologically committing to them?” (Thanks to Richard Woodward for stressing this point.)

⁹ There are also motivation issues. Notice the contrast between a version of Perdurantism that expects to be fictionalist from the outset and standard fictionalist proposals in other domains. Standard

There is an additional element regarding the commitments following from a certain linguistic proposal. When two metalinguistic proposals enter into conflict, it seems reasonable to expect that the proposal which eventually prevails in the dispute (if any) will imply some ontological commitments for *all* the disputants. Thus for instance, were the perdurantist to “win” the dispute, this would imply a commitment for all parties to use “there is” in such a way as to quantify over temporal parts. This would have various implications about which statements are evaluated as true or false among the parties: for instance, a statement of “Yesterday’s temporal part of this tree is not the same as today’s temporal part” would now be considered as true. By contrast, were the endurantist to “win” the dispute, it seems that the existential quantifier would have to be used by all parties in such a way as to not quantify over temporal parts, and statements like “This tree is the same as yesterday’s tree” would consequently be deemed true.

It therefore seems that the ontological import of the metalinguistic dispute comes from the joint contribution of two factors. The first is that introducing certain linguistic expressions (like “temporal part”) would seem to imply an ontological commitment to certain objects for the proponents of the linguistic introduction. The second is that a resolution of the dispute in favour of one option or another would seem capable to affect the ontological commitments of all the parties to the dispute. If these considerations are sound, we now seem to have a first-pass proposal regarding a sufficient condition for the obtaining of minimal substantivity in ontological disputes:

[*Minimal Substantivity-1*] An ontological dispute is minimally substantive if it is linked with a metalinguistic, non-verbal dispute whose resolution can affect the parties’ ontological commitments.

It should be stressed that being ontologically committed to, say, temporal parts need not mean believing, for instance, that “temporal part” refers to temporal parts in any robust sense, or that temporal parts are objects in any inflated, heavyweight sense. There are ways of conceiving reference and objecthood that are sufficiently deflationary so as to guarantee that ontological commitment stays suitably deflationary too.

For instance, one may have a sufficiently broad notion of reference which not only implies that it is a language-world relation, but also that it could obtain when certain *intra-language* relations obtain. According to this less demanding notion, reference need not obtain only when an object is picked out by a certain term *t*, but it could also obtain when the sentence *S* containing a certain term *t* is considered equivalent to

hermeneutical Fictionalism, for example, concerns linguistic practices that are *already in place*, from talk about numbers (Yablo 2002: 87) to talk about ordinary objects (Rosen and Dorr 2002: 171). An important motivation for the view seems to be that since we cannot get rid of these already established practices, we need a way of salvaging as much as possible of a set of linguistic usages that are otherwise regarded as metaphysically and semantically confused. The practice proposed by a fictionalist perdurantist would, however, be a *new* one. The purpose of legitimizing a defective practice that we cannot get rid of would be utterly absent. This seems to deprive the fictionalist perdurantist of an important motivation that is commonly associated with standard forms of fictionalism. One could then wonder what the motivation for going fictionalist from the outset could be: why not be a *conventionalist*, or a *deflationist realist*, about temporal parts? (Thanks to Alexis Burgess and David Plunkett for prompting me to clarify these issues).

another sentence S^* that does not contain t and that is deemed true. Following this strategy, the perdurantist might say that, if the sentence: “An object o is F at time t_1 ” is true, the sentence: “The t_1 -temporal part of o is F ” is true too and hence, the term “temporal part” refers. The latter proposal would amount to a deflationary approach to the reference of terms like “temporal part” along Neo-Fregean lines (cf. Hale and Wright 2001, 2009).¹⁰

Analogously, one need not believe that temporal parts are objects in any robust sense—for example, instantaneous or even just very short-lived spatio-temporal objects.¹¹ Indeed, the perdurantist may presume right from the start that temporal parts are to be considered objects in a more deflationary sense. For instance, one could say that a temporal part is an object in the “covering” sense of the term individuated by Thomasson (2007, 2009, 2015), in that from the sentence “Today’s temporal part of this tree is blossoming” it is possible to infer “Something is blossoming” where “something” plays the role of a dummy sortal.

