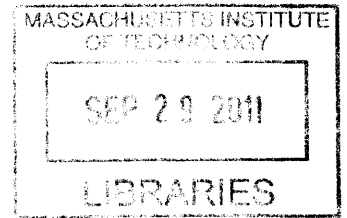


# The Significance of Metaphysics

by

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B.A. Philosophy  
Acadia University, 2006



Submitted to the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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## **Thesis Abstract**

In this thesis, I investigate the nature of metaphysics and the role it plays in our broader theoretical pursuits. In doing so, I defend it against various criticisms and offer a novel conception of why metaphysical disputes are important.

In Chapter One I address the general question of when disputes are defective and when they are worth taking seriously. I first criticize one popular way of answering this question that appeals to the difference between verbal and factual disputes. Verbal disputes involve divergence in what the participants mean by their terms and some think that metaphysical disputes are defective in this way. I argue that this approach fails because the verbal/factual distinction is incapable of doing the work this view requires of it. I then offer an alternative view where the status of a dispute depends on its role in our theorizing. Worthwhile (or, as I call them, significant) disputes are those with appropriate connections to the rest of our theorizing while defective (or insignificant) disputes are insular, with no implications for anything beyond themselves.

In Chapter Two I apply the framework developed in the previous chapter to a pair of ontological disagreements: those over the existence of concrete possible worlds and coincident material objects, like a statue and its clay. The question is whether ontological disputes like these have the requisite theoretical connections to render them significant. I argue that they do. I then address some general reasons for doubting their significance, arguing that they are not compelling.

In Chapter Three I contrast my approach with some other recent defenses of metaphysics, with particular focus on the views developed by Theodore Sider. Metaphysics is, on these views, an inquiry into the world's fundamental structure. I argue that this approach is unsatisfactory because it cannot guarantee that metaphysical disputes are significant in the way I describe. It thus threatens to render metaphysics irrelevant to our other theoretical activities, undermining many of its legitimate successes, like the role theorizing about metaphysical modality played in the development of modal logics applicable in many different fields.

Thesis Supervisor: Stephen Yablo  
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## **Chapter 1**

### **When is a Dispute Worth Taking Seriously?**

Disputes are common throughout philosophy and elsewhere. In some cases, people suspect that a dispute is somehow defective or confused. A common sort of confusion according to ordinary diagnoses is that the disputants are merely talking past one another, or arguing over words without realizing it. If they understood one another properly, they would no longer disagree. The dispute is merely verbal. Philosophers in particular are often accused of talking past one another. Though they take their disagreements seriously, many can appear to be based on nothing more than differences in how they use the terms in question. Some think that by clearly defining our terms, we can strip away these distracting terminological disagreements and move beyond them to the bedrock of genuine factual disagreements they mask. Hence many philosophers see the idea of merely verbal disputes as a powerful philosophical tool, one that can be used to dissolve many of the more intractable philosophical disputes.

In this chapter, I will show that these hopes are misguided. Though we may be able to recognize verbal disputes in straightforward cases, as happens in some ordinary contexts, the distinction between verbal and factual disputes is not robust enough to be usefully employed in philosophy. Serious difficulties arise when attempting to apply the distinction in philosophy and they can be avoided only by appealing to implausible conceptions of meaning. Hence it cannot be relied upon to do explanatory or methodological work, by either accounting for the defectiveness of certain disputes or helping us determine which disputes to take seriously and which to ignore.

On my view, the status of the verbal/factual disputes distinction is the same as the status of the analytic/synthetic distinction—the distinction between truths of fact and truths of meaning—according to the widely held view that we can recognize analytic truths in certain straightforward cases, but the distinction is too problematic to do any serious work in philosophy. The close connection between the two distinctions should not be surprising: many advocates of the philosophical significance of the verbal/factual distinction are also defenders of the analytic/synthetic distinction. For instance, David Chalmers introduces his discussion of the verbal/factual distinction with the question “Is

there a distinction between questions of fact and questions of language?” and goes on to say that despite a tendency among some philosophers to answer *no*, a “version of this distinction is ubiquitous in philosophy and elsewhere in the notion of a verbal dispute.” (Chalmers (forthcoming))

Thus one might see verballity as a Trojan horse of sorts for analyticity, helping to revive the distinction between questions of fact and questions of language and gaining additional authority through its applications outside of philosophy. In section 1.2, I will argue that rather than making analyticity more respectable, the connection between the two notions makes verballity more suspect. That is so regardless of the use made of the verbal/factual disputes distinction outside of philosophy, since the unsystematic and highly defeasible application of the distinction in response to specific examples in ordinary contexts differs greatly from the kind of work philosophers hope to do with it. My ultimate hope is that just as a proper understanding of the limitations of the analytic/synthetic distinction helped make room for a more sympathetic understanding of the subject matter of certain areas of philosophy (such as metaphysics), a proper understanding of the limitations of the verbal/factual disputes distinction will help make room for a more sympathetic understanding of the nature of philosophical disputes.

Seeing that the verbal/factual disputes distinction cannot play the kind of role that many philosophers think it can leaves us with various questions concerning the distinction between disputes that are in good standing and those that are somehow defective. In section 1.3, I will offer an alternative proposal for how to explain this distinction and how, in practice, to distinguish between cases of either kind. The proposal is that whether a dispute is worthwhile (or *significant*, in my terms), depends on the dispute’s theoretical role, which is to be understood in terms of the impact the dispute has on our theorizing in general and vice versa. Significant disputes have some relevance to our broader theoretical interests, while insignificant disputes are insular, having no impact on anything outside the disputes themselves. With this account, we can explain what it is for disputes to be defective or not. It also clarifies the practical issue of how to tell whether a dispute is significant: let the dispute play out and see whether it connects up with the rest of our theorizing in interesting ways. Engaging in the dispute itself, or

carefully considering its details, is how to determine whether it's worth taking seriously, since that is how to determine whether it is a theoretical dead end.

## 1.1 Verbal Disputes

I'll begin by clarifying what it is for a dispute to be verbal. The idea that the distinction between verbal and factual disputes plays an important philosophical role goes back at least to Hume:

From this circumstance alone, that a controversy has been long kept on foot, and remains still undecided, we may presume, that there is some ambiguity in the expression, and that the disputants affix different ideas to the terms employed in the controversy. (1748/1993, p. 53)

Hume's discussion captures the underlying idea of what makes a dispute verbal: if a dispute is merely verbal, then the disputants mean something different by some term in the disputed sentences without realizing it. That condition seems to account for both the apparent defectiveness of verbal disputes along with the fact that the defectiveness is somehow a matter of language. This idea is spelled out more carefully by Chalmers:

A dispute over sentence S is merely verbal iff for some term T in S, the participants use T differently (or disagree, perhaps tacitly, about the meaning of T) and the dispute over S arises wholly in virtue of this difference regarding T.

Although there may be problems with taking this condition as sufficient for verbality, it is plausible that it is necessary.<sup>1</sup> Various other philosophers who have recently discussed verbal disputes (such as by Eli Hirsch (2005, 2009) and David Manley (2009)) are also committed to this necessary condition, either explicitly or because their characterizations entail it.

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<sup>1</sup> The problem with taking it as sufficient is that it will probably overgenerate, especially in cases where the dispute about S hangs on the meaning of context sensitive terms, like demonstratives. We might, for instance, have a dispute about whether something is a rock that will involve a disagreement over the sentence "This is a rock," and in doing so disagree about whether "this" stands for a rock in the context, but our dispute should not be considered merely verbal on that basis.

In the next section, I will argue that this necessary condition gives rise to serious problems that prevent the notion of verbal disputes from playing an important role in philosophy.

## 1.2 The Problem with Verbal Disputes

I will begin by briefly presenting the problem, after which I will elaborate on it and explain what I think it shows. It will be helpful to begin with a comparison to an older dialectic concerning the analytic/synthetic distinction (ASD): the distinction between sentences true purely in virtue of their meaning, and those true partly in virtue of meaning and partly in virtue of the way the world is. For example, “All bachelors are unmarried,” is often regarded as a paradigmatic analytic sentence, while “All bachelors eat pancakes,” would count as synthetic. Consider an influential objection to the ASD (offered in some form by W. V. O. Quine (1951, 1976a), Keith Donnellan (1962), Hilary Putnam (1962, 1975), Jerry Fodor (1964), Edward Shirley (1973), and others). Sometimes we change our attitude toward a sentence: at one time we accept it and then later we reject it. If the sentence in question is analytic (before the change), then we must regard the change in attitude as due to a change in the meaning of the sentence: if the sentence is true in virtue of meaning, then we can come to regard it as false only if we no longer take it to have the same meaning.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, if the sentence is synthetic, then such a change could reflect either a change in meaning or a change in our beliefs about the subject matter.

The problem, so the objection goes, is that there is an inescapable element of arbitrariness in whether some change in attitude should be regarded as reflecting a change in meaning or a change in belief. That is because in most cases we could interpret it either way: generally when we change our attitude toward a sentence, that change could be accounted for by appealing to changes in our beliefs, without appealing to changes in meaning. Furthermore, in most cases the reasons we have for changing our attitude in the first place do not provide principled reasons for preferring one interpretation over the

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<sup>2</sup> There may also be cases where we have false beliefs about the sentence’s meaning, in which case we can change our attitude without changing the meaning even if the sentence is analytic. For our purposes, we can stipulate that we’re not talking about cases like this, which is fair so long as the defender of analyticity doesn’t embrace a kind of global skepticism concerning our knowledge of meaning.

other. So it's often unsettled whether a change in attitude reflects a change in meaning rather than a change in belief.

Examples can be found throughout the history of science. It's plausible that at some time "Water is an element" was regarded as analytic, but due to the development of modern chemistry, that sentence is now regarded as false. However, there seems to be no principled reason to think that such a change reflects a difference in the meaning of "water" or "element," especially since the reasons for the change were the discovery that water consists of complex molecules—an object-level, empirical fact of the sort that is generally a reason to change our beliefs about water, rather than the meaning of "water." That's not to say that we couldn't explain this change in terms of a change in meaning, but it shows that there is nothing about the case in question that forces us to do so. Other examples include sentences like "Atoms are indivisible," "I can hear you only if you are within earshot," "Whales are fish," and "One cannot reach the place from which one came by traveling away from it in a straight line and continuing to move in a constant sense."<sup>3</sup> All of these may have been regarded as analytic at some point and all of them are now regarded as false. According to defenders of the ASD, the meanings of these sentences must have changed, but in none of these cases are there principled reasons for thinking that there was a change in meaning rather than a change in belief.

The verbal/factual disputes distinction (VFD) is open to a similar objection. According to those who accept the VFD, we can distinguish between disputes that arise from differences in what the disputants mean by their terms and disputes that arise from a difference in their factual beliefs. Notice, however, that this distinction is simply a synchronic, interpersonal version of the diachronic, intrapersonal distinction between changes in meaning and changes in belief. In the case of analyticity, we considered a single person changing her attitudes towards a sentence over time. In the case of verballity, we have two people with conflicting attitudes towards a sentence at the same time, and the distinction that the defender of verballity wants to draw is essentially the same as the one we criticized above, transposed into this new setting.

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<sup>3</sup> Some of these examples are discussed in various places in the literature, especially "Whales are fish." An early example is Donnellan (1962). The last example comes from Putnam (1962).



Hence the same objection applies. These disputes can generally be construed as resting on underlying disagreements about the facts, rather than divergences in meaning, and the reasons for thinking that the speakers are disagreeing can be equally well understood as reasons for thinking that the participants hold different beliefs. Generally there is no independent reason to think that they mean something different rather than just hold different beliefs.

For instance, a case where two people agree about someone's height in inches but disagree about whether she is tall might be thought to be a paradigmatic verbal dispute, but even it can be construed as factual. Perhaps both participants have a property in mind, tallness, and disagree about its extension. The reasons they offer in defense of their position will be of the form "So-and-so is definitely tall, and he is shorter than her;" namely, factual claims about the extension of tallness (not sociolinguistic claims about the use of "tall")—precisely the kinds of things our beliefs about a property's extension should be sensitive to. Why not, then, regard it as a factual disagreement about the extension of a property?<sup>4</sup>

A philosophical example with a similar upshot can be found in certain disagreements over personal identity. In some disputes over whether, for instance, a certain entity is a person, or whether two temporally distinct person-like entities are stages of the same person, the participants agree about many of the underlying physical (and perhaps metaphysical) facts, like when and where the entities exist, what they are composed of, their causal history, and so on. Nonetheless, the disputants still disagree concerning whether they are *persons*, or the *same person*. In such a case, their agreement on the underlying facts generates some temptation to construe the dispute as merely verbal, resting on a difference in the disputants' usage of "person."<sup>5</sup> However, there is another way of construing the dispute, according to which they both have some property, personhood, in mind, and they disagree about whether certain entities instantiate that property. Clearly they disagree about its extension and perhaps the conditions necessary for possessing the property, but that needn't prevent them from having the same property

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<sup>4</sup> This example might be slightly confusing, since even if one thinks that "tall" picks out a property, one will still think it picks out different properties in different contexts. The relevant kind of disagreement for the example is one that takes place in a single context, the point being that there we're not forced to interpret the disputants as meaning different things. Thanks to Steve Yablo for the example.

<sup>5</sup> Derek Parfit defended this line at one point (see Parfit (1995)).

in mind and then having a factual disagreement about it (otherwise, factual disagreement will be much less common than we ordinarily suppose).<sup>6</sup>

What do these considerations show? There are various different conclusions one might draw that are not always clearly distinguished in discussions of the ASD (perhaps for good reason, since it's not totally clear what follows from the problem I've described). It is worthwhile, however, to get a sense for the different conclusions that might follow, so I will consider some of the options. I'll begin by mentioning two possible views just to set them aside, before discussing some others that are more plausible. The first is that there simply is no ASD and no VFD, perhaps because the distinctions are unintelligible. I don't think we should accept this conclusion because it's too strong. As Grice and Strawson (1956) point out, "the existence of statements...about which it is pointless to press the question whether they are analytic or synthetic does not entail the nonexistence of statements which are clearly classifiable in one or other of these ways," and there is still non-collusive agreement about whether certain sentences are analytic, and certain disputes verbal, in some straightforward cases. An example of a clearly verbal dispute is William James' case of a person walking around a tree while a squirrel crawls around the trunk of the tree in order to remain unseen by the person.<sup>7</sup> The tree always remains between the person and the squirrel. A dispute over whether the person is going *around* the squirrel could easily be based on confusion over two different senses of "around"—the person does go around in the sense that her path encloses the squirrel, but the person does not go around in the sense that she never moves behind the squirrel. Rather than reject the VFD entirely, we can allow that there are some clear cases, while nonetheless holding that in most cases the distinction plays no important role. In light of this, I think we should accept a view along the lines of that defended by Hilary Putnam (1975). There may well be an ASD and a VFD, but they are unable to do certain kinds of philosophical work that their proponents hoped they could do (I will elaborate on this in a moment).

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<sup>6</sup> The problem I'm pointing to here may remind some readers of one noted by Tim Sundell (MS), but it is importantly different. Sundell points out that sometimes there are also facts at stake in what are clearly verbal disagreements, while I want to point out that there are difficulties in understanding disagreements as verbal in the first place.

<sup>7</sup> James (1907/1981).

The second view I want to set aside is that there really is an ASD and a VFD, but they can only be drawn on the basis of empirical evidence from linguistics, psychology, and other sciences. On this view it is objectively settled, for each sentence, whether that sentence is analytic or synthetic (for instance), but whether it is so can only be known on the basis of empirical inquiry. Such a view would support a Putnam-style conclusion: there is a distinction, but it lacks certain features traditionally associated with the ASD and is thus unable to do certain kinds of work its proponents wanted it to do. For example, on this view whether some sentence is analytic is not reflectively accessible to speakers just in virtue of their linguistic competence. Hence this ASD would be unsuitable as an explanation of the possibility of *a priori* knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Though similar to the sort of view I want to defend, I don't think this view is correct. I think the problem with the distinctions in question goes deeper.

