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Against Deflationary Semanticism in Metaphysics

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ABSTRACT

Semanticism, often using the problem of persistence as its flagship, had argued that metaphysics disputes are merely verbal and can be resolved by appeal to ordinary language. Hence, metaphysics is not a substantive discipline. This position threatens the importance of metaphysics as the basis of all rational activities. This paper identified the absurdity and inconsistencies in Semanticism. This is with the aim of showing that metaphysics is a substantive branch of philosophy. The paper made use of relevant texts. Data collected from these texts were subjected to close reading. The paper also used the methods of conceptual analysis, critical analysis and philosophical argumentation to achieve its objective. The paper concludes that, contrary to the position of Semanticism, there is no sufficient evidence that metaphysical disputes are mere verbal disputes, as Semanticism fails to show that ordinary language can resolve metaphysical disputes. Subsequently, metaphysics is a substantive branch of philosophy.

Keywords: Metaphysics, Semanticism, Verbal disputes, Ordinary language.
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1. Introduction

Metaphysics, the branch of philosophy that is concerned with the foundations and nature of reality, has repeatedly come under attacks from deflationary attitudes such as Semanticism. Semanticism is a deflationary attitude that argues that most metaphysical disputes are mere verbal disputes and can be resolved by an appeal to ordinary language. This anti-metaphysical attitude has led to significant suspicions of the nature and methodology of metaphysics. Hence, this paper argues that Semanticism is absurd, inconsistent and self-stultifying.

Semanticism, often use the problem of persistence as flagship that metaphysical debates are not substantive, but mere verbal disputes. According to Semanticism, both endurantism and perdurantism, just like most debates in metaphysics, say the same thing in different languages and

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erroneously assume there is a debate. This is with the aim to show that metaphysics is insignificant and adds no value to philosophy and is a mere unending circle of insignificant debates.

Metaphysics, however, is regarded as the foundation for intellectual activities; hence, the framework for other specialised disciplines. Semanticism is a threat to the significance of metaphysics as a branch of philosophy. A threat to metaphysics is a challenge to the foundation of other rational activities. It is therefore important to defend metaphysics, and show that anti-metaphysical positions such as Semanticism is absurd.

This paper highlights some of the major flaws in these contemporary attitude and reject the position that most metaphysical disputes can be resolved by an appeal to ordinary language. To achieve this, the paper will first characterise metaphysics and trace the background to anti-metaphysical positions in philosophy. Second, the paper will examine what constitutes a verbal dispute. Third, the paper will examine the arguments of Semanticism for its position that most metaphysical disputes are mere verbal disputes. Fourth, the paper will characterise the problem of persistence in metaphysics and the arguments of Semanticism that it is a mere verbal dispute. The paper will then respond to the arguments of Semanticism.

To achieve this, the paper places more emphasis on Eli Hirsch's version of Semanticism, this is because it successfully combines all the arguments of Semanticism into his version and has a wide body of work on verbal disputes in metaphysics. The paper employs the use of conceptual analysis and philosophical argumentation to achieve these objectives. The paper finds that, contrary to the position of Semanticism, an argument is verbal can be verbal, yet substantive. The paper further finds that, there is no evidence that the sort of ordinary language Semanticism advocates for actually exists. Also, the paper finds that Semanticism did not properly engage in first order metaphysics on the problem of persistence. Hence, did not realise that endurantism and perdurantism disagree on how objects persist and not just on how to describe it. The paper concludes that the position of Semanticism on metaphysics is absurd and fails to show that metaphysics is insignificant.

2. Metaphysics

Metaphysics is a primary branch of metaphysics that studies the nature of the world. According to David Manley, "Metaphysics is concerned with the foundations of reality. It asks questions about the nature of the world…" Although, there is no consensus on the definition for metaphysics, metaphysicians agree that the definition given by Manley roughly captures the essence of metaphysics, but is inadequate. This is because almost every discipline is concerned with a particular nature of reality. Fine Kit argues that, although metaphysics is indeed concerned about the nature of the world, it is a slim definition of metaphysics, as there are other disciplines concerned with the nature of the world such as physics. Hence, it is imperative to show how metaphysics is different from other disciplines in its approach to the nature of the world and reality.

