

Two Defenses of Common-Sense Ontology

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ABSTRACT

In a series of publications, Eli Hirsch has presented a sustained defense of common-sense ontology. Hirsch's argument relies crucially on a meta-ontological position sometimes known as 'superficialism'. Hirsch's argument from superficialism to common-sense ontology is typically resisted on the grounds that superficialism is implausible. In this paper, I present an alternative argument for common-sense ontology, one that relies on (what I argue is) a much more plausible meta-ontological position, which I call 'constructivism'. Note well: I will not quite argue that constructivism is *true*; merely that it is significantly more plausible than superficialism, and consequently affords a safer route to common-sense ontology. Thus my main goal in the paper is not quite to *establish* common-sense ontology, nor for that matter to *refute* Hirsch's argument for it. My goal is, in a way, more expressive than argumentative: I wish to *articulate* a novel meta-ontological position, one that I take to be in no way obviously less plausible than already familiar positions, and to point out that the position probably leads to common-sense ontology. I open, in section 1, with a discussion of Hirsch's argument and the main objection to it. I then develop, in section 2, a sketch of the alternative meta-ontology I have in mind. I close, in section 3, with the argument that this alternative meta-ontology, too, leads to common-sense ontology.

1. *Hirsch's argument for common-sense ontology*

Ontology is the theory of what there is. Let *common-sense ontology* be any ontological theory whose verdicts about what there is do not diverge overmuch from the verdicts of common-sense.¹ Philosophers can be led to common-sense ontology in one of two ways: (i) by engaging in ontological inquiry and being led, possibly to their surprise, to verdicts akin to common-sense's, or (ii) by adopting a meta-ontological position that imposes *a priori* restrictions on how much an

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¹ Thus 'is a common-sense ontology' is a vague predicate. Nonetheless, there are uncontroversial cases of it. We may draw two distinctions regarding common-sense ontology. One is between *positively* common-sense and *negatively* common-sense ontology. Lack of common-sense ontological commitment to a certain type of entity can be interpreted either as a commitment to the lack of that entity or as silence on the question of that entity's existence. A positively common-sense ontology is one that resembles common-sense interpreted in the first way, a negatively common-sense ontology in the second way. Another distinction is between *explicit* and *implicit* common-sense ontology. Common-sense may have both explicit views on what there is and implicit commitments that are brought out by analysis of language or practice. (Indeed, its explicit and implicit commitments may well contradict each other.) An explicit common-sense ontology is one that does not diverge overmuch from the explicit verdicts of common-sense, an implicit common-sense ontology from its implicit verdicts.

ontological theory can (justifiably) diverge from common-sense. Call the former the *first-order route* to common-sense ontology and the latter the *second-order route*.²

Eli Hirsch (2002, 2005, 2007) has offered a sustained defense of common-sense ontology that takes the second-order route. The meta-ontological position that underwrites his second-order route to common-sense ontology is what we may call *superficialism* (following Hawthorne 2009, and Hirsch's own talk of 'shallow ontology'). According to superficialism, ontological disputes are typically more verbal than substantive. More precisely, for many types of entity X and pairs of ontological theories T1 and T2, such that T1 asserts 'there are Xs' and T2 asserts 'there are not Xs,' T1 and T2 mean something different by 'there are'; this is what Hirsch (2002) calls 'quantifier variance'.³ For example, when some ontologists assert 'there are tables' while some, rarer ontologists (e.g. van Inwagen 1990; Merricks 2001; Rosen and Dorr 2002; Sider ms) assert 'there are not tables,' their sentences simply express different propositions. Since probably they mean the same by 'table,' we can infer that they mean something different by 'there are'.⁴ Either way, the result is that there is no single proposition *p* such that T1 assents to *p* and T2 dissents from *p*.⁵

How does meta-ontological superficialism lead to common-sense ontology? This is not entirely clear in the literature: while there is a sense that superficialism does lead naturally to common-sense ontology, what the best way is to capture this sense in a specific reconstruction of the argument remains somewhat obscure; Hirsch's own writings do not appear to settle this issue. Here I am going to present one reconstruction of the argument, but cannot confidently say that it captures exactly what Hirsch has in mind, much less what all his interpreters do. While my hope is that it does capture Hirsch's original intent, I would be content if it provided one central way one could argue from Hirsch's superficialism to common-sense ontology even if it is not exactly identical to Hirsch's own way of arguing.

² With some trepidation, we may also call the former the *empirical route* and the latter the *transcendental route*.

³ There is a side issue here that I do not wish to address, concerning what an ontological dispute exactly is. One view might be that it is any dispute over the truth value of an existential statement. A more restrictive view will rule out certain existential statements as irrelevant to ontology proper – e.g. 'there are ghosts', or 'there are prime numbers greater than 100'.

⁴ That they probably do not mean 'table' differently, and that the ambiguity is located in 'there are', can be appreciated from the fact that if these two ontologists are talking past each other when considering the truth-value of 'there are tables', then they also do regarding many other sentences of the same form that do not include 'table' but do include 'there are', such 'there are chairs' (Sider 2009).

⁵ There are many ontological disputes not easily put in terms of disagreement about the truth of a statement of the form 'there are Xs'. But I take it that while putting the statement in this form may be difficult, it is always possible if the issue is genuinely ontological.

Given its emphasis on Davidson's principle of charity, I understand Hirsch's reasoning to proceed as follows. Once we adopt superficialism, the question of whether to assert 'there are Xs' or 'there are not Xs' becomes the question of who is right about what 'there are' really means.⁶ To see who is right on this, we engage in something like conceptual analysis for quantifier concepts, the concepts expressed by expressions such as 'there are,' 'there exist,' 'exists', etc. Importantly, this kind of enterprise is governed by a constraint often referred to as 'the principle of charity', which requires that we interpret people as by and large speaking the truth. Its present application is that we should interpret 'there are' in such a way that users of that expression end up by and large making *true* statements about what there is.

To appreciate the principle of charity, consider the following example, adapted from Davidson (1974, 18). Suppose someone holds up a cup and says 'look at this tiger – it is really a very nice-looking tiger'. Two interpretations are open to us consistent with this person's verbal behavior: (a) that she believes she holds a nice-looking tiger, and takes the word 'tiger' to express the concept of a tiger; (b) that she believes she holds a nice-looking cup, and takes the word 'tiger' to express the concept of a cup. The principle of charity requires us to choose (b), and it is motivated by the thought that any competent interpreter would indeed choose (b).⁷ Arguably, it is a constraint on the very competency of an interpreter that s/he choose (b) in a situation such as this.

Just as we are charitable to as many people as we can be when they use the word 'tiger,' we should be charitable to as many people as we can be when they use the expression 'there are'. As long as our interpretation of what they mean by 'there are' is consistent with their verbal behavior, we should interpret them so that they come out speaking the truth, and devise an account of the meaning of 'there are' in light of this interpretation. Since by far the greater number of users of 'there are' assent to 'there are tables' and dissent from 'there are not tables,' we should interpret 'there are' in such a way that 'there are tables' comes out true. Unsurprisingly, then, when we take the resulting account of the meaning of 'there are' back to the dispute between the ontologists who assert 'there are tables' and those who assert 'there are not tables,' we find that it is the former who are right about

⁶ If it means what the T1 theorist says it means, then we should assert 'there are Xs', but if it means what the T2 theorist says it means, then we should accept 'there are not Xs'.

⁷ Davidson's (1974, 18) original example is this: "If you see a ketch sailing by and your companion says, 'Look at that handsome yawl', you may be faced with a problem of interpretation. One natural possibility is that your friend has mistaken a ketch for a yawl, and has formed a false belief. But if his vision is good and his line of sight favorable it is even more plausible that he does not use the word 'yawl' quite as you do, and has made no mistake at all about the position of the jigger on the passing yacht".

what ‘there are’ really means.⁸ This will generalize, of course, to other areas in which common-sense makes claims about what there is: we must interpret ‘there are’ so that ‘there are persons’ and ‘there are not unicorns,’ for example, come out true.⁹

This way of resolving the dispute over the existence of tables depends, of course, on adopting a superficialist meta-ontology to begin with. But once this is done, we can see that there are *a priori* restrictions, and quite tight ones, on how much ontological theory can (justifiably) diverge from common-sense ontology. Hirsch’s second-order route to common-sense ontology can therefore be reconstructed as a relatively straightforward argument: the first premise is superficialism, the second premise is the principle of charity, and the conclusion is common-sense ontology. Call this the *superficial argument for common-sense ontology*. As noted, this is only one interpretation, or reconstruction, of Hirsch’s reasoning. However, although it is not obvious to me that the reasoning cannot be reconstructed in some other legitimate fashion, I am not familiar with a specific interpretation that is more accurate.