Of course, whether or not the perdurantist will be happy with this minimal set-up will depend on her stance with relation to what reference and objecthood amount to. However, it seems entirely possible and not *ad hoc* to opt for a combination of ontological commitment *plus* deflationary reference and objecthood, and still be considered as somebody who engages in a dispute that has some ontological significance. Otherwise put: it seems possible, and not *ad hoc* or let alone inconsistent, for someone to accept: (i) that the dispute about temporal parts has a minimal ontological significance insofar as it concerns the selection of a language from which certain ontological commitments are to be extracted; and (ii) that reference to temporal parts themselves, or that the kind of objects they are, are construed in a deflationary fashion.

So far, I have argued in what sense metalinguistic proposals—such as that of introducing the term “temporal part”—may have an ontological significance, for they might create an *ontological commitment* as a result of the dispute. The ontological commitment can be formulated in a sense that is (i) minimal enough as to exclude robust views of reference and objecthood; but still (ii) sufficient for ensuring that the proposal has *some* ontological import.

3.2. *Resisting Two Attempts at Downplaying the Proposal*

One way in which this proposal may be downplayed is by arguing as follows: the metalinguistic negotiations considered so far are disagreements that only obtain between philosophers. Some of the competing linguistic options could at best imply ontological commitments for a few, initiated ontologists (e.g., the commitment

¹⁰ It is also possible to follow other deflationary accounts of reference: Horwich’s (1998) view would have it that the term refers so long as the meaning of “temporal part” is constituted by certain use-features, and the expression occurs in instances of a disquotational schema like: “(x) (<n> refers to x iff x = n)”. Field (1994: 261–3), would presumably emphasize the term’s computational role; Brandom (1994: 360–70) would stress the expression’s inferential role and the substitution patters in which it enters; while Burgess (2015) suggests that, in an inferentialist framework, a term refers if it occurs in a simple atomic truth.

¹¹ One could have qualms with instantaneous objects (as noted by Fine 2006: 700), or with short-lived temporal parts (like my temporal part between October 1, 2016, and October 2, 2016), on account that physical objects like these could not “pop in and out of existence”.

to temporal parts). Given what Eli Hirsch calls “the lack of authority that philosophers have in our culture” (Hirsch 2008a: 181), it seems that some of the competing options could not make it out of the “ontology room” and be absorbed into ordinary usage. This seems to significantly reduce the interest of minimal substantivity, because even if the dispute produced a change in ontological commitments, these may well remain confined within the narrow conversational setting of a few academic specialists. In response to this downplaying attempt, let me try to more precisely pin down the connection between the philosophers’ (metalinguistic) dispute and the broader ontological “language games” practised in ordinary language.

To start with, it seems uncontentious that, when we think and talk about what there is—in *both* ordinary life and in philosophy—we engage in “language games”¹² which feature certain types of expressions and certain rules about how to use those expressions. These linguistic resources mainly consist of the quantificational apparatus, the numerals, the identity sign, *plus* nouns, predicates, and variables. There is therefore an undeniable continuity between the linguistic resources employed by the ontologist and the linguistic resources employed in order to talk about what there is in ordinary contexts.

Now, the language game of talking about the existence of temporal parts is one that almost exclusively philosophers engage in; however, nothing prevents that, *at least in principle*, the linguistic usages established by the philosophical discussion “leak” into (some fragments of) the ordinary language, thus affecting the ontological commitments and interpretations of the relevant key vocabulary. Note that this does not require us to imagine a world where philosophers have authority over ordinary linguistic usages; it only requires to imagine a world where the uses in the ontology room *causally contribute* to a change (or consolidation, where applicable) of ordinary language games about what there is. This seems like a much less demanding scenario than the one Hirsch seems to expect to obtain. As to the contention that the notion of minimal substantivity is not interesting enough because the link with ordinary linguistic practices is too feeble, I will not pursue the issue further, partly because it is not clear what “interesting” in this context might exactly mean, partly because it seems to me obvious that there is at least *one* sense in which this notion is interesting enough, given appropriate aims and purposes.