John Carroll and Ned Markosian refer to this definition as the big-picture approach. This is because it is a difficult task to sum up exactly what the topics of metaphysics have in common. The nature of the reality Biology is interested in for example is the physical characterisation of living organisms. Hence, Biology can easily be defined as the natural science that studies the life, structure and function of living organisms. This is however not the case with metaphysics. The nature of reality that metaphysics is concerned with is the fundamental nature of all realities. Physics, for example, argues that the reality of nature is that what is common to everything in the world is that they all exist in time and space. Philosophy on the other hand wants to know why this is the case.

One major difference between the nature of metaphysics and that of other disciplines is the reason for engaging in metaphysics. For biologists, the reason for studying biology is simply to understand the structure and functions of living organisms, in order to maximise the benefits that can be gained from living organisms. However, Taylor argues that the purpose for metaphysics is curiosity and understanding. Hence, because curiosity has no limit, it is difficult to restrict metaphysics to just a particular aspect of reality like disciplines such as physics and biology. Furthermore, as argued by Taylor, metaphysics is not concerned with how, but with why.

To further characterise the nature of the reality metaphysics is concerned with, Kit identified five features that can distinguish metaphysics from other discourses. First, the methodology of metaphysics is different from that of other discourses concerned about the nature of the world.

Second, the generality of the subject matter of metaphysics. Third, the transparency of the concepts of metaphysics is such that it distinguishes it from other discourse. Fourth, metaphysics is largely anaemic in nature. It is not immediately known what can be done with the findings of metaphysics, unlike other discourse. Metaphysics, as argued by Lowe and Taylor, is however the foundation of what there is, which is its greatest strength and the fifth feature of metaphysics.

Some of the basic topics metaphysics covers are identity, causality, consciousness, universals and particulars, existence, space and time, among others. Carroll and Markosian argue that another way to distinguish the reality metaphysics is concerned from other disciplines and from other branches of philosophy is to adopt the 'definition-by-example' approach. 'Definition-by-example' approach is to use the subjects or topics examined in metaphysics to understand the nature of metaphysics. Hence, Carroll and Markosian use topics in metaphysics, to characterise the nature of the reality metaphysics is concerned with.

The a priori method of metaphysics, its anaemic feature, generality and open-ended nature, makes it understandably a suspicious enterprise. Hence, some scholars argue that metaphysics is unnecessary or meaningless or futile or pseudo. At least three philosophers shaped anti-metaphysical positions in the history of philosophy. They are David Hume, Alfred Jules Ayer and Rudolph Carnap. Anti-metaphysical positions, starting from the 18th century with Hume, became a subject of interest.

3.   Background to Anti-Metaphysical Positions

The first significant attack on metaphysics dates back to the mid twentieth century, with Carnap and Quine as the major actors. The summary of Carnap's position on metaphysical enterprise is that metaphysics is mere semantics and nothing more than linguistic choice. That is, metaphysics is nothing more than the use of language, and contrary to the position of ontologists; metaphysics has no bearing on objective reality. Carnap holds a dismissive approach towards metaphysics. The initial position of Carnap is that metaphysical statements are pure nonsense, since they are not verifiable in experience. With the demise of verificationism, especially because it is self-stultifying, Carnap argues that all of metaphysics borders on mere usage of language. Carnap argues that metaphysical questions and statements are mere proposals that are not capable of been true or false.[2]

Although, traditional metaphysics survived Carnap, there is still a school of thought who argue that metaphysics is not as important as presented. This school of thought, conscious of how difficult it is to maintain an outright metaphysical anti-realist position, argue that their attitude to metaphysics is deflationary in nature. As the name suggests, this school of thought attempts to deflate the importance of metaphysics.[3] The proponents of this school of thought, such as Eli Hirsch and Kristie Miller, are classified as neo-carnapians; they are obviously influenced by Carnap, but do not hold every position of Carnap, especially his outright dismissive attitude to metaphysics.[4] Hence, they adopt a deflationary attitude to metaphysics.

Deflationary approach to metaphysics is basically a school of thought that argues that most metaphysical disputes are misguided and not substantive ontological disputes. A common deflationary approach is the argument that most metaphysical disputes are mere verbal disputes and can be resolved by a recourse to semantics or ordinary language. A proponent of this school of thought is Eli Hirsch, who uses the problem of persistence in metaphysics as a flagship for the claim that most metaphysical disputes are ordinary verbal disputes.[5]

4.   Verbal disputes

What immediately comes to mind when one is confronted with 'verbal dispute' in philosophy is that there is a seeming dispute between at least two parties, and each party assumes there is a

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[2] Carnap, Rudolph. "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology." *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method.* Ed. Richard Rorty. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. 73.