There remain three possibilities to consider, each of which is fairly plausible (I remain neutral on which is correct, though I find the first the least plausible and the last the most plausible). The first is that although there is an ASD and a VFD, as a matter of fact there are no, or almost no, analytic sentences or verbal disputes. The distinctions are intelligible in principle, but don't mark any real distinction between actual cases, because, as a matter of fact, sentences are (almost) always synthetic and disputes (almost) always factual. In this case, I will call the distinctions *empty*, like the distinction between flying horses and non-flying horses. A second possibility is that the distinctions are *vague*. Although we can make sense of them, and although they have instances on both sides, there is a large set of cases where it is indefinite how they apply. Thus although there might be some disputes that are clearly verbal, there will be many borderline cases where the dispute is not clearly verbal or factual. In that case, the distinctions are like that between red and orange. A third possibility is that the distinctions are *arbitrary*, by which I mean that (focusing on VFD), outside of some clear cases at the extremes, disputes can be understood as either factual or verbal and it is objectively unsettled which construal is correct. In other words, they can be equally well construed as factual or

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<sup>8</sup> The thought here is that, on traditional views, analyticity explains the possibility of *a priori* knowledge because we can know whether certain sentences are true (the analytic ones) just on the basis of our linguistic competence rather than on the basis of experience (even if we need experience to acquire that competence in the first place). However, if linguistic competence alone isn't enough to know whether an analytic sentence is true, as on the present supposition, then it's not clear how the explanation works.

verbal.<sup>9</sup> An example of this sort of arbitrariness is whether a sentence like “The referent of ‘Halifax’ is among the set of things picked out by the predicate ‘is a city’” is, perhaps implicitly, about language or about the world. Given the equivalence between that sentence and “Halifax is a city,” both characterizations are defensible and neither is solely correct.<sup>10, 11</sup>

These three views all lead to the conclusion that there is a distinction, but it can’t do what philosophers hoped it could. So, we need to ask: exactly what work are these distinctions unable to do? Set aside the ASD and focus on the VFD. There are at least two philosophical applications of the VFD that are undermined by the objection. The first is methodological: we might want a practical guide to which disputes are worth taking seriously, one that will inform our decisions about which disputes to engage in. The VFD is sometimes held to provide a methodological tool that can help us make those decisions. The second is explanatory: we might want a constitutive account of what

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<sup>9</sup> Arbitrariness and vagueness are similar in that they both entail that in many cases, it is objectively unsettled whether the dispute in question is verbal or factual. They differ in that if the distinction is vague, it is objectively unsettled because neither property clearly applies. If the distinction is arbitrary, it is objectively unsettled because either could be consistently applied and neither is better supported by the facts. We might also characterize this as a situation where the dispute is both verbal and factual, though perhaps in different, equally good senses; the important point in that case is that they aren’t *merely* verbal.

<sup>10</sup> Williamson (2007, p. 26-8) makes a similar point, arguing that even if there is a sense in which object-level sentences are implicitly about language in virtue of equivalences with metalinguistic sentences, it follows that there is also a sense in which those metalinguistic sentences are implicitly not about language in virtue of the very same equivalences.

<sup>11</sup> One might want an explanation of how the VFD could be arbitrary in this way. I am not entirely confident what the explanation would be, but I can sketch one possibility in order to indicate the sort of thing I have in mind. One mechanism that could generate this kind of arbitrariness is conflict in the principles that guide our interpretation (or, in less committal terms, among the facts that determine meaning). One guiding principle is that we should, as best we can, interpret speakers so that they mean the same by the same or similar utterances; or, in other words, that we should prefer interpretations that minimize differences in meaning between speakers. Such a principle is plausible since something along those lines is needed to preserve communication. Too frequent attributions of differences in meaning would undermine our ability to communicate successfully, since it would mean we are, in general, talking past one another. This principle would generate a presumption in favor of interpreting disputes as factual, based on differences in belief rather than meaning. Another principle, however, generates the opposite presumption: the principle that we should minimize seemingly trivial or intractable or vacuous (or, perhaps more generally, inexplicable) disagreement between speakers. This can be seen as an offshoot of the principle of charity. We expect speakers to be reasonable, and so we should do our best to avoid interpreting them in such a way that they engage in unreasonable disagreements. This principle generates a presumption in favor of interpreting certain kinds of disputes as merely verbal. It’s obvious that in many cases these principles will pull in opposite directions, but it’s also obvious that in many cases both will be applicable given the facts at hand. There will be some exceptions, as when the dispute is so obviously trivial that the second principle wins out (perhaps evidenced by the participants’ willingness to abandon the dispute after being made aware of the possibility that it is verbal). But in many cases, both interpretations will be defensible on the basis of these principles and it will be objectively unsettled which of these principles wins out, leaving it undetermined whether the dispute in question is verbal or not.

makes disputes worthwhile or defective. The VFD is sometimes held to provide such an account. I will discuss both of these in turn.

Methodological applications of a distinction impose epistemological requirements on our ability to tell whether and how the distinction applies to the objects being sorted. If we are to use the distinction between As and Bs to determine whether certain objects are F or G, we must be better, or more reliable, at determining whether the objects in question are A or B than we are at determining whether they are F or G. Otherwise, the A/B distinction would hinder rather than help us, since we could simply check whether the thing we're investigating is F or G directly. For instance, if we want to use the distinction between brown and yellow bananas as a guide to which bananas we should eat, we need to be better at determining whether bananas are brown or yellow than we are at telling which bananas are worth eating and which are not, independently of their color. Otherwise the distinction will not, in practice, help guide our decisions about which to eat.

Returning to the case at hand, one upshot of the objection above is that we're not very reliable at judging when a dispute is verbal or not, even when it's clear that something isn't quite right with the dispute in question. How does the objection undermine our reliability? The thought is that, in general, our beliefs about whether some dispute is verbal or factual are based largely on how naturally we can characterize the dispute in the formal or material mode, either mentioning or using the key terms of the dispute. The *prima facie* plausible thought is that these characterizations correlate with whether the dispute actually is verbal or factual, making us reliable judges, but that thought is undermined by the objection we've discussed. Even if we are strongly inclined to characterize some dispute in the formal mode, as with the tallness case or the personal identity case, that does not rule out the opposite characterization and leaves open the possibility that the dispute is factual. Hence we're not reliable judges of whether a dispute is verbal or factual, so the VFD should not be relied on to do methodological work.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Even if one disagrees with this particular account of why we're unreliable, I think it's clear from the examples alone that it's difficult, in practice, to tell whether some dispute is verbal, enough to undermine the distinction's methodological utility.

For explanatory applications, the crucial point is that a distinction is only as explanatory as the basis on which it is drawn, because the distinction will inherit the features (including any imprecision, vagueness, or arbitrariness) of that basis. It's not enough that the extension of the distinction is relatively clear or that there is widespread agreement about certain cases. It must also be that the distinction is a suitable one for the purposes at hand, or that it matches the relevant features of whatever it is meant to explain. An example might make this clearer: suppose we want to explain why bees are more attracted to some flowers than to others. The flowers can be roughly categorized into red and orange, with a lot of borderline cases. If the bees' behavior exhibits a similar kind of vagueness (i.e. most of the bees visit the clearly red flowers but some also visit those closer to orange, with their numbers trailing off somewhere in the middle), then we could explain the bees' preferences in terms of the distinction between red and orange flowers. If, however, there is a sharp cut off between the flowers that the bees visit and those they don't, one that isn't mirrored in the distinction between red and orange flowers, then that distinction is not a suitable explanation. A more suitable explanation will match the precision in the bees' behavior (it might still involve vague notions like colors, including red and orange, but they will need to be supplemented or rendered more precise in some way). Vagueness, however, is not the only feature that is relevant; there are other ways that an *explanans* must match its *explanandum*. For instance, if a distinction is *arbitrary*, in the sense of being objectively unsettled or left open by the facts in a large number of cases, then it is unsuited as an explanation of a *less* arbitrary difference between the relevant objects. So, by showing that the VFD is empty, vague, or arbitrary, the objection shows that the VFD is unsuitable as an explanation for the difference between defective disputes and worthwhile disputes.<sup>13</sup>

To draw these points together, recall that the VFD is the distinction between disputes that are due to the participants meaning different things by their terms and those that are due to their believing different things about the facts. For the distinction to be

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<sup>13</sup> Another possibility is to admit that the difference to be explained is itself empty or arbitrary or vague, but I think that comes to largely the same thing, since it then becomes much less clear what the philosophical relevance of the distinction is. For instance, many want to appeal to this difference in defending the claim that ontological disputes are problematic but those in physics or some other branch of science or philosophy are not; if we're forced to view the difference as arbitrary, it's unclear that these fine distinctions can be drawn or what would be gained thereby.

methodologically and explanatorily useful, we must be able to reliably track whether disputes rest on a difference in meaning (compared to what we're using it as a guide for) and it must be non-arbitrary whether disputes rest on a difference in meaning (compared to what we're trying to explain). The objection shows that neither is the case.

I will close this section with an analogy that should help illustrate the overall view. Psychologists have observed that there is widespread agreement in how people apply the distinction between bright and dark to coughs and sneezes (when asked, people generally classify coughs as dark and sneezes as bright).<sup>14</sup> This widespread agreement suggests that there is some bright/dark distinction that applies to coughs and sneezes, just as agreement over (some) cases might support the claim that there is an ASD and a VFD (as Grice and Strawson argue). However, the agreement does *not* show that the bright/dark distinction can do certain kinds of work. In particular, the distinction would not be a useful guide, in practice, to whether some event is a cough or a sneeze, at least for most people, since most of us are much better at determining whether something is a cough or a sneeze by other means. It would be difficult to *first* figure out whether something is bright or dark (in the relevant sense), and then decide whether it is a cough or a sneeze on that basis. Similarly, the distinction does not provide a good explanation of what the difference between coughs and sneezes consists in, for even if it is a relevant difference, it is not robust enough: even if there is agreement over how to apply the distinction, there is still *less* agreement concerning that than there is concerning whether the events in question are coughs or sneezes. The distinction might be useful for other purposes (it might tell us something interesting about the psychological basis of metaphor, for instance, or about our understanding and use of language more generally), but not for these.<sup>15</sup> The same, I think, is true of the VFD: there may well be a distinction,

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<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Marks (1982). Ernst Gombrich (1960) discusses a similar example where the names “ping” and “pong” are used to name cats and elephants.

<sup>15</sup> The phenomena I’m discussing here is very similar to what Wittgenstein calls “secondary sense.” ((1960, p. 135-141); see also Cora Diamond (1995, p. 225-241)). In this case, the application of “bright” to sneezes would be part of the secondary sense of “bright.” Other examples include “Tuesday is lean, while Wednesday is fat,” and the much more common “This music is sad.” Secondary sense is similar to metaphor in some ways, but differs in that the primary/secondary senses of a term do not stand in the same explanatory relationships that the literal/metaphorical senses of a term do (on the assumption that the literal aspects of a term’s meaning often play a role in explaining its metaphorical uses). Nonetheless, as Wittgenstein argues, understanding secondary sense is often just as crucial, as far as understanding a term goes, as understanding the primary sense is, meaning that secondary sense is an important aspect of our use

and it may well be important for some purposes, but it cannot do the methodological or explanatory work that philosophers have hoped it can do.

### 1.3 When is a dispute worth taking seriously?

Nonetheless, it often happens that a dispute strikes us as somehow trivial or vacuous. If we can't rely on the verbal/factual disputes distinction to help us figure out which disputes are defective, or to help explain what that defectiveness consists in, it would be helpful if we had some other way of understanding what's going on in these cases.

What we're looking for is a way to understand the distinction between what I will call "significant" disputes and "insignificant" disputes, where significant disputes are those that are worth taking seriously, or paying attention to, or investing time and effort in, and insignificant disputes are those that are somehow defective in ways that make them not worth taking seriously. The account we're looking for should play two roles. First, it should explain (as far as it is possible to explain) the difference between disputes of these kinds and what their (in)significance consists in. Second, it should provide some guidance for distinguishing between disputes of these kinds. How much guidance can be provided or reasonably expected is an issue I will return to later, but the hope is that we can at least do better than the verbal/factual disputes distinction.

Though I won't attempt a definition of it, I'm using the term "significant" in a somewhat technical sense. The rough idea is that significant disputes are those whose resolution matters or is important. There are, however, different ways a dispute might matter. A dispute over how many votes a candidate has received is significant for primarily political reasons; it bears on who can legitimately govern. A dispute over which route to the airport is the quickest is significant for primarily practical reasons; it bears on how to avoid being late for one's flight. A dispute in geology over the age of the Earth is significant for primarily *theoretical* reasons; it bears on which theories we should accept in geology, physics, and biology. These different ways of being significant may not always be cleanly separable, but the one I'm most interested in is best captured

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of language. These observations support my claim that this usage of these terms marks a real distinction, but that it needn't be capable of fulfilling certain explanatory or methodological roles.



by the last example. There is also a correlative sense of “insignificant,” applicable to those disputes that lack the relevant feature. Though most disputes over the age of the Earth are significant in the relevant sense, a dispute over the age of the Earth down to the billionth decimal place is most likely insignificant. It’s also natural to speak of a dispute’s mattering or being important to or for somebody, or relative to certain interests, and so there may be a corresponding sense of “significance.” A dispute over the identity of my great, great grandfather might be significant to me (if I have an interest in genealogy), but not to many other people. I have in mind a more impersonal notion of significance. In saying that a dispute over the age of the Earth is significant, we needn’t think that it is significant *to* or *for* so-and-so (i.e. for any specific person) or relative to any particular set of interests (except, perhaps, very general interests, like figuring out what is true). Hopefully this helps pick out the notion I have in mind; more clarification will come in what follows.

I think the proper approach is to look at the (theoretical) roles played by the disputes. My suggestion is that what matters for whether a dispute is significant is how it hooks up with the rest of our theoretical projects. What matters is whether the dispute is the product of tensions arising from previous theorizing and whether its resolution would have consequences for other theoretical issues by, for instance, helping us answer other questions, resolve other disputes, open new lines of inquiry, draw new distinctions, and so on. Although I think this gives us a good guide to what to look for in classifying disputes, this characterization is admittedly rough. I’m not sure, however, that we should seek out a more precise statement of the view. Even a rough characterization can yield a precise classification of a wide range of cases and I see no simple way to codify the great variety and complexity of factors on which a dispute’s significance might depend. The situation might thus be the reverse of that with the VFD: though easy to state precisely, the VFD was ultimately found not to pick out a clear difference between disputes.

That being said, let me note some consequences of the view that shed more light on it and remove the temptation to look for a perfectly precise and systematic account. The first is that a dispute’s significance cannot always be determined *a priori*, because its theoretical role cannot be known *a priori*, or prior to actually pursuing the dispute to its natural terminus. I think that is the correct result. It would, on the contrary, be amazing

if one could distinguish the worthwhile disputes from the empty ones merely by reflecting on them in the abstract. We certainly can't do this in other areas of inquiry, like physics or math (we can't, for instance, pronounce that some research program is fruitless before even considering what results it may have). Rather, we must see how the disputes play out, how they affect other areas of inquiry, whether they produce fruitful lines of research, and so on. The upshot is that one reason for looking for a precise and systematic account of significance—the desire to determine *a priori* whether some dispute is worth engaging in, before getting our hands dirty—is misguided.

A second feature of the view is that a dispute's status depends largely on its extrinsic features. Whether a dispute is worth taking seriously does not depend merely on the features of the dispute itself, such as what the sentences are that it targets, what languages are used, and who the participants are. Rather, it depends on the wider theoretical context: what prior research produced the question, what prior commitments led the parties to disagree, what lines of research their positions might produce, how their positions bear on commitments in other areas of inquiry, and so on. A dispute's significance is a matter of how it relates to our inquiry more generally and not on what the dispute itself, in isolation from the rest of our theorizing, is like.

A consequence of this observation is that any dispute, individuated by its intrinsic features, could be significant (or fail to be), so long as it occurs against the proper theoretical background. Some might find this implausible, but I think it is correct. It's not difficult to imagine contexts where an important theoretical question hangs on even the most silly-seeming issue. Imagine arguing about whether every true sentence can be rewritten in subject-predicate form (e.g. "A is thus and so"). In most contexts, this question doesn't matter and an effort to establish whether such equivalences held would be a waste of time (imagine, for instance, someone insisting on making sure that an article submitted to a physics journal could be completely rewritten in that form before publishing it). Nonetheless there are contexts where it is very important: if we are evaluating Leibniz's theory of truth (according to which "an affirmation is true if its predicate is contained in its subject,"<sup>16</sup>), or his defense of nominalism,<sup>17</sup> then this is

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<sup>16</sup> G. W. Leibniz, quoted in Benson Mates (1986, p. 84). There are various other formulations of this idea by Leibniz, e.g.: "in every true affirmative proposition, necessary or contingent, universal or singular, the

precisely the question to ask. Another example: Ann and Bert disagree as to whether, during the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, there was one destructive event (involving both towers) or two destructive events (each involving a single tower only). For many purposes, e.g. if we were deciding how to describe the event in a history textbook, this is beyond pointless. Yet it might matter a great deal for the purpose of settling an insurance claim, depending on how it is worded (there could, for instance, be limits on how much is paid per destructive event.)

That significance is extrinsic defuses another reason for wanting a precise and systematic account: the thought that we can settle, once and for all, which disputes are significant and which aren't. If significance is extrinsic, then a dispute could be significant in one context and not in another, so long as the theoretical background shifts accordingly. Our account of significance should be flexible enough to accommodate those shifts.

All of this raises the question of how my distinction relates to the VFD. Is it meant to respect the same judgments about cases and to explain precisely the same phenomena? I don't intend the distinction to overlap with the VFD, so that our judgments about which disputes are insignificant or not will always agree with our judgments about which disputes are verbal or not. In fact, I think that some verbal disputes can be significant and some factual disputes can be insignificant.<sup>18</sup> Thus my

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concept of the predicate is included in some way in that of the subject, *praedicatum inest subjecto*." (quoted in Robert Adams (1994, p. 57)) and "the predicate... is always in the subject... and the nature of truth in general... consists in this very thing." (Leibniz (1989, p. 31)). I am not a Leibniz scholar, so I stand open to correction if I have misrepresented his views.

