

The Argument from Charity Against Revisionary Ontology

Daniel Howard-Snyder

Revisionary ontologists are making a comeback. Quasi-nihilists, like Peter van Inwagen and Trenton Merricks, insist that the only composite objects that exist are living things. Unrestricted universalists, like W.V.O. Quine, David Lewis, Mark Heller, and Hudson Hudson, insist that any collection of objects composes something, no matter how scattered over time and space they may be. And there are more besides.¹ The result, says Eli Hirsch, is that many commonsense judgments about the existence or identity of highly visible physical objects are a priori necessarily false. In a “last ditch effort” to bring revisionary ontologists back to their senses, Hirsch marshalls what he calls *the Argument from Charity*.² We can be sure that there are tables and chairs and that there are no fusions of Plato’s nose and the Eiffel Tower, says Hirsch, because these commonsense platitudes are a logical consequence of the well-known principle of interpretive charity applied to natural languages, like English. In what follows, I assess the Argument from Charity. My conclusion is that if this is the best we can do to save revisionary ontologists, they are surely lost forever.

I. Hirsch’s Argument from Charity

Let ‘O’ be some sentence that typical fluent speakers of the English language assert.

Hirsch puts the Argument from Charity somewhat formally like this:

1. Typical fluent speakers of the [English] language assert (or assent to) the sentence ‘O’.

¹ Bibliostuff....

² Eli Hirsch, “....,” *Philosophical Topics*, forthcoming.

2. Therefore, there is the charitable presumption that, on the correct interpretation of ‘O’, speakers have good reason to assert ‘O’, so that ‘O’ is not a priori necessarily false.
3. There is nothing to defeat this presumption.
4. Therefore, ‘O’ is not a priori necessarily false.
5. Therefore, it’s possible that O.
6. [Therefore, it’s actually the case that O.]

What should we make of this argument? I will not dwell on the last two inferences.

Rather, I will assume with Hirsch that, for any revisionary ontology, if it is true, then it is necessarily true and every competitor is necessarily false; furthermore, I will assume with Hirsch that, if O is impossible, then ‘O’ is a priori necessarily false.³ Finally, I will not question the widely accepted principle of interpretive charity (PC) on which Hirsch relies. Rather, my focus shall be premises 2 and 3.

II. Premise 2 and the Principle of Charity

I begin with premise 2. Premise 2 is an implicit conjunction. The first conjunct is

- 2a. There is the charitable presumption that, on the correct interpretation of ‘O’, speakers have good reason to assert ‘O’.

The second conjunct is

- 2b. If speakers have good reason to assert ‘O’, then ‘O’ is not a priori necessarily false.

Given 1, 2a and 2b, it follows that

- 2.5. There is a charitable presumption that, on the correct interpretation of ‘O’, ‘O’ is not a priori necessarily false,

from which 4 follows, given 3. But why should we believe premise 2, particularly its second conjunct, 2b? It’s hardly obviously true; indeed, it’s a virtual platitude in the

³ I can’t see why the impossibility of a state of affairs entails that there is a sentence in the English language that typical fluent speakers of the language assert, which both expresses that impossibility and which is

discipline that we can have “good reason”—even in a “robust sense” (cf. 23n27)—to believe a proposition that is a priori necessarily false. So what reason does Hirsch offer us to deny this platitude?

Hirsch’s official reason is eleven words long: “2 comes out of the widely accepted principle of interpretive charity” (10). One might have expected a bit more in the way of a reason to reject a platitude, but length is not always the virtue it’s cracked up to be. So let’s have a closer look at this short, pithy reason. Hirsch characterizes the widely accepted principle of interpretive charity like this:

PC. If we have two candidate interpretations for a set of sentences that fluent speakers of a language would typically be prepared to assert (assent to), then, if one of these interpretations implies that the speakers have good reason to assert these sentences, and the other interpretation implies that they do not, then there is a presumption in favor of the first interpretation (3-4).

So far, so good. Unfortunately, while 2a obviously comes out of PC, 2b obviously does not. PC vouchsafes a presumption in favor of English speakers having a good reason to assert ‘O’. It does not vouchsafe a presumption in favor of the good reason implying that the proposition expressed by ‘O’ is not a priori necessarily false. So, 2 does not come out of PC; at any rate, 2 does not come out of PC *by itself*.

