Metaphysical Disputes and Metalinguistic Negotiation

in *Analytic Philosophy*
July 2016

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The period after Quine brought a new heyday for metaphysics, with proliferating disputes and an ever-widening range of views about what exists. But more recently, the complete failures of convergence, recondite nature of many debates, and lack of clarity about the epistemology of metaphysics have led to renewed suspicions about metaphysical disputes. The main threat to taking these debates seriously and at face-value has been thought to lie in the idea that many or most metaphysical disputes turn out to be merely 'verbal disputes', roughly in the sense that each disputant can be charitably interpreted as speaking a language in which what she says is true (Hirsch 2002a, 2002b, 2009, 2011). The main focus of those who hope to defend serious metaphysics, as a result, has been to attack the idea that metaphysical disputes are merely verbal disputes (Van Inwagen 1998, 2009; Sider 2009, 2011).

I have argued elsewhere (2015) that there is another option for deflationists, separate from the verbal disputes idea: the idea that ontological disputes (at least taken in what Carnap would have called the 'internal' sense) are typically 'easy' to resolve—so easy in fact that the drawn out disputes about them must be seen as misguided. Since this approach doesn't rely on the idea that the disputes are merely verbal, or the related idea of quantifier variance, it remains untouched by most recent defenses of serious metaphysics. I will begin by looking at these two deflationary options, and trying to weigh up some of their advantages and disadvantages.

But both sorts of deflationism face a common criticism from their opponents: that they can't give an adequate interpretation of what disputants in serious metaphysics are up to. For the verbal disputes idea leads one to treat the disputants as each uttering a trivial truth in her own language; while the easy ontological approach sees the eliminativist in most ontological disputes as uttering an obvious falsehood. Neither, it is said, can interpret what serious ontologists are doing in a way that can preserve the idea that there is a real disagreement between those on opposite sides of a metaphysical debate that is non-trivial and worth having.

Now of course to a certain extent this is a demand the deflationist can brush off: after all, her whole point is that there is something amiss in these debates—so she is not obliged to respect the practitioner's entire self-conception of what they're up to, or to show that it all makes perfect sense. She is going to diagnose them as making some mistake somewhere.

Nonetheless, even if we remain suspicious that something has gone wrong—particularly in recondite recent debates about the existence of composite objects or mereological sums—it would clearly be better if the deflationist had something to say to

account for the felt disagreement, depth and importance of at least many classical debates in metaphysics, such as debates about personal identity or the existence of free will. I think something more can be said, and most of this paper will be devoted to developing the idea that many metaphysical disputes[1] may be understood as involved in what Alexis Burgess, David Plunkett and Tim Sundell have called 'metalinguistic negotiation'.[2] The resulting view gives us a new pragmatic form of deflationism that provides a way of understanding what serious ontologists are up to that doesn't render metaphysical disputes pointless. At the same time, it leaves us with us a rather different view of what their point might be, in a way that could lead us to reconfigure our understanding of what we can and should do in metaphysics.

1. The Verbal Disputes idea, its goals, and its difficulties

Informally, the idea that metaphysical disputes are merely verbal is that "nothing is substantively at stake in these questions beyond the correct use of language…" (Hirsch 2005, 67), that the disputes are merely 'shallow', or "pointless" (Chalmers 2011, 5). Even the standard examples that are used to introduce the idea of verbal disputes seem chosen to convey an air of triviality: Hirsch appeals to the example of disputes about whether a glass is a cup (2005, 69); Bennett discusses the case of whether some odd alcoholic concoction in a V-shaped glass is a martini (2009, 50); Chalmers discusses whether, in James' famous case, the man goes 'round the squirrel' (2011, 515-6). It would be hard to find 'disputes' that are more shallow, trivial, pointless. So, as Matthew McGrath puts it, "if we came to conclude that ontological disputes were one and all verbal, we might understandably conclude that ontology is silly, a waste of time" (2008, 482).

It was Eli Hirsch (2002a, 2007, 2009) who brought into mainstream discussion the idea that many metaphysical disputes are merely verbal disputes. In a verbal dispute, as Karen Bennett puts it, "each side ought to acknowledge that there is a plausibly charitable interpretation of the language associated with the other side's position which will make that position come out as true" (Bennett 2009, 51). Admittedly, externalist considerations might lead us to conclude that the disputants in typical debates *in fact* use terms with *the same* meaning—if the meanings of their terms are determined by the usage of the linguistic community and they belong to the same linguistic community. But this doesn't affect the key point at issue: we can still think of each disputant *as if* they belonged to their own linguistic community, and diagnose the dispute as merely verbal if (so-considered) each side would agree that the opponent speaks the truth in their own language (Hirsch 2009, 239-40).[3]

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[1] Of course this isn't to say that the deflationist does or must understand *all* metaphysical disputes as involving metalinguistic negotiation. The idea instead is that this provides an additional tool for the deflationist, in her (perhaps diverse) assessments of metaphysical debates. I will return to this point below.

[2] See Burgess and Plunkett (2013a and 2013b), Plunkett and Sundell (2013) and Plunkett (2015).

[3] More formally, Hirsch suggests, we can define verbal disputes as follows: Two parties A and B are having a verbal dispute iff, were A and B to inhabit an A community and B-community (respectively) in which everyone exhibits the same sort of linguistic behavior that A and B actually exhibit, then on the correct view of linguistic interpretation, A and B would agree that both speak the truth in their own language. (2009, 238-40).

It is constraints of interpretive charity, Hirsch argues, that should lead us to interpret each disputant as saying something true in their own language. For on Hirsch's view, the principle of charity encourages us to interpret a community in a way that makes many of their shared assertions come out as true, or at least reasonable (2005, 70-71):

> Central to linguistic interpretation is the presumption that the correct interpretation is the one that makes people's use of language as reasonable as possible. In interpreting a language there is therefore an overwhelming, if in principle defeasible, presumption that typical speakers make perceptual assertions that are reasonably accurate, and that they do not assert relatively simple sentences that are a priori false. (2009, 240)

If we took van Inwagen, say, as speaking Standard English when he denies that tables exist, it seems we would have to convict him of making perceptual errors or otherwise asserting obvious falsehoods. However, if we aim to be charitable (on these criteria of charity) we can instead see him as speaking truths in his own language—one in which all of his ontological utterances are true (Hirsch 2002a, 69).

Where metaphysical disputes about existence are in question, making good on the idea that the disputants are each uttering truths in their own language is generally held to require accepting that each is using the quantifier (and related terms like 'existence') with a different meaning.[4] Ted Sider (2009) argues that if we interpret disputants as meaning different things (and so talking past each other) when one asserts and the other denies 'tables exist', we must locate the source of the differences in their meanings at the level of the quantifier, rather than the predicate 'table'. For these disputes can be restated without using a noun like 'table' at all, in terms that use only quantifiers, truth-functional connectives, and the identity predicate (Sider 2009, 390). Assuming that there is no equivocation on truth-functional connectives or the identity predicate—if there is any shift of meaning it must be in the quantifier. So the idea that disputes about existence are merely verbal is closely tied to the idea, also popularized by Eli Hirsch (2002a, 2007, 2009), that the quantifier may vary in meaning. Hirsch himself doesn't think the English quantifier actually varies in meaning. But he does think that there are many equally good ways one could use the quantifier. As a result, when we interpret our eliminativist and realist about tables charitably, we may interpret each of them as if they were each speaking in a community that used the quantifier in a way to make their claims true, making their dispute merely verbal.

While Hirsch has applied the idea primarily to disputes about the ontology of physical objects, clearly the strategy could be wielded elsewhere—say, for debates in modal metaphysics—as well: one might charitably interpret, say, disputants about personal identity as each employing a different concept of 'person', perhaps one understanding it in psychological terms and the other in biological terms, and aptly laying out what follows from it.[5] Then, if Hirsch's approach is correct, in these cases, too, we

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[4] Of course neo-Meinongians, who reject equating the quantifier with existence, will reject the link between seeing existence disputes as verbal and accepting quantifier variance. Thanks to Suki Finn for making this point.

