Eli Hirsch
Quantifier Variance and Realism: Essays in Metaontology.
Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011.
xvi + 261 pages
$74.00 (cloth ISBN 978–0–19–973211–1)

Eli Hirsch's *Quantifier Variance and Realism* is perhaps the most thorough example of a recent trend in metaphysics that steers away from a traditional substantive view while veering towards neo-Carnapian deflationism. Though this monograph contains interesting and valuable discussions on many topics within metametaphysics and metaontology, two main arguments are prominent. First, Hirsch details the thesis of 'quantifier variance' (QV), a position that argues that many (though not necessarily all) of our metaphysical disputes are, in fact, 'merely verbal'; and, secondly, proposes a return to ordinary language metaphysics, favouring those entities in our metaphysical account of the world that normal speakers of a language would generally assent to, under a suitable presumption of charity.

Quantifier Variance is a collection of previously published papers, which, whilst each connects in some way to the larger themes outlined above, cover a large amount of ground. As such, with space restrictions, this review will focus on the above two main themes. These overall thematic strands come together across many of the essays, the main bulk of which show a clear line of thought in Hirsch's metaontology since 1997 (all bar one essay originates after 1997), and thus the most instructive method of handling this piece is through a more holistic treatment of the overall arguments, as each is extended and supported within many different articles present in this collection.

First, however, these metaontological themes need to be distinguished from related but distinct questions about whether there are any *psychological* constraints to the ontologies developed by humans. Hirsch covers these issues in 'A Sense of Unity' and 'Basic Objects: A Reply to Xu.' We can leave such questions aside for the moment insofar as clearly, Hirsch's main aim is to provide answers to the question of the *metaphysically* possible ontological languages, not the *psychologically* possible ontological languages.

The theory, and its support, of 'quantifier variance' (QV) is clearly the most pressing issue for Hirsch (the collection after all takes its name from the essay containing the theory's most explicit exposition). QV bears strong connections to the thesis of 'conceptual relativism' as defended by Putnam (*The Many Faces of Realism*, Open Court 1987; *Realism with a Human Face*, Harvard UP 1990; *Ethics Without Ontology*, Harvard UP 2004). Hirsch's QV, much like conceptual relativism, starts from the claim that the "quantificational apparatus in our language and thought – such expressions as 'thing', 'object, 'something', '(there) exists' – has a certain variability or plasticity" (68). This is not, of course, just any kind of phonetic variability such that we could have chosen the term "object" to be the term we use for entities of the sort that we normally describe as "table." Rather, there is no necessity to using such quantificational terms in a certain way, with a certain meaning, instead of some alternative way, as "the world can be correctly described using a variety of concepts of 'the existence of something'" (68). Hirsch, as Carnap and Putnam before, uses mereological disputes as his favoured example to illustrate this.

A disagreement between a mereologist and an anti-mereologist will thus only concern the particular interpretations of the existential quantifier that they have chosen to use. Nothing more substantive is at issue than which interpretation we should adopt.

This, Hirsch maintains, is "simply a corollary of Urmson's dictum" (xii), that is to say, the claim that truth-conditionally equivalent languages are of equal metaphysical merit. The disputants in a metaphysical argument only differ over which of the available truth-conditionally equivalent ontological languages they are speaking – "the doctrine says that there is no uniquely best ontological language with which to describe the world" (xii); the quantifiers, and related expressions, are variable. Hirsch continues by distinguishing this claim, QV, from two theses that might stem from it: 1) "that ordinary language is a perfectly good ontological language", and 2) "that many (perhaps not all) ontological disputes are merely verbal" (xiii). I shall discuss both these claims. Let us consider the second claim first, as it is perhaps the more contentious.

It is worth noting that QV as it is stated above is most likely true *on occasion*. Even a staunch defender of the substantivity of metaphysics should accept that it is in principle possible, on some occasion, that we debate into a stalemate wherein we have two equally good descriptions of the structure of reality. The extra claim within thesis 2 is that the reason for this stalemate is not some epistemological or linguistic failure on our part, but is because there is no fact of the matter, no uniquely best description available. For the defender of substantive metaphysics, two as-far-as-we-know truth-conditionally equivalent languages *are* importantly different in that only one of them will accurately describe reality, and it is a failure of our intellect that limits us from knowing which that language is. There is thus still something substantive at stake; it is this that Hirsch wishes to deny – "nothing is substantively at stake in these [metaphysical and ontological] questions beyond the correct use of language" (144). Of course, 'the correct use of language' is not going to be something that many metaphysicians want to limit their inquiries to.

So why do we lack substantivity in metaphysical debates? Central to this argument is Hirsch's principle of charity, wherein, everything else being equal (we do not think the speaker is deliberately lying, etc.), we should interpret a speaker's statements in such a way that they are true in that language (this idea is repeated especially within chapters 9, 10, and 12). Thus the mereologist speaks one language, the anti-mereologist another, and each should charitably take the other to be correct in their own ontological language, with its own interpretation of the quantifier. What it is for something to be a 'correct' ontological statement within a language is merely that normal speakers of that language would understand the quantifier typically in that way. Non-verbal disputes, of which Hirsch accepts that there could still be a priori and empirical examples, is often shown by "consideration of charity to retraction" (152), wherein a person would retract a certain claim after being shown that they are making a conceptual or empirical mistake, "in the sense that she is wrong even in 'her own idiolect'" (152).