In assessing this argument, an opponent of common-sense ontology might reject the Davidsonian claim that the principle of charity is a condition on the competency of interpretation, or meaning-assignment. But whether we should accept or reject the Davidsonian claim depends on matters pertaining more properly to the philosophy of language, not to ontology. Thus *qua* proponent of revisionary ontology – hence *qua* ontologist – one should first attack the argument’s first premise, i.e. the superficialist meta-ontology. Hirsch himself nowhere offers a clear *argument* for superficialism. One gets the impression that what motivates the view to him is that a certain deflationary reaction to ontological disputes seems both widespread and appropriate. When acute, this reaction involves a phenomenology of frustration with ontological disputes; when milder, a general sense of intractability and hopelessness. Thus many philosophers – especially outside the ranks of metaphysicians – are often visited by a certain suspicion of the thought that there are mind-independent facts of the matter that

⁸ The reasoning here would actually have to be subtler than this, given that on some views of the meaning of kind terms such as ‘table’ is sensitive to the extension those tables are taken to have – if one speaker takes ‘table’ to have the empty set as its extension, whereas another takes it to have quite a big set, then the meaning of ‘table’ in their mouths is different. The way to make the reasoning subtler, in order to accommodate this view of meaning (regardless of how plausible it is) is to identify a semantic property of kind terms that can be shared by speakers who take their terms to have different extensions. This semantic property may be thought of as a Fregean sense, a Kaplanian character, or whatever.

⁹ A closely related meta-ontology, though motivated by a different sort of semantic theory, is Thomasson’s (2007). According to Thomasson, there are analytic entailments from ‘there are simples arranged table-wise’ to ‘there are tables’, such that it is a trivial fact about the English language that the latter is true given that the former is true.

settle the question of whether there are tables or only simples arranged table-wise, and that the goal of ontological inquiry is to discover those facts. It is this sentiment of suspicion that Hirsch appeals to, presumably holding it to track a genuine irresolvability in the ontological issues themselves.

Clearly, this is not exactly an *argument* for superficialism, but I trust the sentiment Hirsch reports is not unfamiliar: even optimists about ontology sometimes encounter pangs of self-doubt. And yet, most metaphysicians insist, contra superficialism, that ontological disputes are substantive, and would therefore reject Hirsch's argument for common-sense ontology as unsound. Typically, objectors have denied that ontological disputes are verbal (Eklund 2007; Bennett 2009; Hawthorne 2009). Some have agreed that they are in one sense verbal, or at least linguistic, but denied that this makes them insubstantive (Sider 2004, 2009 and forthcoming, chs 5, 9).¹⁰

Perhaps the most acute version of the former objection is presented by Hawthorne (2009), who presents the following challenge: Hirsch's superficialism is committed to a kind of verificationism about ontological statements, but given verificationism's utter implausibility for non-ontological (e.g. scientific) statements, it is unclear why it should be taken seriously for ontological ones.¹¹

According to verificationism, empirically equivalent statements in the same language – i.e. statements of a single language that accommodate the empirical data equally well – have the same content. So any dispute between empirically equivalent theories must ultimately be due to different languages being used – it must be a verbal dispute. Hirsch's superficialism seems committed to something like verificationism about ontological statements, at least insofar as it treats empirically equivalent ontological statements as having the same content. Yet verificationism is widely regarded as refuted, the objector points out.

I say 'something like verificationism' because against the background of certain relatively uncontroversial assumptions about philosophical methodology, it may be odd to speak of *empirical* equivalence for philosophical theories. The relevant view of philosophical methodology connects it closely to *a priori* reasoning rather than empirical investigation, which casts the data of philosophical inquiry as not properly empirical. However, we can introduce the notion of *data-equivalence* and say that philosophical (including ontological) theories are data-equivalent just when they accommodate the data of philosophical inquiry, whatever those turn out to be, equally well. The thesis that data-equivalent philosophical statements have the same content is thus at least verificationist in spirit, and Hirsch's superficialism seems committed to it. Hirsch's view of the data of

¹⁰ I will explain momentarily what I mean by this.

¹¹ For a variation on this point, see Sider (2009, section 12).

ontological inquiry appears to be that they are bits of verbal behavior involving ontological vocabulary, in particular the existential quantifier – linguistic utterances involving terms such as ‘there are’. If this is right, then in claiming that ontological disputes are typically more verbal than substantive, Hirsch effectively commits himself to the claim that the statements of disputants are typically data-equivalent.

This claim about data-equivalence can be denied, and occasionally is. But Hawthorne’s challenge is deeper, rejecting the very inference from data-equivalence of ‘*p*’ and ‘ $\sim p$ ’ to the choice between them being merely verbal. Just as we deny the verificationism about scientific statements that inspires treating apparent disagreements between empirically equivalent scientific theories as *merely* apparent, so we should deny the broadly verificationist thesis that inspires treating apparent disagreements between data-equivalent ontological theories as *merely* apparent.

Hirsch could respond that there is an important disanalogy between him and the verificationists of yore. Although he takes data-equivalent ontological statements to have the same content, he does not take them to have the same content *because* they are empirically equivalent – at least not *only* because they are. There are other features of such statements that merit casting them as having the same content, he might insist. Discussing what these further features might be would take us too far afield, but we should note that this response to Hawthorne’s objection is incomplete in the absence of a specification of these features. In any case, it seems to me that the deepest objection to Hirsch’s superficialism lies elsewhere.

The deepest objection seems to me to be due to Sider (2004, 2009 and forthcoming, chs 5, 9). One way to think of the objection is as follows: even if we concede to Hirsch that those who assert ‘there are tables’ and those who assert ‘there are not tables’ use the expression ‘there are’ differently, it does not follow that there is no substantive disagreement underlying their dispute. To appreciate what it is that Sider takes the underlying substantive disagreement to be, consider that contrary to what Hirsch seems to suppose, not all languages are created equal. Thus, everything we say in English we can say in a language with the simple predicate ‘is grue’ replacing ‘is green’. The problem with this language is not *only* – indeed, not *primarily* – that it is unlike our language. The main problem is that it is *worse* than our language: it does a worse job of carving nature at its joints.¹² Likewise, according to Sider, even if we concede to Hirsch that those who assert

¹² It is a non-trivial question what *makes* a language that does not carve the world at its joints worse than one that does. This is of course a vast area of research, joined to an immense literature, and cannot be done justice to here. However, a growing consensus seems to take the key to the answer in the notion of *projectibility*: predicates that carve nature at its joints seem to be more projectible than ones that do not.

'there are tables' and those who assert 'there are not tables' use the expression 'there are' differently, it is not true that the only question remaining at that point concerns who is right about what we English-speakers really mean by 'there are'. The more important question concerns who is right about what we *ought* to mean by 'there are'. More precisely, the important question concerns which of the two languages carves nature at its *quantificational joints* – the language where 'there are' means what ordinary English speakers do, or the language where 'there are' means what the eliminativist about tables means by it. That is, the pro-table and anti-table ontologists may speak different languages, but this leaves open not only the question of which language is more like English but also, much more pertinently, the question of which language does the better job of carving nature at its joints.