[5] Burgess and Plunkett (2013a, 1092-3) aptly analyze certain debates about personal identity—say about whether one survives a 'teleportation device' as debates in what they call 'conceptual ethics'—

could charitably interpret the disputants as each speaking truths in their own language (this time, in ways that didn't require supposing that they were using the quantifier, rather than key noun terms, differently).

Unsurprisingly, the idea that ontological disputes are merely verbal disputes has brought out the best in serious ontologists hoping to defend their practices, and so has come under a great deal of criticism. One major line of criticism to treating debates about *existence* as merely verbal comes from those who doubt that we can make sense of quantifier variance. Indeed much of the discussion in meta-ontology has centered on the question of whether or not to accept quantifier variance. In opposition to the quantifier variance view, Peter van Inwagen has argued that since existentially quantified statements may be paraphrased in terms that use only numbers ('the number of Ps is non-zero') or logical particles (disjunction), the quantifier must be univocal, given that logical particles and number terms are (2009, 482-4). Ted Sider has argued that regardless of whether the English language quantifier is univocal, disputing ontologists can agree to speak a new language, Ontologese, in which the quantifier is stipulated to 'carve at the logical joints of the world', and thereby ensure that their dispute is not merely verbal (2009).[6] If we can't make sense of quantifier variance, then we will have trouble treating debates about existence as merely verbal. And if we can make sense of the idea of an Ontologese quantifier, we can revive serious debates about existence even if there are many potential meanings for the English quantifier.[7] But doubts about quantifier variance do not undermine efforts to treat *modal* metaphysical debates (about the nature of art, persistence conditions for artifacts, identity conditions for persons…) as verbal disputes.

Other objections, however, would apply equally well to attempted diagnoses of debates as verbal disputes, whether they concern existence or modal matters. It is often suggested that it can't really be charitable to interpret ontological disputes as merely verbal. For even if doing so meets requirements of charity in enabling us to see the disputants as uttering truths, it doesn't give us a way to charitably understand what they are *doing* in engaging in their disputes. First, if there is one thing the disputants on all sides agree on, it's that they are really disagreeing; and all *intend* to mean the same thing by their sentences when, say, Lynne Baker asserts that there are tables and Peter van Inwagen says there aren't. The verbal disputes idea is often criticized as being unable to capture this intuition of disagreement,[8] and as taking the disputants to fail in their intentions to use terms in the same way while (rather inexplicably) failing to notice this (Balcerak Jackson 2014, 43).[9]

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that is, debates about how we should refine our concept of a person in light of technological advances.

[6] Sider argues that the Ontologese proposal threatens easy ontology in a different way: by undermining the claim that there are analytic entailments that can be used in easy ontological arguments. I respond to this threat in (2015, Chapter 10).

[7] For doubts about the Ontologese quantifier, however, see my (2015, Chapter 11).

[8] Below I will argue that the metalinguistic negotiation idea gives them a way to capture it.

[9] As Brendan Balcerak Jackson puts it, "It would be astounding to learn that merely verbal disputes over 'pain' or 'material object' have somehow managed to survive undetected across decades or even centuries of discussion… The burden of proof on a charge of mere verbalness in such a case should be extremely high" (2014, 43). Balcerak Jackson argues elsewhere that consideration of the demands of charity to perception and charity to understanding don't give us sufficient reason for holding that the

John Horden develops a powerful argument that considerations of charity, properly understood, should actually lead us to deny that the relevant disputes are merely verbal. Hirsch draws primarily on charity to truth: the idea that (ceteris paribus) we should interpret the speech of others in ways that makes what they say true, or at least reasonable, and that doesn't attribute to them widespread perceptual errors or assertions of relatively simple sentences that are *a priori* false (2009, 240). But, as others have pointed out, this may not exhaust all there is to charity. For charity includes not merely aiming to make the speaker's assertions true (or reasonable), and avoiding attributions of simple *a priori* errors or widespread perceptual mistakes, but also aiming to interpret their *desires, intentions,* and other attitudes as reasonable (Horden 2014, 231). If we interpret the parties to the material composition debate, say, as each speaking a truth in their own language, we leave them each uttering a trivial and obvious truth (see also Balcerak Jackson 2014, 47). As a result, their utterance would be entirely uninformative, leaving us unable to give an account of what they are *doing* in making the utterance that can make sense of their desires and intentions. As Horden puts it, "Hirsch can only account for the meanings he assigns to their utterances by uncharitably ascribing highly unreasonable intentions to these philosophers" (2014, 234). In broader strokes, we might say, those who diagnose ontological debates as mere 'verbal disputes' give a charitable interpretation of what the disputants are *saying* (in a way that leaves each uttering a truth) at the expense of having difficulties in giving a charitable interpretation of what they are *doing*.

2. The Easy Alternative

While most of the discussion about metaontological deflationism has focused on the prospects for seeing the disputes as merely verbal, as I have argued elsewhere (2015, Chapter 1) there is an alternative way of deflating debates about existence questions. The alternative way is, roughly, Carnap's.[10] The primary advantages of this sort of deflationary approach over serious metaphysics are epistemological: for we need acknowledge no methods for answering metaphysical questions other that are (in Sider's sense) 'epistemically metaphysical' (2011, 187)—that is, resolvable neither by direct empirical methods nor by conceptual analysis.

Carnap of course held that there are two ways of asking and answering questions "concerning the existence or reality of entities": *internal questions,* asked "within the framework", and *external questions* "concerning the existence or reality *of the system of entities as a whole"* (1950/1956, 206). Following Huw Price (2009), I have argued that one should interpret internal questions simply as questions asked *using* the relevant terms of the linguistic/conceptual framework (2015, 30-45). *Using* the relevant terms of the

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disputes are merely verbal—as the disputant with a controversial view might be interpreted not as making a simple perceptual error, but rather as making a mistake in some difficult reasoning and reflection on the basis of that perception. (2013, 429) Secondly, as Brendan Balcerak Jackson points out, Hirsch's appeals to charity make no contribution to a 'rationalizing explanation', in explaining the ways in which each party contributes to a debate, whether their responses are most reasonably construed as conflicting responses to a single question or consistent responses to different questions (2014, 47).

[10] Although Carnap himself is often described as a defender of quantifier variance, I have argued elsewhere (2015, 69-80) that this is a mistake.

framework, with the rules by which they are introduced to our language, internal existence questions are easy to answer. That is to say not that they can be answered quickly without much effort, but rather they may be answered either by straightforward empirical means (1950/1956, 207) (say, in the case of internal questions in the thing language, like 'Did King Arthur actually live?' or 'are there really any centaurs') or by "logical analysis based on the rules for the new expressions" (1950/1956, 209) (in the case of questions like 'is there a prime number greater than a hundred' (1950/1956, 208-9)). From answers to any of these internal questions, we can make easy inferences that speak directly to the ontological question: from 'there is a prime number greater than a hundred' we can easily infer: 'there is a number', and so answer the question of the existence of numbers affirmatively (1950/1956, 209). I have defended this approach extensively elsewhere (2015).

This way of understanding (internal) existence questions gives us a different way of articulating a sense that something is amiss in many standard ontological debates: debates about the existence of numbers, on this understanding—taken as *using* the relevant number terms and disagreeing about the answer to the *internal* question—would be pointless. But here the pointlessness arises not because the disputants are most charitably interpreted as talking past each other, and each uttering a truth in her own language (on this view, the eliminativist utters a falsehood). Instead, the debates are pointless because the question is so *easy* and *obvious* to answer (with a 'yes') that the serious debates about the existence of numbers or mereological sums are out of place.