Does 2 come out of PC in conjunction with some other well-known fact? One will look in vain to find this strategy explicitly developed by Hirsch, although one might be tempted to think that the following words are a gesture in that direction: “if revisionists interpret the ontological sentences of common sense as a priori necessarily false then, assuming there are available other interpretations, this does prima facie violate the principle of charity, since people are not normally thought to have good reason to assert

known or knowable a priori to be necessarily false. Presumably Hirsch is just being a bit quick here. And, presumably, there is something in the neighborhood that would suit Hirsch’s purposes.

what is a priori necessarily false” (5). These words might suggest that PC in conjunction with the premise that people are not normally thought to have good reason to assert what is a priori necessarily false will get us 2, and hence 2b. How might we unpack this suggestion? So far as I can see, it would go like this: From 1 and PC, we have

2a. There is the charitable presumption that, on the correct interpretation of ‘O’, speakers have good reason to assert ‘O’.

Now, add

2c. “People are not normally thought to have good reason to assert what is a priori necessarily false.”

From 2a and 2c it follows that

2b. If speakers have good reason to assert ‘O’, then ‘O’ is not a priori necessarily false.

Unfortunately, 2b obviously does not follow from 2a and 2c. Moreover, 2c itself is either false or true but irrelevant, depending on whether it’s philosophers or ordinary folk of whom Hirsch is claiming that they do not typically think people have good reason to assert what is a priori necessarily false.

I suspect that Hirsch has misled us. The Argument from Charity, properly constructed, does *not* contain premise 2, with its second conjunct, 2b. Moreover, the argument does not rely *solely* on the widely accepted principle of interpretive charity that Hirsch repeatedly mentions, the principle enunciated by the likes of Wilson, Quine, Davidson, and Lewis, i.e. PC. The truth of the matter is that, in addition to PC, Hirsch relies on *another* principle of interpretive charity (4-5), one not nearly as well-known as PC, namely this one:

HPC. If we have two candidate interpretations for a set of sentences that fluent speakers of a language would typically be prepared to assert (assent to), and both of these interpretations imply that the speakers have good reason to assert these

sentences, then, if one of these interpretations implies *that all those sentences are not a priori necessarily false*, and the other interpretation implies *that all those sentences are a priori necessarily false*, then there is a presumption in favor of the first interpretation.

HPC is exactly what Hirsch needs to get from 2a to 2.5. Consequently, the portion of the Argument from Charity on which I am focusing is more accurately expressed as follows:

1. Typical fluent speakers of the language assert (or assent to) the sentence 'O'.
- 2a. Therefore, there is the charitable presumption that, on the correct interpretation of 'O', speakers have good reason to assert 'O'. (from 1 and PC)
- 2.5. Therefore, there is a charitable presumption that, on the correct interpretation of 'O', 'O' is not a priori necessarily false. (from 2a and HPC)
3. There is nothing to defeat this [second] presumption.
4. Therefore, 'O' is not a priori necessarily false.

This, I submit, is not merely a slightly different argument from the one Hirsch explicitly presents. It is *much* better. It avoids the problematic 2b, and it makes it explicit that the relevant presumption referred to in premise 3 is not the presumption referred to by PC but rather the one referred to by HPC. Moreover, by my lights, it achieves what Hirsch intended to achieve: it makes everything hang on premise 3.

III. Premise 3 and Hirsch's Principle of Charity

What should we make of premise 3? Well, let's begin with the question of what it would take to defeat the presumption in question. And let's consider, first of all, the question of the sorts of circumstances in which a charitable interpreter might (and sometimes should) say that, although the speakers have good reason to assert a certain sentence, that sentence is *empirically false*.

Fortunately, we need not look far. Friends of the original PC agree that mistakes based on limited sensory data sometimes should lead the charitable interpreter to ascribe such mistakes to speakers. Suppose the natives of some tribe assert (the tribal equivalent of) ‘The earth is flat’. The charitable interpreter will, in accordance with PC, charitably presume that they have good reason to assert ‘The earth is flat’, but she will not interpret that sentence as true in the tribal language. For the charitable interpreter has a perfectly good explanation as to why they assert ‘The earth is flat’, an explanation that is at home with their having a good reason to assert it. They have limited sensory data; this limitation quite reasonably leads them to assert ‘The earth is flat’. This explanation defeats the presumption in favor of interpreting ‘The earth is flat’ as true in the tribal language, even though it allows that they have good reason to assert it.