There is another way in which [*Minimal Substantivity-1*] might be downplayed, this time linked to a specifically (Neo)-Carnapian way of portraying the role of language in ontology. The potential worry could be illustrated with an example drawn from Amie Thomasson’s work. Thomasson finds it objectionable that there may be more than one sense of the existential quantifier—a joint-carving sense in addition to its standard, first-order predicate logic sense (conferred by introduction and elimination rules). If the existential quantifier only has one sense, then any sentence purportedly formulated with the other sense of the quantifier would be semantically defective, either because it has no clear meaning or because it is straightforwardly false (Thomasson 2015: 317; 2016: 8–9). So, even if the dispute

¹² The expression “language games” is simply meant to designate rule-governed practices of language use; it should not be understood as a way of endorsing Wittgensteinian ideas on meaning or rule-following.

eventually led (or seemed to have led) to a change in ontological commitments, the only parties uttering semantically acceptable sentences at the first-level would be the parties that stick to the standard semantics of the quantifier. The parties deviating from such standard semantics would be committing a form of semantic mistake. In this case, any such dispute would be a disappointment: for only one party could ever be right, because only one party would be upholding the semantics of English.

If the focus is restricted to the semantics of the existential quantifier, Thomasson may have her reasons to look unfavourably at the notion of minimal substantivity, which I will not discuss here. However, she need not reject that metalinguistic negotiation might concern other kinds of expressions, for example nouns like “table”, “number”, “person”, “corporation”, or “marriage”. In particular, she may well accept that metalinguistic negotiation is sometimes needed in order to clarify or precisely determine the conditions of application of a certain term, or to change them so as to overcome a number of semantic flaws. In Thomasson’s own words:

Conceptual work needn’t be simply explicative:...at times we may have work to do to determine how best to fill in the details of our concept of ‘same person’ or ‘same work of art’, consistent with some (ethical, aesthetic, or pragmatic) purpose. Conceptual work is also involved in determining whether tacit contradictions or incoherencies beset parts of our conceptual scheme.... Ontologists may also be engaged in what Carnap would have called ‘conceptual engineering’: revising or devising systems of categories to help them better serve some practical purpose. (Thomasson 2015: 327–8)

It is compatible with this picture that, sometimes, a disagreement may arise concerning the rules of application of a certain term; or concerning whether or not a new term (with application rules to be fully worked out) should be introduced in the linguistic framework used to talk about matters ontological. If ontological commitments would flow from the adoption of these terms—for instance via analytic entailments, in accordance with her own account (Thomasson 2007: 167; 2015: 145–58)—then it seems that if the dispute could lead to a change or establishment of ontological commitments, the dispute would be minimally substantive after all, even in Thomasson’s framework. Therefore, setting aside her reservations on the semantics of the existential quantifier, minimal substantivity turns out to be compatible with the set-up proposed by Thomasson, at least for some expressions.

To be sure, Thomasson may still not accept that the ontological commitments extracted from a certain framework be understood in terms of “robust” notions of existence, reference, and object; they would rather have to be understood along deflationary lines. Still, it seems that [*Minimal-Substantivity-1*] is sufficiently schematic and independent of considerations of ontological robustness in order for it to be effortlessly imported into her Neo-Carnapian account. As it turns out, then, Thomasson’s views need not be hostile to the notion of minimal ontological substantivity.