According to Sider, then, even if we concede that 'there are' does not mean the same thing for the pro-table and anti-table ontologists, there is a substantive disagreement underlying their dispute. It is just that the underlying substantive disagreement cannot be characterized as concerning whether the proposition expressed in English by 'there are tables' is true. Rather, it must be characterized as concerning whether nature's joints are better carved by English (and any variant on English in which the meaning of 'there are' is such that 'there are tables' comes out true) or by a language (also a variant on English, I suppose) in which the meaning of 'there are' is such that 'there are tables' comes out false. This is a substantive disagreement about nature's joints, then, and cannot be brushed aside by the adoption of a superficialist meta-ontology. To adopt superficialism about ontology nonetheless would have the effect of making this further issue inaccessible to ontological inquiry, but no less real a concern for that. Denying that this is a genuine concern would require arguing either that languages can be equally good for ontological purposes regardless of how closely they come to carving nature at its joint – or else that nature has no joints. The latter option seems entirely implausible, while the former requires making substantive, non-verbal metaphysical claims, which would be self-defeating for a superficialist (and which anyway Hirsch never argues for).

To conclude, Hirsch presents a relatively straightforward argument for common-sense ontology, going from superficialism in meta-ontology, via the principle of charity, to common-sense ontology. This argument has the advantage of being relatively uncomplicated. But it also has the disadvantage that it rests upon superficialism in meta-ontology, which is doubly problematic. First, it requires that data-equivalent ontological theories have the same content and therefore differ only in terms of the language used to express them. Second, it requires the assumption that all languages are created equal, in the sense that there is no significant question as to which carves the world more closely to its natural joint.

2. *From superficialism to constructivism*

Let *ontological anti-realism* be any meta-ontological position according to which there are no mind-independent, or more generally representation-independent, facts of the matter that settle ontological disputes.¹³ *Radical* anti-realists, such as Carnap (1953), maintain that there are no facts of the matter *at all* to settle such disputes; *moderate* anti-realists, such as Hirsch, maintain that there are such facts, but they are mind-, or language-, or otherwise representation-dependent.¹⁴ There are also some anti-realists, such as Sidelle (2002), who are happy simply with the disjunction of radical and moderate anti-realism.¹⁵

Superficialism is a form of moderate ontological anti-realism, since it allows facts about linguistic representation to settle ontological disputes.¹⁶ However, superficialism is only one version of ontological anti-realism, just as verificationism, or rather the logical positivism that spawns it, is only one version of scientific anti-realism. We may therefore ask ourselves whether there is a different and more plausible version, just as there are versions of scientific anti-realism that are more plausible than logical positivism. In this section, I present a different kind of ontological anti-realism, modeled on a different kind of scientific anti-realism, namely van Fraassen's (1980) 'constructive empiricism'. My primary goal is simply to *articulate* this new and different form of ontological anti-realism. In addition, however, I want to make two claims regarding it: first, that it is at least as more plausible than superficialism as constructive empiricism is than verificationism (positivism); and second, that it too affords us a second-order route to common-sense ontology.¹⁷ I argue for the first claim towards the end of this

¹³ Note that as meant here, ontological anti-realism is a position in meta-ontology, not in first-order ontology. (This is important to stress, since Hirsch explicitly states that his superficialism entails ontological anti-realism only when the latter is meant as a position in meta-ontology.) This is the characterization of ontological anti-realism suggested by Bennett (2009) and Jenkins (2010). A closely related characterization is due to Chalmers (2009), who defines 'ontological anti-realism' as the view that most ontological questions do not have 'objective answers'.

¹⁴ Other radical anti-realists are, it would seem, Chalmers (2009) and Yablo (2009). Other moderate anti-realists seem to include Thomasson (2007).

¹⁵ Sidelle (2002, 135) writes: "I suppose it is clear that this is how I view things, and is, at bottom, why I think there is no fact of the matter. It is also why I think that even if there were a fact of the matter, it would be a matter of convention".

¹⁶ It is also a version refuted to my satisfaction by Hawthorne's and Sider's arguments, especially the latter. I should note that Hirsch does address Sider's objection – see Hirsch 2007 toward the end of the article (the last two pages). It is not entirely clear to me, however, what the response exactly is. The main complaint seems to be that Sider's idea is "excessively obscure" (Hirsch 2007, 378).

¹⁷ I apologize to the reader for the playful construction in my statement of the first claim. The idea is that the increase in plausibility involved in moving from logical empiricism to constructive empiricism is (at least) matched by the increase in plausibility involved in moving from superficialism to constructivism in meta-ontology.

section, and for the second one in the next section. Note well: I will nowhere argue that the resulting form of ontological anti-realism is superior to ontological *realism*. Thus I will not attempt to show that this is the best meta-ontological position to have; merely that it is better to have than superficialism. There are two reasons for the modest scope of my claim. First, I am simply not sure that the position I will articulate is in fact superior to ontological realism, because (more deeply) I am myself torn between realism and anti-realism in meta-ontology.¹⁸ Second, discussing the wider issue of which meta-ontology is the best to have will take us too far afield (surely it should be addressed in a dedicated paper). This paper focuses on the question of what meta-ontology is best for a second-order route to common-sense ontology to rest upon; not on what meta-ontology is best *simpliciter*.

The central thesis of van Fraassen's constructive empiricism in the philosophy of science is twofold: "Science aims to give us theories which are empirically adequate; and acceptance of a theory involves as belief only that it is empirically adequate" (Ib., 12). To this meta-scientific thesis, a parallel meta-ontological thesis can be matched:

- (a) ontology aims to give us theories which are adequate to the data of ontological inquiry, and (b) acceptance of an ontological theory involves as belief only that it is adequate to those data.

I will call this twofold thesis, perhaps sub-optimally, *constructivism* in meta-ontology.¹⁹ According to it, the aim of ontological inquiry is to construct theories that are adequate to the relevant data, and accepting such theories does not require believing anything more than that these theories are adequate to those data. Let me clarify some aspects of this twofold thesis. I will then argue that it is more plausible than superficialism (and also that it is no less plausible than constructive empiricism about science).

First, note that the first part of the thesis concerns the *aim* of ontological inquiry. Van Fraassen is quick to note that a thesis about *aims* of inquiry is neither a sociological thesis about the *motivations* of inquirers (which, as far as we are concerned, may be vain or silly) nor a normative thesis about what inquirers *ought* to believe (we are tolerant: they may believe what they wish). Rather, it is a thesis

¹⁸ As Joseph Levine puts it somewhere in a different context, on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday I wake up feeling the force of one view, on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday the force of the other view.

¹⁹ This may not use the term 'constructivism' as it is often used in other areas of philosophy (let alone other areas of the humanities). On the other hand, there is a proliferation of senses of the term, combined with dearth of explicit analysis. Certainly I do not mean 'constructivism' in the way it is used when it is taken to intimate that a certain type of knowledge (or, sometimes, truth) is 'constructed' rather than discovered. I call the view constructivist merely for the sake of terminological continuity with van Fraassen.

about what the fruits of inquiry really are – what the goods produced by it are, what the thing of value is that we genuinely stand to gain from engaging in the relevant inquiry.²⁰ According to constructive empiricism, we stand to gain from science empirically adequate scientific theories; we do not stand to gain *true* theories. By the same token, according to constructivism in meta-ontology, from ontological inquiry we stand to gain data-adequate theories, rather than true theories, about what there is.²¹

Second, a central notion in constructivism (both meta-scientific and meta-ontological) is that of *adequacy* to the data (whether empirical or not). According to van Fraassen, this must be understood, in the first instance, in terms of correct description, prediction, and ‘postdiction’ (or ‘retrodiction’) of the data: a theory is adequate to the empirical data when it generates the verdict that a certain observable event took place, or will take place, when it will in fact, or did in fact, take place.²² The status of the goal of *explaining* the data in constructive empiricism is delicate, but for present purposes we may ignore it and simply rule out explanatory power as an aspect of empirical adequacy.²³ The parallel position in meta-ontology would be that an ontological theory is adequate to the data just when it describes, predicts and postdicts them accurately. Call *accommodation* the relationship between theory and data that consists in the description, prediction and postdiction of the latter by the former. We may then say that an ontological theory’s data-adequacy is a matter of it accommodating the data, and that theories are data-equivalent when they accommodate the data equally well. In a slogan: ‘adequacy as accommodation’. What this comes down to depends, of course, on what the data of ontological inquiry actually are. For while it is relatively clear (though by no means uncontroversial) what the data of scientific inquiry are, it is very much an open question what the data of ontological inquiry are, and different versions of

²⁰ This is not intended as a general analysis of aim talk, certainly not of aim talk elsewhere in philosophy (e.g. in discussions of the aim of belief).

