

Book Review

Austere Realism: Contextual Semantics Meets Minimal Ontology, by Terence Horgan and Matjaž Potrč. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Pp. 232. H/b £22.95, P/b £11.95.

In this interesting and wide-ranging book, Horgan and Potrč (hereafter, H&P) offer a case study of how to navigate the border between philosophy of language and metaphysics. On the metaphysics side, they argue for an austere ontology (*blobjectivism*) according to which all that exists is just a single concrete particular, namely, the whole universe (the blobject), which has no proper parts. On the language side, they argue for a semantic theory (*contextual semantics*) according to which the truth of a statement or thought just is its being semantically correct under contextually operative semantic standards. Their semantic thesis allows H&P to avoid the following inconsistent pair:

(M) There are mountains in North America

(\neg M) There are no mountains

H&P want to affirm both (M) and (\neg M), even though the two are *prima facie* contradictory. H&P's strategy is to hold that there are two kinds of semantic standards that the truth of a statement is determined with respect to — DC (or direct correspondence) and IC (or indirect correspondence) standards. On DC standards, truth is direct correspondence with the facts, so (M) is true by DC standards just in case there are things referred to by 'mountains' that bear the relation referred to by 'in' to the thing referred to by 'North America'. On IC standards, truth is indirect correspondence with the facts, and on some IC standards (M) may be true even though there are no things referred to by 'mountains' that bear the relation referred to by 'in' to the thing referred to by 'North America'. Thus, in contexts governed by DC standards, (M) is false and (\neg M) is true, while in contexts governed by IC standards, (M) is true and (\neg M) is false. But in no context are both true together.

I applaud H&P's deep and intellectually honest discussion of these topics. However, in this short review I will focus primarily on the points of the book that left me puzzled or unpersuaded (see [Korman 2008](#) for an overview of the entire book).

1. Ontological austerity

Let us begin by exploring one of H&P's central arguments for an austere ontology (and hence for negative ontological claims like $(\neg M)$). Their argument involves two steps, using (1) as an instance of a more general schema:

- (1) If there are mountains, then there are vague objects
- (2) There are no vague objects

H&P conclude that there are not any mountains, people, staplers, cells, and so on. They go on to argue that all that exists is the blobject (the entire universe, which is perfectly precise) and various perfectly precise properties of it.

Since H&P never give an explicit argument for (1) (or the other instances of the general schema of which it is an instance), it is hard to evaluate their case for it. They sometimes write as if (1) is a commitment of 'reflective common sense', in the following way (p. 28). Take an arbitrary mountain, Mt. Whitney. Now, take the set S of the 'vastly many precise mereological sums of matter that are all equally good candidates for being Mt. Whitney'. They contend that reflective common sense holds that Mt. Whitney is not identical to any member of S —rather, it is a vague object. Since Mt. Whitney is an arbitrary mountain, (1) follows.

Yet it is not obvious that reflective common sense supports this conclusion. After all, it seems just as intuitively obvious (to me at least) to hold that while some member of S is identical to Mt. Whitney, none of them are determinately identical to it (see Evans 1978, Williams 2008, Barnes 2010 for more discussion of indeterminate identity):

- (3) a. $D(\exists x \in S : x = \textit{Whitney})$
- b. $\neg \exists x \in S : D(x = \textit{Whitney})$

On this 'non-determinate identity view', Whitney is not a vague object; rather, it is vague which thing in the world Whitney is. It is not obvious to me whether common sense favours the 'vague object view' or the 'non-determinate identity view'—mere appeal to intuitions do not settle the case one way or the other. Hence, I find this motivation for (1) unsatisfying.

Here is another reason to be sceptical of (1). There are several theories of vagueness according to which there are mountains and no vague objects. Since all such theories entail that (1) is false, a satisfactory defence of (1) would require arguing against all of them. Now, H&P *do* argue against some competing theories of vagueness. For instance, they argue against classical supervaluationism and epistemicism on the grounds that both incur commitments to sharp transitions in sorites sequences, and that this is inconsistent with the essence of vagueness (p. 26). However, there are moves an epistemicist might make in response. First off, it is not obvious why we

should accept the absence of sharp transitions as essential to vagueness in the first place. Certainly, the epistemicist incurs some (perhaps significant) cost to predicting that there are sharp transitions in sorites sequences — a point that is well appreciated by epistemicists like Williamson (1994) and Sorensen (1988, 2001) — but it is far from obvious to me that this prediction is sufficient to render epistemicism false. For what it's worth, I am more confident that epistemicism is a possible candidate theory of vagueness than I am that the absence of sharp transitions is part of the essence of vagueness. Secondly, even if the absence of sharp transitions were the essence of vagueness (a big *if*), an epistemicist might respond by holding that, contrary to our commonsense reflections, nothing whatsoever is vague. Taking this line, the epistemicist might then propose her view as an error theory of vagueness, explaining all the features of language and thought that are seemingly vague in terms of ignorance. On either strategy, the epistemicist could agree with H&P that there are no vague objects (since that would require 'strong logical incoherence', see pp. 26–7), but go on to accept that there are mountains (albeit perfectly precise ones with unknowable boundary conditions).