[3] Hirsch, Eli. "Ontology and Alternative Languages." *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology.* Eds. David Chalmers and Ryan Wasserman. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009. 231-259, Thomasson, Amie. "Answerable and Unanswerable Questions." *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology.* Eds. David Chalmers and Ryan Wasserman. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009. 444-445

[4] Hirsch, Eli. "Ontology and Alternative Languages." 231-259, Miller, Kristie. "The Metaphysical Equivalence of Three and Four Dimensionalism", *Erkenntris* . 62:1 (2005) 91-117.

[5] Hirsch Eli.

disagreement when actually there is none. In other words, a verbal dispute occurs when the disagreement is over meaning or words and not facts. While the disputants assume there is a genuine dispute, clarification of language or key terms can resolve the pseudo dispute. Once the disputants understand that the clarification of key terms or language employed can solve the problem, the pseudo dispute can be resolved. This description of a verbal argument is aptly captured in the words of David Chalmers:

Intuitively, a dispute between two parties is verbal when the two parties agree on the relevant facts about a domain of concern, and just disagree about the language used to describe that domain. In such a case, one has the sense that the two parties are "not really disagreeing": that is, they are not really disagreeing about the domain of concern, and are only disagreeing over linguistic matters.[6]

There are at least two senses of verbal disputes. The first sense of verbal dispute occurs when the key term in a dispute refers to different things, but the disputants assume it has only one meaning. For example, in America a football is spherical, has two pointed edges and is brown. However, in Britain, a football is round, has no edge and is black and white. If an American and a Briton are not aware, that football in America is different from football in Britain, it is possible they disagree over the appropriate description for a ball.[7] A dispute of this sort is verbal, and to resolve it the disputants can be educated on the differences in what is called football in both countries. Awareness that a football can be round and black and white in some climes, and spherical and brown in some climes can resolve the dispute.

Another sense of verbal dispute occurs when context-dependence is not considered.[8] For example, if a Nigerian from the North, who has lived her whole life in the North visits Canada, when the Canadians claim the weather is hot, she will most likely disagree and insist that the weather is cold. This is because her understanding of hot weather depends on her own environment, while that of the Canadians also depend on their environment. In other words, the context in which they understand hot weather depends on their environment. A dispute may arise on whether it is true or false that the weather is hot. However, an understanding that the use of hot weather is context dependent and are both legitimate will end the seeming dispute. Hence, one sense of verbal dispute occurs when the disputants employ key terms that refer to different things in their idiolects, and both interpretations are legitimate in their respective domains.

The grounds for a mere verbal dispute are first, the disputants use the key term or terms in their respective language and do not realise this. This ground is premised on the assumption that the disputants are from different linguistic communities. The second ground is that the disputants may belong to the same linguistic community and use the same language, but a disagreement still ensue from a difference in context. Third, the disputants all make true assertions, but in their respective idiolect and context.[9]

5. Semanticism

According to Semanticism, most disputes in metaphysics on physical-object ontology are not a verbal disputes where the disagreement is context-dependent. In this case, the dispute is in the first sense of verbal disputes; like that between the American and the Briton. A verbal dispute in the sense in which Semanticism uses it has some characteristics peculiar to it. The first characteristic is that the assumed correct answer posed by each disputant does not depend on facts about the world, but depends on the meaning of the words used in the dispute. In other words, there is no evidence that the dispute is on facts, there is only evidence that it is about words. The disputants disagree more on the appropriate words to describe their reality, rather than describing the reality in the world.[10]

For example, if there is a dispute over a car, the disputants are more concerned about the best way to talk about the car, than disagree about the car itself. Simply put, in a dispute over a car, the disputants all agree that a car is a vehicle, a car uses at least four wheels, and a car has an engine and so

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[6] Chalmers, David. "Verbal Disputes." *Philosophical Review.* 120:4 (2011), 515.

[7] Manley, David. "Introduction: A Guided Tour of Metametaphysics." *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology.* Eds. David Chalmers and Ryan Wasserman. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009. 8.

[8] Manley, David. "Introduction: A Guided Tour of Metametaphysics.", 8.

[9] Manley, David. "Introduction: A Guided Tour of Metametaphysics." 8-12.

