

Karen Bennett, 'Composition, colocation, and metaontology'

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1 The flavours of dismissivism

- (1) There is no fact of the matter about whether or not there are Fs. "There are Fs" does not have a determinate truth-value.
- (2) The dispute about whether there are Fs is purely verbal. the disputants assign different meanings to either the existential quantifier, the predicate "F", or the negation operator, and are consequently just talking past each other.
- (3) "There are Fs" is either true or false, and disputes about its truth-value are not verbal disputes. But there is little justification for believing either that it is true or that it is false
- (3') Disputes about the truth-value of "there are Fs" are not verbal disputes. But there is little justification for believing either that it is true or that it is false.

IMPORTANT: Karen does not want to be dismissivist across the metaphysical board. There is no specific problem that afflicts all and only metaphysics. There might be something deeply wrong with all of philosophy, but in this case there is no special problem that metaphysics has. And any problem that afflicts all of metaphysics is bound to have ramification for other areas of philosophy.

2 Two metaphysical disputes: constitution and composition

- **Constitution:** Can objects spatio-temporally coincide? **One-thingers or low-ontology side:** no. **multi-thingers or high-ontology side:** yes
- **Composition:** Special composition question: when do simples compose a larger thing? **nihilists:** never. **believers:** sometimes

- Analogies: Both debates have a high- and a low-ontology side. Both debates are difference-minimizing.

3 Difference Minimization I: Downplaying Excess Ontology

- **aim of high-ontologist:** downplay the large numbers of objects she posits: she will say that they are in some sense thin (without identifying them with the objects of the low-ontologist):
the high-ontologist will offer a **linking principle:** a necessary conditional connecting the things the low-ontologist countenances to the things only the high-ontologist countenances: *Constitution:* Multi-thinger: necessarily, if there are multiple modal profiles instantiated in a region R, then there are multiple objects in R. *Composition:* Believer: Necessarily, if there are simples arranged F-wise in region R, then there is an F in R.
- **Conclusion:** everybody agrees about the left-hand side of the conditional linking principles and the disagreement is only about whether these entail the right-hand sides. But: semanticism does not follow!

4 Against Semanticism

- Semanticism about metaphysical disputes claims that these disputes are in some sense *verbal* - everybody agrees on what the world is like, or what the facts are (in some sense of "fact"); the only disagreement is about the truth-conditions of (English) sentences containing words like "exists" or "object".
- A sufficient condition for a dispute's being verbal (that is a way of guaranteeing that the necessary condition is met):
(H) A dispute over the truth of a sentence D is merely verbal if there are two undisputed sentences U1 and U2, one true and one false, such that one side holds that D is (a priori necessarily) equivalent to U1 and the other side holds that D is equivalent to U2.
- **Example:** "There is a martini on the table". The undisputedly true sentence U1 is "there is an alcoholic cocktail in a V-shaped glass on the table", and the undisputedly false sentence U2 is "there is a mixture of gin or vodka, dry vermouth, and olives on the table". Purists take D to be equivalent to U2 and say that D is false. Other people take D to be equivalent to U1 and say that D is false. They are simply talking past each other.

- **Composition:** disputed sentence $D = \text{"There is a table in region } R\text{"}$. $U1$ is the undisputedly true sentence "there are simples arranged tablewise in region R ". $U2 = ???$ "There is an extra object in front of me, completely independent of the simples".
- **Constitution:** $D = \text{"there are (at least) two distinct objects in region } R\text{"}$. $U1 = \text{"There are two sets of persistence conditions instantiated at } R\text{"}$. $U2 = ???$ "there are two completely independent objects crammed into R ".
- If metaphysical disputes are about linking principles, then it seems to follow (by Hirsch's light) that they are merely verbal. High-ontologist says: " $U1$ entails D . You, the low-ontologist, think that D entails $U2$. But this is something I would like to distance myself from."
- **Worry 1 about Hirsch:** It is not clear what $U2$ is supposed to mean exactly. Is there really an undisputed falsehood $U2$ to which the low-ontologist takes D to be equivalent? If not, then the sufficient condition (H) is not met. And then we still have no reason for thinking that the composition or constitution disputes are verbal disputes.
- granted Worry 1 can be met. Worry 2: (H) is not sufficient for a dispute's being verbal anyway.
 - (1) (H) itself says nothing about analyticity. It only requires that the $D \leftrightarrow U$ equivalence be necessary and *a priori* in the mouth of one of the disputants. But presumably the relevant criterion should require that it also be analytic in the mouth of one of the disputants:

(Ha): A dispute over the truth of a sentence D is merely verbal if there are two undisputed sentences $U1$ and $U2$, one true and one false, such that in one's side language D is a priori necessarily and analytically equivalent to $U1$, and in the other sides language D is a priori, necessarily and analytically equivalent to $U2$.
 - (2) (H) does not entail (Ha) and is thus not itself sufficient for a dispute to be merely verbal. For the linking principles are not analytic: It is not analytic in the believer's language that if there are some simples arranged F-wise in region R , there is an F in R .