<sup>17</sup> Here I am relying on Benson Mates, who writes: "The propositions ordinarily considered most basic by Leibniz are those expressed by simple sentences of the form 'A is B,' possibly supplemented by the quantifiers 'some,' 'no,' or 'all.' He seems to think—because of his nominalistic metaphysics, as I conjecture—that whatever can be said at all can be expressed in such propositions." (1986, p. 54)

<sup>18</sup> An example of a significant yet verbal dispute might be the following: suppose two people disagree over whether John is late. The two disputants, along with John, are members of an organization that has strict penalties for those who are late to their meetings. The two disputants agree about when John arrived but, due to their associating different standards of precision with "late," disagree over whether he was late and, therefore, whether the penalties should apply. Here the dispute arises from some semantic divergence between the disputants, but it is still significant: it will affect what happens to John, it will affect how the organization's rules and regulations are interpreted from then on, it will affect how the term "late" is used in similar circumstances, and so on. An example of a non-verbal dispute that is insignificant might be a dispute about how many times the letter "e" occurs in my copy of Kant's 1st Critique. Plausibly, the resolution of this dispute is not at all important for our theoretical interests (assuming, for instance, that we don't have some psychological theory linking the prevalence of certain letters in an author's text with some personality disorder) and is, therefore, insignificant, even though it is not verbal in the sense at issue here (it

proposed distinction is not simply an alternative analysis of the VFD with another name. Nonetheless, they are not entirely unrelated. As I've noted, the VFD is meant to play a certain philosophical role and we can identify that role independently of the distinction thought to fulfill it. What my distinction has in common with the VFD is that I think it's the best candidate for a distinction that can play that role (given, as I've argued above, that the VFD cannot): explaining the difference between worthwhile and defective disputes, and providing some guidance concerning which disputes to take seriously. The two distinctions will diverge concerning precisely which disputes are worth taking seriously, but the theoretical work they are meant to do is the same.

At this point, one might wonder: is *every* dispute significant, on this view? Every dispute has *some* consequences, since it bears on who is right in that particular disagreement. We can always construe it as contributing to the enterprise of resolving disputes *like these*, where *these* are related to one another but not to anything else. Indeed, I think many people suspect metaphysics, or perhaps just ontology, as falling into precisely into this sort of category. How are we to distinguish cases like these from those where the consequences really do matter?

On my view, the insignificant disputes are the insular ones. The problem just raised is that perhaps all disputes, no matter how insular they appear, could be construed as having consequences for our theorizing. Thus there may not be any insignificant disputes, on my account, or at least no way to establish that some dispute really is insignificant.

How threatening this objection is depends on what we expect to get out of an account of significance. Does the observation that there is never a guarantee of insignificance undermine my account? Consider the explanatory and the methodological applications of the view separately. The observation will threaten the explanatory application if one thinks there is a clear line to be drawn between the significant and insignificant disputes, since it will show that it's impossible to say where exactly the line is to be drawn. However, I am comfortable admitting that significance comes in degrees. That shouldn't be surprising or unsettling if significance is determined by a dispute's

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is, in some sense, about language, but not in the sense that makes it verbal, since it is a wholly factual question about how many physical bits of ink of a certain kind appear on certain pieces of paper).

theoretical role, since different disputes might have greater or lesser influence on our theorizing. So, even if every dispute can be construed as having *some* theoretically interesting consequences, what should be uncontroversial is that some have many more, or far fewer, interesting theoretical connections than others. In that case, what the objection shows is that no disputes have absolutely no significance, which is a far less threatening result, since we can still point out that many disputes are highly insignificant, far more so than those that we want to take seriously.

Whether this is a *methodological* problem depends on how well we're able to distinguish, *in practice*, disputes that are objectionably insular from those that are not. I think our ability here is generally quite good. This is especially clear when the disputes occur outside of highly theoretical disciplines like philosophy, where disputes are often resolved on the basis of our ability to recognize that they have no bearing on anything (as in obvious cases of verbal disputes, like William James squirrel case). In less straightforward cases, the difficulty is just that of understanding the dispute itself: it can be unclear, when a debate is still ongoing, what its causes are, or what is at stake in it, or whether it will have interesting consequences for other issues. Once those features become clear, it also becomes clear whether the dispute is objectionably insular. The difficulty arises in identifying the dispute's theoretical role, but I don't think we need a special methodology for that, we can just let the dispute play out and see what comes of it.

This might still seem unsatisfactory. It certainly does not provide us with foolproof criteria.<sup>19</sup> From this perspective, my view might be better understood as follows: there is no methodology for determining whether a dispute is significant, but this shouldn't worry us because, if my view is correct, no methodology is expected or needed. Not expected, because there are many ways that a dispute can be relevant to our theorizing and there is no reason to think that they can all be subsumed under a single methodology. Not needed, because whether a dispute is significant depends on factors that we are antecedently good at detecting. That does not, of course, mean that there won't be hard cases, but the difficulty here is the sort that arises whenever we must rely

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<sup>19</sup> It does provide some guidance, however, by clarifying what kinds of considerations are relevant when evaluating the significance of some dispute.

on our judgment rather than on some predetermined decision procedure. On my view that sort of difficulty may well be ineliminable, but I think that will be so on any reasonable view. Trying to determine which disputes are significant is like trying to determine which horses to bet on; there are no wholly foolproof criteria that could provide a fixed methodology, but we can make clear what considerations are relevant and refine our judgments nonetheless.

This methodological point is important. I think it lies at the heart of the mistake made in traditional applications of the VFD. It shares much in common with the mistake made by the logical positivists in their search for a criterion of meaningfulness, and in many other philosophical projects. It can be tempting to answer difficult philosophical questions by first seeking out an explicit methodology or a rule that can be relied on to guide us in answering those questions. Faced with the question “When is a linguistic expression meaningful?” we are tempted to look for explicit criteria of meaningfulness first, and to then apply those criteria in difficult cases. But we’ve learned that often, as with meaningfulness, this temptation leads us astray. Often the criteria are inadequate, giving us too narrow a view of the phenomena, and when they are adequate we’re often deceived about how much work they are really doing, with our judgments driving the application of the rule and not the other way around. This approach is not always misguided, but there is a history of cases in which we were led astray by our reliance on a principle when we didn’t really need one. Much of the appeal of the VFD stems from the fact that it promises to give us a rule for dividing the worthwhile disputes from the defective ones, but I think this is precisely one of those cases where a rule will not serve us well. Similarly, the attempt to determine in the abstract which expressions are meaningful was closely related to the attempt to determine the prior epistemological constraints that a research program (in science or philosophy) must satisfy if it is to have any content or hope of success. Over time it became clear that this project was also doomed; we just cannot always tell beforehand which lines of inquiry will bear fruit. Nonetheless, many recent discussions of metaphysics and ontology, and the philosophy of philosophy more generally, adopt a very similar viewpoint. They assume that we can discover some prior principle, like the VFD, for distinguishing at the outset the worthwhile disputes from the defective ones. More generally they seek to discover the

prior constraints that philosophical activities, like ontology, must satisfy in order to be worthwhile. I think this approach is mistaken. Even setting aside any pessimistic inductions, we can only go so far in replacing our reliance on good philosophical judgment with more philosophical theory.<sup>20</sup> That's not to say that we can't make progress through metaphilosophical reflection, just that such reflection should not be a search for foolproof recipes. My hope is that the view I have developed here avoids these pitfalls.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

Summing up, I have argued that the distinction between verbal/factual disputes cannot explain the difference between defective disputes and those worth taking seriously, and cannot guide us in distinguishing between them either. A more promising alternative is to look to the role played by a dispute, or its place in our theoretical activities, to see whether it is significant or not. Those that have an impact on our broader theorizing are significant, while insular disputes are not.

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<sup>20</sup> This approach also suffers from a fairly serious regress problem, since we're left with the problem of adjudicating between rival metaphilosophical theories.

## Chapter 2

### The Significance of Ontological Disputes

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, philosophers were suspicious of metaphysics, regarding metaphysical disputes as somehow defective or vacuous, perhaps resting on linguistic mistakes or confusions. As the views underpinning these suspicions, like logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy, became less widely accepted, metaphysics underwent a revival, with ontology—the study of what exists—taking on a central role. But many remain suspicious of metaphysics all the same and various new and sophisticated attempts have been made to demonstrate that metaphysical disputes (and ontological disputes in particular) are more problematic than the new metaphysicians have supposed. In light of this, we should not naively suppose that ontology is in good standing. We should ask: are ontological disputes worth taking seriously?

I think many ontological disputes are worth taking seriously. In this chapter, I will explain why. In the previous chapter I articulated a way of understanding when disputes are significant, or worth taking seriously, according to which a dispute is significant if it related to the rest of our theorizing in the appropriate way. So, in order to see whether ontological disputes are significant, I will be exploring the question of whether they have the right kind of theoretical consequences.

Although ultimately we have to settle the question of significance on a case by case basis, considering the details of each dispute on its own, I will argue that we have good reason to think that many familiar ontological disputes are significant. I will do so by first considering some representative examples and describing the relevance they have for various issues outside of ontology, thus providing *prima facie* reason to think they are significant. Then, I will respond to a more general worry about ontological disputes that threatens to undercut their significance. I will argue that this general worry is not as threatening as sometimes supposed, but that a specific version of it can, in some cases, pose a real threat to the significance of ontological disputes.



## 2.1 Are Ontological Disputes Significant?

### 2.1.1 Significance

When is a dispute worth taking seriously? Here I will briefly sketch my answer to this question, which I will rely on in what follows.<sup>21</sup> I will call disputes worth taking seriously “significant” and those that aren’t “insignificant.” Significant disputes, on my view, are those that hook up with the rest of our theorizing in the right kind of way: they are the product of prior disagreements, or their resolution would help resolve other disputes or draw new distinctions or open new lines of research; generally, they have some bearing on our broader theoretical projects. Insignificant disputes are *insular*: they have no interesting connections to other theoretical projects; their resolution has no bearing on anything beyond the dispute itself. More simply, significant disputes ramify throughout the rest of our inquiry while insignificant disputes do not.

Significance contrasts with various other properties that a dispute might have. Saying that a dispute is significant, in the sense I have described, is not the same as saying that it is genuine or deep or substantive. Similarly, insignificant disputes are not necessarily merely verbal or lacking objectively correct answers or vacuous in some other way. The target notion that I mean to explicate in terms of connections to the rest of our inquiry is a dispute’s relevance, or its importance; the question of whether it is significant is the question of whether it *matters* or is a waste of time and intellectual effort. I point out these contrasts because many of my opponents disagree with me only indirectly. Consider, for instance, the view that ontological disputes are merely verbal. Insignificance is not the same as mere verballity, but I think mere verballity is sufficient for insignificance.<sup>22</sup> By arguing that ontological disputes are significant, I disagree with the view that they are merely verbal, but in an indirect way. My suggestion is that we can make matters simpler and less obscure by focusing directly on the issue of significance rather than taking a more indirect route through mere verballity or substantivity.

There are, of course, various questions one might ask about how to understand the suggestion that significance is a matter of theoretical connections (and insignificance a matter of theoretical insularity) and it is not always straightforward how to answer them.

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<sup>21</sup> This is itself a difficult question and I don’t mean to suggest that my view is obvious or uncontroversial. I discuss it in more detail in the previous chapter.

<sup>22</sup> I think the “mere” is crucial here. I leave open the possibility of significant yet verbal disputes.

Many of these points of uncertainty may become clearer once I have considered some examples and shown how the view applies in practice, but some uncertainty is unavoidable. I don't think we can find any account of the difference in question that provides us with a mechanical methodology for determining whether some dispute is worth taking seriously. In all cases we will have to rely on our judgment. What I hope is that my view makes it clear what the relevant considerations are, so that we're in a good position to exercise our judgment.

My defense of ontology will be no different. I will attempt to show, through some examples, how ontological disputes can bear on the rest of our theorizing, but it remains open for someone who disagrees to question whether the theoretical connections I point out are sufficient to establish the significance of ontological disputes. I should thus be regarded as trying to establish a *prima facie* case that they are significant, even if the argument will have to continue on from there.

### 2.1.2 Possible Worlds

I want to begin with a dispute whose significance is, I hope, less controversial than other disputes in ontology, in order to illustrate the idea that theoretical connections are what makes for significance and to motivate the idea that ontological disputes can have such connections. The dispute I have in mind is that between modal realists, like David Lewis, and actualists, like Alvin Plantinga, Robert Stalnaker, and others, over the existence of concrete possible worlds of the sort Lewis accepts.<sup>23</sup> The dispute is ontological in the straightforward sense, yet I think there is less temptation to think that it is insignificant compared to examples more frequently discussed in the metaontology literature, such as the persistence and composition debates. The reason, I think, is that the wider theoretical relevance of the dispute concerning possible worlds is more obvious than in those cases. Here I will point out some of the ways in which it is relevant.

Let's begin with its source. What, for instance, are Lewis's motivations for accepting his account of possible worlds, in contrast with the actualist alternatives? In *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Lewis considers a wide range of theoretical work that

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<sup>23</sup> For Lewis's views, see Lewis (1986). For actualism, see Plantinga (1974, 1976), chapter 3 of Stalnaker (1987), and Stalnaker (2003).

possible worlds can perform.<sup>24</sup> He notes that they can be used in explicating modal notions (including not just necessity but counterfactuals and causation as well), in developing a theory of content for speech and thought, in a theory of properties, and so on. In many of these cases there is agreement between Lewis and actualists about the role possible worlds can play, but two cases that are especially important to Lewis set them apart. One, which appears again and again in *On the Plurality of Worlds*, is eliminating primitive or unanalyzed modality. The second is giving a purely extensional theory of properties on which properties are identified with sets of their instances.

Regarding the first, Lewis's thought is that modal notions can be explicated in terms of possible worlds (e.g. necessity can be understood as truth in all possible worlds) and possible worlds in turn can be understood in non-modal terms. They are simply concrete universes, of the sort we inhabit, that are spatiotemporally isolated from one another. Modal notions like necessity can then be understood in terms of quantification over the space of possible worlds. No primitive modal notions are needed.<sup>25</sup> On the second point, Lewis favors a set-theoretic conception of properties.<sup>26</sup> Though attractive, the view that properties are just the sets of their instances (and that every set is a property of its members) is open to a powerful objection from the existence of distinct yet co-extensive properties, as in the famous example of renates and cordates. The sets in question are identical, since they have the same members, but the properties, intuitively, are not. Lewis's plurality of concrete possible worlds gives him a way out of the problem: take properties to be sets of individuals from all possible worlds. Assuming that being a renate is not *necessarily* co-extensive with being a cordate, then in some world there is a renate, non-cordate (or the other way around) and so the set of *all* renates is distinct from the set of all cordates.

These two applications of possible worlds set Lewis's apart from actualists who accept an ontology of non-concrete or abstract possible worlds. His primary objection to each of the actualist (or, in his terms, ersatz) alternatives he considers is that it is

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<sup>24</sup> See especially the first chapter of Lewis (1986).

<sup>25</sup> That is, at least, how the picture is meant to work. I want to set aside, for now, the question of whether Lewis really succeeds in eliminating any primitive modality and focus instead on the intended contrast between his view and those of his opponents.

<sup>26</sup> At times, he flirts with more robust conceptions of properties as universals (see Lewis (1983a), but generally he relies on the set-theoretic view.

incapable of dispensing with primitive modality. In each case, some sort of primitive modal notion is needed to make sense of what the actualist's possible worlds are. For instance, in the version of actualism that takes possible worlds to be sets of sentences of some kind, one needs a notion of consistency to distinguish between those sets of sentences that serve as *possible* worlds from those that do not (an inconsistent set of sentences could at best be an impossible world). But, Lewis argues, consistency is a modal notion since it signals that the sentences in question *could* all be true together. We might explain it by saying that a set of sentences is consistent if there is a world where they are all true together, but that would be circular for the actualist in question. So some notion of consistency must be taken as primitive (or some other modal notion taken as primitive, in terms of which consistency can be explained).<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, it's clear that actualists cannot take properties to be sets in the same straightforward way without running afoul of the co-extension problem. Many actualists adopt a more realist attitude towards properties, taking them as primitive in some way (some even employ them in their account of what possible worlds consist in, as in Stalnaker (1987, p. 46)).

The suspicion of primitive modality and the set-theoretic conception of properties are related in that they both find their motivation in the broad empiricist tradition that regards primitive modality and intensionality as somehow mysterious or objectionable. Furthermore, they rest on the view that at least conceptually there is a distinction between the modal and the non-modal, for otherwise the project of eliminating primitive modality is hard to make sense of.

In contrast, rather than viewing it as a disadvantage of their position, many actualists are happy to accept unreduced modality and properties. Actualists often view modality in particular as pervasive and primitive. Far from mysterious, modal notions form part of our ordinary conception of the world, and although they might stand in need of some regimentation for theoretical purposes, conceptually they are no more problematic than so-called "non-modal" notions. I say "so-called" because many actualists also endorse the view that there is no sharp distinction between the modal and

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<sup>27</sup> I am oversimplifying here by ignoring attempts to formulate a syntactic notion of consistency. Lewis discusses this in more detail in section 3.2 of Lewis (1986).

the non-modal, or that many apparently non-modal notions are in fact modal, at least in the sense that a proper understanding and application of them involves understanding certain modal facts. As a result, many actualists view the project of eliminating primitive modality as misguided, manifesting a misunderstanding of modality. Without this motivation, there is less reason to think of possible worlds as concrete universes, especially when combined with a willingness to take properties (or similar abstract entities like states of affairs or essences) as primitive, rather than reducing them to sets. Those entities can then be used to make sense of our talk of possible worlds.