[10] Manley, David. "Introduction: A Guided Tour of Metametaphysics." 11-12.

on. There is hardly any substantive disagreement on what a car is. All the disputants have a fair agreement on what the term 'car' is.

A second characteristic is that when a disputant is asked how the truth of her claim can be known, the disputant employs her linguistic intuitions to justify her 'truth'.[11] For example, the disputant may argue that her truth in the dispute over a car can be understood by those who know the meaning of a particular language used to describe the act of a car in motion. In the case of endurantism and perdurantism, Semanticism will argue that to justify the commitment to temporal parts, a perdurantist appeal to some basic intuitions on the use of temporal parts. With these two characteristics Semanticism argues that a verbal dispute in ontology occurs when disputants who, although make the same claim, employ the use of different semantic preference or different linguistic communities arising from their preferred convictions.

One major proponent of Semanticism in metaphysics is Eli Hirsch. According to John Hawthorne, "… I focus on the version of superficialism presented by Eli Hirsch. His is the most developed and philosophically sensitive version of that approach."[12] Hirsch's arguments for Semanticism brings the arguments for the position that most metaphysical disputes are mere verbal disputes under one neat umbrella. Hence, I will focus more on his version of Semanticism.

According to Hirsch,

… a dispute in which, given the correct view of linguistic interpretation, each party will agree that the other party speaks the truth in its own language. This can be put more briefly by saying that in a verbal dispute each party ought to agree that the other party speak the truth in its own language.[13]

Let us consider this illustration for verbal arguments by Hirsch. Two linguistic communities have a dispute over whether a glass is a cup. The first linguistic community believes a glass is a cup, which is a drinking vessel made of glass, while the second linguistic community believes a glass is not a cup. Hirsch argues that ontological disputes on physical objects are of this nature. Each linguistic community is just talking pass the other, and there is no substantial dispute at stake. This is because each community only employs an alternative language for referring to the same thing, which is a cup.

If both linguistic communities can just use the word cup for a drinking vessel, the dispute will be non-existent. This is because either 'glass' or 'cup', the referent is a drinking vessel made of a glass. Hirsch argues that ontological disputes on physical-objects are of this nature; where the real object of dispute is not denied, but the problem is the words or key terms used in describing or referring to it. Using the problem of persistence as its flagship, Hirsch argues that most ontological disputes are of this nature.

6.   The problem of persistence in Metaphysics

The problem of persistence is the metaphysical problem of how objects persist through time, experience changes, yet do not lose their identity. In other words, the problem of persistence is the problem of how to explain and justify how sameness is preserved in an object as it persists through time, especially after undergoing various changes. The problem of persistence makes a distinction between two identities of an object – numeric identity and diachronic identity. The identity of an object at a particular time location is the numeric identity of that object. While the identity of the object with itself at another time location is the diachronic identity.[14]

The numeric identity of the basket of banana is the identity of the basket of banana at time T_1, at time T_2 and at time T_3. While the diachronic identity of the basket of banana is the relationship it has with itself at time T_1, with time T_2 and with time T_3. In other words, the diachronic identity of an object is the identity holding between an object at a particular time location and that same object at another time location. The problem of persistence in metaphysics is concerned with how to explain the diachronic identity of an object, and the relationship it has with its numeric identity.

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[11] Manley David. "Introduction: A Guided Tour of Metametaphysics." 12-13.

[12] Hawthorne, John. "Superficialism in Ontology." *New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology.* Eds. David Chalmers and Ryan Wasserman. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009. 214.

[13] Hirsch, Eli. "Ontology and Alternative Languages." 239.

[14] Lewis, David. *On the Plurality of Worlds.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986. 204.

The problem of persistence presupposes that the numeric identity of an object is simple and unproblematic. Hence, the problem of persistence does not consider the numeric identity of an object problematic. Persistence assumes that at each point in time, an object is identical with itself and this is not controversial. However, attempt to explain the diachronic identity of objects creates or raises problems. The numeric identity of an object establishes that an object is identical with itself and this does not raise problems for the discourse on persistence. It is accepted as given by theories of persistence that the numeric identity of an object raises no problem.