Interestingly, H&P think that a version of supervaluationism is true (they call it transvaluationism) and according to it, strictly speaking, there are no mountains (p. 84). This is because they think that, on supervaluationism, 'truth is not a matter of direct correspondence' with the world; rather 'truth is an indirect form of correspondence, involving multiple mappings from vague singular terms and predicates to the world — multiple ways of forging word-world relations each of which reflects an eligible precisification of a statement's vague vocabulary' (p. 84). This raises issues having to do with what direct and indirect correspondence semantic standards are that I will address in section 2, so I will set this matter aside for now.

H&P argue for (2) as follows. For an object or property to be vague, there must be a boundaryless sorites sequence involving it. A boundaryless sorites sequence is a sequence of items with two properties:

- (i) There are some items in the sequence which have status F and some which have status $\neg F$, but none which have both statuses
- (ii) Each item in the sequence has the same status as its immediate neighbors

There cannot be any boundaryless sorites sequences unless there can be true contradictions. There are no true contradictions (H&P assume — no argument is given here against the dialetheist). Therefore, there cannot be any vague objects.

My response to this argument is to reiterate my response on behalf of the epistemicist above: it is unclear why we should accept H&P's proposed essential feature of vagueness. In this case, perhaps a defender of ontological vagueness could argue that it is enough to account for the vagueness of F_{ness}

by holding that it gives rise to an *indeterminate* sorites sequence, where any such sequence has two properties:

- (i*) It is determinately the case that there are some items in the sequence which have status F and some which have status $\neg F$, but none which have both statuses
- (ii*) There are items in the sequence whose status is indeterminate, such that it is indeterminate which of some set of possible cutoffs is the point at which there are immediate neighbors one of which is F and the other $\neg F$

Unlike boundaryless sorites sequences, there can be indeterminate sorites sequences (see Akiba 2004, Barnes and Williams 2011). Now, if H&P insist that ontological vagueness requires boundaryless sorites sequences, then it seems open to the defender of ontological vagueness to concede in that case that nothing whatsoever is vague (in H&P's sense) and then offer an error theory of why it seems that things are vague (in that sense). Either way, I am not convinced about (2).

2. Contextual semantics

The primary motivation for H&P's theory of contextual semantics is that it provides a way of saving many of the claims of reflective common sense in the face of its seeming commitment to an austere ontology, as we saw at the outset. This may seem extravagant—we might think that we should not draw linguistic conclusions from ontological theses. However, this characterization is not completely fair to H&P. We might simplify their argument as follows: ($\neg M$) is true (and so on for many such negative ontological claims), yet the vast majority of ordinary speakers of English would endorse (M) as true; so either the vast majority of ordinary speakers are wrong, or contextual semantics is true. H&P find contextual semantics the better of these two alternatives. Thus, H&P's motivation for contextual semantics is *partly* ontological and *partly* linguistic—they aim to vindicate the truth-conditional intuitions of native speakers, even though their ontological views prevent them from doing so in the most straightforward way.

However, it should be emphasized how radical H&P's claims are: they claim that every sentence is context-dependent, including sentences like (4) which only contain logical vocabulary (pp. 60–3):

- (4) There are two things

They even claim that the kind of context dependence exhibited by (4) persists across contexts in which the domain of its existential quantifier remains constant (see pp. 62–3). H&P attempt to allay these concerns by citing several surprising instances of context dependence uncovered in Lewis's 1979 discussion of how the 'conversational score' changes in response

to what is said in the course of a conversation. But even granting the context-dependence of possessives, definite descriptions, quantificational determiners, modals, gradable adjectives, and so on (as many linguists and philosophers of language, including yours truly, are happy to do), one might still worry about there being an additional kind of context-dependence that persists even between contexts which settle the semantic value of all such expressions. For H&P, this kind of context dependence just is the dependence of the truth of the statement or thought on the prevailing semantic standards in the context.

Before we accept this radical context dependence, we should assess what actual linguistic data it is supposed to explain. H&P do not spend much time on this issue, but their example of Carnap and the Polish logician seems to be a case they think tells in favour of contextual semantics (pp. 60–6). Confronted with the same things, Carnap counts three objects on the table (O_1 , O_2 , and O_3) while the Polish logician counts seven (O_1 , O_2 , and O_3 , plus their mereological sums):

- (5) a. Carnap: There are three objects.
b. PL: There are seven objects.