²¹ There is a question, of course, of what motivates this claim. At this stage, I am only discussing what the view is. What motivates the view is something I turn to later in the section.

²² Van Fraassen writes: “a theory is empirically adequate exactly if what it says about the observable things and events in the world is true – exactly if it ‘saves the phenomena’ ” (1980, 12).

²³ Van Fraassen’s actual approach to the explanatory component of science is elaborate and intricate, and cannot be done justice to here. The upshot for our present purposes is as follows. Many aspects of explanation go beyond the sphere of empirical data, in that they involve positing entities whose existence is unnecessary for mere description of the data. These aspects of explanation do *not* affect the explaining theory’s empirical adequacy. There may, in addition, be certain aspects of explanation (e.g. unification of the data) that are internal to the sphere of empirical data, so to speak, in that they do not involve positing the aforementioned entities. If there are such aspects, they *do* affect the theory’s empirical adequacy. This is, at least, what seems to me to be the upshot of van Fraassen’s overall position on explanation and empirical adequacy. Thus van Fraassen writes that “success of explanation is a success of adequate and informative description” (1980: 156–157).

constructivism will be defined by different accounts of what these data are. In the next section I take up the issue of the data of ontology, offering my own view.

Third, constructive empiricism about science and constructivism about ontology make claims only about what acceptance involves by way of *belief*, and are silent about what else it might involve. Thus, it may strike us as plausible that acceptance of (scientific and/or ontological) theories could or should be affected by esthetic preferences: of two data-equivalent theories, we may prefer the more beautiful one – perhaps the one that exhibits greater unity, simplicity and symmetry, construed as purely esthetic, non-truth-conducive virtues. According to constructive empiricism and constructivism in meta-ontology, this would not render the beautiful theory in any way more *believable*, even if it renders it more *acceptable*.

Fourth, as important as what the constructivist theses say is what they do *not* say. They do *not* say that the content of scientific or ontological statements and theories is exhausted by their adequacy to (accommodation of) the data. This is something van Fraassen often stressed: *constructive* empiricism is distinguished from *logical* empiricism (logical positivism) in not holding that the content of scientific statements is exhausted by what they say about the empirical data. The meaning of a scientific statement can have more to it than what should be believed or disbelieved. Scientific statements are about how the world is, not about the observations we make or can make. Thus the statement ‘the world doubled in size instantaneously last night’ should be neither believed nor disbelieved, but contrary to verificationism, it is not meaningless. Thus constructive empiricism rejects verification-conditional semantics and endorses instead truth-conditional semantics. Likewise, ontological constructivism (constructivism in meta-ontology) embraces truth-conditional semantics for ontological statements, casting them as statements about how the world is. It merely insists that the part of their content that we should believe or disbelieve concerns merely the accommodation of the relevant data.²⁴

To the extent that what is most alarming about superficialism is its unsavory association with verificationism, and more generally non-truth-conditional semantics, this represents a significant advantage of constructivism. It is a consequence of constructivism that data-equivalent ontological statements (and theories, construed as systems of statements) may nonetheless have different contents. From this it follows that the disagreement between such statements (and theories) is substantive rather than verbal: it concerns how the world is. Ontological disputes thus need not be chalked off to differences in what disputants mean by ‘there are’

²⁴ To repeat, what those data are is the topic of the next section.

(or any other ontologically significant expressions). They may mean exactly the same thing.²⁵

In allowing ontological disputes to be substantive, constructivism rejects the hallmark of superficialism. It also positions itself as a much more plausible meta-ontology. Importantly, neither Hawthorne's nor Sider's argument against superficialism carries over to constructivism. Hawthorne's objection certainly does not apply, since constructivism does not hold that data-equivalent ontological statements have the same content. But nor does Sider's objection apply, since data-equivalent theories can use the same language, which therefore carves the world at the same places. For the constructivist, pro-table and anti-table ontologists have a genuine disagreement, and mean the same thing by 'there are' in 'there are (not) tables'. It is just that the choice between their respective views, the acceptance of one ontological view of tables over the other, involves as belief only commitment to which of the two views better accommodates the table-relevant data of ontological inquiry. Thus neither Hawthorne's nor Sider's argument against the superficialist version of ontological anti-realism carries over to the constructivist version.

More generally, it appears that constructivism in meta-ontology is as more plausible than superficialism as constructive empiricism is than logical positivism. In the philosophy of science, constructive empiricism is often credited with 'rehabilitating' scientific anti-realism, making it again a live and respectable option in the wake of positivism's demise.²⁶ This is, it seems to me, mainly due to its success in divorcing scientific anti-realism from verificationism. By the same token, ontologists who dismiss superficialism on broadly anti-verificationist grounds, and more specifically on the grounds that ontological disputes cannot be dismissed as merely verbal, should treat constructivism as a live and respectable option that could potentially 'rehabilitate' ontological anti-realism.²⁷ For constructivism does not cast ontological disputes as merely verbal, instead casting them as substantive. Thus, just as many philosophers who have consigned *logical* empiricism to the flames of history consider *constructive* empiricism a viable position in philosophy of science, so we should treat constructivism as a viable position in meta-ontology even as we reject superficialism.

²⁵ There is still a question of why the dispute generates a sense of intractability, and in some a phenomenology of frustration. One answer is that this is not because it is insubstantive but because no progress can be made once the data have been fully accommodated.

²⁶ This despite the fact that, sociologically speaking, constructive empiricism has failed to swing the pendulum in the anti-realist direction. In a recent survey of 3,226 philosophers, 75% stated that they accept or lean toward scientific realism, only 11% that they accept or lean toward anti-realism (see <http://philpapers.org/surveys/results.pl>).

²⁷ As in the case of constructive empiricism, it may do this without quite making ontological anti-realism more palatable than ontological realism (see previous note).

It is worth noting, moreover, that the central argument *against* constructive empiricism does not carry over very impressively to constructivism in meta-ontology. This is the argument from inference to the best explanation that we may represent as follows: science is successful; scientific realism is the best explanation of science's success; therefore, by inference to the best explanation, scientific realism is true.²⁸ The parallel argument against constructivism in meta-ontology would have an underwhelming first premise: ontology is successful; ontological realism is the best explanation of ontology's success; therefore, by inference to the best explanation, ontological realism is true. The first premise is underwhelming because, as is commonly conceded, ontology does not seem to be successful in any sense resembling that in which science is. Most strikingly, the history of ontology displays no systematic convergence towards a consensus on ontological matters of the sort the history of science displays. Indeed, as already stressed, ontological debates often come across as intractable and resistant to clear progress – much more so, at any rate, than scientific debates.²⁹ Given this, it is difficult to see in what sense ontology could be claimed to be 'successful'.

Interestingly, Sider (2009) presents an argument from inference to the best explanation for ontological realism, one that appeals not to the success of ontology however, but instead to that of science. According to Sider, the success of science requires not only that the fundamental predicates of scientific theory carve nature at the joints, but also that its fundamental logical vocabulary, including the quantifiers, do the same. From this we can infer (to the best explanation) that the logical vocabulary of ultimate science, including the existential quantifier, carves nature at its joints, including its quantificational joints. Once we accept that nature has quantificational joints to carve at, however, we must also accept that there are mind-independent facts of the matter to which ontological theories are answerable, as per ontological realism.

Since it is not my goal here to defend the superiority of constructivism over realism in meta-ontology, this argument is strictly speaking orthogonal to my present concern. Nonetheless, it might be thought that if ontological anti-realism is unviable in some obvious way, then the whole exercise of identifying the best version of ontological anti-realism becomes devoid of any further importance (it becomes 'purely academic', as they say). For this reason, let me respond briefly to

²⁸ Putnam puts it particularly pithily: "The positive argument for realism is that it is the only philosophy that doesn't make the success of science a miracle" (1975, 73).