The problem of persistence, given the example of the bunch of banana, is how to justify the acknowledged sameness of this bunch of bananas at time location T_1, time location T_2, and time location T_3, within a metaphysical framework. A bunch of bananas at different time locations has incompatible properties. At T_1 it is green, at T_2 it is yellow, and at T_3 it is black; yet it is assumed it is still the same bunch of banana that persists from time location T_1 to time location T_3. The problem of persistence is how it can be explained, within a metaphysical framework, that the bunch of banana persists through time T_1 to time T_3.

There are two major theories that respond to the problem of persistence within a metaphysical framework. They are endurantism and perdurantism. Endurantism argue that objects persist wholly from one time location to another. Thus, the same bunch of bananas at T_1 is also the same as T_2 and T_3. While perdurantism argue that objects persist as temporal slices from one time location to another.[15] The bunch of bananas is identical to itself, but the bunch of bananas at T_1 is not the same as what it is at T_2 or T_3 or any other time.

7. Semanticism on the problem of persistence

Semanticism, characterised the dispute on the problem of persistence as a debate between endurantism and perdurantism on whether persistence is three-dimensional or four-dimensional. That is, the ontological dispute between endurantism and perdurantism is reducible to whether objects have temporal parts or not; endurantists deny this, while perdurantism affirms it. While endurantism argues that persistence is three-dimensional, perdurantism argues that persistence is four-dimensional.[16] Both the endurantist and the perdurantist insist the disagreement between them is substantive and not verbal.

According to Semanticism, there is no substantive dispute between endurantism and perdurantism. The dispute is a mere verbal dispute, because the assumed correct answer posed by each disputant does not depend on facts about the world, but depends on the meaning of the words used in the dispute. According to Hirsch, a major advocate of Semanticism, the disputants use different language to make the same claim and they are ignorant of this. Hirsch characterised it thus:

In my view, an issue in ontology (or elsewhere) is "merely verbal" in the sense of reducing to a linguistic choice only if the following condition is satisfied: Each side can plausibly interpret the other side as speaking a language in which the latter's asserted sentences are true.[17]

Hence, in the language of perdurantism the claim that temporal parts exist is true, while in the language of endurantism the claim that temporal parts exist is false. Hence, it is not the case that temporal parts exist in objective reality, but it is a case of linguistic choice. The striking feature in this verbal dispute is that both disputants make right assertions in their respective languages. Hence, in this ontological dispute on the problem of persistence, the dispute is verbal and the arguments for each side of the dispute are reducible to linguistic choice. Hirsch thus argues that:

We can, if we wish, think of X as forming its own linguistic community. If side X is perdurantism then X's language is the language that would belong to an imagined linguistic community typical members of which talk like perdurantists, i.e., they assert the sentences that perdurantists assert and endurantists reject.[18]

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[15] Donnelly, Maureen. "Endurantism and Perdurantist Accounts of Persistence." *Philosophical Studies* 154.1 (2011): 27-51.
[16] Hirsch, Eli. "Ontology and Alternative Languages." 233.
[17] Hirsch, Eli. "Ontology and Alternative Languages." 231.
[18] Hirsch, Eli. "Ontology and Alternative languages." 239.

In other words, the preferred language of perdurantism favours the term temporal parts in characterising persistence, while that of endurantism rejects it. Although, it is possible that both disputants in a debate make wrong assertions and still have a mere verbal dispute, this is not the case with the debate on the problem of persistence in ontology.[19] In this case, it is a verbal dispute, and the assertions of the disputants are both right, even though they are not aware of this. Hence, the first feature of the verbal dispute that plagues the problem of persistence and consequently many ontological disputes is that assertions of the disputants are both correct assertions.

The implication is that both endurantists and perdurantists characterise exactly the same thing, but in different languages. Thus, there is no substantial dispute between endurantists and perdurantists. This is why Eve Kitsik argues that, "The parties in an ontological dispute should see each other as just speaking different, course-grainedly intertranslatable languages and being in no substantive disagreement."[20] A necessary tool in resolving the seeming dispute is to apply the presumption that the correct use of language is that which appeals more to the sense of the people who speak the language. Moreover, the use of language should not be awkward, and should be as reasonable as possible.[21] According to Hirsch, the language of endurantism is not awkward, and is more reasonable than that of perdurantism. Hence, while both endurantism and perdurantism are involved in a verbal dispute, perdurantism is guiltier of a verbal mistake. Hirsch argues thus,