In general, the schematic character of [*Minimal-Substantivity-1*] makes it compatible with several ways in which ontological commitment could be cashed out, ranging from “robust” to “deflationary”. We could therefore say that [*Minimal-Substantivity-1*] is compatible with *various ways of being a realist*, ranging from hard-line approaches whereby certain objects or facts are taken as ontologically

“thick” and wholly language- or mind-independent, to minimal approaches where their existence is “thin” and often tied to semantic considerations. Such approaches can be held not only with regard to material objects, temporal parts or mathematical entities, but also with regard to—for example—moral properties and facts, and in general in normative domains where realism can assume the nuances just outlined. Meta-ethics provides an example here, for one can either be a robust realist about moral properties and facts; or one can be a “minimal realist” who confines herself to claiming that moral discourse is truth-apt and by-and-large true, where this gives rise to no inflationary views about the nature of moral properties or facts. As Gideon Rosen puts it, “the minimal realist holds that in a thin and metaphysically unambitious sense, the doctrine correctly represents... a genuine domain of fact: at least some of the objects the discourse posits really exist, and the corresponding singular terms refer...” (Rosen 1994: 281). If what I have argued is right, [*Minimal Substantivity-1*] serves the minimal and non-minimal moral realist equally well.

To conclude this section, I have argued that metalinguistic disputes related to certain ontological matters (like persistence or composition) can be considered as “minimally substantive”. The metalinguistic proposals in play (as, for example, that of introducing talk about temporal parts) imply a certain degree, no matter how minimal or deflationary, of ontological commitment, so minimal substantivity has to do with the potential the dispute has to affect the parties’ ontological commitments. Two attempts at downplaying minimal substantivity have also been deflected, by (i) pointing out that the dispute could in principle affect the ontological commitments underlying ordinary language games and (ii) showing that the notion of minimal substantivity is compatible with metalinguistic negotiation within a (Neo)-Carnapian set-up.

4. Rescuing the Epistemic Significance of Metalinguistic Disputes

The deflationist could concede that the metalinguistic disputes associated with the Persistence and Composition debates comply with [*Minimal Substantivity-1*]. Yet, she could insist, the disagreement suffers from another kind of defectiveness, one whereby we do not have enough evidence to choose between one linguistic option and the other—for example, between E-English and P-English. This position is dubbed by Karen Bennett (2009: 73) *Epistemicism*.

I will now reconstruct a potential epistemicist argument that may apply to the metalinguistic negotiation between P-English and E-English (Bennett’s version concerns the very theories, like Endurantism and Perdurantism). The epistemicist about the metalinguistic dispute between E-English and P-English could say, first of all, that neither of the two languages seems to guarantee greater simplicity. The perdurantist will obviously have to increase the complexity in her language by adopting the term “temporal part”. However, the endurantist will also complicate her language by turning monadic predicates like “being blue” into polyadic predicates like “being blue-tly”. Therefore, it is not clear who wins on the front of simplicity. Second, it is not clear that the perdurantist’s linguistic innovations help completely and uniformly

to solve Endurantism's problems. Recall that the endurantist struggles with co-location, in that her account leaves it open whether, in the Lump-Statue case, there are two objects or just one. The standard worm-theory perdurantist claims to solve the problem by saying that the temporally extended lump and the temporally extended statue share some temporal parts, exactly like two roads can share a stretch of road (Sider 2001: 153). However, we could imagine that the statue and the lump are created and destroyed at the same times (Gibbard 1975: 191), where this revives the puzzle for the perdurantist as well: are there two temporally extended objects or just one (cf. Magidor 2016: 524)? Provided this line of argument could go through, absence of sufficient grounds to select one option as opposed to the other would undermine the significance of the dispute.