Argument: the believer does not think that composites are identical to anything that the nihilist accepts. She does not think that "table" just relates the simples, i.e. it is not co-referential with "simples arranged tablewise".

To refuse to take the non-identity between simples and the table they constitute on board would be to refuse to take the debate on its own terms: in this case the debate would be between two nihilists. The revisionary Nihilist

thinks that there are only simples bearing various relations to each other, that the word "table" is intended to refer to a composite, and thus that "there is a table in R" is false. The hermeneutic Nihilist thinks that there are only simples bearing various relations to each other, that the word "table" refers to simples standing in some of those relations, and thus that "there is a table in R" is true. This dispute is merely verbal, but it is not a dispute between a nihilist and a believer.

If the linking principle was analytic, it would define things into existence.

5 Difference Minimization II: Up-playing expressive power

- **goal:** defend (3'). How the low-ontologist tries to increase, or "up-play", her expressive power. **Problem:** "The toaster old" is somehow "better" than "The toaster is talkative". (Or: no nihilist wants to say: "There are no toasters - revise your breakfast plans".

Revisionary nihilists: both sentences are strictly speaking false. But "The toaster old" is still assertable, or quasi-true, because it is associated with another sentence that is literally true.

Hermeneutic nihilists: "The toaster old" is true - but it carries no commitment to toasters.

Central tool: Plural quantification. Problem with that: "There is a chair" can be dealt with. But what about "The chairs are arranged in rows". That is, the nihilist needs to be able to recapture sentences that apparently involve the satisfaction of plural predicates by composites. Even if the nihilist can get round that (and similar) problems: the paraphrase scheme of the nihilist is not going to be as simple as it may first seem.

6 The Costs of Up-Playing Expressive Power

1. There is a (putatively) low-ontology side and high-ontology side.
 2. The low-ontologist tries to recapture most of the claims that the high-ontologist accepts.
 3. It is not obvious that the low-ontologist's view is simpler than the high-ontologist's view.
 4. The problems for the high-ontolgoist rearise for the low-ontologist
- **ad 3:** the high-ontologist multiplies objects while the low-ontologist multiplies properties. Trade: ontology versus ideology. (The high-ontology

side need not endorse the highly structured properties the low-ontology side has to countenance. (Hence, there may not even be an undisputed truth U, as Semanticism claims.)

7 Problems Rearing for the Low-Ontologist

- The same problems arise for both sides. It is in principle impossible for anyone to come up with a new challenge to the high-ontology side that does not rearise for the low-ontology side.
- **van Inwagen's argument:** a) all of the nonextreme answers to the SCQ are unacceptably arbitrary; b) the extreme answer "always" is not acceptable for other reasons. BUT: the nihilist, while having a straightforward answer to the SCQ, does not have an answer to the question: "when, if ever, are some things arranged F-wise?"
- **The problem of the many:** there are an awful lot of things in the same region R, if nihilism is rejected. BUT: while the believer nihilist is apparently committed to the existence of many mostly overlapping Fs, the nihilist is apparently committed to the existence of many mostly overlapping instantiations of being arranged F-wise.
- **Exclusion problem:** Any putative effect of an event putatively evolving a composite object would be fully accounted for by events involving the simples that putatively compose C. So any such effect would be overdetermined. BUT: there is also causal competition among the simples.
- The nihilist has a straightforward solution to the **puzzle about colocation**. Since he is not committed to the existence of either lumps or statues, he is certainly not committed to the claim that a single spatio-temporal region can contain both a lump and a distinct statue. BUT: The nihilist also needs to account for every-day claims about persistence like "This is the same table that was in the kitchen yesterday".

8 The Third Dismissive Attitude

- Conclusion: there do not appear to be any real grounds or choosing between the competing positions about either composition or constitution We are not justified in believing either side. These are basically cases of underdetermination of theory by evidence. The problem is that both debates are difference-minimizing. (unlike the dispute between actualists and possibilists, or the dispute between presentists and eternalists.