This is very Carnapian in spirit. The claim amounts to the idea that we can only be substantively wrong *within* our own idiolect or language, as the terms that would make us false only have their meaning within that language. Ontological disputes are rendered 'merely verbal', since there is no way to discuss the meaning of the quantifier *independent* of any particular language. One difference that Hirsch wishes to draw with Carnap (chapter 12), however, is that

Hirsch maintains that he is a realist. Hirsch's realism derives from his insistence that one's choice of language, and therefore quantifier, does not bring the object into existence. The world, and the objects in it, exist; what we do not have is a privileged language to describe it. Language for Hirsch therefore does not decide in any way what objects are in the world, it does not create or destroy entities by our language choices, and language choice does not alter reality.

The self-ascription of 'realism' by Hirsch is one aspect that could require additional discussion, especially given recent interest in the notion of 'realism' in the metametaphysical and metaontological literature (for example, many contributions to Chalmers, Manley, and Wasserman's *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, Oxford UP 2009 take discussions of 'realism' as their main topic). Those predisposed to a more substantive form of metaphysics may balk slightly at a position such as QV, with its strong deflationism of metaphysical debate, being termed 'realist'. Certainly Hirsch is no idealist, but we might ask whether a denial of idealism leads to a *realist* thesis. Devitt, for example, notably holds that the existence of an unstructured 'stuff-world' is only an idle addition to idealism (*Realism and Truth*, Blackwell 1991). If we are sympathetic to this view, as I think we should be, more would be needed to substantiate Hirsch's claim to being a realist. This could be taken only as a semantic point, and if so, nothing rides on it, as anyone is free to claim any title they wish. However, something weightier might ride on this ascription if we take realism to involve exactly those sorts of substantive claims Hirsch's QV denies – i.e., truth claims about reality. This point is one area where we might wish for more clarity from Hirsch. QV may not entail linguistic idealism (say, of the sort normally ascribed to Goodman), but it is not clear that this denial of idealism leads it to being a realist position in and of itself.

This issue aside, QV clearly posits a significant problem for those who wish to support a traditional substantive account of metaphysical disputes. One issue that we might have relates to the principle of charity. Under a posited language of metaphysics, such as Sider's Ontologese (*Writing the Book of the World*, Oxford UP 2011), we might think that the charity principle forces us to accept their meta-semantical insistence that the 'correct' meanings in Ontologese do 'carve reality at its joints'. Metaphysics is thus substantive so long as it is carried out in Ontologese. Hirsch does respond to Sider, most notably by considering whether the metaphysicians in the 'ontology room' are not just talking different versions of Ontologese, and his correct point that we cannot get to a language with the features of Ontologese merely by insisting that we are talking Ontologese (212–218). However, it is not clear that Ontologese is given the same principle of charity granted to other languages. The notion of Ontologese is relatively underdeveloped, and therefore it is too much to expect Hirsch to respond to such ideas conclusively here, but it is an area that this book leaves open to further elaboration and detail. Granted that Ontologese is one of the more promising routes available to the supporter of substantive metaphysics, and the area that Hirsch takes to be the major response line available to the supporter of substantive metaphysics, it may be a discussion that Hirsch returns to in future work.

Hirsch, though, wants to push farther against the putative supporter of revisionist metaphysics. For Hirsch, the revisionist metaphysician can only possibly be doing one of two things: either they are speaking plain English, and hence are speaking falsely, or, from the arguments above, their disputes are merely verbal, with each holding to the trivial truths of their

own ontological language. Thus the metaphysician must, to maintain some value to their discussion, accept the first option; therefore for Hirsch a return to ordinary language is required (chapters 6, 7, 9, and 10). Applying the principle of charity to the majority of speakers in a community, this requires that the ontology we accept should be one that finds common assent among English speakers. The motivation for this argument comes from Hirsch's analysis of metaphysicians as often trying to correct ordinary language. However, given recent claims to the effect that metaphysics and the language we use to express it are distinct (most notably Heil's discussion of 'Picture Theory'), on the one hand, and the move to Ontologese (a language only used in the 'Ontology Room') on the other, it is not clear that this analysis is right – that metaphysicians are really setting out to correct ordinary language. This does still leave the need to find a satisfying way to avoid the negative consequences of the second disjunct – the obvious route to block the move to ordinary language ontology is to respond to the thesis of quantifier variance, but this is itself no easy task.

Eli Hirsch's 'Quantifier Variance' thesis poses serious problems for those who wish to maintain a substantive metaphysics. Ontologese would appear to be a promising area of research to this end, but it requires more research before it can solve the problems that Hirsch raises here.

J. T. M. Miller
University of Durham