While Carnap's focus was on questions about the existence of entities of various kinds, a similar view can be applied to questions about the natures, identity or persistence conditions of things of various kinds (persons, works of art, artifacts…). As I have argued elsewhere in defending 'modal normativism', such modal metaphysical questions (again taken internally) are 'easy' to answer via analysis of how the concept actually works, of the rules it follows (in some cases, as combined with empirical facts) (2007b, 2013). Again, that is not to say that answering these questions is always easy in the sense of being quick and uncontroversial—conceptual analysis may be a difficult matter, and empirical work often is. In both cases, to say that the disputes may be resolved 'easily' is to say that resolving them needn't involve any mysterious insights into modal or metaphysical reality, or any methods that are 'epistemically metaphysical'—nothing more mysterious than the methods involved in acquiring empirical knowledge and engaging in conceptual analysis.

Deflating metaphysical debates by seeing them as 'easily' settled in this sense enables us to avoid the first two challenges leveled at the verbal disputes idea. First, (as I have argued elsewhere (2015)) it enables us to entirely avoid debates about quantifier variance. Defenders of mainstream ontology have seen defeating quantifier variance, or more broadly, defeating the idea that ontological disputes are merely verbal, as *the* challenge to meet (see also Bennett 2009). The 'easy' way of understanding internal questions, however, shows that there is a distinct threat to serious ontology that does not rely on the idea that the quantifier does or could vary in meaning. On the contrary, Carnap seems to have defended the idea (later defended by van Inwagen (2009)) that the

quantifier is a *formal* term with fixed core rules of use.[11] As a result, the easy approach is immune to all of the defenses of serious ontology that have focused on defeating the threat of quantifier variance.[12]

The second objection to the verbal disputes idea lay in the thought that it was not *really* charitable to interpret the disputants as speaking truths in their own language: that it could not capture the disputant's *intention* to be using their terms in the same way as each other, nor their sense that they were *really disagreeing*. But the easy ontologist can account for all that: on this view, the realist who says there are numbers and the eliminativist who denies there are may be seen as using their terms in the same sense, and as engaged in a literal disagreement at the level of semantic content: one asserts a proposition that the other denies.[13] So we do remain true to their intentions and self-conception in certain ways: for they think of themselves as using words in their usual way, with their usual meanings intact, with the eliminativists denying exactly what realists are asserting, and saying something they expect ordinary speakers will find surprising. I will leave open here the question of which deflationist is, at this level, more charitable: the quantifier variantist can treat them each as speaking more truths, but must reject their view that they are debating and using terms the same way; the easy ontologist treats one as speaking truly and the other as speaking falsely, while holding onto the view that they are debating and using terms the same way.

But there is a corresponding cost, not unlike the third problem raised against the verbal disputes view. As we saw above, the accusation was that the verbal disputes idea leaves us unable to make sense of *what the disputants are doing* when they make their utterances—for it seems to reduce each to uttering trivial truths that would be entirely uninformative and pointless. The friend of easy ontology, of course, does not take both disputants to be uttering trivial truths. She takes one (generally the realist) to be uttering a trivial truth, and the other (generally the eliminativist) to be uttering a trivial falsehood. Now of course we can make some sense of why one would utter a trivial *truth* in contexts in which it has been publicly denied—so the one who utters a trivial truth may often be seen as doing something sensible at least in the context of such debates. The tougher side of the challenge is making sense of what disputants who utter a trivial falsehood can be doing. They can't be treated as incompetent speakers (at least, they seem to use terms in the normal way outside the philosophy room) or as making perceptual errors. And so it does seem that the easy ontologist faces similar difficulties in charitably *interpreting what such serious ontologists are up to*—not in interpreting *what they are* saying but *what they are doing*.

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[11] Of course this doesn't mean that Carnap would deny the trivial point that one might attach different meanings to the symbol 'E', or (given the principle of tolerance) develop alternative logical systems in which it might be stipulated to have different meanings. See my (2015, 69-80).

[12] There are undeniably some additional liabilities that come with taking this approach to deflation—most notably a commitment to there being conceptual truths that we can use in making trivial arguments to the ontological conclusions. This is an idea I have defended elsewhere (2007a, Chapter 2 and 2015, Chapter 7).

[13] Thus the easy ontologist, unlike the quantifier variantist, may treat ontological debates as what Plunkett and Sundell call 'canonical disputes' (2013, 9).

3. Metalinguistic Negotiation

As we have seen, despite their differences, the verbal disputes view and the easy ontology view face a similar challenge: charitably making sense of what the disputants in serious metaphysical debates are doing, in a way that makes their behavior seem reasonable.

Even Carnap thought that we couldn't really interpret what serious ontologists were doing as aiming to give a literal answer to the internal question. Since the internal questions about the existence of general kinds of things are typically answered so easily in the affirmative:

> …nobody who meant the question 'Are there numbers' in the internal sense would either assert or even seriously consider a negative answer. This makes it plausible to assume that those philosophers who treat the question of the existence of numbers as a serious philosophical problem and offer lengthy arguments on either side, do not have in mind the internal question. (1950/1956, 209)

This of course is where the idea comes in that, though they express it in object-language terms, what serious ontologists are *doing* in uttering these claims (that might otherwise sound fairly baffling) can be more charitably understood as answering an *external* question. Now, as Carnap had it, there were two ways of understanding external questions: taken as 'factual' he took them to be pseudo-questions; but they can also be more charitably construed as *practical* questions about whether we should make use of the linguistic forms in question (1950/1956, 213). And this was also Carnap's preferred interpretation of what serious metaphysicians were up to:

> Those who raise the question of the reality of the thing world itself have perhaps in mind not a theoretical question as their formulation seems to suggest, but rather a practical question, a matter of a practical decision concerning the structure of our language. We have to make the choice whether or not to accept and use the forms of expression in the framework in question. (1950/1956, 207)

Carnap's suggestion here is often overlooked, or just given brief lip service. But recent work by David Plunkett and Tim Sundell (2013) has (without drawing explicitly on the Carnapian heritage) done a great deal to develop and motivate the idea that what look like factual debates may often be better seen as pragmatic disagreements. I will begin by describing their notion of 'metalinguistic negotiation', and then in the next section I'll discuss how it can be brought into service to help both sorts of deflationist solve their common problem.

Plunkett and Sundell's target is not metaontology, but metaethics—where it has often been assumed that in order to make sense of the idea that those arguing about an ethical issue are engaged in a genuine dispute, we must take them to use their moral terms with the same meanings.[14] Against this, they point out that in a great many ordinary contexts, we needn't think that speakers are giving literal expression of incompatible semantic contents to see them as genuinely disagreeing. For a great many debates can be best understood as involved in what they call 'metalinguistic negotiation': debates that revolve not around any other 'facts', but rather that involve negotiating the appropriate use of a piece of language:

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[14] Though also see Plunkett (2015) for application of the idea to certain metaphysical issues.

We use the term *metalinguistic negotiation* to refer to… those disputes wherein the speakers' metalinguistic use of a term does not simply involve exchanging factual information about language, but rather negotiating its appropriate use (2013, 15).

So, for example, (borrowing an example from Peter Ludlow (2008)) consider a debate on sports radio about whether the racehorse Secretariat should be counted as among the greatest athletes of all times. The dispute is not about any of the 'facts' about Secretariat's deeds; rather, one disputant denies that Secretariat is an athlete at all, while the other asserts it (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, 16). Even if we interpret the disputants as using the term 'athlete' in different ways (given their dispositions to apply/not apply it to non-human animals) and each speaking a truth in their own idiolect, we can still see them as involved in a genuine dispute: not at the level of literally asserting conflicting propositions, but rather at the level of what is pragmatics. For each speaker can be seen as advocating for ways the term 'athlete' *should* be used: whether it should be applied to non-human animals or reserved for humans. And such disputes may be very much worth having. For how we use words *matters,* given their relations to other aspects of our conceptual scheme, and to our non-verbal behavior. Treating an individual as an 'athlete', for example, is connected to a range of types of societal honors and rewards—so in asking whether non-human animals can legitimately be given the title, we are also negotiating how they are to be viewed and treated, and how we are to distribute the relevant rewards.