H&P note (i) there is some pull to say that both speak truly (in their respective contexts — though one might wonder what we should say when they are face to face, yet (ii) they nonetheless disagree about how many objects there are. However, it is not clear that we have both of these intuitions simultaneously, and if in fact when we accept (i) we reject (ii) and vice versa, we would not need contextual semantics to explain this. For instance, perhaps, when we focus on (i) we think that Carnap and the Polish logician assert different (and compatible) propositions, owing to their claims being about different domains of objects. But we are inclined to accept (ii) because we think, were their claims about a common subject matter (some relevant domain), it could not be the case that both claims be true. Indeed, H&P themselves admit that the conflict feels like ‘no big deal’ once (i) is recognized, and when plumping for (ii) they point out that no one could accept both claims at once. But do we really have intuitions distinguishing a genuine disagreement that is ‘no big deal’ from no disagreement at all? (Their reaction to this case is reminiscent of the literature on faultless disagreement — see Kölbel 2002, 2004; Lasersohn 2005; Wright 2006, Glanzberg 2007; Richard 2008, MacFarlane 2007, 2014; Cappelen and Hawthorne 2010 for discussion.) If this is the kind of linguistic data contextual semantics is designed to predict, this seems to me to be a quite shaky edifice on which to build such radical theory.

However, I wonder whether H&P actually need contextual semantics to do the work they want (namely, avoid endorsing contradictions like (M) and ($\neg M$)). To illustrate an alternative, let us consider an example H&P present on p. 41:

- (B) Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony has four movements

The truth of (B) by IC standards does not require that there be something denoted by the expression ‘Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony’ that has the property denoted by ‘has four movements’. However, this does not mean that the truth of (B) by IC standards does not require anything of the world. H&P suggest that its truth is secured by other ‘more indirect, connections between the sentence and the world’ (p. 41). For instance, it might require that Beethoven’s and others’ cognitive states have certain properties. Ultimately, it will require (perhaps) that the blobject have certain properties F_1, \dots, F_n instantiated *R-ishly* (‘at its *R*-regions’, see especially pp. 176–8). They explicitly note that this ‘constitutes the *truth conditions* of the thought/statement’ (p40, emphasis theirs) — though perhaps for vague sentences there will be a one-to-many mapping between them and various candidate truth conditions (at least, this is consonant with their endorsement of *transvaluationism*, as I understand it — see especially pp. 78–88). However, they also hold that the statement of its truth conditions is not a statement of what (B) means (p. 43); this latter commitment allows them to maintain that the success of their project is not bound up with the project of providing meaning-preserving paraphrases of ontologically problematic statements (see also pp. 130–3 and p. 141).

Given our schematic truth conditions for (B) stated above, the truth of (B) by IC standards only requires that the blobject have certain properties F_1, \dots, F_n instantiated *R-ishly*. However, the truth of (B) by DC standards requires that there be something denoted by the expression ‘Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony’ that has the property denoted by ‘has four movements’. Since there is only one thing, the blobject, and it is neither a symphony nor does it have four movements, (B) is false by DC standards. A strange consequence of this view is that in ordinary contexts, there is a gap between what we take ourselves to be talking about (Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, right?) and what things in the world make our claims true (features of the blobject). Only in contexts of ‘serious ontological inquiry’ does this gap disappear. Offhand, one might have thought the reverse should be the case — the gulf only reveals itself once we do serious ontology. Fleshing out this offhand thought will lead to my alternative proposal.

My alternative is to take H&P’s truth conditions for (B) as telling us what it is for Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony to have four movements. That is, after engaging in some serious ontology, rather than find out that there are no symphonies and thus that (B) is false, I find out instead that for Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony to have four movements *just is* for the blobject to exhibit certain properties! On this view, (B) is true just in case the blobject has certain properties F_1, \dots, F_n instantiated *R-ishly full stop* (not by IC standards or DC standards, etc). This claim is compatible with also holding that the truth conditions of (B) are not revealed by mere reflection on the meanings of its words and their mode of combination. The situation (as I am spinning it) is just like our situation with respect to natural kind terms like ‘water’. The

truth conditions of sentences containing ‘water’ are not entirely revealed by our semantic intuitions — once we discover that water is H_2O we learn something about the truth conditions of sentences containing ‘water’. My suggestion is that we might understand H&P’s metaphysical programme in the same way, as revealing the true nature of things rather than that all of our ordinary claims are false by some semantic standards (cf. Chalmers 2005, Rayo 2013).

I am guessing that H&P would not accept this co-opting of their metaphysical programme, and I will not be able to anticipate and address all the problems they may find with it. To say a bit in its defence, though, here is how it handles the issue of (M) and (\neg M) discussed at the outset.

(M) There are mountains in North America

(\neg M) There are no mountains

Given my alternative proposal, it seems that (M) and (\neg M) cannot both be true, so how can H&P accept both? On my version of their theory, (M) is true and (\neg M) is false. But then how can we state H&P’s thesis of ontological austerity? Well, we cannot describe it by saying things like:

(6) Only one thing exists

But so what? We can still understand what their picture of reality is like — we might describe it like this: everything that is not the blobject is a property of the blobject. And this picture of reality is still interesting and coherent, even if we cannot use sentences like (6) to truly express this thesis. I leave this as a question for H&P: Why contextual semantics rather than this alternative?

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