²⁹ Quite plausibly, there is routinely second-order progress in the clarity and precision with which the various ontological options are articulated: the map of options, and the web of entailment relations among them, becomes more and more transparent. However, this is not the same as first-order progress towards resolution of the debate by settling on one of the options. Of course, individual ontologists do settle on single options, but unlike what we see in scientific progress, there is no convergence toward a consensus over time (especially not if by 'time' we allow into view intervals longer than that of one philosophical generation).

Sider's argument. In essence, my response is that we have no vantage point from which to assess the relative success of science in a way that would justify one view of how many joints nature has rather than another.³⁰ Let me elaborate.

Imagine three worlds – W1, W2 and W3 – such that the only mind-independent difference between them is that in W1 nature has no joints, in W2 nature has joints for predicates to carve at but not for quantifiers, and in W3 nature has joints for both predicates and quantifiers.³¹ According to Sider, science would not be as successful if the actual world were not more similar to W3 than to W1 or W2. His reasoning may be represented as follows: (1) only if the actual world is more like W3 than W1 or W2 could science be successful to degree D; (2) science is in fact successful to degree D; therefore, (3) the actual world is more like W3 than W1 or W2. I am now going to argue that there are three different interpretations of Premise 1 in this argument, and that two of them make the premise plausible but cast Premise 2 as unjustified, while one of them would cast Premise 2 as justified but makes Premise 1 implausible.

The claim that science would not be as successful as it actually is if the actual world were not more like W3 than W1 or W2 can be interpreted in the following three ways. On the first interpretation, science would be utterly unsuccessful if the actual world were more like either W1 or W2, in the sense that no predictions and/or explanations of any individual events in it would be possible.³² On this interpretation, *any* predictive or explanatory success on science's part would require the world in which science operates to be like W3. On the second interpretation, there may be *some* success for science in worlds such as W1 and W2, but not as much as in W3. The natural thought is that the predictive and/or explanatory success of science in W3-style worlds is greater than in W2-style worlds, and in W2-style worlds greater than in W1-style worlds. An intermediate (third) interpretation is that the existence of *any* success for science in some world requires the relevant world to have *some* joints, and the more joints the world has the more successful science is going to be in that world. On this interpretation, science will be more successful in W3-style worlds than in W2-style worlds and utterly unsuccessful (predictively and explanatorily impotent) in W1-style worlds. These are the

³⁰ In the terms in which Sider (forthcoming) conducts his discussion, the point can be put by saying that we have no vantage point from which to assess the relative success of science in such a way as to discriminate between different views as to how much *structure* the world has.

³¹ As far as I can see, the reasoning I am about to develop does not require us to suppose that all three worlds are metaphysically possible, only that they are logically possible. (Note: the logical difference between W1 and W2 is that only in W2 there are joints for predicates to carve at, which presumably means that W2 contains natural properties, or properties endowed with naturalness, whereas W1 does not.)

³² In this discussion, I will discuss the success of science not only in terms of prediction (etc.) but also in terms of explanation, because there is no reason to suppose that Sider (or any ontological realist) should accept van Fraassen's position on the relevance of explanation to the adequacy of science.

three interpretations of Premise 1 in the argument just ascribed to Sider. What I want to argue now is that the first interpretation casts the argument's first premise as implausible, while the second and third interpretations make it impossible to justify the argument's second premise.

Start with the implausibility of the first interpretation, according to which science could predict or explain nothing unless the world has joints for both predicates and quantifiers to carve at. This seems entirely unsupported: I see no reason to expect science to be utterly unsuccessful in this way in a world of W2's mold. Due to the existence of joints for predicates to carve at, surely *some* predictions and/or explanations of individual events, and general patterns could be devised in such a world. Certainly it would be Sider's burden to show that no predictive or explanatory success would be possible in such a world.

It is much more plausible that science would have *some* success in a world such as W2, whether or not it could have any success in a world such as W1. So while science is successful to degree D in W3, it is also successful to degree D* in W2 (where $D, D^* \neq 0$). My contention, at this point, is that confined as we are to one world, we have no way to determine whether the degree of success of science in this one world is closer to D or to D*. Suppose for the sake of exposition that the degree of success of science in a given world is determined sheerly by the *number* of token events predicted by science in that world. And suppose that science in the actual world is established to have predicted N token events. Is N the number of events we can expect a science successful to degree D to predict or the number we can expect a science successful to D* to predict? *This*, if any, is a question we have no means of settling: there is no basis on which we may surmise that it must be the latter rather than the former or the former rather than the latter. Ditto for other conceptions of what determines the success of science in a given world.³³ The underlying point is that we have no vantage point from which to determine whether science's actual success is indicative of its operating in a W2-like world or a W3-like world. Indeed, if we lived in a W2-world, we would have as much reason to think that we lived in a W3-world as we do now.

It would seem, then, that constructivism in meta-ontology does not share constructive empiricism's main liability, inasmuch as it is not as susceptible to the argument from inference to the best explanation to realism. This casts constructivism in meta-ontology as not only more plausible, 'vertically,' than superficialism, but also more plausible, 'horizontally,' than constructive empiricism in philosophy of science.

³³ Thus, suppose that science is more successful if the rate of its progress is higher, that is, if it predicts or explains events and patterns faster. Again, we have no vantage point from which to determine whether the rate of science's progress in the actual world is the kind it should have in a W2-like world or a W3-like world.

One consideration that gives me pause with respect to this ‘horizontal’ claim, however, is that although ontological constructivism does not share the main liability of constructive empiricism, it seems to me also not to share its main asset. Van Fraassen’s case for constructive empiricism is extensive, of course, but to my mind the greatest asset of the view is actually a consideration due to Rosen (1994). Rosen notes that belief in empirical adequacy of their theories is the minimally committal attitude we must ascribe to scientists in order to make sense of their activity. Any stronger attitude is thus superfluous in terms of accounting for the scientific practice, and could therefore be dismissed as not inherent to the aim of science. This consideration does not carry over very straightforwardly to the ontological domain: belief in the data-adequacy of their theories does not seem quite strong enough an attitude that its ascription to ontologists would make sense of their activity. It seems that a stronger attitude is needed to account for the kind of papers they write, presentations they deliver, conference hallways conversations they hold, etc.

One reaction to this worry is to point out that the above remark about the way ontologists write and talk is compelling only for a specific subset of ontologists, perhaps most notably current-day American and Australian ontologists. But it is not the case that ontologists everywhere and everywhen wrote and talked in a way that could not be done justice to by ascribing to them the attitude constructivism is inclined to ascribe. In particular, ontologists who organize their inquiry around conceptual analysis – e.g. British ontologists of the mid-twentieth century, as well as various followers of Chisholm, arguably including Hirsch – fit the constructivist bill much better. So there is no universal practice of ontology across time and place that constructivism simply misrepresents. Instead, there are different practices at different times and places, and constructivism cannot capture them all. But then again, nor can realism.

Furthermore, and relatedly, it seems to me that for ontologists, unlike for scientists, the first-order practice is affected crucially by the reigning meta-theory. While scientists conduct their research without reflecting overmuch about the nature of science, ontologists’ practice is much more affected by their conception of the nature of ontology. This leads me to a deeper reaction to the worry under consideration, which is to cast constructivism explicitly as more normative and less descriptive than constructive empiricism. The thought is to claim that the actual practice of latter-day ontologists is the way it is in large part because ontologists today are by and large beholden to a misguided meta-ontology. They write and talk the way they do because they are ontological realists, but what they *ought* to be is ontological anti-realists. Casting the central claim of constructivism in meta-ontology in this way is eminently reasonable in light of the fact, stressed above, that constructivism is not a theory about what ontologists actually do or believe but about the *aim* of ontology, where the aim is understood in terms of the

genuine intellectual goods we can expect from ontological inquiry. If it is true that the only genuine goods we can expect are data-adequate theories, then even *if* ontologists everywhere and everywhen wanted more than that, the fact that they did could not change the *aim* of ontological inquiry.³⁴

I conclude that, when properly understood, constructivism is *at least* as more plausible than superficialism in meta-ontology as constructive empiricism is than logical empiricism in the philosophy of science. Note, once more, that this claim is compatible with constructivism being less plausible than ontological realism. My main thesis in this paper is not that we should adopt ontological anti-realism. Rather, it is that there is a version of ontological anti-realism which both (a) should be considered a live and respectable option and (b) supports a second-order route to common-sense ontology. In this section, I attempted to defend part (a) of this. In the next, I attempt to defend part (b). In any case, arguing that ontological anti-realism is not only *viable* but *true* is something I do not wish to argue here.