In arguing against this epistemic criticism, I will assume that there are two angles from which to look at a dispute: one is the "external" angle, to be identified with the bird-eye perspective of the neutral onlooker. This is the perspective of someone who accepts that, in adjudicating between different languages (like E-English or P-English) that are associated with ontological theories (Endurantism and Perdurantism), we should keep in mind that a number of "theoretical virtues" ought to be honoured—like simplicity or explanatory power. However, one has *no determinate views* as to which virtues should take priority, thus remaining somewhat "neutral" or "open-minded". The other perspective is the "internal" one, to be identified with the point of view of an engaged participant to the dispute. This is the perspective of someone who, for instance, has clear views about which theoretical virtues should take priority when adjudicating between E-English as the language of Endurantism and P-English as the language of Perdurantism. For instance, one may believe that ontological simplicity/parsimony should be maximized even if this meant increasing ideological complexity.

Having distinguished between the "external" and "internal" perspective, one may grant to the epistemicist that, from the "external" point of view, evidence does not favour any of the linguistic options, because they all stand on a par with respect to a number of features. However, it seems to me plausible that from the "internal" perspective, there will often be *some admissible consideration* that appears conclusively to favour one particular choice.¹³ For instance, the endurantist may concede that she has to make her predicates more complicated, but also consider that as a bearable cost at least if she is a nominalist about properties. The cost of complicating the predicates may be outweighed by the benefits of not introducing terms that imply commitments to new objects—like temporal parts. Avoidance of a certain object-talk may therefore count as a sufficient reason to adopt E-English, at least *relative* to these theoretical considerations.

Also, all participants to the dispute would seem to be *entitled* to the theoretical considerations they favour, provided these are *admissible* by the lights of the

¹³ I am saying "often" and not "always" (or, let alone, "necessarily"), because cases should be allowed where these admissible considerations are lacking, and there is therefore no internal justification. Absent internal justification, the subject would therefore not be fully rational in believing her favoured theory. Presumably, in this case the subject should suspend judgement, or believe with a very low credence.

philosophical community's standards, and are not merely idiosyncratic motivations. So, the perdurantist would seem to be entitled to her preference for the ontologically committal idiom of temporal parts, if, for example, maintaining a monadic conception of temporary intrinsic properties is more important for her; for such a ranking of preferences would count as an admissible consideration. Analogously, the endurantist seems entitled to a more complicated ideology, if she is willing to trade that with a smaller, temporal-parts free ontology; for this too strikes as an admissible consideration. If all parties are entitled to such preferences, then if their views honour them, believing these views will be justified at least relative to the adopted perspective. Their views would therefore enjoy an "internal" type of justification. (A further question, which I cannot settle here, is whether "internal" justification has any interesting relation with truth-conduciveness. In Belleri (2017) I argue that it does).

So far, we have simply argued that the internal perspective is available besides the external one. Now we need to be convinced that the external perspective is not relevant in the assessment of ontological disputes. The epistemicist seems to assume exactly this, so countering this thesis may constitute a strategy for undermining her case. I wish to suggest that recognizing the internal perspective allows a more *charitable* reconstruction of the epistemic status of the debate, and should then be preferred to the external perspective. So for instance, countenancing the internal perspective allows one to say that each party to the debate has sufficient justification (*of the internal kind*) to believe their view, while the external perspective would view them as insufficiently justified, *tout court*. Furthermore, according to the internal approach, the considerations each party invokes in favour of their view offer epistemic support to it at least relative to their *own* perspective. By contrast, in the external approach, the reasons invoked by the parties could not count as conclusive even from each party's own point of view. In virtue of the greater charity afforded by the internal approach, and assuming that *ceteris paribus* an account that maximizes charity is to be preferred, I then conclude we should deem the internal approach more relevant than the external approach.

The upshot, then, is that even if metalinguistic ontological disputes were faced with the epistemicist critique, as long as each of the linguistic options could be seen as internally, conclusively justified, these metalinguistic disputes *would not be completely epistemically deflatable*, in that it would not be possible to claim that we lack sufficient justification *tout court* to believe any side.