Hence the dispute over concrete possible worlds has its source at least in part in competing conceptions of modality and the prospects for reduction. Much of the motivation for adopting a Lewisian ontology stems from an aversion to primitive modality and intensionality. Those who do not share this aversion are free to adopt alternative conceptions of possible worlds, as many actualists do, since although actualists and modal realists agree about many of the theoretical roles that possible worlds should play, providing a non-modal ground for modal notions is not a shared goal.

There is not, however, complete agreement over what roles possible worlds should play, and those disagreements also help account for the significance of the dispute over concrete possible worlds. I've already mentioned one such role, namely providing the materials for a set-theoretic reduction of properties. Another point of divergence is the scope of possibility. Some actualists (though not all<sup>28</sup>) appeal to possible worlds primarily as part of a theory of content (of mental states or other representations) and are not interested in their more metaphysical uses. If possible worlds are to be used primarily to help explain the behavior of rational agents in terms of the contents of their attitudes, then one's conception of possible worlds need only be rich enough to capture those possibilities that ordinary speakers are apt to recognize and distinguish between. Hence one lacks the motivation for a more robust conception of possible worlds intended to capture more bizarre or alien possibilities, which in turn might affect one's conception of what possible worlds *are*. One reason to adopt the view that possible worlds are concrete

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<sup>28</sup> The actualist I'm describing here adopts a particularly instrumentalist conception of modality where possibilities are no more fine-grained and extensive than human rational capacities require (there are not, for instance, possibilities that we cannot describe or understand). Other actualists, in contrast, are closer to Lewis on this point.

is to allow for certain bizarre possibilities that might really be out there, even if they cannot be described or understood by us. An actualist of the sort I'm describing might deny that there are any such possibilities, and hence see no reason to think that possible worlds are the sorts of things that could really be out there, independently of our rational activities.

Other prior disagreements are also relevant (for instance, different views about the epistemological and metaphysical significance of the concrete/abstract distinction), but let me turn from the source of the dispute to its consequences. Some of its consequences are obvious from the foregoing: how the dispute plays out will affect what theoretical roles possible worlds can play. For instance, as I've already mentioned, those who accept concrete possible worlds can offer extensional accounts of various apparently intensional phenomena, like properties, but also counterfactuals, causation and so on. That in turn has consequences for what kind of language and ideology we employ in our theorizing, or which and how many primitive terms we must employ. Other consequences are less obvious from what I've said, but still important. The parties to the dispute might be committed to different treatments of *de re* modality (counterpart theory vs. more straightforward accounts of transworld identity), to different views about which modal claims are true or false or meaningful at all (see, for instance, Alan McMichael (1983)), to different semantics for terms like "actual," and so on. I won't discuss these points in detail here; rather, my hope is to draw attention to the fact that it is because of these points that many people are inclined to take the dispute over concrete possible worlds seriously. The dispute has important ramifications for our theorizing in various domains and its significance is due to those connections. So, I think the case serves as a model for how to think about the significance of ontological disputes more generally.

### 2.1.3 Coincident Objects

Let me now turn to a case whose significance is more controversial: the dispute over materially coincident objects. Consider the following disagreement. An artist has two lumps of clay, one shaped like the upper half of Goliath, and the other shaped like the lower half. At noon, the artist puts them together, thereby creating both a new lump of clay and a new statue of Goliath, which he names "Lump" and "Goliath," respectively.

At 1:00, he smashes the object, thereby destroying both Lump and Goliath. Two people observe these events, and are asked: from noon to 1:00, were there two, coincident things, or was there only one thing? The first (who we will call “2-thinger”) answers that there were two, and the second (“1-thinger”) that there was one.

Is their dispute significant? I think it is, and I will explain why in a moment, but let me first note that the claim that it isn’t does have a certain appeal. What, one might wonder, could possibly be at stake here? They both agree about the configuration of molecules occupying the relevant region of spacetime, about how much everything occupying the relevant region weighs, and, more generally, about all the subvening properties of the thing or things in question. It seems that all they disagree about is how to describe whatever is there, or perhaps about certain identity statements (like “Goliath = Lump”) that seem fairly idle, given the rest of their agreements.

Though attractive, I think this line of thought is mistaken. The first thing to note is that we can fill in the background of their dispute in such a way that it is not the result of idle metaphysical speculation, but is prompted by a challenge to ordinary ways of thinking about material objects. The disputants are brought to their positions by reflecting on a paradox and their positions represent different ways of coping with genuine tensions in their beliefs. For instance, suppose that prior to their disagreement both 1-thinger and 2-thinger began by accepting the following three claims:

1. Leibniz’s Law (i.e. if  $x$  is identical to  $y$ , then  $x$  and  $y$  have all the same properties).
2. Distinct material objects cannot occupy exactly the same region of spacetime.
3. Lump could have survived changes that Goliath could not and vice versa.

From these claims, we can derive a contradiction, as follows: Lump and Goliath both occupy exactly the same region of spacetime, so by claim 2, they are identical. We can also assume, as an instance of claim 3, that Lump could have survived being squashed into a ball while Goliath could not have survived that change. However, given Leibniz’s Law, it follows from the identity claim just established that *Goliath* could have

survived being squashed into a ball, while Goliath could not have survived that change, which is inconsistent.

2-thinger and 1-thinger's divergent reactions to the case can be seen as divergent attempts to resolve this paradox, with 2-thinger abandoning the claim that material objects cannot spatiotemporally coincide (claim 2), and 1-thinger denying that Leibniz's Law applies in this case, perhaps by reinterpreting the sentences attributing modal properties to Lump and Goliath so that they don't attribute the same properties when different names are used to pick out the thing in question. She thereby blocks the inference from the identity of Lump and Goliath, plus Leibniz's Law, to the inconsistent modal claim. 2-thinger's reaction leads him to think that Goliath and Lump are distinct but perfectly coincident, while 1-thinger's leads her to think that Goliath and Lump are identical, even though something can be true of that thing *qua* Goliath that is not true of it *qua* Lump and vice versa.

That the disagreement is prompted by different reactions to a tension in their beliefs lends some support to the claim that the disagreement is significant, but we should also consider whether the positions they arrive at would have different consequences for issues beyond the dispute itself. Does their disagreement bear on other issues, outside their dispute and outside of ontology? I think there are a number of important connections. They are explored in more detail in various papers by David Wiggins (1968), Alan Gibbard (1975), Lewis (1986, chapter 4), Theodore Sider (2001), Kit Fine (2003), Karen Bennett (2009) and others, but I will summarize some of them in order to make their relevance clear.

One consequence is that 2-thinger and 1-thinger are committed to different conceptions of *de re* modal predication. 1-thinger's response to the problem requires her to adopt a semantics on which one cannot simply substitute co-referring proper names in *de re* modal predications while preserving truth value. Given that she accepts that Goliath = Lump, such a semantics is required to block the inference from "Lump could survive a change that would destroy Goliath" to "Goliath could survive a change that would destroy Goliath." There are different ways of achieving this goal; one familiar route would be to adopt a Lewisian semantics in terms of counterparts, but there are other options. The unifying idea behind these options is that the properties attributed to a thing



by predicates like “could survive being squashed into a ball” vary along with the name used to pick out that thing, so that the same predicate can apply to a thing under one name and fail to apply under another name.<sup>29</sup> In that case, despite the fact that the same predicate is used in both the consistent and the inconsistent predications, the same property is not being attributed by those predications, and so Leibniz’s Law cannot be used to derive a contradiction.<sup>30</sup> On a counterpart semantics, the property picked out by the predicate depends on the counterparts picked out by the counterpart relation: “could survive being squashed into a ball” picks out the property of having *this* counterpart (the one picked out by the relevant relation), who survives being squashed into a ball. Furthermore, if one thinks that the counterpart relation is fixed, at least in part, by how one refers to the object in question (e.g. “Goliath” fixes the statue counterpart relation, while “Lump” fixes the lump of clay counterpart relation), then the property attributed varies along with the name, since the name varies the counterpart relation.

Thus 1-thinger will be committed to various theses in the philosophy of language (exactly which theses will depend on how she spells out her view). She maintains metaphysical consistency by adjusting her semantics. 2-thinger, on the other hand, incurs no such commitments from his view; he might adopt those views for independent reasons, but as far as this dispute is concerned, he is free to treat *de re* modal predications as he likes.

This particular consequence is really an instance of a more general consequence. The divergence between their views will not be isolated to the semantics of modal claims. Following Fine (2003), there is reason to think that modal properties are not the only properties that (seem to) distinguish Lump and Goliath. Depending on the case, it might be that Goliath is poorly made but Lump isn’t, or that Goliath is valuable but Lump isn’t, or that Goliath is well insured but Lump isn’t, or that Goliath is the referent of “Goliath”

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<sup>29</sup> There is an alternative to the Lewisian view according to which the property attributed is the same and the counterpart story only affects the evaluation of whether the object possesses the property. In that case, we should say that whether the thing has the property in question depends on whether it is referred to as “Goliath” or “Lump,” as opposed to saying that which property is attributed depends on whether we refer to the thing as “Goliath” or “Lump.” Both interpretations block the inference involving Leibniz’s Law, though the second might require us to abandon or at least modify the law in some way.

<sup>30</sup> It’s tempting to describe the idea as follows (though it’s not clear that a counterpart theorist could consistently say this): Lump *does* have the property attributed in “Goliath could survive such-and-such a change,” even if it lacks that attributed in “Lump could survive such-and-such a change.” It possesses the first property only *qua* Goliath.

but Lump isn't, and so on. If so, and if 1-thinger appeals to the same strategy for dealing with these cases, then predications like "Goliath is valuable," "Goliath is poorly made" and "Goliath is the referent of 'Goliath'," as well as many others, will require special semantic treatment, in the same way as *de re* modal predications. The result will be an even greater divergence between 2-thinger's and 1-thinger's views in the philosophy of language.

Another, related consequence of the dispute is that 2-thinger and 1-thinger are committed to different views about identity. In particular, they are committed to different answers to the question of whether identity can be contingent. 1-thinger is committed to the claim that identity can be contingent, in the sense that the following can be true: Goliath is identical to Lump, but there is a world where Goliath and Lump both exist yet are not identical. Generally, that is because 1-thinger thinks that Goliath and Lump are identical yet have different modal properties (e.g. Lump could survive being squashed into a ball but Goliath couldn't). We can assume that in some world, the relevant difference is realized: the thing is squashed, Lump survives, and Goliath does not. In that world, the two are not identical, yet both exist (at some time or other). Alternatively, continuing in a Lewisian vein, depending on the counterpart relation in question there may be a world where the thing in question has two distinct counterparts, one a lump of clay and one a statue, thus making true the claim that Lump and Goliath could have been distinct. 2-thinger, on the other hand, is not committed to any such views about identity.<sup>31</sup>

These consequences have further consequences. A disagreement over whether there can be contingent identity will generate disagreements about what is possible, and disagreements concerning the space of possible worlds can generate disagreements over what is intelligible or conceivable and what isn't. A simple example is that 2-thinger and 1-thinger might disagree about whether it's conceivable for Goliath and Lump to be

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<sup>31</sup> Putting this point in terms of contingent identity might be a bit misleading. 1-thinger need not accept that identity can be contingent in the sense that Saul Kripke (1971) famously argued against. On the Lewisian version of this view, the claim that Goliath and Lump are contingently identical can be understood as shorthand for the real story in terms of counterpart relations, and since a thing and its counterparts in other worlds are never really identical (in the strict sense), there is a clear sense in which there are no contingent identities in Lewis's system. Nonetheless, putting things in terms of contingent identity is not entirely inaccurate either, especially since people who adopt the 1-thing view often characterize their view in those terms (see, for instance, Gibbard (1975)).

distinct. These disagreements open up the possibility of more interesting disagreements; for instance, 1-thinger's commitments remove at least one barrier to the intelligibility of certain theses in the philosophy of mind (like the view that mental states are contingently identical with brain states or that persons are contingently identical with their bodies), theories that 2-thinger should find unintelligible in principle.

There are additional consequences of the disagreement that are somewhat more general and difficult to pin down. One is that 2-thinger and 1-thinger are committed to different views about how our epistemic situation constrains the existence claims we can justifiably accept. For instance, 2-thinger thinks that there can be two distinct objects even if there are no observational differences between them and no way to detect, by ordinary empirical means, that there are two things rather than one. This commitment might require him to reject some (perhaps naïve) versions of verificationism or antirealism. Regardless of whether there is a specific view that he must reject here, 2-thinger and 1-thinger's disagreement might lead to additional disagreements over certain epistemic claims concerning when we're justified in believing identity claims (or their negations), how we distinguish objects from one another, and so on.

There is, as I mentioned before, a temptation to think that the dispute here is insignificant, but I think that once we see what prompts the disagreement, and what additional disagreements are prompted thereby, it becomes highly plausible that the dispute is significant. Its resolution would have an impact on the philosophy of language, epistemology, and other areas of inquiry. In my discussion I have focused on a fictional dispute, but the details are drawn from actual disagreements between philosophers. Of course, in actual philosophical disputes, it can be difficult to neatly separate out what, exactly, is the source of a dispute, what is a consequence of it, and what is an argument used to defend a view, but the connections between the dispute and our wider theoretical concerns are fairly clear and I don't think my treatment of the case distorts the actual facts in problematic ways.

How many other familiar ontological disputes are significant on this view is a question that I will leave unanswered for now. As I hope is clear from the above, answering this question in difficult cases—such as the dispute over when and how often composition occurs—will require careful attention to the details of the case in question.

For reasons of space, I can't discuss all the interesting cases here, though I suspect that many other familiar disputes will turn out to be significant, once we look carefully at the puzzles that produce them and the consequences they might have for various other branches of philosophy.

## 2.2 Difference Minimization

I turn now to some general reasons for resisting the claim that ontological disputes are significant. The main threat to the significance of ontological disputes is that they appear to be *difference minimizing*.<sup>32</sup> There are different ways for a dispute to be difference minimizing, but the common feature of such disputes is that the differences between the two positions regarding issues outside the dispute itself can be minimized or eliminated by various means, either through reinterpretation of other disputed claims or by some kind of translation or paraphrase of the claims in question. The end result is that the dispute has little or no bearing on other issues, for regardless of who ends up being correct, the relevant difference minimizing mechanism will ensure that the same consequences follow.

Not all difference minimization threatens a dispute's significance. It is possible to minimize the differences between the disputed positions in some respects but not others. Philosophers on opposite sides of some dispute might come to find common ground on some issues but not all; in that case, the differences between their positions might be partially but not completely minimized. Their disagreement is not as wide-ranging as it seemed. That kind of *partial* difference minimization, though it may reduce a dispute's degree of significance, need not undermine it completely. However, enough partial difference minimization can be just as threatening as complete difference minimization, for the straightforward reason that we should lose interest in a dispute as its significance nears zero and not only when it reaches zero (I discuss this more in section 2.2.2).

Are ontological disputes difference minimizing? It's clear that they are at least partially difference minimizing. Often ontologists on opposing sides of some dispute will both find ways to reconcile their views with certain claims of common sense, in order to avoid the accusation of rejecting certain Moorean facts. Although (as I will discuss later)

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<sup>32</sup> I am borrowing this phrase from Bennett (2009), but I am not using it in exactly her sense.

this practice might pose a threat to significance, in some cases it is fairly innocuous, since finding points of agreement with one's opponent is not, on its own, enough to undermine a dispute's significance. The real question, then, is whether ontological disputes are difference minimizing to an objectionable degree, enough to undermine their significance (in what follows, I will drop the qualifications when using the phrase "difference minimizing," unless noted otherwise).

There are at least two general reasons for thinking they are. I will explore them in turn.

### 2.2.1 Translation

One frequently discussed idea is that ontological disputes are insignificant because the different ontological theories defended by the participants in those disputes can be translated into one another without loss. Another way to put the idea is that given the correct theory of meaning, each participant could express their beliefs using only sentences that their opponent would also accept. If that is the case, then it's plausible that these ontological disputes are completely difference minimizing: if the opposing positions can be translated into one another without remainder, it's hard to see how the dispute over which is correct could have much bearing on any theoretically important question. Regardless of who is right, the results would be the same.

The most well known proponent of this idea in recent discussions is Eli Hirsch (2005, 2009). On Hirsch's view, ontological disputes are merely verbal if "each side can plausibly interpret the other side as speaking a language in which the latter's asserted sentences are true." (Hirsch (2009, p. 231)) Even setting aside the question of whether ontological disputes are merely verbal,<sup>33</sup> Hirsch's condition does threaten the significance of the disputes in question; if each side agrees that what the other says is true on some plausible interpretation, it's hard to see how their positions could have different ramifications for anything else. It would be irrelevant which side turns out correct, for the same things will follow regardless. There could at most be a question about which

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<sup>33</sup> I argued in chapter 1 that the verbal/factual distinction is unfortunate in various ways, so that we're better off employing other classifications.

language we do or should speak, as Hirsch argues, but that is not the sort of question that ontologists are interested in.