3. *Ontological data*

My claim in this last section is that, on the most plausible account of the data of ontological inquiry, constructivism also leads us, via the second-order route, to common-sense ontology. It imposes *a priori* restrictions on how much ontology can justifiably diverge from folk ontology. I start by suggesting that the distinctive data of ontological inquiry are intuitions, or rather a specific subset thereof.

In designating data for ontological inquiry, it is perfectly legitimate to allow in many of the data of other types of inquiry, including scientific inquiry. Perceptual data, for example, would be welcome. However, perceptual data typically do not distinguish between competing ontological theories. The views that there are tables and that there are only simples arranged table-wise accommodate the perceptual data equally well.³⁵ Thus we need data distinctive to ontological inquiry, data that can potentially distinguish competing ontological views, in the sense that some views might accommodate them better than others.

³⁴ At the same time, there may well be instrumental value in a realist stance in meta-ontology, insofar as one would be more motivated to pursue vigorously one's project if one were under the impression that one's project might issue in more than just data-adequate theories. This is a point similar to one sometimes made by proponents of a pragmatic theory of truth, when they attempt to explain the intuitive pull of something like a correspondence theory of truth, claiming that the notion of correspondence with a mind-independent reality is a useful fiction.

³⁵ At least this is so on a natural understanding of perceptual data. This natural understanding may be wrong, in the following way. It is not implausible that perception is theory-laden and involves conceptual content, so it is typically the concept of table rather than the concept of simples arranged table-wise that is the constituent of perceptual content, in normal adult human perceivers at least. However, even if this is right (as it seems to me to be), there is clearly a sense in which the tables and simples arranged table-wise are 'qualitatively indistinguishable'. We may appeal to this fact by saying that *sensory* data, or pure-observational data, cannot distinguish between tables and fusions of simples arranged table-wise.

Enter intuitions. It is commonly thought that the deliverances of intuition can function as philosophically *distinctive* data that can potentially distinguish competing philosophical (including ontological) views. What is less clear is *how* they do this. Many questions arise: what is the faculty of intuition? What are its deliverances, i.e. individual intuitions? What if anything do these track? What (if anything) and how (if at all) do they justify? I do not answer these questions here, and more generally do not offer a comprehensive account of intuition. Instead, I want to circumscribe a subset of intuitions and designate them as the (distinctive) data of ontological inquiry. The hope, however, is that the circumscription is such as to make answering the above questions easier.

In the first instance, let us distinguish ‘extravagant’ from ‘modest’ intuitions. The former purport to put us in cognitive contact with a realm of abstract entities. The idea is that there is a realm of abstract objects – universals, propositions, etc. – that the faculty of intuition in some way acquaints us with (see e.g. Bealer 1996, 1998). It is controversial that any intuitions do in fact acquaint us with abstract entities, but we need not challenge this claim here. Let us concede that there are mental states which at least have the phenomenology of purporting to acquaint us with abstract objects.³⁶ These are the extravagant intuitions. The modest intuitions are much less ambitious – they only purport to turn in verdicts on whether some concept of ours applies to some item, or in some scenario, of which we can conceive (where concepts are construed as mental entities rather than abstract entities).³⁷ Here the idea is that we possess concepts – construed as mental rather than abstract entities – and we have intuitions on what kinds of real or imaginary items or scenarios these concepts apply to (see e.g. Goldman and Pust 1998). Thus modest intuitions do not purport to cognize a realm of independent, extra-mental entities, but merely to register the behavior of one’s own concepts in specific (real and imaginary) situations.³⁸ What I want to claim is that only modest intuitions are data of ontological inquiry. If there are extravagant intuitions, statements that express them are better thought of as theoretical statements than as data in need of prediction or explanation.³⁹

³⁶ For a pair of recent treatments of the phenomenology of intuition – both quite sympathetic to this notion – see Bedke (2008) and Chudnoff (forthcoming).

³⁷ A comment is called for here concerning conceiving and the conceived: let us construe conceiving as a doxastically non-committal intentional act, that is, an attitude that involves the entertaining, or contemplating, or apprehending, of some intentional object or content (without any endorsement of the relevant object or content); and let us construe the conceived – items and scenarios – as the intentional objects/contents of the relevant acts.

³⁸ Note well: the modest approach is in no way wedded to the notion that through comprehensive examination of intuitive verdicts, we can generate *definitions* of (or for) our folk concepts. The modest approach is an approach to what intuitions are, not to what projects they may help pursue.

³⁹ It is an open question whether it is importantly virtuous for a theory to accommodate extravagant intuitions. I am inclined to think that it is, and that the specific virtue at play here is

Second, among modest intuitions, let us distinguish *singular* from *general* intuitions. Singular intuitions are intuitive verdicts with singular content: typically, content of the form ‘*a* is F’, or ‘*a* qualifies as an F’, or ‘F applies to *a*’, or ‘*a* is an instance of/exemplifies F’. The general form of such singular statements involves a term that picks out an item or scenario and a term that expresses a concept. In the statements of the forms just listed, ‘*a*’ is a proper name, a definite description, a demonstrative, or a nominal, while ‘F’ expresses a concept. For example, when exploring our intuitions about tables, I might find out that I intuit ‘this is a table’, when demonstrating (if only in thought) my desk, to be true; that I intuit ‘Lucy is a table’, when naming (if only in thought) my neighbor’s dog, to be false; that I intuit ‘the salient object under the window is a table’, when definitely describing (if only in thought) my desk again, to be true; and so on and so forth.⁴⁰ Thus in essence they are verdicts on whether some scenario or item falls in the extension of some concept. General intuitions are intuitions with quantified rather than singular content. For example, I might intuit that all bachelors are unmarried, or that all physical events have complete physical causes (as per the principle of the causal closure of the physical). This would be a general intuition, since it has quantified content. The claim I want to make is that only singular (modest) intuitions are data of ontological inquiry. A general intuition involves an element of theorization from singular intuitions: if I intuit that all As are Bs, this cannot have quite the same status as when I intuit that this A is B, that A is B, etc. Only the latter are data properly so called.

Third, arguably some singular modest intuitions can be disregarded – those of the clinically insane, for example. In trying to capture the contours of the folk concept of an F, we need only take as data the intuitions of subjects representative, in some way, of the folk at large. It is natural to construe the representative subject as the normal intuiter in normal conditions, where an intuiter is normal when her faculty of intuition functions as it is supposed to (e.g., as it was selected to function) and conditions are normal when they do not inhibit the faculty’s ability to function as it is supposed to. (For more detail on how best to construe the normal

what Quine and Ullian (1970) call ‘conservatism’: an ontological theory is more conservative insofar as it can accommodate commonly shared extravagant intuitions. But this does not bestow on extravagant intuitions the status of *data*. On the contrary, it bestows on them the status of (fragments of a potential) established theory.