The sort of scenario imagined here could conceivably occur on a large scale, for vast sets of sentences, e.g. the sentences of what pass for a tribe’s “science,” its tribal astronomy, chemistry, physics, biology, and so on. The charitable interpreter will not be led to interpret the scientific set of sentences as true. Why? Because there is a perfectly good explanation why the tribesfolk assert the sentences comprising their scientific set, an explanation that is at home with their having a good reason to assert them, a reason rooted in limited sensory data.

With these remarks about defeat in mind, consider the following question: if mistakes based on limited sensory data should sometimes lead the charitable interpreter to ascribe mistakes to speakers, why shouldn’t the same hold for mistakes based on limited metaphysical data? Typical speakers of English either lack the capacity or (more likely, and less snobbishly) the time to acquaint themselves with the ontological options

and their evaluations that professional ontologists are acquainted with. Thus, typical English speakers lack the data that revisionists have available to them. On the face of it, there is no reason to think that English speakers's limited metaphysical data should not play the same role in the charitable interpreter's activities as the limited sensory data of the tribesfolk. There is this difference, of course. Whereas in the case of sentences like 'The earth is flat', which are not interpreted as true in the language, the revisionary ontologist will interpret everyday ontological sentences as *a priori necessarily false*. But this is exactly what we should expect. After all, this difference is wholly a consequence of Hirsch's assumption (mentioned at the outset) that for any revisionary ontology, if it is true, then it is necessarily true and every competitor is necessarily false. If it were rejected, then the two cases would be more closely analogous. Even with Hirsch's assumption in place, however, revisionists can plausibly avail themselves of the point that English speakers have good reason to assert 'O' due to limited metaphysical data even though 'O' is a priori necessarily false, in just the same way that the tribesfolk have good reason to assert 'The earth is flat' due to their limited sensory data even though the 'The earth is flat' is false.

Hirsch will reject the analogy. In the case of the tribesfolk, the charitable interpreter imputed to them a good reason to assert 'The earth is flat'. By contrast, Hirsch will say, revisionary ontologists "imply that typical speakers of the [English] language make many a priori false ontological judgments for no good reason" (21). But Hirsch is not trying hard enough here. Revisionists have amply plausible explanations for why English speakers have good reason to assert sentences that presuppose commitments to commonsense ontology. For example, English speakers are the evolutionary upshot of

their distant pre-hominoid predecessors, for whom environmental factors and random genetic variation selected successors whose genotype displayed a proclivity toward communicating quickly and efficiently. Would it be all that surprising, then, if evolution selected for the use of *short* nouns characteristic of commonsense ontology rather than the comparatively *long* noun-clauses characteristic of revisionary ontologies? Would it be all that surprising, then, if evolution selected for an interest in medium-sized dry goods, rather than the rest that populate the (four-dimensionalist) universalist's world?

Commonsense ontology—which is what happens when evolution selects against proto-revisionists—has dominated the species. Now, with much more leisure time available to a higher proportion of the human population, and with the vicissitudes of nature somewhat more at bay, the truth about ontology can be attained...or so the revisionists might say. This seems to be a very obvious and plausible explanation. No doubt there are others.

Hirsch says that “revisionists have no plausible way of explaining why people make the mistakes revisionists allege” (20). Picking on (quasi-) nihilists like Aristotle, van Inwagen, and Merricks, he writes:

According to (quasi-) nihilists...people mistakenly judge tables to be in front of them when there are no tables in front of them. Why would people makes a mistake like that? The illusion of depth that generates the whole revisionary project also generates the illusion that there is an answer to this question: People makes these mistakes because it requires deep philosophical insight to avoid them. But what sense does this make? If there isn't an object of a certain sort in front of people why would they have to be as philosophically acute as Trenton Merricks to avoid the mistake of perceptually judging that such an object is there?

I suggest that the (quasi-) nihilist say that people would make a mistake like that because evolutionary pressures selected for natural languages that wear commonsense ontology on their sleeves. Is it any wonder that Hirsch, along with the rest of us, should be bewitched by our language? As for Trenton Merricks's philosophical acuity, well,

fortunately, it does not prevent him from making mistaken perceptual judgments like the rest of us. Nature and custom, not to mention his family, won't let him get away with that. What sets him apart—*if* his revisionary ontology is correct—is either blind good luck or philosophical insight, and a fine education combined with oodles of leisure time. It doesn't take much ingenuity to come up with explanations for other revisionist ontologies.

For all I have argued, revisionary ontologies are deserving of the scorn Hirsch heaps upon them. It would be unwise, however, for any ontologist—even a commonsense ontologist like me—to mistake a true conclusion for a good argument.⁴

⁴ Acknowledgements...