This case is by no means an outlier. In many, many cases, we become involved in heated debates that are not based in different empirical views, but rather reflect disagreements about how our terms *should* be used in a given context. Consider the use of 'torture'. In arguments about whether waterboarding is torture, the disputants may have no difference in their knowledge about its practice, its effects on the interrogated, etc. Yet it doesn't capture the depth and seriousness of the debate to simply say that the disputants are engaged in a pointless verbal dispute, talking past each other, in which one is using the US Justice Department definition and the other the United Nations definition (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, 19). Nor would it be better to take them as literally disagreeing by uttering competing propositions (say, if we took both to use the term with the United Nations definition), which must be trivially true on the one side, and false on the other. Much more is at stake here than can be captured either in the idea that they are engaged in a verbal dispute or that they are just uttering trivial truths or falsehoods.

What is at stake is how we are to regard and treat both the prisoners and the perpetrators of waterboarding:

By employing the word 'torture' in a way that excludes waterboarding, the speaker… communicates (though not via literal expression) the view that such a usage is appropriate to those legal or moral discussions [about how to treat prisoners]. In other words, she communicates the proposition that waterboarding itself is, in the relevant sense, unproblematic—a proposition that is, we submit, well worth arguing about. (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, 19)[15]

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[15] David Chalmers makes a similar observation that verbal issues "often have serious practical import", such that "there may be a serious practical question about what we *ought* to count as falling

Plunkett and Sundell mention many other cases of ordinary disputes that are best understood as metalinguistic negotiation: disputes about whether Missouri is in the Midwest, whether Pluto is a planet, whether the federal anti-drug effort is a war. One might extend the list indefinitely: whether the Oklahoma City bombing was terrorism, whether Orlan's performance-plastic-surgeries are art, whether work on Buddhism is philosophy, whether the long-term partner of a gay man's biological child is a dad, whether alcoholism is a disease or autism a disability…

Looking at these examples, we can notice some hallmarks of metalinguistic negotiations that make them particularly persistent and hard to resolve. First, where disputants are involved in a metalinguistic negotiation, the disputants may have no differences in their knowledge or beliefs about (other) facts, nor any sense that further discoveries might resolve things one way or the other. Second, such disputes typically don't go away even if the disputants agree about how the term is *actually* used. (This also captures the common intuition that such disputes are not resolvable by x-phi surveys that might help determine how subjects actually use the terms.) Third, the dispute may persist even if the disputants come to recognize that they are using the term in two different ways.[16]

Thus metalinguistic negotiations differ importantly from the traditional vision of 'verbal disputes'.[17] For verbal disputes can typically be resolved by figuring out 'who is speaking English'. Even if that can't be done (e.g. where the use of the English term is ambiguous), the dispute tends to go away once disputants recognize that they are using the term in different ways. Most importantly, unlike paradigmatic verbal disputes, many cases of metalinguistic negotiation involve disputes very much worth having. Far from the standard examples about whether a sweet cocktail is a martini or whether the man goes 'round the squirrel, these disputes are not trivial or shallow. Why not? In the cases of metalinguistic negotiation mentioned above, there is something significant at stake: how we treat the perpetrators and victims of the Oklahoma City bombing, or of waterboarding; how we evaluate, treat, interpret, and value the actions of Orlan and thereby reinforce or modify the canon of what we will consider valuing as art; how we define the confines of our discipline of philosophy—with consequences for what gets taught, published, read, who gets hired or tenured…; how we allocate the legal, moral and economic privileges given to those considered 'family'; what sorts of treatments insurance pays for, who is entitled to accommodations in schools, and so on. In each case, there is a great deal that is really at stake, and worth arguing about.

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into the extension of these terms"—mentioning terms like 'torture' and 'marriage' and 'murder' (2011, 516-7).

[16] These differ to some extent from the features Plunkett (2015, 847) cites as evidence of a metalinguistic negotiation. First (unlike Plunkett), I emphasize that the disputants may agree on other relevant facts and not see the dispute as resolvable by further discoveries. Second (unlike Plunkett) I do not take it as a central point evidence that speakers mean different things by at least one of the terms in the dispute. (I prefer to remain neutral on this, since I think we can equally diagnose metaphysical disputants as engaged in metalinguistic negotiation whether we think of them as using terms with different meanings—in the quantifier variance case—or with the same meaning—in the easy ontology case.)

[17] Plunkett (2015, 842) also gives reasons to think metalinguistic negotiations are not just a 'talking past'.

It is also crucial to note that, in treating these as metalinguistic negotiations, we are not saying that they are really disputes 'about words'. They are, in two crucial senses, worldly disputes. First, the literal semantic content of their sentences (expressed in the object language) is certainly world-oriented. I have argued that what is more interesting than the literal semantic content is the pragmatics—the ways in which speakers use these utterances to reinforce or alter the norms for using the terms in question. But even here, the wider import is again world oriented—since what is really at stake in the way we use terms is worldly issues, like those described above. This also makes sense of why disputants would resist the idea that their dispute is 'merely' verbal, just 'about language' and the like—why they have a strong (and accurate) sense that it is really about this horse, that crime, these books, those acts of cosmetic surgery, these families, those conditions.

4. Reading (some) metaphysical disputes as metalinguistic negotiations
The idea that our literal assertions often have the pragmatic function of metalinguistic negotiation gives deflationists of both sorts a new option for charitably making sense of what disputants in metaphysics are doing. As Plunkett and Sundell (2013) argue, once we see the possibility of a metalinguistic negotiation, there is no need to require that speakers use terms with the same meaning in order to allow that they may be involved in a genuine—and significant—dispute. So the fan of verbal disputes can get around the second problem—and hold that the disputants may be charitably interpreted as using key terms differently in ways that lead them to literally express compatible propositions, without giving up the idea that they may be involved in a genuine dispute at the level of pragmatics. As Delia Belleri puts it, the metalinguistic negotiation account may provide the "best way of explaining the persisting intuition of disagreement in the face of the presence of a verbal dispute" (forthcoming, 9 in draft). For there may be a genuine dispute even if it is not at the level of literal expression of conflicting semantic contents. Indeed, since the task was to make sense of what speakers in these debates are *doing,* it should come as no surprise that the answer comes from attending to pragmatics rather than semantics.

The easy ontologist, of course, could accept that the disputants literally express incompatible propositions, and so readily account for the appearance of disagreement. Nonetheless, as we have seen, the easy ontologist faces a similar problem of making sense of what disputants are *doing,* particularly where one utters (what the easy ontologist sees as) an obvious falsehood. But attention to pragmatics here and its role in the idea of metalinguistic negotiations gives the easy ontologist a new tool to make sense of what disputing metaphysicians—in at least some metaphysical debates—may be doing.