In light of the foregoing considerations, we should qualify the sufficient condition spelled out in [*Minimal Substantivity-1*] by making it a conjunction of two conditions, one about the dispute's potential for commitment-change and the other about the non-epistemic deflatability of the dispute.

[*Minimal Substantivity-2*] An ontological dispute is minimally substantive if (a) it is linked with a metalinguistic, non-verbal dispute whose resolution can affect the parties' ontological commitments; and (b) the latter dispute is not epistemically deflatable.

5. Dispelling a Threat of Excessive Proliferation

It could be objected that [*Minimal Substantivity-2*] generates way too many minimally substantive ontological disputes. Suppose Carla argues that there are such things as “Schmartinis”, which come into existence whenever an alcoholic drink is served in a V-shaped glass, while Farida rejects this existential claim. What should we say about this case?¹⁴

Suppose for the sake of the argument that there are sufficient grounds for believing that Carla and Farida are having a metalinguistic dispute. At first sight, it may seem that the objector is right: in principle, this dispute could affect the parties’ ontological commitments, and Carla could be internally justified, if she provided admissible (not excessively idiosyncratic) considerations to which justification could be relativized. The dispute would then be minimally substantive: a rather unpalatable consequence.

The problem with this objection is that it trades on an *underdescribed* scenario. What we learn from the Schmartini case is that it seems wrong to call “minimally substantive” a dispute that, because of the *very few* details offered by the objector, seems to arise out of nowhere, seems not motivated by the need to solve a specific problem, and where no immediately recognizable valuable consequence seems to result from the prevailing of any of the options at stake. However, it seems obvious that all these elements *should* normally be specified. So it seems disingenuous to base the objection on an abnormally underdescribed case and not on a normally, adequately described case, in which it would indeed be possible to appreciate why, for example, Carla and Farida are having the Schmartini dispute in the first place, what problem they are trying to solve, and what benefits they pursue with their respective claims. If all these elements were specified, I am confident that the verdict as to the dispute’s minimal substantivity would greatly differ.

Of course, it is open to the critic to find an example in which all the details are specified and still it is counter-intuitive to call the exchange minimally substantive. My expectation would be that (i) either the specified details make the dispute so silly and idiosyncratic that (at least) one of the two conditions contained in [*Minimal Substantivity-2*] is not met; or (ii) the specified details make the dispute reasonable enough as to turn out as minimally substantive.

The overgeneration charge contained in the Schmartini objection therefore reveals what seems to be a *background condition* that has to be satisfied in order for the elements spelled out in [*Minimal Substantivity-2*] to suffice for minimal substantivity: that the dispute occurs in a sufficiently rich context, where the rationale, aims, and prospective benefits of the dispute can be clearly identified. Luckily for us, we can specify all of these ingredients in the case of ontological disputes, as well as in countless other philosophical and non-philosophical cases.

¹⁴ Thanks to Esa Díaz-León for discussion on this point.

6. Conclusion: Minimal Anti-Deflationism

The characterization encoded in [*Minimal Substantivity-2*] could be adopted to spell out a minimal form of Anti-Deflationism about some, if not all, ontological disputes. The position is formulated in the following way:

[*Minimal Anti-Deflationism*] Some (if not all) ontological disputes are minimally substantive, because even if the dispute at the first-level is verbal, it can be linked to an explicitly metalinguistic dispute such that: (a) it could affect the parties' ontological commitments; and (b) it is not epistemically deflatable.

As I have shown, as long as there is sufficient evidence that the Endurantism-Perdurantism debate is a metalinguistic negotiation in the sense coined by Plunkett and Sundell (2013), we could move from an implicit, merely pragmatically conveyed negotiation to an explicit disagreement, which Plunkett and Sundell would call a "canonical dispute", about whether or not to employ certain linguistic items. If it is true (a) that this dispute could in principle affect our ontological commitments; and (b) that it is not epistemically deflatable, then the dispute is minimally substantive.