⁴⁰ I can see a case for requiring that the definite descriptions would be referentially rather than attributively used, in Donnellan’s (1966) terms. Donnellan claimed that the person reading the newspaper and saying ‘the murderer is cruel’ and the person sitting in the courthouse and saying ‘the murderer is good-looking’, do not use the description ‘the murderer’ quite the same way – only the latter uses it in a genuinely referential way. Kripke (1977) objected to this, claiming that the referential/attribution distinction is pragmatic not semantic. I do not wish to enter the fray here, but only to point out that *if* we accept Donnellan’s distinction (as semantic), we might need to restrict the kind of definite description used to express intuitive judgments to the attributively used ones.

intuiter and normal conditions, see Kriegel 2008.) My claim, then, is that the distinctive data of ontological inquiry are the normal subject's singular modest intuitions in normal conditions. We may summarize the thesis as follows: 'ontology's (distinctive) data are normal singular modest intuitions'.⁴¹

With this specification of the distinctive data of philosophical inquiry in place, we can appreciate that the accommodation relation between philosophical theory and data is none other than the relation of *entailment*: a philosophical theory accommodates an intuition just in case the (potentially quite long) statement that expresses the theory entails the statement that expresses the intuition. Suppose one is a functionalist about tables, holding that what makes a table the table it is, and a table at all, is its functional role. When we (normal intuiters under normal conditions) conceive of a number of different items lacking functional role (e.g. causally inert items), functionalism about tables entails for each of those items that it is not a table. Whenever our intuition regarding one of the conceived items is that it indeed does not qualify as a table, it will have turned out that functionalism about tables entails the intuitive statement that expresses our intuition, and therefore accommodates our intuition. It would thereby accommodate a datum of ontological inquiry. However, if there is, among the items we are conceiving, one we intuit to be a table, then functionalism about tables would have turned out to fail to accommodate that intuition, thus fail to accommodate a datum of ontological inquiry. A familiar example of this is the tripartite analysis of knowledge (as justified true belief) and Gettier's (1963) counter-examples to it. In devising these examples, Gettier effectively described conceivable scenarios that elicit in normal intuiters under normal conditions an intuition with the content 'this is not a case of knowledge', or 'Brown's belief does not qualify knowledge', or some such singular modest intuition. The tripartite analysis entails that Brown's belief does qualify as knowledge, and therefore the tripartite analysis fails in this case to accommodate an intuition that constitutes a datum of ontological inquiry.⁴² It is, to that extent, *disconfirmed* by that intuition.

What I want to argue now is that the thesis that ontology's distinctive data are normal singular modest intuitions paves a second-order route from ontological

⁴¹ Note that while it is natural to hold that the intuitive verdicts are *constitutive* of our concepts' application conditions, it is also possible to hold that they merely *track* the (intuition-independent) application conditions of our concepts. (The former version of the view raises the question of *why* intuitions should be constitutive of application conditions. The latter version raises the question of *how* intuitions manage to track concepts' application conditions.) This is an interesting choice point for proponents of the idea that singular modest intuitions are data of ontological inquiry. But the idea itself is silent on what the right choice is.

⁴² At the same time, the intuition in the described case does qualify as an instance of belief, an instance of truth and an instance of justification. Gettier's examples thus reveal something about the folk concept of knowledge, namely that it does not apply in certain scenarios in which the concepts of justification, truth and belief all co-apply.

constructivism to common-sense ontology. That is, just as superficialism led to common-sense ontology when combined with the principle of charity, so constructivism leads to common-sense ontology when combined with the thesis that ontology's distinctive data are normal singular modest intuitions. The basic reason for this, as we will see momentarily, is that folk concepts are bound to parallel closely common-sense.

Recall that according to constructivism, (a) ontology aims to give us theories which accommodate the data of ontological inquiry, and (b) acceptance of an ontological theory involves as belief only that it accommodates such data. If the data of ontological inquiry – at least the data that can distinguish between ontological theories – are normal singular modest intuitions, then this follows:

- (a) ontology aims to give us theories which accommodate normal singular modest intuitions, and (b) acceptance of an ontological theory involves as belief only that it accommodates normal singular modest intuitions.

Call this *intuitional constructivism* (with apologies for the label's inelegance). My claim is that it is *a priori* that for any ontological theory T, intuitional constructivism recommends accepting T if, and only if, T does not diverge overmuch from what folk ontology says there is, that is to say, if and only if T is a common-sense ontology.

Consider the dispute raging over tables. I claim that it is *a priori* that intuitional constructivism recommends the pro-table theory and discommends the anti-table theory. These theories face the tribunal of intuition along two fronts: where our concept of table – the concept expressed by 'table' – applies, and where our concept of existence – the concept expressed by 'there are' – applies. We can appreciate that this tribunal will be table-friendly in two steps.⁴³

In a first stage, Jane Sixpack, a normal intuiter normally circumstanced, is presented with many scenarios involving pluralities of simples arranged table-wise. On every occasion she is offered the statements 'this is a table' and 'this is not a table', whereupon she virtually always assents to the former and dissents from the latter. In a second stage, and taking into account the results of the first, Ms. Sixpack is presented with many pluralities of simples arranged table-wise and is offered the statements 'this table exists' and 'this table does not exist' (or somewhat more awkwardly, 'there is this table' and 'there is not this table'). Again, she virtually always (perhaps definitely always!) assents to the former and dissents from the latter.

⁴³ I use the phrase 'tribunal of intuition' to underscore an analogy with Quine's claim that scientific theory faces the 'tribunal of observation'. I develop the analogy more in Kriegel (2008); see also Cummins (1998).

The first set of data is constituted by Ms. Sixpack's intuitive verdicts about whether her concept of a table applies to certain sums of simples. The second set of data is constituted by Ms. Sixpack's intuitive verdicts about whether her concept of existence applies to sums of simples to which her concept of table applies. In both cases, overwhelmingly the answer is yes. The upshot is that a chunk of the world to which her concept of a table applies is such that her concept of existence applies to it too. Since Ms. Sixpack is *ex hypothesi* normal, and normally circumstanced, we can say that the pro-table ontology can accommodate these data while the anti-table cannot. Thus nihilism about tables is *massively disconfirmed* by the data, whereas realism about tables is *massively confirmed*.

It is clear that Jane Sixpack's intuitions are the way they are precisely because she is beholden to the common-sense view about what there is and what there is not. Thus this will generalize to any other ontological dispute in which common-sense takes a position. If we are concerned whether there are persons or not, and probe the normal subject's intuitions about this, we will find that the data support the person ontology as against the anti-person one. More generally, wherever common-sense is committed to there being Fs, the normal subject's intuitive verdicts on whether her concept of existence applies in conceivable scenarios in which her concept of F applies will be affirmative; which in turn will make intuitional constructivism commend an ontological theory that countenances Fs and discommend one that repudiates Fs. The connection between what common-sense ontology says and what intuitional constructivism recommends an ontology say is therefore far from accidental; it is *a priori*.

The situation with negative ontological commitments is trickier. Consider the debate over whether there are (arbitrary) fusions of tables and the moon. Common-sense shuns such fusions, but some philosophers – mereological universalists (e.g. Van Cleve 1986, 2007; Lewis 1991) – embrace them. The folk's intuitive verdicts will be *against* 'there is a fusion of this table and the moon' (or 'the fusion of this table and the moon exists'). But one might worry that the folk do not possess the concept of a table-and-moon-fusion, and therefore we cannot say that examination of whether their concept of existence applies in a conceivable scenario in which their concept of table-and-moon-fusion applies returns a negative verdict. Instead, we have to say something like this: there is no conceivable scenario in which their concepts of table, moon, fusion and existence all co-apply, and this is revealed (to them and to us) when they examine their concepts with proper instructions.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ The intent of adding 'with proper instructions' is to keep in mind the distinction between performance and competence, requiring specifically competent intuition harvesting for the purposes of ontological theory construction. This is not an illicit way of moving away from folk intuitions to expert intuitions. Rather, it is an insistence on revealing what the folk intuitions are regarding the actual scenarios we are interested in, as opposed to scenarios easily confused with those.

Because this is what the examination reveals, intuitional constructivism will discommend ontological theories that posit fusions of tables and the moon and recommend ones that do not. Again, the connection is *a priori* rather than accidental, for the same reasons we encountered in the case of positive verdicts.