In daily life it is not uncommon to utter trivial or obvious truths or falsehoods. I walk late into a meeting I am supposed to be chairing and everyone keeps on chatting; "I am here now," I say. Children are climbing all over the desks and chairs in a classroom "This is not a playground", says the teacher. John invites me to his 60th birthday party and I say, "No way, you are not turning 60!" I observe police officers mistreating an arrested man in his cell and say "He is not an animal!" We do not utter these obvious truths (or falsehoods) in order to communicate their literal content (that would indeed be pointless). Rather, the obvious truth (or falsehood) of what is said triggers listeners to attend instead to the pragmatic point of the utterance: that the meeting should begin, that

the children should stop climbing, that I am surprised by John's age, that the man should be treated more humanely.[18]

In the case of metalinguistic negotiations, the utterances of trivial truths or falsehoods may similarly have a deeper *pragmatic* point: to press for ways in which the very linguistic/conceptual scheme used in expressing the obvious truth or falsehood is to be used. When the ACLU says that waterboarding is torture, they are not just uttering a trivial truth (given the United Nations definition), they are *advocating* for certain changes in the way we think about waterboarding, engage in it (or rather: that we cease to engage in it) and treat those involved in it (on either side). When a young man in the year 2000 said his biological father's life partner is his father, he is not to be seen as having uttered a literal falsehood (given what was then the current legal definition of 'parent'). Instead, he was pragmatically pressing for a change our usage, by drawing attention to the commonalities between this relationship and those that are recognized with the title and given the relevant social, legal, and economic benefits.

Can metaphysical debates really be seen in this light? Of course there is not space here to treat every metaphysical debate. Nor is the easy ontologist committed to seeing *every* debate in metaphysics as tacitly engaged in metalinguistic negotiation—this is just one tool available to make sense of at least certain classic debates, allowing that they may be seen as doing something reasonable and valuable, even from the deflationist's standpoint. I can do no more here than point to a few suggestive examples of how this might go, beginning with metaphysical debates about identity and persistence conditions, and then turning to the more difficult case of debates about existence.[19]

Many of the metaphysical debates about essence, identity and persistence conditions that are the most central in the history of philosophy concern entities most central to our practices, our values, our way of life—entities like persons, works of art, artifacts, and the like. And these can very easily be seen as involved in metalinguistic negotiation. When Clive Bell (1914) argued that art is significant form, he may quite readily be seen not as just engaged in a shallow verbal dispute with those who would use 'art' to apply only to mimetic work, or as saying something that would have been trivially false, at least in an older art-historical context. Instead, regardless of how we interpret the literal content of his words, he can be seen as *doing* something non-trivial and reasonable: as pragmatically pressing for a new understanding of 'art' that could be more

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[18] Grice similarly notes that we may, in uttering 'patent tautologies' like "War is War", violate the maxim of Quantity ("Make your contribution as informative as is required") while being informative 'at the level of what is implicated' (1989, 33).

[19] Other examples are given by David Plunkett, who similarly argues that "some (perhaps many) philosophical disputes are metalinguistic negotiations" (2015, 853), focusing on questions of ground, supervenience, and real definition rather than the modal and existence questions I discuss above. Also, where I use the idea that disputants may be engaged in metalinguistic negotiation as a way of defending the deflationary approach, Plunkett emphasizes that his analysis is consistent with thinking there are substantive issues about ground, supervenience, essence, and is also consistent with the idea that issues in conceptual ethics are settled by mind-independent normative facts or facts about the objective joints of reality (2015, 860-861). Delia Belleri also argues that the debate between endurantists and perdurantists can be understood as a case of metalinguistic negotiation, even if we accept Hirsch's diagnosis of the dispute as merely verbal, arguing that metalinguistic negotiation is "a useful tool to make sense of ontological disputes, *deflationism notwithstanding*" (forthcoming, 2 in draft).

inclusive, and include the works of Cezanne, Gauguin and Matisse as much as of DaVinci and Tintoretto. This new conception is tied up with wider pragmatic matters: reconceiving the importance of art in our lives as a way of provoking aesthetic emotion rather than as representing important people or events, imitating nature, or adding to moral or religious education, or... When Mark Sagoff (1978) much later argues that works of art cannot survive even a tiny replacement of parts, he can easily be seen not just as saying something that (given our standard reapplication of terms for works of art after restorative changes) is trivially false, but rather as pragmatically advocating for a change in how we reapply the term 'art' that would lead to drastic changes in our conservation practices—a change connected to a broader view about the value of works of art as historical relics rather than as a means for communicating a certain kind of experience. Similarly, debates about whether works of music are created are often explicitly tied to questions about how we should value the work of composers (see, e.g. Levinson 1990, 66-68).

> While the metalinguistic negotiation idea seems to apply with ease to many of the classic modal debates in metaphysics, it may be less obvious whether and if so how it may be used as a way of understanding debates about existence—Carnap's original target.[20] But some classic philosophical debates about existence can be readily seen as reflecting disagreements not about *how* the term should be used, but rather about whether the term *should be used at all*.[21] Take debates about free will, for example.[22] Even if the hard determinist's definition of 'free' differs from the compatibilist's, the two may disagree at the level of metalinguistic negotiation. For what's really at stake in these debates is how we should treat people (including ourselves)—when and to what extent we should hold people responsible, punish, praise or blame them, feel guilt, regret or pride, and so on. And so even if we accept Hume's observations about how the term 'free' (or 'liberty') is standardly used, we needn't take the hard determinist to be incomprehensibly just uttering a trivial falsehood when she denies that anyone is ever free. In denying that any actions are free, the hard determinist can be seen as pragmatically advocating for a revision in our use of 'free' that would not see the term as applicable at all, and that would lead us to reject retributive punishment and soften hardline stances on guilt, responsibility, and the like. In a sense, one can see the eliminativist as engaged in a metalinguistic negotiation to eliminate (positive, atomic) use of the term 'free'—on grounds of rejecting the purpose it was to serve of aiding in assigning blame and guilt, legitimizing punishment, and so on.

> Or consider debates about whether races exist. Anthony Appiah (1992) has argued that there are no races; Sally Haslanger (2012) argues that there are. They explicitly offer

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[20] Of course here we are talking about ontological, philosophical debates about existence—debates that are typically thought not to be 'settled' even when the disputing parties agree about the empirical facts (for the deflationist has no wish to deflate empirical debates about existence).

[21] Burgess and Plunkett likewise suggest that certain forms of eliminativism can be understood as the position that we *ought to stop using* a given term or concept (2013b, 1103). They also plausibly suggest that revolutionary fictionalists can be seen as taking the position that we ought to use a set of terms within the scope of a pretense.

[22] Plunkett also argues that debates about free will may be seen as involved in metalinguistic negotiation (2015, 856-7).

different conceptual analyses of 'race': on Appiah's view, it is part of the concept of race that there are heritable characteristics that enable us to divide humans into races, and that there is a racial essence of 'traits and tendencies' that accounts for more than the visible characteristics we use to make our classifications (Haslanger 2012, 383). So given that there are no such racial essences, there are no races. Haslanger, by contrast, takes a social constructionist approach that treats races as racialized groups, where a group is racialized "if and only if its members are socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension… and the group is 'marked' as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region" (2012, 384). But although Appiah and Haslanger explicitly use different concepts of 'race' we would do best not to see the disputants as simply talking past each other, or to see Haslanger (when she says 'races exist') as simply uttering a trivial truth (using her concept) or falsehood (using Appiah's concept). What's interesting about this debate (unlike so many existence debates in metaphysics) is that Haslanger herself makes explicit that what is really at issue between them is what functional role the concept of race plays and ought to play in our society.[23] Haslanger suggests that the point is not to engage in a form of conceptual analysis aimed at discovering how anyone's actual concept of race functions, but rather in what she calls 'ameliorative' conceptual analysis. That work begins by asking "What is the point of having the concept in question…? What concept (if any) would do the work best?" (2012, 386). Bringing in the social constructionist analysis of race, she argues, may not capture what most speakers have in mind but may serve the useful function of diagnosing the source of illusions about race, and motivating social change (2012, 385)—quite a different function, perhaps, than the old term served, in which it was used to lend false legitimacy to oppressive practices. Debates about the existence of races, then, may—at the most deep and important level—be understood as engaged in metalinguistic negotiation about what function we want race concepts to serve (if any), and whether our purposes would be better served by reshaping the contours of our concept of race or doing away with it altogether, or replacing it with something else (say, a concept of racial identity). Haslanger's approach to debates about the existence of races makes unusually lucid the role of practical and functional questions in such debates—making explicit the crucial role of what I am calling 'metalinguistic negotiation' in such existential debates, where this is usually left behind the scenes.