How does the view work in practice? The basic idea is to find interpretations—assignments of coarse-grained truth conditions, on Hirsch’s view—of the disputants’ utterances according to which each can agree that what the other says is true. Consider how the view might apply to the Lump/Goliath dispute we discussed above. Suppose 2-thinger says “There are 2 distinct things, Goliath and Lump” while 1-thinger says “There is only 1 thing, Goliath and Lump are identical.” To undermine the dispute, a proponent of Hirsch’s view might recommend that they understand each other as follows. First, from 1-thinger’s point of view, 2-thinger seems to think that objects have more fine-grained identity conditions than 1-thinger accepts. Despite being identical in all observable and categorical respects, 2-thinger distinguishes objects on the basis of their modal properties. What 1-thinger needs to make sense of 2-thinger’s utterance are things that he could be referring to that are more fine-grained than ordinary (according to 1-thinger) objects like statues or lumps of clay. One option is to understand 2-thinger’s objects as pairs of 1-thinger’s objects and individuation conditions, where those can be understood as specifications of *de re* modal properties. Thus when 1-thinger hears 2-thinger say “Goliath and Lump are distinct,” she should understand him to mean “(Object A, statue individuation conditions) and (Object A, lump of clay individuation conditions) are distinct,” something that 1-thinger can agree is true.<sup>34</sup>

From 2-thinger’s perspective, the issue is reversed. 1-thinger thinks that objects are more coarse-grained than 2-thinger does. He needs to find some object in his ontology that completely overlaps both Lump and Goliath and could serve as the referent of “Lump” and “Goliath” in 1-thinger’s utterances. One option is the spatiotemporal worm or world-slice that might be thought of as Lump and Goliath minus their modal properties. The thought is that on 2-thinger’s view, we can distinguish between ordinary objects, like statues and lumps of clay, that are individuated at least partially on the basis of their modal properties, and spacetime worms that are individuated solely on the basis of their non-modal properties (alternatively, we might think that absolutely all of their

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<sup>34</sup> “Object A” here is meant to refer to the object that is both Goliath and Lump in 1-thinger’s view.

properties are essential, which will have the same result).<sup>35</sup> Assuming, as we have, that Lump and Goliath exist for the same length of time and are only distinguished by their modal properties, Goliath's spacetime worm is the same as Lump's.<sup>36</sup> Thus 2-thinger can interpret 1-thinger as referring to that spacetime worm with both "Goliath" and "Lump," in which case 2-thinger can agree that 1-thinger speaks truly in saying "Goliath and Lump are identical."

To be sure that these interpretations are plausible, we would have to consider various different utterances that each disputant might make about Goliath, Lump, statues and lumps of clay in various different contexts, but for now this should give us a good grip on how the translation idea is meant to work. From the outside, we can find ways for each disputant to understand their opponent's utterances in terms of their own view, ways on which what their opponent says is true. Of course, each would reject the interpretation of their utterances that their opponent might accept (e.g. 2-thinger would insist that Goliath is a *statue*, an ordinary concrete thing and not some construction out of coarse-grained objects and individuation conditions), but from the outside, one can see how the availability of these translations could pose a threat to the significance of the dispute. If we're willing to adopt these interpretations, then why does it matter which way the dispute plays out?

Although I agree that ontological disputes are insignificant *if* the ontological theories are translatable in this sense, I think it's much harder to establish that they are in fact translatable than is often supposed. In these toy examples we can, of course, just stipulate how each should translate the other, but in actual practice we need to make sure that the translations in question are plausible to all involved (we don't, for instance, want our views on meaning to be dictated by our desire to deflate certain ontological disagreements). I think, however, that there are principled reasons for thinking that this cannot be established without begging the question, at least not in any straightforward way.

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<sup>35</sup> This way of putting things makes it sound like 2-thinger can't think that ordinary objects are spacetime worms, but that is unintentional. The crucial point is that he recognize a category of objects whose modal properties play no nontrivial role in their identity conditions.

<sup>36</sup> On this view, 2-thinger might better be understood as a 3 (or more)-thinger, Goliath, Lump and worm. I will set that complication aside.

To see why, it will be helpful to discuss an important insight offered by Lewis (1990). Lewis is concerned with how to understand Richard Routley's claim to be a noneist, someone who does not believe in any of the more metaphysically controversial entities (like past and future things, unactualized *possibilia*, abstract objects, properties, and so on). The difficulty is that though he claims to be a noneist, Routley is happy to quantify over those things that do not, according to him, exist. That is, though he accepts "There are numbers" he does not accept "Numbers exist." More generally, he accepts "There are some things that don't exist." In other words, Routley thinks there are two different kinds of quantification, one that is existentially loaded and is expressed by terms like "exist," and one that is existentially neutral and is expressed by terms like "some" or "there are."

Speaking for what he calls the orthodox view, Lewis argues that Routley is better understood as an *allist*, at least by people who share Lewis's metaphysical views. For Lewis does not accept that there are two different kinds of quantification. According to Lewis, "There are numbers" means the same as "Numbers exist." Given that *we* (supposing we agree with Lewis) accept these equivalences, how are we to understand ourselves in relation to Routley, and vice versa? Does he really reject the existence (in our sense) of numbers? Lewis thinks not; our one and only kind of quantification is best understood as corresponding to Routley's neutral quantification. On this view, Routley accepts a distinction that we don't among the things that, according to us, exist: there are also those things that *Exist* in some more loaded sense that we don't recognize. Thus we should not take Routley at his word. On our view he is an *allist*, not a noneist, for he accepts the existence of all the controversial entities in the only sense of existence that we recognize. That he also accepts a further notion that we do not (what he calls "existence") and applies it only to the more uncontroversial entities is beside the point. Just as many people are unconvinced by Berkeley's insistence that he really does believe in the existence of trees in the quad (precisely because he doesn't believe in what *we* mean by "tree"), we should not think that Routley is a noneist, as he claims.

The details of Routley's case are not my main concern here. More important is the general insight that Lewis is defending: the idea that how we interpret a philosopher's claims often depends on our *own* philosophical position. As he puts it:



Why all this fuss over translation? Routley writes in English, after all. Is he not the final authority on his own position? Should we not translate him homophonically? No. He is the final authority on *his* position, but not on *ours*. Therefore he does not have the final word either on how his position should be expressed in our language, or on how ours should be expressed in his. Nor do we. There is no authoritative final word; we can only seek the translation that makes him make sense to us, and us to him. (p. 26)

And earlier:

[W]hether ‘we’ may take a philosopher at his word depends crucially on who ‘we’ are, and what philosophical premises we ourselves argue from. That is distressing. (p. 24)

Distressing or not, the point is important for our question of whether the ability to translate ontological positions into one another undermines their significance. For what I think Lewis’s point shows is that whether we regard two ontological positions as translatable into one another itself depends on our prior ontological beliefs. There is no question of finding an ontologically *neutral* translation.

I’ve already indicated how this might pose a problem in the Goliath/Lump case above. Although 1-thinger can find a way to validate 2-thinger’s utterances, and vice versa, each will reject the other’s attempts to reinterpret their utterances, for each relies on metaphysical assumptions that the other rejects. On 1-thinger’s interpretation of 2-thinger, “Goliath” does not refer to a statue (at least not to what 2-thinger thinks is a statue), but to a coarse-grained object of some kind together with individuation conditions. On 2-thinger’s interpretation of 1-thinger there are similar problems, since on 2-thinger’s view statues and lumps of clay are distinct from the spacetime worms that 1-thinger is taken to refer to. On that view, 1-thinger is understood as restricting her attention to a sub-region of the true ontology, something that 1-thinger will deny. In each case, the disputant’s interpretation of their opponent rests on an ontological theory that

their opponent rejects. It gives each a way to understand the other, but not a way that is neutral—a way that each can find plausible. And although we needn't think that theories of meaning must be agreed on by everyone, the particular way in which these interpretations fail to be neutral is crucial: they presuppose certain ontological claims that are still up for grabs in the dispute itself. In that case, we can't evaluate their plausibility independently of the ontological dispute and so they can't, in practice, give us reason to abandon the dispute as insignificant.

In more general terms, Lewis's observations show that whether certain ontological disputes appear significant to one will depend on one's own ontological position, for one's ontological position helps determine what translations one finds acceptable and hence how to interpret the participants in the relevant debate. Whether one is *correct* about whether the dispute is significant will itself depend on whether one's ontological position is correct. The upshot is that the claim that ontological disputes can be translated into one another is not a neutral reason for regarding the dispute as insignificant; rather, it must presuppose some ontological position of its own, a position which might be at issue in the very dispute in question. We cannot, therefore, use translatability as a reason for thinking that some ontological dispute is insignificant without begging the question by assuming some position in the very debate in question.

A similar point arises from a qualification that Hirsch makes regarding his position. Hirsch points out that his view may only apply to ontological disputes that have reached the stage when "all is said and done," which Hirsch (quoting Lewis (1983b, p. x)) describes as the point when "all the tricky arguments and distinctions and counterexamples have been discovered,' so that each position has achieved a state of 'equilibrium'" (Hirsch (2005, p. 80-81)). Before that stage is reached, it is always an open possibility that some participant in the dispute will become convinced by their opponent's arguments or retract their claims, something that Hirsch regards as inexplicable unless the participants are interpreted as speaking the same language. At the all-is-said-and-done stage, everyone is set in their views, and it is only then that we should ask whether their positions are translatable, Hirsch argues. However, that is precisely the point at which the dispute can be regarded as resolved by all parties, including whoever is doing the translating; everyone will think they have weighed all the

available evidence and that their opponents are simply mistaken, not due to their overlooking some considerations, but simply in what conclusion they draw from the evidence. In other words, the question of translation only arises for Hirsch once one has settled on some ontological position at the end of the relevant inquiry. While the dispute is still ongoing, when it is still unsettled what the correct view is if there is one, we cannot determine whether it is significant or not. This, I think, helps illustrate how the question of whether the positions are translatable itself presupposes an answer to whether and how the dispute has been resolved. It is not a question that can be answered independently of resolving the dispute at issue and so is not the sort of reason that can be offered in advance for regarding the dispute as insignificant.

Thus I do not think that translatability poses a serious threat to the significance of ontological disputes. Not because it doesn't matter whether they are translatable, but rather because whether they are so cannot be determined without taking a stand on the ontological questions at issue. Hence even if some ontological positions are translatable, so that a dispute between them would be insignificant, this is not something that can be determined independently of that dispute, without first engaging in the real work of ontology. Since I think most ontological disputes are still open, and the ontological assumptions that underpin any attempt to demonstrate that rival ontological views are translatable are themselves still up for debate, I do not see any compelling reason in this line of thought for thinking that ontological disputes in general are not significant.

### 2.2.2 Paraphrase

A common feature of contemporary ontological disputes is the practice of paraphrasing ordinary claims made outside ontology in order to render radical ontological positions consistent with what are regarded as uncontroversial truths. Perhaps a paradigm case of the kind of paraphrase I have in mind is W. V. O. Quine's (1976b) treatment of belief ascriptions. Quine's problem is the apparent commitment to propositions carried by sentences of the form "S believes that *p*." Quine rejects the existence of propositions; at the same time, he admits that many belief ascriptions of that form are obviously true. The solution to this dilemma comes in the form of a paraphrase, whereby Quine replaces sentences of the form "S believes that *p*" with those of the form

“*S* believes-true ‘...’ in *L*.”<sup>37</sup> Reference to propositions is eliminated yet the truth of the ordinary belief ascriptions is preserved.

The practice of paraphrasing ordinary claims in order to preserve their truth in the light of apparent contradiction with firmly held theories is not unique to philosophy. For example, in many contexts heliocentrists are happy to assert “The sun has just moved behind the elms,” even though that sentence, interpreted in a (perhaps perversely) strict way, seems to imply that the sun moves through the sky, which is false on their view. The apparent contradiction is resolved by recognizing that the sentence and others like it could easily be paraphrased in other terms that do not have the same implication (they could, for example, be systematically replaced with descriptions of the change in position of the observer in relation to the sun due to the Earth’s rotation).

Similar strategies are ubiquitous in contemporary ontology. For instance, compositional nihilists who deny that there are any composite objects often try to paraphrase ordinary claims about composite objects into their preferred terms in order to show that despite their radical ontological views, they need not deny claims of ordinary common sense. An example is given by Peter van Inwagen (1990), who paraphrases the claim that there is a chair supporting him as he writes in the following sort of way:

The chair-receptacle *R* [the region of space thought to be occupied by a chair] is filled with rigidly interlocking wood-particles; the regions immediately contiguous with *R* contain no wood-particles; the wood-particles at the boundary of *R* (that is, the wood-particles within *R* that are not entirely surrounded by wood-particles) are bonded to nearby wood-particles much more strongly than they are bonded to the non-wood-particles immediately outside *R*; the strength of the mutual bondings of wood-particles within *R* is large in comparison with the forces produced by casual human muscular exertions.

Using such paraphrases, ontologists are in a position to justify their own and other’s acceptance of claims that are apparently inconsistent with their ontological views. The inconsistency is merely apparent, if the relevant claims are understood properly.

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<sup>37</sup> In intensional terms, the paraphrase is “*S* believes-true the sentence ‘...’ that expresses *p* in *L*.”

This kind of paraphrase might initially seem the same as the kind of translation discussed in the last section, but they differ in several respects.<sup>38</sup> First, their targets are different. In the case of translation, the target sentences are those uttered by the ontologists, especially the claims that characterize their ontological positions (like “Goliath and Lump are distinct” or “Composite objects like tables do not exist.”). In the case of paraphrase, the target sentences are those uttered in ordinary contexts by people not engaged in ontological investigations, like “I have more statues than lumps of clay in my studio,” uttered by an artist who is running low on unused pieces of clay.<sup>39</sup> Second, their aims are different. In translation, the aim is to undermine the dispute, revealing it to be vacuous or pointless by establishing some kind of equivalence between the disputed positions. For that reason, the translations are usually undertaken by a third party to the dispute or someone not initially engaged in the dispute who thinks that it is insignificant. Furthermore, they are *hostile*: the disputants tend to resist the translations and regard them as misrepresentations or misunderstandings of their claims. Paraphrase, on the other hand, is undertaken by the disputants themselves with the aim of making their positions more plausible. A common objection to compositional nihilism is that many claims referring to tables are obviously true.<sup>40</sup> The paraphrase strategy is in part a response to these objections, since those claims can be paraphrased by others that the compositional nihilist agrees are true. Though radical, their ontological position need not contradict such uncontroversial truths, once they are properly interpreted. The differences in the targets and aims of translation and paraphrase also lead to a difference in their scope. The target sentences, in the case of translation, include all of those that the ontologist might utter, including their most straightforward ontological claims. In the case of paraphrase, the scope is limited. Though a compositional nihilist will paraphrase ordinary claims involving tables (like “We have another table in the next room,” uttered by the host of a dinner party who is running out of space), they will insist that “Tables

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<sup>38</sup> These differences are most obvious in paradigm cases, but there may be cases of translation and paraphrase that do not differ in these ways since the two shade into one another. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that I’m using the terms “paraphrase” and “translation” in somewhat technical, or at least unusually restrictive, senses.

<sup>39</sup> This way of putting things isn’t meant to require any deep distinction between ontological contexts and ordinary contexts. That is just a helpful way to identify the set of sentences targeted in each case.

<sup>40</sup> A particularly popular form of this objection appeals to common sense in a Moorean fashion to argue that no radical ontological position that contradicts common sense could be true.

exist” is false, offering no paraphrase of it in less committal terms. Otherwise, they would undermine their disagreement with those who do accept the existence of composite objects. They must preserve a kernel of conflict in order to have a genuine disagreement.

Because of these differences, the threats posed by translation and paraphrase also differ. Given its more limited scope, paraphrase does not necessarily pose a threat to ontological disputes in the way translation does, for the differences between the disputed positions are only partially minimized. Proponents of those positions will both accept various ordinary claims about the disputed objects, but they will retain a core of disagreement despite this. For instance, heliocentrists agree with their opponents that “The sun has just moved behind the elms” is true in some contexts, but there are many other sentences that they regard as false that are accepted by their opponents. Since those sentences are not paraphrased or reinterpreted, much remains in dispute. Similarly in ontology; in the above example, van Inwagen goes on to say that although he accepts the claim I quoted above, he denies that there is something that fits exactly into R or that there is something that the particles in R compose. Perhaps that leaves enough room for significant dispute over the existence of chairs.

On the other hand, this limited scope also highlights the dangers of paraphrase. For although it’s true that, unlike in the case of translation, a kernel of genuine disagreement is preserved, the paraphrases make salient the fact that the disagreement is pared down to the absolute minimum, leaving the question of why it matters at all. As more and more paraphrases are found for claims outside of ontology, the point of disagreement between different ontological views becomes smaller and more obscure. After a certain point the dispute becomes insignificant, for both disputants could adopt the same views about all other issues. The worry is that many disputes in ontology approach too close to this boundary. Both nihilists and universalists about composition accept van Inwagen’s paraphrase. What remains of their disagreement, perhaps, is that they disagree about whether there is something that fits exactly into R, but it’s hard to see how *that* has important consequences for the rest of our theorizing. More generally, why does a disagreement about whether “Tables exist” is true matter if the truth of all other claims we might make about tables is unaffected due to the availability of paraphrases for them?