An analogous point evidently holds for those who "talk like endurantists." Their language, as indicated by charity to use, is E-English. Of course, the people in our own community talk like endurantists. Plain English, therefore, is E-English. Insofar as both endurantists and perdurantists claim to be speaking plain English, the endurantists are right. Perdurantists are making a verbal mistake. They have somehow managed to philosophize their way out of the communal language.[22]

In other words, there is no factual disagreement on persistence, thus, there is no problem of persistence. The only problem is of a linguistic nature. Each disputant believes her own language is better than the others is. The only dispute is on who uses a better language to describe persistence. According to Hirsch, the best representation is that of endurantism, because it satisfies the conditions for linguistic interpretation and charity of use.[23] Hence, the verbal (not factual) error is on the part of perdurantism. Therefore, endurantism is correct in their description of persistence of objects. Simply put, both perdurantism and endurantism will realise that ordinary language can say all what both theories say on persistence. Perdurantism especially will realise that their language of choice for persistence cannot be right and accepted in ordinary language; hence should adopt ordinary language and the easy answer to the question of persistence.[24] Hirsch argues thus,

Why, then, should these perdurantists knock themselves out trying to come up with fancy arguments that might allow them to persevere in speaking their specialized language of P-English? Better quickly to jump quickly to the "all is said and done" stage by reverting to endurantism and speaking to plain English (=E-English).[25]

8. In response to Semanticism

The first problem with the position of Semanticism on metaphysical disputes is that the characterisation of metaphysics by Semanticism is inadequate. Proponents of Semanticism, such as Eli Hirsch, argue that disputants in a metaphysical dispute actually agree on how the world is or the fundamental facts of reality. There is no genuine disagreement over the state of the reality at the centre of their dispute.[26] There is no evidence that disputants in a metaphysical dispute always agree on the fundamental facts of reality. Consider a dispute between an eternalist and presentist on the nature of time, both disputants will agree that time is real and both disputants will agree that time has at least three dimensions; the past, the present and the future. However, they will disagree on which of

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[19] Hirsch, Eli. "Ontology and Alternative languages." 238.
[20] Kitsik, Eve. "Trees and Tables Versus Crackpot Ontology: Jury still Out." *Studia Philosophica Estonica* 5:1, 2012, 11.
[21] Hirsch, Eli. "Ontology and Alternative Languages."40.
[22] Hirsch, Eli. "Ontology and Alternative Languages" 240-241.
[23] Hirsch, Eli. "Ontology and Alternative Languages" 238-244.
[24] Hirsh, Eli. "Ontology and Alternative Languages." 241
[25] Hirsch, Eli. "Ontology and Alternative Languages" 241
[26] Manley, David. "Introduction: A Guided Tour of Metametaphysics." 12.

the dimensions of time is more significant. While the eternalist will argue that all dimensions of time have the same ontological significance, the presentist will argue that the present is more ontologically significant than the others.[27] Hence, that disputants in a metaphysical dispute agree on most fundamental facts, in some cases, does not mean they agree on all fundamental facts in the dispute.

A second challenge with Semanticism is that it over assumes that speaking the same language can resolve the disagreement in most metaphysical disputes. First, even glaring verbal disputes can turn into a substantial dispute. Consider the example of a context dependent verbal disagreement between a Canadian and Nigerian used earlier. After explaining to the Canadian and the Nigerian that the context in which they use hot differs, the Nigerian may insist that it is wrong to call such weather hot irrespective of clime and context, while the Canadian may insist that it is proper to call it hot regardless of clime and context. In this case, the dispute is no longer a verbal disagreement, but now a substantive disagreement.

The implication of this is that it is not the case that when a dispute is over words and not facts, then it is definitely a pseudo-argument. It is possible to have a genuine dispute, yet it is over words. For example, there can be a dispute over the appropriate linguistic choice, as seen in the examples of the American and Briton over football, and that of the Canadian and Nigerian over the weather. In other words, within the same context and the same idiolect, there can be a disagreement over the correct usage of a word, phrase or key term. In this case, it is a factual disagreement and not a verbal disagreement. Hence, although linguistic choice may suggest a non-substantive dispute, it may be necessary for a substantive dispute. Furthermore, this shows that verbal disputes do not always only depend on linguistic choice but also the disputants.