Yet still, some might protest, this does not yet touch on the sorts of ontological debates that Carnap had in mind, which fill the pages of the mainstream metaphysics articles, and are the targets of suspicions that they are either verbal or easily resolvable—debates, say, about whether tables, mereological sums, tables, numbers, properties, and the like exist. I have suggested that some disputants about existence can, on this model, be plausibly seen as engaged in metalinguistic negotiation not about *how* a key term should be used, but about *whether* it should be used at all. In the case of debates about freedom and race, when eliminativists reject the term, we can see them as doing so at least in part because they reject the function the term has served. But it is very hard to see debates about tables on that model.

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[23] Burgess and Plunkett similarly identify Haslanger's work as involved in 'conceptual ethics'.

What is the function of the term 'table'? Presumably to enable us to keep track of our environment (as what Huw Price (2011, 20-23) calls an 'e-representation') in ways that enable us to more simply arrange dinner parties, furnish our homes, cope with our dining and writing and other practices, perhaps as part of a social/artifactual environment that plays a part in reinforcing a web of behavioral norms. This is hardly a function the eliminativist can be legitimately seen as rejecting as inappropriate. On the contrary, eliminativists typically introduce a substitute concept, e.g. of *particles arranged tablewise*, to enable us still to—somewhat clumsily—do some of the same work.

So it is hard to see eliminativists about tables as pragmatically advocating for rejecting the term on grounds of rejecting its function. We can, however, sometimes see eliminativists as pragmatically recommending that we reject a term/concept on grounds that it (allegedly) does not function *properly*—as its use (supposedly) involves us in contradictions. Trenton Merricks' (2001) arguments against tables fall into this model, for he argues that tables, if they existed, would be causally efficacious—but as they are causally redundant we would be left in a contradiction. In my view, such accusations shouldn't be given much initial plausibility—as these common sense terms, at any rate, have been functioning quite well for us, that seems to be a sign that they are not deeply problematic.[24] Moreover, provided the function is legitimate and important, giving up the term altogether might seem worse than modifying the concept in ways that would remove the problem--even if there is a hidden contradiction.[25] But at any rate, such recommendations for change based on alleged internal failings of the concepts must be handled on a case-by-case basis.[26]

This, of course, merely provides a few examples of cases in which classic metaphysical debates can be seen on the model of metalinguistic negotiation. Further work would be required for determining whether various other debates can be seen on this model. But it is worth emphasizing that the deflationist is under no constraint to see *all* metaphysical disputes on this model. The crucial advantage of easy ontology is its ability to demystify the epistemology of metaphysics. As a result, what the defender of easy ontology *is* committed to is the idea that, to they extent that they can be understood as sensible, metaphysical debates and claims can be understood as involved in conceptual and/or empirical work. She is not committed, however, to seeing *all* metaphysical debates as sensible—some she may diagnose as misguided, based on mistaken arguments or misuse of language, or as simply nonsensical.[27] Other claims of metaphysics she may see as sensible, but involved in tacitly empirical or descriptive-conceptual (rather than normative-conceptual) work—and resolvable straightforwardly. The idea of metalinguistic negotiation serves as an important additional tool in the deflationist's

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[24] See my 2007, Chapter 1 for a way of untangling this alleged contradiction.

[25] See my 2015, Chapter 8 for discussion of the related 'bad company' problem.

[26] In other cases eliminativists might be charitably seen as suggesting that we revise a concept by removing certain unfortunate associations or even inferential roles. Thus some eliminativists about numbers might be seen as suggesting: don't think of numbers on the model of things; moral anti-realists might be suggesting that we can't think of moral properties as perceptible, causally relevant, and action guiding, etc. so that some aspect of their conceptual role has to go. (Thanks to Al Wilson for this suggestion.)

[27] I offer diagnoses of where certain metaphysical debates go wrong in my (2007).

interpretive and diagnostic tool kit. The core point to emphasize here is that by taking into our view the *normative* as well as *descriptive* side of conceptual work, the deflationist can do far more to understand how many classic debates in metaphysics can be seen as doing something sensible, difficult, and important—and can do so without giving up the epistemic advantages of the deflationary stance.

5. Conclusion

Deflationism about metaphysical disputes has been strongly associated with the idea that metaphysical disputes are 'merely verbal', and so are as pointless, silly, and as much of a waste of time as debates about whether a sweet alcoholic drink in a V-shaped glass is a martini. But one important result of the work here is to suggest that paradigmatic verbal disputes like that one do not provide a good model for understanding debates in metaphysics. The deflationist needn't be committed to the idea that metaphysical disputes are silly and pointless in this way, and in many ways the metalinguistic negotiation idea seems a far better model for understanding metaphysical disputes. The deflationist does have to remain committed to rejecting metaphysical inquiries that aren't understandable as engaged in empirical or conceptual work, but (especially once pragmatic conceptual work is brought clearly into the picture) this by no means entails being committed to rejecting metaphysical inquiries as shallow, pointless, or just 'about words'.

My initial aim in this paper was to respond to a longstanding criticism of metaontological deflationists: that they can't make sense of what the disputing ontologists are *doing* when they engage in an ontological debate. I have tried to develop a new tool deflationists can use in making sense of what disputing ontologists—in at least some cases—are doing. First, even if we (with the fan of verbal disputes) see them as expressing compatible propositions at the level of literal content, we can often see them as engaged in a genuine disagreement at the level of pragmatics. Similarly, even if (with the easy ontologist) we end up seeing the serious ontologists as uttering trivial truths or obvious falsehoods, we can often make sense of what they are *doing* in terms of *pragmatics*. For at the pragmatic level we can often see the disputants as involved in metalinguistic negotiation—a widespread phenomenon we have independent reason to recognize.

Seeing serious ontological disputes in this light has important consequences. For once we see what's really at stake as a matter of metalinguistic negotiation, we can account for the felt depth, difficulty and importance of many debates in metaphysics. For choices about how these terms are to be used are crucial to issues about what we value, how we live, and how we manage our lives together, enabling us to account for the felt depth of disputes about whether persons can survive a loss of memories, whether works of art can survive restorative changes, or whether races or freedom exist at all. But we can appreciate the depth and importance of these debates without giving up metaontological deflationism. Taken literally as answers to internal questions, the quantifier variantist will still see the disputants as talking past each other; the easy ontologist will see them as making trivially true or false assertions. But disputes at the external level may nonetheless be genuine, rich, and worth having—not because they give us competing descriptions of our world, but rather because they are involved in advocating for different conceptual schemes with different impact on our way of life.

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This is, in many ways, a nice way of giving an account of these disputes: for it accounts for the irresolubility and difficulty of many metaphysical debates without implying that they are pointless. And unlike serious forms of metaontology, we can account for the point of the debates without appealing to fugitive ontological facts we can see the disputants as reporting on, or being left with epistemic mysteries about how we could come to know them. Instead, such disputes can be seen as, at bottom, normatively motivated, and their difficulty and depth can be understood in terms of the difficulties of working out and reconciling differences in our normative views about how we should live and what we should do.