This, I think, poses a genuine threat to the significance of ontological disputes and I do not think it can be discharged in the same way as the threat posed by translation. The problem with the translation idea was that any attempt to establish that the positions really are translatable represents an additional partisan viewpoint in the debate itself with no dialectical authority over the other positions involved. That is because translations presuppose metaphysical positions that might be rejected by those involved in the relevant dispute. Not so in the case of paraphrase, for the paraphrases are offered by the disputants themselves in order to make their views more believable. They cannot, therefore, rest on metaphysical assumptions that the disputants reject.<sup>41</sup> In paraphrasing ordinary claims, ontologists are telling us what their positions amount to but in the process they undermine the interest in their positions by minimizing potential differences between their own and their opponent's views. The further the process is carried out, the more one loses a grip on what is at stake in the dispute.

Nonetheless, paraphrase does not pose a *general* threat to ontological disputes. Unlike translation, paraphrase (of the sort we're discussing) is not imposed from without, and it is an optional exercise. Ontologists don't have to offer alternative interpretations of their views, or of others' views, in order to minimize the radical consequences of their theories. It remains open simply to accept the conflicts. That, of course, comes at a cost: it might make certain ontological positions more difficult to believe. But I think that makes sense. Disputes over revisionary claims are often more significant than others for their resolution has a greater impact on our theoretical projects; at the same time, revisionary claims are harder to defend and render plausible than their more familiar rivals. So there is a trade-off: ontological disputes are more significant the more the involved positions take a stand on many different issues, but at the same time the more they take such a stand, the more difficult it becomes to defend them. This is, I think, as it

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<sup>41</sup> Each might reject the other's paraphrases, but the crucial point is that they each accept their own and hence each will find themselves in agreement with their opponent about the paraphrased claims. There might, however, be a reason here to think that I have overestimated the threat. The threat comes from the fact that paraphrase leads to widespread agreement about claims outside of ontology, but it might be mitigated if the paraphrases the disputants offer are wildly different. In that case, although they agree about the truth of ordinary claims, they will still disagree about what they mean or about why they are true. That in itself might be enough to preserve the significance of the dispute. The point, however, is that whether that is enough will depend heavily on the details of the case and even so, the paraphrases do at least *partially* minimize the differences between the disputed positions. So, I do think it's still important to recognize the potential threat that paraphrases pose, even if there are some mitigating factors.

should be, for it is a common feature of many theoretical disciplines, and I see no reason to think that ontology should be any different.

### 2.3 Insignificant Ontological Disputes

So far I've been defending the significance of ontological disputes and responding to various reasons for thinking they are insignificant. Despite this, I think it's important to recognize that not *all* ontological disputes need be significant and there are compelling reasons for thinking that some particular ontological disputes are not really worthwhile. I will consider some in a moment.

It's difficult, however, to establish that any dispute is truly insignificant. My view of significance naturally leads to a "wait-and-see" attitude when it comes to insignificance, since new developments in a dispute, or in other areas of inquiry, always have the potential to expose connections between that dispute and others. Part of my criticism of various attempts to establish that certain disputes are insignificant (by appealing to translations, or notions of mere verballity, or by other means) is that their conclusions are premature, given the current stage of development of ontology. So in claiming that some dispute is insignificant, there is always a real risk that one's judgment is premature and will be proven wrong.

Yet our judgments are always open to correction in every area of inquiry and so although we must recognize our fallibility, we can still offer evidence that certain disputes are insignificant. The evidence is, I think, more compelling the more particular it is. It's easier to argue that specific ontological disputes are insignificant, rather than arguing from general principles that ontological disputes tend to be insignificant. The strategy in each case would be to offer reasons for thinking that the dispute lacks connections with the rest of our inquiry, so that regardless of which position in that dispute turns out to be correct (if either), the effects on our inquiries will be the same. So, let's consider what that evidence might look like.

Consider the disagreement between nominalists and Platonists over whether mathematical objects, like numbers, exist.<sup>42</sup> Traditionally philosophers have defended

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<sup>42</sup> I intend for this to differ from the dispute over whether abstract objects of any sort (including properties, contents, and so on) exist, which I think is a different matter altogether.



Platonism—the view that mathematical objects exist—by appealing to the theoretical indispensability of mathematical objects to natural science and our understanding of the world in general (as in, for instance, W.V.O. Quine (1951, 1960, 1980a) and Hilary Putnam (1979a, 1979b)). In response, some nominalists (most notably Hartry Field (1980)) have tried to show how our scientific theories might be reworked to avoid reference to mathematical objects. I think it's plausible that a disagreement between Platonists and nominalists of this sort is significant (since it may have important effects on the shape of our scientific theories), but I mention it here only to set it aside. I want to focus instead on a different yet closely related disagreement.

Consider instead the disagreement between what we might call (following Mark Balaguer (1998)) Full-Blooded Platonism (FBP) and Fictionalist Nominalism (FN). FBP is roughly the view that all possible mathematical objects exist (alternatively, all internally consistent mathematical theories are true).<sup>43</sup> According to FN, on the other hand, mathematical claims are not *literally* true, because mathematical objects do not exist. Instead, we think of ourselves as operating under the fiction that Platonism is true, and we *count* mathematical claims as true so long as they are true according to the fiction (or, roughly, would have been true had Platonism been true). This fiction is useful because it allows us to theorize about the concrete world in ways that we could not without it, and it constrains our use of mathematics in the same way that the truth of Platonism would. So on FN, mathematical claims are literally false but we can nonetheless make sense of their usefulness in science and elsewhere.<sup>44</sup>

The defender of FBP holds that numbers exist while the proponent of FN holds that they do not. Yet if developed in the right way, it's plausible that both FBP and FN are fully consistent with our mathematical practice.<sup>45</sup> FBP, on the one hand, seems to escape many of the traditional objections to Platonism that stem from our mathematical practice. For example, working mathematicians seem to require nothing but consistency and usefulness in order to regard some mathematical theory as true, but it's hard to find

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<sup>43</sup> I say “roughly” because there are difficulties with this formulation (for instance, anyone who thinks that the existence of mathematical objects is a noncontingent matter will agree, reading the “possible” as indicating metaphysical possibility). I think the formulation is clear enough for our purposes, but see Greg Restall (2003) for more.

<sup>44</sup> For more detail on the fictionalist strategy, see, among others, Steve Yablo (1998, 2002a, and 2002b), Balaguer (1998), Joseph Melia (2000).

<sup>45</sup> This is the general argument of Balaguer (1998)

an epistemology for traditional Platonism that makes sense of this. FPB fares much better, for any consistent mathematical theory is true. On the other hand, FN does not require us to rewrite our scientific theories in a language that does not quantify over numbers, unlike the other version of nominalism I mentioned above. Apparent reference to mathematical objects is explained as a descriptive aid and mathematical claims can be treated as true for all scientific intents and purposes. So objections from the ubiquity and usefulness of mathematics in natural science do not threaten FN.<sup>46</sup>

It would take us too far afield to go through all possible connections between these two positions and the rest of our mathematical practice, but these observations indicate that there is reason to think that both FBP and FN would have (or not have) the same effects on the rest of our inquiry. If this line of thought is correct, they would require us to think differently about the question of whether numbers exist but not much else. Resolving the dispute one way or other would have little effect on practicing mathematicians, scientists who employ mathematics, semanticists interested in understanding mathematical discourse, epistemologists interested in our knowledge of *abstracta* and other theorists. The fictionalist strategy underlying FN serves as a very thorough difference minimizing mechanism, so even if the dispute between it and FBP is genuine, there is reason to think it is insignificant.<sup>47</sup>

Another source of evidence of the insularity, and hence insignificance, of this dispute is the indifference we find amongst those most likely to be effected by it (i.e. practicing mathematicians).<sup>48</sup> For a dispute to be significant, it must have connections with other areas of inquiry. In some cases, it's clear where we should expect to find those connections. Questions about the existence of numbers should affect those areas of inquiry that involve numbers, if they have effects at all. Theorists who work in those areas are, therefore, the most likely to take an interest in the dispute (among those not

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<sup>46</sup> Some might complain that this requires us to adopt a less than fully serious attitude about science, regarding it as partly fictional. However, more recent developments of this approach dispense with the idea of fictions and appeal to independently motivated linguistic mechanisms to explain how mathematical claims can count as true even if numbers do not exist. See, for instance, Yablo (2009)

<sup>47</sup> Not everyone agrees that it is genuine. Balaguer, for instance, thinks that there is no fact of the matter about which view is correct. This seems to me an overreaction, but that goes beyond my primary concern here.

<sup>48</sup> Here the differences between FBP and traditional Platonism, and FN and traditional nominalism, are perhaps less important (many mathematicians seem uninterested in both).

engaged in the dispute itself). So, if we find that they are thoroughly uninterested in the dispute, we have some evidence that it lacks any connections and is thus insignificant.<sup>49</sup>

In this particular case, the question is whether mathematicians are concerned with the outcome of the Platonism vs. nominalism disagreement. The issue is a bit tricky, since the question should not be a purely sociological one. Many mathematicians do have views on the metaphysics of mathematics and some do let it affect their practice. Perhaps a better way to put the question is whether, from the perspective of working mathematicians, discovering that nominalism or Platonism is true would be compelling reason to abandon (or reconfigure in some nontrivial way) the field of mathematics. I think it's plausible that most would say *no*. It might require them to adjust their understanding of the metaphysics of mathematics, but it's doubtful that mathematics as a science would disappear or change dramatically. Consider, for instance, some remarks made by William Timothy Gowers in discussing the ontological status of ordered pairs in light of the availability of multiple set-theoretic reductions of them:

I would contend that it [whether there are ordered pairs] doesn't matter because it *never* matters what a mathematical object is, or whether it exists. What *does* matter... about a piece of *mathematical terminology* is the set of rules governing its use. (Gowers (2006, p.192))

In this particular example, we can see why the disagreement between FBP and FN over the existence of ordered pairs is irrelevant to a mathematician like Gowers, for both agree on the rules governing mathematical terminology. Gowers goes on to say:

Suppose a paper were published tomorrow that gave a new and very compelling argument for some position in the philosophy of mathematics, and that, most unusually, the argument caused many philosophers to abandon their old beliefs and embrace a whole new -ism. What would be the effect on mathematics? I

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<sup>49</sup> This is highly defeasible evidence, of course. We must assume that these theorists are aware of the dispute in question, that they understand it and have properly assessed its possible ramifications, and so on.

contend that there would be almost none, that the development would go virtually unnoticed. (Gowers, (2006, p. 198))

We shouldn't draw too strong a conclusion from the claims of a single mathematician, but Gower's outlook supports the idea that working mathematicians are not very concerned with the outcome of the Platonism vs. nominalism dispute.<sup>50</sup> That, I think, provides some evidence that the dispute would have no impact on mathematics, which in turn is some evidence that it is insignificant.

It would be overly hasty to think that any of the observations I've made in this section establish that this particular ontological dispute is insignificant. The issue is far too complicated to be settled by this brief treatment. What I've tried to do, however, is to illustrate the kind of evidence that I think is compelling and the kind of arguments that really do threaten ontological disputes. The best strategy is to find specific reasons for thinking that the dispute in question is insular, rather than general principles that cast doubt on ontology as a whole.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have tried to make it plausible that many ontological disputes are significant. I argued for this first by discussing in detail some examples of ontological disputes and how they bear on other theoretical pursuits, something that I regard as sufficient for significance. I also considered some general reasons for accepting the opposite conclusion and argued that they are not universally compelling, while illustrating a more promising strategy for those who doubt the significance of ontology. Some issues remain, such as how far my claim that ontological disputes are significant can be generalized, but I hope to have made the initial case that ontological disputes are worth taking seriously.

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<sup>50</sup> I think Gower's remarks are much more plausible in the case of the FBP vs. FN dispute, rather than all possible Platonism vs. nominalism disputes, for some such disputes could lead to genuine differences in the rules that govern our usage of mathematical terminology (for instance, some nominalists might eliminate its usage altogether).

## Chapter 3

### Structure and Significance in Metaphysics

Metaphysics has long been the target of criticism in philosophy. From Hume's critiques down to the logical positivists, the very existence of metaphysics as a field of inquiry has been a point of controversy for many philosophers. In recent times, many philosophers have continued this tradition and metaphysics has attracted new and sophisticated criticisms. At the same time, however, it has also attracted a number of defenders. These defenders argue that metaphysics is a worthwhile form of inquiry and that metaphysical disputes—like those over the existence of composite objects, over the nature of possible worlds, and so on—are not a waste of time.

The most well-known attempts to defend metaphysics have much in common. In particular, they appeal to a family of notions, taken as primitive, that are meant to explain what metaphysics is about and why we should care about it. Such notions include *structure*, *fundamentality*, something's being the case *in Reality*. Most of these notions also have uses in ordinary contexts, but in this case something more is meant. They are taken to be primitive and to provide the basis of metaphysical inquiry. The rough idea is that metaphysical disputes are about what is *fundamental*, or the world's *structure*, or what is true not *simpliciter*, but *in Reality*. These notions pick out a special class of truths and on these views simply grasping the truth is not enough in metaphysics; we must also discern what is fundamental.<sup>51</sup>

My concern in this chapter is not the notions of structure or fundamentality themselves but the question of their usefulness in defending metaphysics. Ultimately I will argue that it is a mistake to base one's defense of metaphysics on such notions.

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<sup>51</sup> Although I will criticize these views, this reveals an important insight that they share. They all correctly recognize that mere truth is not enough to satisfy us in the theoretical realm. We don't simply want a list of everything that's true, but we seek to understand certain classes of truths that are distinguished from the rest in some way (for instance, in physics we seek to understand general laws; a description of all physical events with no unifying principles would be unsatisfying). Similarly, the form that a theory takes is also very important; we could, for instance, have a theory consisting of a single sentence "F" stipulated to express the proposition true in the actual world alone, but the theory would still be unsatisfying. When theorizing, we generally don't just want truths of whatever kind in whatever form, but certain kinds of truths in a perspicuous form. So, the general thrust of the views I will criticize is not misguided but, as I will argue, the particular implementation (using notions of structure or fundamentality to isolate the privileged class of truths) is.

Before that, however, it will help to get a bit clearer on the role they play in such defenses.

### 3.1 Significance and Structure

There are various different things that might count as a defense of metaphysics and various different aspects of metaphysics that one might defend. I will consider the question of whether metaphysics is worth taking seriously: whether it is the kind of inquiry that we should care about. My focus will be on particular metaphysical disputes (rather than metaphysics as a whole), and my question will not be whether they are genuine, or factual, but rather whether they matter or whether they are a waste of time. These questions needn't be the same, for many genuine, factual questions are pointless from the perspective of inquiry. For instance, we might, out of sheer fancy, wonder how many blades of grass are on my property and even come to disagree about the correct answer, but generally nothing of interest to anyone else will hang on the question.

So, the question I am interested in is whether metaphysical disputes are worthwhile.<sup>52</sup> My proposal is that a dispute is worthwhile if it is embedded in our inquiry in the right sort of way: if it has consequences for other disputes or lines of research, if it is the product of previous inquiry or tensions in our theorizing, and so on. Worthwhile disputes are those with appropriate connections to the rest of our theorizing while defective disputes are insular, with no clear implications for anything beyond themselves. I call disputes of the first kind “significant” and those of the second “insignificant.”<sup>53</sup>

Two virtues of this proposal are that it has very wide application and that it is largely independent of one's metaphysical views (it does not, for instance, require one to adopt any new metaphysical primitives). On the first point, the proposal is meant to explain why any dispute whatsoever is worthwhile. It does not, in other words, apply only to metaphysical disputes. So in applying this proposal to metaphysical disputes we are holding metaphysics to a standard applicable to any area of inquiry. On the second

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<sup>52</sup> This is admittedly a rough characterization. I try to clarify it, and the proposal that follows, in chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>53</sup> As in the previous chapters, I am using “significant” and “insignificant” as technical terms, signifying the properties of disputes that make them worthwhile and not worthwhile respectively (which are, in my view, the property of being connected to the rest of our inquiry in the right way and the property of being insular). “Significant” can also carry connotations of being meaningful or genuine, but that is not my intention; the intended reading is that significant disputes *matter*.

point, our standard of significance should be intelligible to people with a very wide range of metaphysical and anti-metaphysical views. That should be the case on this proposal, for the defense of a dispute's significance involves demonstrating its relevance for other disputes outside itself; a defense of metaphysics, then, requires one to establish connections between metaphysical questions and our other theoretical projects. This standard of significance thus offers us a way of defending metaphysics that requires no special treatment of metaphysics and should, in principle, be compelling even to those not initially supportive of metaphysics.

In what follows, I will interpret the other defenses of metaphysics as addressing the same question: "What makes metaphysical disputes worth taking seriously?" This is not, as I will discuss in a moment, the only way to interpret them, but I think it is fair. I will not assume at the outset that their views are incompatible with the one I have just sketched. Rather, the question I am interested in is to what extent, if at all, their defenses can help establish that metaphysical disputes are significant in the sense just sketched and, if they can't, what sorts of problems that poses for them.