As hinted at in the Introduction, similar remarks apply, I submit, to the dispute between the views competing in the Composition debate, involving such positions as Nihilism, Universalism, Common-Sense ontologies, Organicism, and so on. Although further work will have to be done in order to substantiate this claim, it is already possible to offer a "preview" of how Minimal Anti-Deflationism could be applied to the aforementioned dispute.

To illustrate, consider a supporter of common-sense ontology declaring "There are composite objects (such as chairs, trees, mountains)"; a nihilist replies: "There are no composite objects". Suppose it were conceded that the commonsensical theorist is uttering something true in plain English, where the domain of the existential quantifier ranges over *ordinary objects*; while the domain of quantification of the nihilist were restricted to *simples* (e.g., subatomic particles). The two contenders would therefore be using two different senses of "there is", call them "there is_c" and "there is_n". Suppose one could successfully argue that this dispute be interpreted as a metalinguistic negotiation, where the parties are pragmatically communicating their advocacy of "there is_c" and "there is_n" respectively. It would then be easy to recast the dispute as an explicit metalinguistic negotiation, where the commonsensical theorist were proposing to use "there is_c" and the nihilist were proposing to use "there is_n" when discussing matters of composition.

At this stage, the proponent of Minimal Anti-Deflationism about the Composition debate may argue that this dispute: (a) could affect the parties' ontological commitments concerning parthood and material composition. For instance, were the nihilistic version of English to prevail, this could result in the parties' withdrawing their commitment to the existence of tables and chairs. Additionally, it could be urged that (b) the dispute is not epistemically deflatable, because each party enjoys at least an internal form of justification. Successfully arguing for (a) and (b) would imply that the dispute in question is minimally substantive. Although many details will have to be filled in, this brief outline already shows that a Minimal

Anti-Deflationist project can be sensibly pursued in the Composition case as well as in the Persistence case.

Before closing, we should go back to the question “What can the notion of minimal substantivity do for conceptual engineers?” As I anticipated, the notion of minimal substantivity can help clarify what is ontologically substantive in disputes where parties need not be engaged in “tracking” any fundamental aspect of reality, nor need to pursue a naturalistic project.

For instance, we might say that a debate on whether there are (or there can be) same-sex marriages is ontologically substantive in a relevant, “minimal” sense, *although* marriage-facts are not fundamental or are not naturalizable. Provided we have enough evidence suggesting that the dispute is a metalinguistic negotiation, we may argue that: (a) debating over whether we should use the expression “same-sex marriage” can affect our ontological commitments (to types of marriages) and the language games we play when we speak about what there is and what there is not, especially with regard to marital unions (actually, these disputes have *already* contributed to a massive change in the relevant language games. So the possibility claim is easily ascertained to be true.) As to condition (b): it is arguable that the dispute is not epistemically deflatable either since, *contra* the epistemicist, there is indeed sufficient evidence to favour one linguistic option rather than another. For instance, it seems that numerous arguments drawing on normative considerations, sociological studies, reports, and so on, favour use of the word “marriage” to denote same-sex couples as well as heterosexual ones. Similar considerations arguably apply to several other ontological or metaphysical disputes on matters that are neither “metaphysically fundamental” in Sider’s favoured sense nor obviously naturalizable in the Quinean sense, including disputes about GENDER, WOMAN, RACE, BLACK, RAPE, SEXUAL HARASSMENT, and so on.

Last, I should stress that labelling these disputes “minimally substantive” should not be understood in a demeaning sense, but simply as signalling that the dispute is substantive in a way that requires no naturalistic or realistic assumptions. If you do not like the word “minimally”, you could say that the dispute is “non-naturalistically ontologically substantive” or that it is “ontologically-committing substantive”. In general, the idea of minimal substantivity should be compatible with a dispute being highly important and worth pursuing for cultural, civil, ethical, or political reasons. It seems like the notion I have been delineating can fulfil this task.

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