5. Objections and replies

The suggestion that we can sometimes see those engaged in metaphysical disputes as engaged in metalinguistic negotiation, I have argued, enables the easy ontologist to preserve various elements of the disputants' self-conception. We can capture the ideas that disputants may be using terms with the same meaning (as they intend to), that they are literally disagreeing, and that their dispute is in an important sense about the world. Nonetheless, obviously deflationists cannot preserve their whole self-conception. And so a likely response to come from serious ontologists is to deny that they think of themselves as engaged in pragmatically communicating something normative about our linguistic or conceptual scheme—rather than simply reporting metaphysical discoveries about the world.[28]

This line of objection might be thought to put pressure on the metalinguistic analysis in the following way. The most familiar cases in which we appeal to pragmatics to make sense of the point of an utterance (other than by way of the literal semantic content being communicated) are cases in which the speaker is making a conversational implicature. On the classic Gricean understanding of conversational implicature (1989), a speaker who says p implies q when the speaker *means* q without saying it, and intends the listener to be able to work out that she means q by appeal to the Cooperative Principle and its associated conversational maxims. So if we think of what one conversationally implicates as part of speaker meaning, we can see what is being done pragmatically as the intentional communication of additional content, where the speaker intends the listener to recognize her belief (Grice 1989).[29] Thus when a speaker says 'The student's attendance at tutorials has been regular' (in a letter of recommendation) the writer plausibly does *intend to* communicate (without expressly saying) the additional content that the student

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[28] Recent work on generics (Leslie forthcoming, and Wodak, Leslie and Rhodes 2015) provides a range of other examples of cases in which what look like descriptive claims (generalizations) turn out to carry normative force.

[29] Of course there may be room for a less intentionalist understanding of conversational implicature. That is, one could treat conversational implicature as a matter simply of what the hearer can legitimately infer via inference to the best explanation on the basis of the Cooperative Principle and literal meaning, without concern for whether the imputations of the speaker's intentions and beliefs match the speaker's actual attitudes. If one adopts that reading of conversational implicature, the objection that metaphysicians might not intend to implicate any such thing gives us far less to worry about—and so much the better for the view at issue here. Thanks to Delia Belleri for discussion of this issue.

is not very good at philosophy, and intends her readers to be able to work out that that is what she means (by flouting the maxim of quantity) (1989, 33).

Presumably, if one interprets cases of metalinguistic negotiation as cases of conversational implicature, one must say that the speaker who says 'Secretariat is not an athlete' implicates the additional content that *the term 'athlete' should not be applied to non-human animals*, and intends listeners to be able to work out that this is what she means. Similarly, the metaphysician who says "Tables don't exist" must be thought to implicate that the term 'table' ought not to be used, intending listeners to be able to work out that that is what he means. If we aim to model what is being done pragmatically on a classical Gricean model of conversational implicature, then the fact that at least in many cases, metaphysical disputants would deny that this is what they intend might be thought to threaten the analysis.[30]

Is conversational implicature the right model for understanding what we are doing, pragmatically, when we engage in metalinguistic negotiations? Plunkett and Sundell remain neutral about how exactly to characterize metalinguistic negotiation. At certain points they speak in ways consistent with the conversational implicature reading of metalinguistic negotiation, speaking of speakers as 'communicating' 'information' via metalinguistic usage (2014, 63), or saying that in metalinguistic negotiation we use a word "to communicate views about the meaning of that word" (Plunkett 2015, 833).

I don't wish to take a stand on whether conversational implicature is the best model for understanding what is being done pragmatically, in cases of metalinguistic negotiation. Instead, I will respond to these concerns on two levels: first, by noting that even if we require intentional communication of content in cases of metalinguistic negotiation, avowals are little evidence of intention; second, by suggesting that there is room for an account of what disputing metaphysicians are *doing* that does not appeal to pragmatic *communication of additional propositional content* at all—and so takes us away from the conversational implicature account altogether. While I think the latter route is in various ways promising, I will have space only to sketch it here, and I do not mean to be rejecting the conversational implicature model as untenable.

On the first point, even if we treat metaphysical disputants as pragmatically communicating the content that we ought to use terms in this way, on the model of conversational implicature, and take this to require intentional communication, we need not take metaphysicians' avowals as giving very good evidence about their intentions.[31] In general, when we interpret human intentions, we should give most weight not to not what people *say* about their intentions, but to what they *do.* And typically what metaphysicians do is to appeal to criteria that are better suited for *advocating* for a conceptual scheme than for *reporting* quasi-scientific discoveries. Debates about personal identity, for example, often explicitly appeal to *what we care about* in judging whether a person has survived; debates about what art is similarly appeal directly to what we care about in critically evaluating works of art (Davies 2004)—criteria that would be more relevant to pragmatically arguing for a given treatment of a concept than as evidence for

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[30] Thanks to Ray Buchanan for nicely articulating and pressing this objection.

[31] Moreover, even if metaphysicians do not intend—under that description—to *communicate* views about how key terms should be used, their utterances may nonetheless give *evidence* of their views about how the terms should be used. Thanks to Ray Buchanan for this point.

a worldly discovery. Neo-Quineans often support an ontological position by arguing that it better preserves one or more theoretic virtue than its rivals. But rival ontological views are typically on a par where empirical adequacy is concerned, and the remaining theoretic virtues are far more plausibly thought of as relevant criteria for choosing a conceptual scheme useful to us (simple to use, productive, etc.) then as conducive to discovering the real truth in the world (cf. Bricker, forthcoming). As Quine put the project initially in the paper that motivated so much recent work on ontology (1953, 16-18), "our ontology is determined once we have fixed upon the over-all conceptual scheme which is to accommodate science in the broadest sense" So, once again, it should be no surprise if the point of much of the work of ontologists following the neo-Quinean model implicitly involves communicating views about what conceptual scheme we should adopt. In short, if we look to the behavior of serious ontologists rather than their avowals, it seems plausible to think of them as engaged in something akin to metalinguistic negotiation—or conceptual ethics more broadly. Moreover, as Plunkett and Sundell emphasize, ordinary speakers are not commonly tuned in to subtle points about what they are *saying* versus what they are *pragmatically conveying,* so it should not be surprising if participants in a metalinguistic negotiation resist this analysis, and would rather describe what they are doing as discussing the true nature of athletes, or art, or persons (2014, 67-8).

There may, however, in any case be reason to think that conversational implicature is not the best way of understanding what's going on in cases of metalinguistic negotiation.[32] Grice openly acknowledges that a limiting assumption of his work is that the purpose of talk is 'maximally effective exchange of information' (1989, 28). But of course (as Grice himself acknowledges) there are also many more uses to which language is put "the scheme needs to be generalized to allow for such general purposes as influencing or directing the actions of others" (1989, 28). And there are some reasons for doubting that the pragmatic point of the utterances in metalinguistic negotiation is to pragmatically communicate any additional *informational content* at all, rather than to *do* something else—something along the lines of influencing the linguistic behavior of others, or altering the boundaries of what is acceptable or unacceptable in language use.

While Plunkett and Sundell sometimes speak in ways consistent with the conversational implicature view, more commonly they refer to speakers as 'advocating' for certain ways of using a term, or 'negotiating *what [the meaning of the relevant expression] should be*' (2014, 63), saying speakers "employ metalinguistic usages of an expression to advocate for competing candidate meanings of that expression" (2014, 63). The point of utterances involved in metalinguistic negotiations may be not to get the listener to recognize the speaker's belief, but *rather to use a given term in order to reinforce or revise the ways the term is to be used.*

Language is a conventional social practice, like many others. Social practices fulfill many functions—enabling us to efficiently acquire food, exchange goods, travel about together. But sometimes individuals engage in social practices as ways of *showing* how to do them, either reinforcing or pressing to alter the norms that govern them. In

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[32] There may also be reason, as David Plunkett has pointed out (conversation), to prefer a less intentionalist understanding of conversational implicature than one gets on the standard Gricean model.

many cases of civil disobedience, agents flout the rules governing a practice as ways of *showing* how the rules should be altered. When Rosa Parks sat at the front of the bus, she needn't have been aiming to get to the destination (her act has point even if she just rides the bus in a circle). Nor is it quite right to see her as aiming to pragmatically communicate to observers her belief that the bus rules ought to be changed. For communicating her belief might not be the best means, in the circumstances, of changing the practices: given her lower social standing in the racist social context, making others aware of her belief might have no effect at all—they might simply dismiss or ignore her. Instead, she aims through her violation of the rules to modify the boundaries of what counts as acceptable. We can identify these as 'metaconventional' actions (analogous to metalinguistic speech acts)—cases in which the point of the action may not be best understood (or even be understandable) in terms of its normal social function, but rather in terms of aiming to show something about the rules, with a view to modifying them or (re-)enforcing them. Another sign that an action is metaconventional is that simple correction of those who violate the rules here would be out of place: to approach Rosa Parks, however gently, and inform her that she has made a mistake, and that people like her are to sit at the back of the bus, would be to miss the point of what she is doing.