Of those defenses, the best developed is Theodore Sider's account in terms of structure (see Sider (2001, 2009, and MSa). Here the idea is that the world has a fundamental structure. The more structural some aspect of the world is, the more eligible it is to supply the meaning (in many cases, referent) of some expression in our language. The model here is David Lewis' theory of intentionality and the notion of natural properties it involves (see Lewis (1983a and 1999)).<sup>54</sup>

On Lewis' theory, there is a primitive distinction between the more and the less natural properties, with the perfectly natural properties at one end of the spectrum.<sup>55</sup> Since the distinction is primitive, no definition of naturalness is available, but some basic features are notable: natural properties are non-disjunctive and non-gerrymandered, the

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<sup>54</sup> The theory of natural properties that Lewis and Sider accept has broad motivations and wide-ranging applications, as is clear from the discussion in Lewis (1983a). I am focusing on its uses in their theories of intentionality, but that shouldn't be thought of as the whole story. Similarly the idea of structure needn't be assimilated to the natural property model, though it does provide a convenient framework for making sense of the idea.

<sup>55</sup> It's possible to have a similar view where naturalness does not come in degrees. On that view, something is either natural or not. This more absolute conception of naturalness may be more amenable to Sider's views, since it better captures the idea of the world's fundamental structure. It's also hard to make sense of degrees of naturalness when extending the notion of naturalness to cover logical vocabulary, as below.

sharing of them makes for objective similarities, they help explain causal powers and feature in laws of nature. Green, for instance, is more natural than grue, and positive charge is more natural than both.

Naturalness also functions as a constraint on the interpretation of our language. Meaning, on this view, can be thought of as the result of interpretation that satisfies certain constraints. One constraint is supplied by some version of the principle of charity, which requires that most of our utterances come out true or at least reasonable. The principle can be thought of as requiring that the interpretation of our language respect our usage of language. The other constraint, on Lewis's view, is eligibility: the more natural some property or object (where the naturalness of objects is a function of the naturalness of their properties), the more eligible it is to stand as the semantic value of some expression. Thus the world itself plays a role in fixing the interpretation of our language, with better interpretations assigning more natural objects and properties as referents. Meaning is the outcome of applying these two constraints which often pull in opposite directions.

Sider adopts this picture but generalizes it beyond properties and objects so that it can be applied to all aspects of our language. Of particular importance is his extension of this idea to logical vocabulary; in particular, to quantifiers and logical connectives. On this view, some interpretations of the existential quantifier are better than others not simply because they better match our usage, but rather because they are more natural. They are metaphysically privileged; they mirror the world's existential structure. Similarly with other non-referential expressions like the logical connectives "and" and "or."

On this generalized picture, expressions can be more or less structural, depending on how well they capture the world's structure or depending on whether they have more or less eligible interpretations. Those that are highly structural can be said to "carve at the joints," in a metaphor that Sider borrows from Plato. How does one tell whether some expression is structural in this way? The primary indicator is its ideological indispensability; a good indication that some expression is structural is that no fully adequate theory of the world can be formulated without employing that expression. It is, for instance, along these lines that Sider argues that the existential quantifier carves at the



joints (as in Sider (2009) and Sider (MSa, sec. 5.5 and 7.4.3)). It's not clear to what extent this provides an independent criterion, since whether we think a theory is fully adequate might itself depend on our views about structure, but it does provide some constraints on whether to regard some expression as structural.

These notions play into the defense of metaphysics in the following way. Disputes are substantive, or deep, to the extent that they are couched in terms that carve at the joints. That is, each dispute can be understood as targeting some particular sentences; if those sentences are structural—if they have a univocal interpretation that is clearly best in terms of eligibility—then the dispute is deep or substantive. On the other end of the spectrum are disputes whose sentences are open to a number of equally eligible, equally charitable yet incompatible interpretations; those disputes are shallow and perhaps merely verbal. In between are disputes where the sentences in question have a univocal interpretation but are nonetheless not deep. It's harder to characterize this class of disputes in Sider's terms, but one possibility is that although in these cases the relevant sentences have a single best interpretation, that interpretation is fixed by the principle of charity, or our usage of language, rather than eligibility, or the naturalness of the interpretation. In these cases, the dispute is shallow but there is nonetheless a fact of the matter about which view is correct. On Sider's view, many familiar metaphysical disputes are deep (the expressions they target carve at the joints) and so should be taken seriously.

Some aspects of Sider's picture—in particular the idea that the quantifier might have multiple interpretations, with some more natural than others—are a bit obscure, so it will help to consider an example. Time has long been an important topic in metaphysics and one well-known dispute in contemporary metaphysics concerns the existence of past and future objects. On one side, presentists argue that only objects that exist in the present exist at all, while on the other side eternalists defend the idea that past and future objects exist in addition to presently existing objects (they do not, of course, exist *now* or in the present, but that does not mean they do not exist *simpliciter*). A common deflationary reaction to this dispute is that both sides are right on some plausible interpretation of their existential claims and so no genuine disagreement remains. When the presentist uses “exist” they should be interpreted as saying something synonymous

with “exists now,” as we would ordinarily use that expression. Their claim that only presently existing things exist then comes out as obviously true; even the eternalist would agree that only presently existing things exist now. Eternalists, on the other hand, should be interpreted so that “exist” means the same in their mouths as “exists now or did exist or will exist” does in ours. Again, even the presentist would agree that past, present and future things all exist now or did exist or will exist (they insist that past and future things *do not* exist, but grant that they *did* or *will* exist). Given these interpretations of their existential claims, no real disagreement remains, since both positions become obvious trivialities. Any real disagreement hinges on there being a tenseless, atemporal notion of existence, one where it is an open question whether things that exist in that sense all exist in the present or whether some of them exist at times in the past or future. So, there are at least three interpretations of the quantifier in the vicinity: exists now, exists in the past or present or future, and exists *simpliciter* (where the last notion is tenseless). Here is where Sider’s idea that some interpretations are more natural than others comes into play, for one can argue that the last is more natural than the first two, containing no implicit tenses and being less disjunctive. If so, then the dispute is best understood using that particular interpretation and our initial deflationary reaction is seen to be mistaken.

Proponents of similar notions are less explicit about how their views work, but the idea is similar. At least in metaphysics, disputes are worthwhile insofar as they concern what is fundamental or what is true in Reality. Otherwise, they are a waste of time. Compare Jonathan Schaffer on questions about what exists:

Contemporary metaphysics, under the Quinean regime, has focused on existence questions such as whether properties, meanings and numbers exist.... [I] suggest that the contemporary existence debates are *trivial*, in that *the entities in question obviously do exist*. (What is not trivial is whether they are fundamental). (Schaffer (2009, p. 356-7))

The deep questions about numbers, properties, and parts (*inter alia*) are not *whether* there are such things, but *how*. (Schaffer (2009, p. 361-2))

Here it's clear that on Schaffer's view metaphysicians would do better by ignoring trivialities concerning what exists. The real work of metaphysics is to figure out what is fundamental.

On Kit Fine's (2009) view, the project of metaphysics is to describe what is constitutive of Reality, where being constitutive of Reality goes beyond merely being true. There is, in other words, some metaphysically absolute conception of Reality, according to Fine, such that something can be true while failing to be true in Reality. In explaining how to understand the traditional atomist view that the world is nothing but atoms in the void, Fine puts the idea as follows:

[On the atomist's view] it will be constitutive of reality that this or that atom has such and such a trajectory but no part of reality that there is a chair over there, even though it is in fact true that there is a chair over there. (Fine (2009, p. 175))

As on Schaffer's view, questions of existence or what is true are not at the heart of metaphysics. It may well be that there are chairs and numbers and various other things. The important question, however, is whether such things are constitutive of Reality.

There are, however, important differences between their views and Sider's. For Schaffer, the primitive notion is the relation of grounding, which is a unique kind of metaphysical dependence (unique in the sense that it cannot be explained in terms of other familiar dependence relations, like supervenience). Grounding in turn helps explain what is fundamental, where the fundamental is what grounds but is not grounded by anything else. This gives rise to a conception of metaphysics as a roughly Aristotelian project of identifying substances (the fundamental entities) and explaining how they ground the non-substances (the derivative entities). The crucial difference from Sider is that Sider's notion of structure can attach to any expression in a language, while for Schaffer the notion of grounding expresses a relation that holds between different entities.

On Fine's view, the primitive notion is something's being the case in Reality, where the expression "in Reality" is understood as a sentential operator which marks that the sentence in question is true in a metaphysically strict sense (see, for instance, Fine

(2009, p. 171-4)). Again this differs from Sider, because for Sider the “structure” operator (if we understand his project along those lines) can operate on any linguistic expression (including, for instance, names, predicates, quantifiers, connectives, etc.)

These differences result in different conceptions of metaphysics and of what counts as a worthwhile metaphysical question. To simplify things in what follows, I will focus primarily on the picture developed by Sider.<sup>56</sup> I will call disputes that are substantive or deep on this picture “structural;” thus a dispute counts as structural if the sentences it targets are themselves structural.<sup>57</sup> My focus will be on the question of whether structural disputes are worth taking seriously, and vice versa, a question I think these philosophers would answer in the affirmative. I am, to some extent, putting words in their mouths in saying this. Sider, for instance, is mostly concerned with showing that metaphysical disagreements are deep or substantive rather than merely verbal or shallow in some other way. I don’t, however, think it’s a stretch to attribute this claim to them. For it is clear that the main proponents of notions like fundamentality, structure, naturalness, and so on, think that structural disputes are worth taking seriously. Generally, these notions are appealed to in defense of certain disputes that others think are misguided or defective. This strategy would be a poor defense if it demonstrated only that disputes are structural but left it unsettled whether people should bother to pursue them seriously. Consider, for instance, what Sider says in defense of his notion of metaphysical structure:

The goal of inquiry is not merely to believe many true propositions and few false ones. It is to discern the structure of the world. An ideal inquirer must think of the world in terms of its distinguished structure; she must carve the world at its joints in her thinking and language. Employers of worse languages are worse inquirers. (Sider (2009, p. 401))

It’s clear that on this picture, structural disputes should matter to ideal inquirers.

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<sup>56</sup> I do think my criticisms can be adapted to Schaffer’s and Fine’s views as well, but it is not immediately straightforward how to do so.

<sup>57</sup> There may be another natural interpretation of what it is for a dispute to be structural: it is for a dispute to be about structure or to concern what is structural. That is *not* what I have in mind in what follows.

In what follows I will also assume that I am at least partially correct about the connection between a dispute's being worthwhile and its being significant. What I will assume is that disputes can't be worthwhile without being significant (or connected to the rest of our inquiry in the way described above) and vice versa. The question is whether there is any similar connection between being worthwhile (hence significant) and being structural. My assumption is not meant to build-in any particular answer to this question from the outset; it could well be that significant disputes are also structural, and vice versa. The question I will explore is whether that is so. If not, I think this presents a serious problem for these defenses of metaphysics.

Why is it a problem? Some ways of defending metaphysics are dialectically stronger than others. Some have a better chance of convincing someone who is initially skeptical of metaphysics or who is undecided about whether to take metaphysics seriously. Who will find which arguments plausible is not the sort of question that I want to speculate about, but it's plausible that the more metaphysical assumptions one makes in one's defense, the less convincing that defense will be. On this score, simply arguing that certain disputes concern the world's structure, or concern what is metaphysically fundamental, is a poor defense. Someone initially skeptical will find this little reason to care about such disputes, assuming they are even willing to countenance the required notions of structure or fundamentality at all. A more compelling defense would show that such disputes can't simply be ignored because they are relevant to other questions that even someone outside of metaphysics could be interested in. For that reason, a lack of connection between structure and significance would leave the defense in terms of structure in a weak dialectical position. It could still be true that metaphysics concerns what is structural, but that will give us little reason to take it seriously. Thus the problem I will present is not so much an internal criticism of Sider's framework, pointing out some tension or contradiction in his view; he might, for instance, be happy to grant that on his view metaphysics does not meet the standard of significance that I set out. The complaint, rather, is that his view leaves us with an inaccurate and dialectically crippled conception of metaphysics, one that I think strengthens rather than weakens many of the common negative reactions people have towards it.

The question, then, is whether the following two claims are true:

Necessity: If a dispute is significant, it is structural.

Sufficiency: If a dispute is structural, it is significant.

I will argue that both are false.

### 3.2 Necessity

Must all significant disputes be structural? I think not. This should not come as a big surprise to proponents of Sider's view; indeed, as I will say in a moment, I think Sider concedes that Necessity is false and so the falsity of Necessity alone is not a fatal problem for Sider's view. Yet I do think its falsity is important. Seeing how it is false helps us understand the difference between structurality and significance. More importantly, its falsity figures into a larger problem with Sider's view, a problem concerning the conception of metaphysics we are left with once all the ties between structure and significance are severed.

Why think Necessity is false? Consider an example. For several decades, disputes about the nature of modality have been at the forefront of metaphysics. They concern questions like: are possible worlds concrete or abstract? Are there merely possible things or are all possible things actual? What is the extent of metaphysical possibility and how does it differ from physical possibility and conceptual possibility?

The work on these and similar questions has been highly influential not just within metaphysics, but throughout philosophy and, more indirectly, outside philosophy as well. Without going into too much detail, these disputes have had an impact on the philosophy of language (e.g. in arguments Kripke (1980) offers for his theory of names), philosophy of mind (e.g. in the many modal arguments offered for dualism, like those in David Chalmers (1996)), epistemology (e.g. in counterfactual theories of knowledge), and in the philosophy of science (e.g. in disputes over the nature of physical laws and causation).<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> For more detailed discussion of some different connections between modal metaphysics and other issues see chapter 2.

Outside philosophy the importance of these disputes derives from their influence on the development of modal logic. Much of the groundbreaking work in modal logic throughout the last century was entangled with these metaphysical issues. Difficult questions about how to interpret modal operators, especially when iterated, gained new clarity when viewed in terms of possible worlds, an idea derived from the metaphysical views of Leibniz. Disagreements, including those between W. V. O. Quine (1976c) and Kripke (1980), over the coherence of Aristotelian essentialism fed into disagreements over the coherence of modal logic. Questions about the ideas of transworld identity and *de re* modality led to the development of various formal frameworks for handling them, including the counterpart semantics developed by Lewis (1968 and 1986). Similar connections appear in work on other modal notions, like counterfactuals and causation.

It's clear that much of the formal work on modal logics and the semantics of modal terms was motivated and influenced by metaphysical concerns.<sup>59</sup> Modal logic, however, has a life outside metaphysics as well. It has important applications outside of philosophy altogether, in computer science and mathematics.<sup>60</sup> Although computer scientists are not typically concerned with metaphysical questions about the nature and extent of necessity, the ontological status of possible worlds, and the coherence of *de re* modality, they employ formal tools whose development was closely tied to those metaphysical questions. Their work is not metaphysical, but metaphysics has, at least indirectly, had some impact on their work.

These disputes over modal metaphysics are, to my mind, among the least controversial examples of significant metaphysical disputes. Nonetheless, they need not be regarded as structural as a result. Sider, in particular, argues that they are not: "At

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<sup>59</sup> One might complain that this is merely a contingent historical accident. Modal logics may have been developed solely by ethicists concerned with the logic of "ought" or by epistemologists looking for a way to formalize relations between "believes" and "knows." I agree, and in actual fact such concerns did play an important role in the development of modal logic. But metaphysics also played an important role and I don't think that is in any way reduced by the fact that things could have been otherwise. The question is not whether disputes over metaphysical questions are essentially connected to formal questions in modal logic; the question is whether those disputes were relevant to those formal questions, and I think it's clear that they were.

<sup>60</sup> For instance, in computer science, modal logics have been used to help understand distributed systems (a simple model might treat each computer as a possible world and relations of accessibility as network connections between them, allowing theorists to model how information is shared in the system), alongside other, more general applications in modeling computer operations, the evolution of databases over time, error-handling, and so on. In mathematics more generally, modal logic has been useful in clarifying the concept of provability (as in George Boolos (1993)).

bottom, the world is an amodal place. Necessity and possibility do not carve at the joints; fundamentally, there is no modality.” (MSa, p. 199) Of course, he still admits that there are modal truths, but they are not properly the concern of metaphysics. The only interesting metaphysical question concerning modality is how to get rid of it: how to reduce it or to account for it in terms of what is fundamental. He goes on to offer a view on which modality is largely a matter of convention.

Why think modality does not carve at the joints? The motivation is to minimize the required stock of primitive notions we should employ in our theories. Metaphysicians should seek to characterize the world as it is fundamentally using the most economical ideology possible and modal notions do not make the cut. Admitting them would needlessly bloat our fundamental language, where a fundamental language includes all and only those expressions that carve at the joints. One might think this begs the question, for one must already think modality is not part of the world’s structure in order to think that modal notions aren’t needed to describe that structure. The point, however, might simply be that we should try to get by with as little as possible and modality is a better candidate for reduction than existence, say, or various properties mentioned in physics. Elsewhere Sider offers a further reason for excluding modality: “one’s primitive ideology should be categorical, not hypothetical.” (Sider, MSb) Whether that reason stands up to scrutiny (are modal notions hypothetical? What does that mean and why is this restriction plausible in the first place?) is not my concern here. The important observation is that on the austere conception of structure that Sider prefers, modality is nowhere to be found. Thus disputes over whether something is necessary are not structural, since the key terms they target (like “necessary”) do not carve at the joints.