It is sometimes argued that folk intuitions are inconsistent, and that therefore common-sense ontology cannot be embraced in principle. But as far as I can tell, inconsistencies in common-sense are never among singular intuitions. Typically, they are between singular intuitions on the one hand and some general intuition on the other. For example, it is sometimes claimed that common-sense is inconsistent in that it (intuitively) regards the statue and the clay as numerically distinct concrete particulars but at the same time is (intuitively) committed to the general principle that distinct concrete particulars cannot be at the same place and the same time – a principle of ‘impenetrability’. However, intuitional constructivism as understood here does not regard the principle of impenetrability as a datum of ontological inquiry, only the singular intuitions about the statue’s existence and the clay’s.⁴⁵ It may well be that these data undermine the common-sense general principle, and that ultimately we must reject the general principle due to the folk’s singular intuitions. But this would still not be a case in which the resulting ontological theory offers an ontological inventory very different from that of common-sense.

It is important to appreciate that none of this prevents the theory that there are not tables, or the theory that there are fusions of tables and the moon, from being *true*. With its realist, truth-conditional semantics for ontological statements, intuitional constructivism is open both to the possibility that there are mind-independent facts of the matter as to whether or not there are tables (or table-and-moon fusions), and that those facts are what the anti-table theory says they are. It thus concedes that such theories can be true. What it denies, however, is that they can be *justified* – and therefore, that the relevant mind-independent facts of the matter can help us settle ontological disputes. According to intuitional constructivism, the data of ontological inquiry are such that there is no way to marshal them to epistemically justify such theories. On the one hand, the *indistinctive* data, such as perceptual data, do not distinguish between pro- and anti-table ontological theories, and therefore cannot support

⁴⁵ This is not to say that it is not *prima facie* desirable for an ontological theory to preserve this general principle. It is just to say that the desirability is not a matter of accommodating the data. Rather, as mentioned in a previous footnote, it is best thought of as a matter of the theoretical virtue of conservatism, whereby in updating one’s theory one ought to stray the least necessary from pre-existing theory (Quine and Ullian 1970). In constructivism, theoretical virtues do not affect the believability of a theory, of course, but they may well affect its desirability.

the latter over the former. On the other hand, the *distinctive* data, normal singular modest intuitions, cannot in principle support any ontological theory that diverges overmuch from common-sense ontology (as we have just seen). The upshot is that *no* data available to ontological theorizing can support nihilism about tables (or realism about table-and-moon fusions). Theories of this sort, while potentially true, are never epistemically justified, according to intuitional constructivism.

Note the difference here between (intuitional) constructivism and superficialism. Although intuitional constructivism insists that we are epistemically compelled to adopt a pro-table ontology, it casts it as perfectly intelligible that ‘there are not tables’ may be true in English. This is very different from what happens with superficialism, where the only way we can entertain the possibility that ‘there are not tables’ may be true is by entertaining that ‘there are’ means something different from what it does in English. This brings out that while there is certainly a deflationary aspect in intuitional constructivism, the deflation is not *semantic* at its source but *epistemic*. The issue for intuitional constructivism is not whether the meaning of existence claims is such that we can sensibly reject common-sense ontology, but whether the data at our disposal are such that they can sensibly support such rejection. Thus even though it does not cast ontological disputes as insubstantive, there is still something very deflating about the meta-ontology of intuitional constructivism.

In this, intuitional constructivism is most reminiscent, among extant meta-ontological positions, of Bennett’s (2009) ‘epistemicism’. According to Bennett, ontological disputes are not verbal, but there is ‘little justification’ for either believing or disbelieving an ontological statement of the form ‘there are Fs’.⁴⁶ In consequence, a dismissive attitude towards ontological disputes is appropriate, albeit on epistemological rather than semantic grounds. This is quite similar to the epistemic deflationism inherent in intuitional constructivism just mentioned. On both views, there is little justification to choose among ontological theories – as Bennett (*Ib.*, 57) puts it, it is “epistemically inappropriate to fight tooth and nail about whether there are tables”. However, the reason there is *little* justification, rather than *no* justification, is different in each view. For Bennett, the reason is that theoretical virtues that go beyond the accommodation of data (such as simplicity, elegance, conservatism, etc.) can still favor one ontological theory over another. Within a constructivist framework, however, theoretical virtues do not affect the *believability* of a theory, though they may affect its overall *acceptability* (see van

⁴⁶ According to Wilson (forthcoming), this sort of epistemicism also captures Carnap’s (1953) deep motivation for ontological anti-realism. Wilson seems to be sympathetic to this kind of epistemicism.

Fraassen 1980, ch. 4).⁴⁷ However, for a constructivist in meta-ontology, there are nonetheless data that bear on the choice among ontological theories, namely intuitive verdicts. It is just that these data are *modest*, in that they concern only the nature of our concepts and what falls under them, not – at least not in the first instance – the nature of the entities that those concepts pick out.⁴⁸

What is the point of doing ontology, if intuitional constructivism is correct, so that ontology is epistemologically deflated in this way? The answer is that it is still valuable to articulate explicitly, and systematize as much as possible, the ontology implicit in our folk conceptual scheme. Doing this would be a major contribution to what Strawson (1959) called ‘descriptive metaphysics’. Granted, this kind of project is not as intellectually exciting as discovering the mind-independent, conceptual-scheme-independent structure of reality would be. But it is epistemically valuable in two ways. First, articulation and systematization of folk ontology generates increased *understanding*: the folk theory of what there is becomes more transparent to itself. For example, a general account of mereological composition that returned the intuitive verdicts in core cases would make us understand better folk ontology’s take on the compositional structure of reality. Second, articulation and systematization of folk ontology enables us to revisit difficult or borderline cases and produce more definitive verdicts about them. For example, it might clear up the fragile status of shadows, holes, rainbows and the like, putative entities on which untutored intuition is often uncertain.⁴⁹

To conclude, in section 1 I presented what I called the ‘superficial’ argument for common-sense ontology: the argument whose first premise is superficialism in meta-ontology, whose second premise is the principle of charity, and whose conclusion is common-sense ontology. We can now appreciate a different argument: the first premise is constructivism in meta-ontology, the second premise is

⁴⁷ Recall that acceptance of a scientific theory, according to constructive empiricism, involves as belief only commitment to the theory’s empirical virtues, its accommodation of the evidence. The theory’s theoretical virtues are not something accepting a theory make us committed to by way of belief.

⁴⁸ It is possible to hold that certain entities are such that learning about the concepts that pick them out will serve to learn about them to. In my view, this is the case for certain response-dependent properties. It is also my view that many more properties are response-dependent than ontologists are typically inclined to think. I will not argue for any of this here.

⁴⁹ It may be objected that this line on the point of doing ontology could very well be, and in fact probably is, shared by Hirsch. However, there is no special reason for intuitional constructivism to offer an account of the point of doing ontology that is significantly (or at all) different from Hirsch’s. The key difference between Hirsch’s superficialism and intuitional constructivism is that only the former casts ontological disputes as merely verbal. It is an advantage of intuitional constructivism that it can provide the very same account of the point of doing ontology without having to cast ontological disputes as merely verbal in this way.

the thesis that ontology's (distinctive) data are normal singular modest intuitions, and the conclusion is common-sense ontology. Call this the *constructive argument for common-sense ontology*.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this paper has been to articulate the constructive argument for common-sense ontology, as well as to argue for its superiority over the superficial argument for common-sense ontology. The superficial argument has been the subject of sustained discussion among ontologists, mainly in their capacity as meta-ontologists, but my contention is that there is in fact a *better* argument to the same conclusion. It will be noted that I nowhere claimed that the constructive argument is *sound*; merely that the likelihood it turns out to be sound is not insignificant, and is in any case higher than the superficial argument's. The reason it is more likely to turn out sound is that while the supporting premises of the two arguments (the principle of charity and thesis about ontology's distinctive data) are both highly plausible, the central premise of the superficial argument – the meta-ontological one – is considerably less plausible than that of the constructive argument: as I have argued in section 2, there are many reasons to prefer constructivism over superficialism in meta-ontology. The reason I nonetheless did not claim that the constructive argument is sound is that I have nowhere argued that constructivism is superior to *realism* in meta-ontology. As I noted in passing, I did not argue for this both because this would require its own undertaking and because I am simply not persuaded that constructivism is in fact superior to realism in meta-ontology. What I am persuaded of, however, is that constructivism is the best version of anti-realism in meta-ontology that creates an important, straightforward and plausible case for common-sense ontology.*

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