  We often employ metalinguistic uses of language: using (rather than mentioning) a term in order to reinforce or modify the boundaries of how that language is *to be* used. An American walks into a greengrocer's in the U.K., sees a large stack of tomatoes behind the counter and says "I'd like five tomatoes please". "We don't have any *tomAYtoes*", the greengrocer replies.[33] The utterance of this obvious falsehood can be understood not by appealing to its literal semantic content, but rather to what the speaker is *doing*: showing that (he thinks) something is wrong with the way the customer has pronounced the word, and aiming to (re)inforce what he considers the 'proper' pronunciation. Similarly, when the child says "Jane and me are going to the park", and the parent echoes: "Jane and *I* are going to the park"—the literal semantic content of the parent's remark may be false, but the pragmatic point of the utterance is to show, grammatically, how the sentence ought to be expressed, re-enforcing grammatical norms. David Lewis (1979, 353-4) notes other cases in which, for example, using a vague term in a certain way may (given rules of conversational accommodation) have the effect of altering the boundaries of the contextually appropriate standards for applying the vague predicate.

  Cases of metalinguistic negotiation might be understood along these lines, as cases in which speakers use terms in certain ways in order to reinforce or alter the semantic norms of their use. We often use language with a view to modifying, resisting, or (re-)enforcing the norms governing its usage. The point of the utterances, in these cases, can best be understood pragmatically. In these cases, too, we often can't make sense of the utterance in terms of the traditional function of communicating semantic content (which often would be obviously true or false). Moreover, as in the cases of civil disobedience, simple correction of the utterance (as if the speakers were just making a

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[33] The speaker here—and in the case to follow—may be seen as engaged in what Laurence Horn (1985) calls 'metalinguistic negation': a way of signaling the speaker's unwillingness to assert a given proposition *in a given way,* whether on account of its phonetic, morphological, syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic form of expression(1985, 122).

mistake) would miss the point. And as in the case of civil disobedience, the point may be to *reinforce* or *modify* the rules in question—not to communicate the speaker's belief about how the term should be used (though the hearer may nonetheless legitimately infer those beliefs). For communicating such beliefs often is not the best method of effecting the relevant change.

Interestingly, this way of understanding metalinguistic negotiations also gives us a better way of accounting for why speakers would engage in this sort of metalinguistic negotiation in the object language, using the terms, rather than more transparently making recommendations in the meta-language. For if the goal is to modify the norms governing the use of the term, the best way to do that may be *to present themselves as making a discovery about the world*—about the real nature of waterboarding, about the real survival conditions for persons, etc.—rather than presenting themselves as making their own recommendations about how to change how we use terminology (recommendations that might then be ignored or fail to find uptake).

Does this interpretation of metalinguistic negotiation fit better with serious metaphysician's avowals about their intentions than the conversational implicature view? To a certain extent, I think it does. It seems plausible that disputing metaphysicians would accept this as an account of *a* point (if not *the* point) of their utterances. For van Inwagen *does* aim to change the way we use the term 'table'—at least in the Ontology Room: to change it in such a way that it is not seen as to be used in atomic predications at all. And Sagoff does aim to change the way we use the term 'work of art', in such a way that it is seen as no longer appropriate to apply it after acts of (attempted) 'restoration'. Of course both might give a metaphysics-first *justification* of this aim: that they aim to eliminate use of the term *because there are no tables,* or aim to stop application of the term 'same work of art' after the restorative modifications *because the original work is no longer there.* There are familiar epistemic and methodological problems with taking this metaphysics-first route that need not be rehashed here. So there might be agreement about (a) point of what they are doing, with a disagreement about *why* they are doing it. But again, we are often mistaken in our self-reports about our motives, and as noted above, the actual criteria serious metaphysicians appeal to in support of apparently revolutionary views often seem more like pragmatic considerations than like evidence for a metaphysical discovery. Moreover, it is easy to find motives for serious ontologists to be self-deceived about the reasons for their recommended change—to see why serious metaphysicians might *want* to think of themselves as engaged in reporting metaphysical discoveries rather than in metalinguistic negotiation. For if they can think of themselves, and represent themselves, as reporting discoveries of the world (rather than advocating for ways we should employ our concepts) that gives their work the air of authority, objectivity, and respectability characteristic of the sciences. And indeed it is commonplace for heavyweight metaphysicians in the neo-Quinean tradition to think of themselves as doing work 'of a piece with' science, weighing up the merits of competing theories about the world just as a scientist does. Where we present something explicitly as a normative suggestion, by contrast, it is far more open to being repudiated or ignored by others who do not share our values or our goals. So it is not hard to see why some deception, even self-deception, about the *grounds* for their suggestions might be

tempting, in which case again we should not simply take the disputant's avowals at face-value in determining the point of their utterances.[34]

By either or both of these routes—reminding ourselves of the limited use of avowals as evidence of intentions (particularly where motivations for deception or self-deception are in place), and by potentially shifting the understanding of what, pragmatically, is done in cases of metalinguistic negotiation away from the old paradigm of conversational implicature—we can have some confidence that metaphysician's denials needn't significantly undermine the idea that many metaphysical debates may be best understood as at bottom engaged in metalinguistic negotiation.

To those who remain unconvinced that this is a plausible interpretation of what many serious metaphysical debates *are* and *have been* up to, an appealing option remains. Treat this instead as a pragmatic suggestion about what metaphysics *can* legitimately do.[35] Try thinking of the work of metaphysics in this light—and note the pragmatic advantages it brings of dispelling ontological mysteries, clarifying the epistemology of metaphysics, and enabling us to make better informed choices by bringing the functional and normative elements of metaphysical theory choice out into the open. Deflationists certainly can adopt this as a model of what metaphysics *can* do regardless of its fate as in interpretation of what past debates have (tacitly) been doing.[36] And with this would come an interesting new picture of the work metaphysics can do, as a kind of—often normative—conceptual work.[37]

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[34] The case is similar with respect to laws. Judges engage to some extent in merely describing a case (according to the law); in other cases in normatively negotiating the concepts that go into describing the case in order to achieve a desired outcome. In this case it is also clear why some dissimulation would be desirable in the latter cases (representing the normative suggestion as descriptive discovery): to retain the authority of law, it is far more effective if observers think of judges as merely reporting their legal discoveries (that this group really isn't a religion) rather than as proposing new norms (that we ought not to treat it as a religion). Thanks to Andrew Verstein for this helpful parallel and insight. Plunkett and Sundell make related observations that, in the legal case, even if a disputant agreed that she were involved primarily in metalinguistic negotiation "she would have very good practical reasons not to parade around that feature of the discourse" (2014, 71).

[35] Thanks to Suki Finn for this insight.

[36] For further development and discussion of this suggestion, see my (forthcoming).

[37] My sincere thanks go to Brendan Balcerak Jackson, Delia Belleri, Ray Buchanan, Suki Finn, John Horden, David Plunkett, audiences at the Oxford Verbal Disputes Conference (May 2015), and at the Sorbonne, at the University of Colorado Boulder, and at the University of Texas Analytic Philosophy Symposium for very helpful comments and/or discussion of earlier versions of this paper.

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