Nonetheless, he agrees that disputes over modality have wide-ranging relevance. Their target notions, like necessity, are “horizontally rich,” in his terms, even though they are not “vertically deep” (or structural) (Sider (MSa, p. 56-7)). In other words, they are “central to our conceptual scheme.” (Sider (MSa, p. 201)) In this way they are similar to other issues in metaphysics, like causation and personal identity.<sup>61</sup> All of these are cases

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<sup>61</sup> See, for instance, Mark Johnston (1992), where Johnston argues that even if personal identity cannot be reduced to, and doesn’t supervene on, the fundamental physical properties and relations of the sort Derek Parfit (1984) takes to be the only plausible candidates, it doesn’t follow that we shouldn’t care about personal identity or that it isn’t the relation that really matters to us.



where the relevant disputes target some notion that is commonly employed not just in metaphysics but throughout our lives and they have an impact on many issues beyond themselves.<sup>62</sup> Yet they also concern some notion which should not, on Sider's view, be included in the austere characterization of the world's structure.

So Sider should agree that the disputes about modality I mentioned at the outset are significant, in my sense, but not deep or structural. We differ, I think, in what conclusions we draw from this. For Sider, I take it, this result means that modality should not be a primary concern of metaphysicians. Some questions remain (for instance, what is the best way to reduce modality or to understand modal notions in terms of others that do carve at the joints?), but it is a mistake to think that modality is a central metaphysical notion and metaphysicians who engage in the sorts of disputes I mentioned initially are focusing on the wrong sorts of questions. The real action lies elsewhere.

From my perspective, this reaction is a grave mistake. Discovering that a metaphysical dispute bears on other questions, that it is entangled with issues from other disciplines, provides a powerful reason to take it seriously as an important theoretical issue, one that could convince someone who is not antecedently friendly to metaphysics. For this reason, my reaction is the opposite of Sider's: modality is a prime example of a metaphysical notion the study of which produced important results not just for metaphysics, but for our inquiries in general. It is, therefore, one which deserves the least suspicion.

This example illustrates how a dispute's significance does not require that it be structural. The reason is that the disputes with the widest relevance are not necessarily those that concern the most structural notions, which is no real surprise given how much of human inquiry concerns phenomena that go beyond what is purely fundamental. Sider, I think, would grant this, but that does not mean it is entirely unproblematic for his view. An initial concern is that using Sider's view as a guide to which disputes to take seriously might result in a misallocation of intellectual resources, since it would recommend that we ignore certain disputes that are highly significant (as in the case of

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<sup>62</sup> I do not mean to suggest that the mere fact that some dispute targets a horizontally rich notion is enough to guarantee its significance (see sections 3.3 and 3.4 for why I think it is not enough). Some disputes about necessity, for instance, might well be insignificant. In the cases I've been discussing, however, we have good reason to think that the disputes do have important connections.

modality). A plausible response to this worry is that Sider's view offers a recommendation for what *metaphysicians* should work on, and if these issues are truly important, they can be taken up by those outside of metaphysics (after all, why does it matter if we think of them as part of metaphysics or not?). But here a greater worry begins to emerge, for we have taken the first step towards severing any link between structure and significance, leaving us with a view of metaphysics as cut off from the rest of our inquiry, rendered irrelevant and uninteresting to everyone but metaphysicians themselves. We might then question whether metaphysics—of whatever sort we're left with—is really worth defending.

The problem, however, would be mitigated if being structural were sufficient for being significant. Although metaphysicians would, in that case, miss out on some significant disputes, metaphysics as a whole could not be accused of being insular and irrelevant.

### 3.3 Sufficiency

Must structural disputes be significant? Again, I think the answer is no. Consider the following example. At one point, Sider asks: “What is the list of (perfectly) joint-carving propositional connectives? Is it:  $\wedge$  and  $\sim$ ? Or is it  $\vee$  and  $\sim$ ? Or perhaps the only joint-carving connective is the Sheffer stroke  $|$ ?” (Sider, (MSa, sec. 8.2)) Now imagine a dispute over which connectives to use in formalizing one's theory, with one side arguing that the theory should only include disjunction and negation while the other argues it should only include conjunction and negation. Such a dispute ought to count as structural. Its key vocabulary carves at the joints and the theory may end up a better reflection of the world's structure depending on how the dispute plays out. We can also grant that there really is a fact of the matter about which connectives we ought to use.<sup>63</sup> Even granting all this, it's hard to see how it is significant, precisely because the connectives are interdefinable in a quite straightforward way.<sup>64</sup> Choosing one set of

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<sup>63</sup> It can be difficult to make sense of this suggestion, but we could imagine that there is some primitive fact about what the correct selection of connectives is, or we might tell a story which privileges one group over the other (perhaps in creating reality, God created conjunction and negation, leaving disjunction to emerge from those as an after-thought).

<sup>64</sup> I emphasize the fact that it is straightforward because I think accusations that disputes are insignificant because the involved claims are interdefinable are more problematic than they can seem, because it can be

connectives over the other is unlikely to have any ramifications for issues beyond the dispute itself.<sup>65</sup>

We can find similar counterexamples by picking up on the idea that disputes couched in terms of logical vocabulary tend to be structural on Sider's view. Consider, for instance, a dispute over whether to always use the existential quantifier as opposed to the universal quantifier. Or, a somewhat different case, consider a dispute over how many things there are; as Sider mentions (2009, p. 390) claims about how many things there are (such as "there are at least  $n$  things") can be stated using purely logical vocabulary and so the disputes in question are structural. Yet it's hard to see what, if anything, would hang on them.<sup>66</sup>

These examples, however, are a bit artificial, since these aren't the kind of disputes people are interested in when raising questions about the status of metaphysics. (Although that itself might be a problem for Sider: if the best that can be said for metaphysical disputes is that they are analogous to disputes like these, then one might wonder if any real progress has been made towards showing that metaphysics is a worthwhile form of inquiry.) In fact, this strategy of argument—offering specific counterexamples to claims like Sufficiency—is in some ways unsatisfactory. For Sider could grant the falsity of Sufficiency in the strict form I've presented, favoring instead a generic reading of the claim. In other words, the important point for Sider is that structural disputes tend to be significant and, when this is so, it is precisely *because* they are structural. So he might well grant that the move from structure to significance is not without exceptions while insisting that being structural tends to make disputes significant.

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difficult to find a suitably neutral sense of interdefinability. (see chapter 2, sec. 2.2.1) Those criticisms do not apply in this case, I don't think, for we are dealing with a formal language with clearly stipulated meanings for the connectives.

<sup>65</sup> This example highlights a way in which Sider's view is distinctive, compared to more traditional metaphysical views, for although notions of structure or fundamentality are similar to more traditional notions of substance and dependence, those traditional notions usually involve some kind of explanatory asymmetry which is lacking in this case. For Sider, two notions can be completely interdefinable, with no explanatory asymmetry between them, and yet one can still be more fundamental than the other.

<sup>66</sup> Of course it's not inconceivable that how many things there are might matter for some question in mathematics, say, or physics or metaphysics, but on the face of it, without filling in the story, it's hard to see what that question would be. Nonetheless, some philosophers have held that it does matter, especially finitists in the philosophy of mathematics (of which F. P. Ramsey and the later Wittgenstein may have been examples). The important point for me is that, as I will argue in a moment, the mere fact that how many things there are can be stated in structural terms isn't enough to show that anything hangs on the issue.

So, let's investigate whether a dispute's being structural gives us a reason to think that it is significant and let's consider a more realistic example in the process. There are some metaphysical disputes that should count as structural on Sider's view, but where it's doubtful that we should regard them as significant for that reason alone. One example is the dispute over composition: imagine a disagreement over whether there are any composite objects (e.g. tables as opposed to particles-arranged-tablewise) at all. Sider notes that

some of the most metaphysically fundamental disputes are horizontally poor—they have relatively few implications outside rarified metaphysics. Think, for example, of disputes over the ontology of composite material objects. This, I suspect, feeds much of the common distrust of those disputes. (Sider, (MSa, p. 57))

In my terms, Sider seems to be admitting that the composition dispute is not significant, even though it is structural. I do not, however, want to assume that this dispute is insignificant. Demonstrating that would require careful consideration of the dispute itself which goes beyond my concerns here. Instead, let's assume that the dispute is in fact structural. The important question is whether granting that assumption is enough to establish that it is also significant. It is that connection that I want to question.

What can we infer from the assumption that the composition dispute is structural? The characteristic feature of such disputes is that the expressions they target carve at the joints. In the case of composition, the relevant bits of language include the idioms of quantification (especially the existential quantifier and the identity symbol) and mereology (including expressions like "is a part of"). What can we infer from the assumption that such terms carve at the joints? We can conclude that they, in some sense, capture the world's metaphysical structure and that no fully adequate theory of the world could fail to include them. But that is not enough to show that any dispute which targets those terms is significant. For what we need is some reason to think that the dispute itself has connections to issues beyond itself, and the fact that the terms employed are joint carving and indispensable supplies no such reason. This is illustrated by our

initial counterexamples: the fact that terms are joint carving doesn't prevent one from formulating insignificant disputes by using them. We can take theoretically indispensable terms and then have pointless disputes involving them. If that were not the case, then any dispute over what exists, phrased in joint-carving terms, would be significant, no matter how foolish (as in questions like "Does conjunction exist?" or "Is there conjunction?" which are hard to make sense of).

At best, the fact that the terms used in some disagreement are joint carving shows that a different but related dispute might be significant. Consider the question of whether the dispute over composition is structural. A disagreement over that question might well be significant, for it bears on issues concerning the correct ideology to employ in formulating our theories. There are connections, in other words, between it and our theorizing in general. But that does not show that the composition dispute *itself* is significant, even if it is structural. In other words, a dispute over whether the composition dispute is structural could well be significant even if the composition dispute is not (even if we assume that it is in fact structural).

The general problem here is that a dispute's being structural is only enough to establish a connection between the vocabulary employed in that dispute and our theorizing in general. It does *not* establish any connection between the disputed *positions* and our theorizing in general. Even if the vocabulary carves at the joints, it could still make no difference which particular view expressed in that vocabulary ends up being true. Both views will employ the same terms, so even if it's a significant question whether to employ those terms, the question of which of those views is true need not be significant.

I am not arguing that structural disputes are *insignificant*. Returning to our example, I remain neutral, at this point, about whether the dispute over composition is significant or not. Rather, I'm arguing that a dispute's being structural is not, by itself, enough to show that it is significant. I think there are clear examples that demonstrate this and we can explain why it would be so in terms of Sider's overall view.

These observations provide compelling reason for rejecting Sufficiency in both its strict and its more generic forms. The strict reading is open to counterexamples that can be constructed using the observation that nothing prevents us from formulating pointless

disputes using joint-carving language. The more generic reading, according to which being structural tends to explain why certain disputes are significant, is called into doubt because it's not at all clear how such explanations would proceed. As we've seen, assuming that a dispute is in fact structural doesn't seem to provide any reason, on its own, to think that it is significant. Even if we assume that the dispute over composition is both structural and significant, its being structural would not explain why it is significant nor even provide much guidance to whether it is or not. Thus even if it were true that, in general, structural disputes are significant, it needn't be that they are significant *because* they are structural. On its own, being structural is not sufficient for being significant, cannot explain why a dispute is significant, and is not a reliable indication that a dispute is significant (except, perhaps, purely by accident).

If appealing to structure is meant to provide a reason for those suspicious of metaphysics to take it more seriously, then our conclusion presents a serious problem for the view. For simply arguing that a dispute is structural is not enough to show that it matters for anything beyond itself. Given the falsity of Necessity and Sufficiency, Sider's view feeds directly into the suspicion that metaphysical disputes are irrelevant to the rest of philosophy and science and can be safely ignored. They might well be "deep" or "fundamental," but few find that a compelling reason, on its own, to take them seriously. We are left with a picture of metaphysics on which it is an insular and irrelevant form of inquiry and the appeal to structure does little, dialectically, to reassure those who doubt its significance. A defense of metaphysics which leads to such a conception of the discipline is, I think, both inaccurate and undesirable.

### **3.4 An Alternative Picture**

I have argued that the picture of metaphysics as the study of the world's fundamental structure is an unfortunate one. It does, however, possess the advantage of giving us some grasp of what metaphysics is and where it belongs in our inquiry more generally. If we reject that picture, is there another that could take its place?

Sider defends the idea that the key notions that metaphysics investigates all carve at the joints; they are, in his terms, vertically deep. I think a better picture of metaphysics is available if we switch axes: the targets of metaphysical investigation are all

*horizontally rich* to a very high degree, meaning their usage throughout the rest of our inquiry and theoretical activities is near ubiquitous. Consider, for instance, the primary targets of metaphysical investigation: existence, necessity, properties, numbers, parthood, identity, personhood, time, causation, and so on. They find employment in almost every theoretical activity. Not so for the objects of most other disciplines; bosons, for instance, play little role in economics, while emerging markets don't often figure in physics. That's not to say that these other disciplines take existence or properties, for instance, as objects of study, but they rely on notions of existence or properties in the course of performing their investigations. The characteristic feature of metaphysics is that it reverses this trend. It takes as its objects those notions that find application throughout the rest of our inquiry.

This feature is not, of course, *unique* to metaphysics, nor is it universally true of all metaphysics. It does not give us a perfect way of demarcating metaphysics from other areas of investigation. Yet I don't think this should trouble us, for I don't think metaphysics is clearly demarcated from other areas of investigation and it is precisely those areas which also share the feature I'm describing with metaphysics that share the fuzziest boundaries with it. I have in mind other areas of philosophy like epistemology and logic, both of which also target notions with widespread application but which also shade into metaphysics in many cases. So, this characterization is a bit fuzzy, but it nonetheless gives us a useful characterization of what metaphysics is and where it belongs in our inquiry.

It also helps explain a number of common reactions people have to metaphysics, without necessarily vindicating them. For instance, it helps explain the traditional, though currently unpopular, view that metaphysics is first philosophy. A natural thought is that if metaphysics studies things presupposed by every other area of inquiry, without presupposing much from those other areas itself, then clearly our theoretical projects ought to begin with metaphysics. Our picture of metaphysics can explain why this thought sometimes strikes people as plausible, but we need not agree with it for reasons I will discuss in a moment.

It also helps explain various negative reactions to metaphysics, like the thought that metaphysics is transcendental (in some objectionable sense), or that it lacks content,

or is focused on external questions rather than internal ones, as in Rudolf Carnap (1956). The complaint is that metaphysics takes the conceptual apparatus we employ throughout the rest of our inquiry and tries to turn it into an object of study on its own. It treats the tools of inquiry as objects of study. This naturally gives rise to the thought that something has gone wrong in metaphysics: that it lacks content or rests on some kind of conceptual use/mention confusion. The plausibility of this thought can be explained by our picture, for it's true that the objects of metaphysics are generally the notions relied on throughout the rest of inquiry and which can thus come to seem like a kind of presupposed conceptual background rather than a potential object of study.

The mistake in both these reactions is in assuming some link between the idea that the targets of metaphysics are very horizontally rich and the issue of whether metaphysical questions (or the disputes over their correct answers) are significant. The first assumes that they must be highly significant, if they target these ubiquitous notions, while the second assumes the opposite. I think the truth lies somewhere in the middle, for I think the mere fact that the key terms of metaphysics are horizontally rich cannot, by itself, settle the question of whether metaphysical disputes are significant. This helps explain a third, less partisan reaction to metaphysics, which is that even if metaphysical disputes turn out to be worthwhile, metaphysics, at the outset, stands more in need of defense than most other areas of inquiry. There is, in other words, a stronger presumption of guilt when it comes to metaphysics compared to most other disciplines. That feeling stems from the implicit recognition that the constraints on metaphysical questions are very thin and by themselves do not suffice to show that the questions matter much for anything else. The terms "number" and "existence" have extremely widespread application, but that alone does not show that disputes over the question "Do numbers exist?" are fruitful. At this level of abstraction, it's totally unclear whether anything hangs on it.

The reasoning here is much the same as that towards the end of section 3.3. There I argued that the mere fact that some term carves at the joints does not show that disputes formulated using it are significant, since it is possible to express silly positions in joint-carving terms. The nature of the vocabulary alone is not enough to give the positions that employ it, and the disagreements between them, any purchase. The same is true,



however, in the case of horizontal rather than vertical depth. The fact that some terms are widely employed doesn't show that every question we might ask about them leads to fruitful theorizing and it doesn't show the opposite either, that questions we might ask about them are somehow defective or pointless. It shows that we must, in each case, consider carefully whether anything is really at stake. In some cases, once we fill in the story we will find that there are rival conceptions of these commonly used notions which would lead to widespread differences throughout the rest of our inquiry. In those cases, we have a significant metaphysical disagreement.

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