A third challenge with Semanticism, which is an off shoot of this second challenge is that it is almost impossible to reconcile linguistic choice the way proponents of Semanticism assume. For example, Hirsch argues that each disputant believes her own language is better than the others is. The only dispute is on who uses a better language to describe persistence. According to Hirsch, the best representation is that of endurantism, because it satisfies the conditions for linguistic interpretation and charity of use. The problem with this claim is that there is no single linguistic interpretation as argued by Hirsch. There is no evidence that such charity of use that can resolve linguistic choice exists.

Let us assume for the purpose of argument that it is true that the dispute between endurantism and perdurantism is a mere verbal dispute, there is no single linguistic interpretation or charity of use that justifies Hirsch's position that the linguistic choice of endurantism is better than that of perdurantism. Hence, in the dispute between the American and the Briton over football, there is no linguistic interpretation that can conclusively determine that the linguistic choice of one disputant is better than the other. Simply put, apart from choice, there is nothing to suggest the American's choice of what to call football is better than the Briton's choice.

A fourth challenge with Semanticism is that it assumes most disputes on physical objects ontology are mere verbal disputes without engaging in first order metaphysics. If proponents of Semanticism engage the problem of persistence, they will realise that the dispute is over and above linguistic choice. In the dispute on persistence of physical objects, for example, endurantists and perdurantists agree that matter exist, they agree that matter persists, but disagree on whether matter persists as a single object or as time slices. Engaging the arguments of both disputants will reveal that there is a difference between a single persisting object and an object as time slices. How do you inter-translate single physical object as time slices? However, Semanticism concentrate more on the choice of words than what the words represent. Engaging more in first order metaphysics will reveal that there is more than linguistic choice in a dispute such as the problem of persistence.

Moreover, the fact that metaphysics seeks to answer questions on objective reality, does not imply that its arguments must always focus on fundamental facts about the world. It is possible for a theory to reflect fundamental facts about the world through the pragmatic value of that theory. For example, the strengths of the temporal part thesis of perdurantism is that it has some pragmatic value that endurantism does not have.[28] Hence, answering questions on objective reality can take different

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[27] Noonan, Harold. "Presentism and Eternalism." *Erkenntnis.* 78.1 (2003). 219. 219-227.
[28] See Lewis, David. *On the Plurality of Worlds.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986. Sider, Theodore. *Four Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

dimensions. As long as arguments show how a particular dimension answers questions on objective reality, the next task is to examine the values and problems with the answer, and not be fixated on linguistic choice.

9.   Conclusion

This paper engaged the arguments of Semanticism on physical object ontology, using the problem of persistence as its flagship. The paper briefly defined metaphysics in order to identify some characteristics of metaphysics, especially the features that make metaphysics susceptible to attacks such as Semanticism. The paper then briefly outlined the background of anti-metaphysical positions and its evolvement to deflationary attitudes. The paper argued that one of the most disturbing deflationary attitude to metaphysics is Semanticism that argues that most disputes in metaphysics are mere verbal disputes.

Semanticism gives three major arguments to show that the problem of persistence, and consequently other metaphysical disputes on physical-objects ontology. First that the dispute on persistence within a metaphysical framework agree on all facts; hence there is no factual disagreement, but a mere dispute over linguistic choice. Second, that ordinary language and common sense ontology suffices in resolving the verbal dispute on persistence. Third, the evidence that the dispute on persistence in ontology is a mere verbal dispute is that the language of endurantism can convey the thesis of perdurantism, and the language of perdurantism can convey the thesis of endurantism. Hence, the problem of persistence, and consequently most disputes on physical-object ontology, are not substantive metaphysical disputes.

This paper engaged these arguments and found that the claim that the dispute between endurantism and perdurantism is verbal is at best erroneous. First, because even if an argument is verbal, does not mean there cannot be a substantive dispute embedded in it. Second, there is no evidence that the sort of ordinary language Semanticism advocates for actually exists. Third, there is no evidence that the linguistic choice which Hirsch proposes for the problem of persistence is preferable to the language of perdurantism, even if the dispute is a mere verbal dispute. Four, Semanticism did not properly engage in first order metaphysics on the problem of persistence. Hence, did not realise that endurantism and perdurantism disagree on how objects persist and not just on how to describe it. The paper concludes that the position of Semanticism on metaphysics is unacceptable.

The paper opens a new discourse on the use of alternative language argument in advancing a substantive metaphysical position. This is expected to open up new discourse on Semanticism and advance a broader perspective in addressing the importance of metaphysics in philosophy.

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