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METALINGUISTIC VALUE DISAGREEMENT

Summary: In a series of publications Burgess, Plunkett and Sundell have developed a metalinguistic negotiation view that they call 'Conceptual Ethics.' I argue that their position adequately captures our intuition that some cases of value disputes are metalinguistic, but that they reverse the direction of justification when they state that speakers 'negotiate' the best use of a term or concept on the basis of its prior social role. Borrowing ideas from Putnam (1975b), I instead suggest distinguishing two meanings of general terms and value predicates. Core meaning represents the lowest common denominator between speakers and is primarily based on our needs to coordinate behavior. In contrast to this, the noumenal meaning of a general term or value predicate is intended to capture an aspect of reality and represents what a term *really* means. Like many other disputes about theoretical terms, terms for abstract objects, and predicates, metalinguistic value disputes are about noumenal meaning on the basis of a shared core meaning. This direction towards reality is what sets the account apart from mere metalinguistic negotiation.

Keywords: metalinguistic negotiation, value disagreement, relativism, meaning theory, externalism

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1 INTRODUCTION

Consider the following conversation:

(1)   **a.** Alice: Capitalism is good.
            b. Bob: No, it isn't.

The dialogue illustrates an old conundrum of lexical semantics that has become important for a recent debate on relativism and contextualism in the philosophy of language. Suppose Alice has a certain logical combination of criteria A_1, …, A_n in mind that account for the truth-conditions of her use of 'good' in that particular case, but that Bob has a different logical combination of criteria B_1, …, B_n in mind. They implicitly disagree about the meaning of that particular use of 'good' in the given context. Then it seems that they are talking past each other, because Bob's reply does not contradict the content of Alice's assertion. He may agree with her about the question of whether capitalism satisfies criteria A_1, …, A_n, but implicitly disagrees with her implicit assumption that these criteria provide an adequate lexical decomposition of her particular use of 'good' in the given situation. The problem is to explain how such disagreements are possible, in which sense they are metalinguistic and in which sense they are substantial. Plunkett and Sundell (2013) argue that speakers can have *substantial* verbal disputes and discuss the following similar examples:[1]

(2)   **a.** That chilly is spicy!
            b. No, it's not spicy at all!
(3)   **a.** Secretariat is an athlete.
            b. Secretariat is not an athlete.[2]
(4)   **a.** Waterboarding is torture.
            b. Waterboarding is not torture.
(5)   **a.** Lying with the aim of promoting human happiness is sometimes morally right. In fact it often is!
            b. No, you are wrong. It is never morally right to lie in order to promote human happiness.
(6)   **a.** A tomato is a fruit.
            b. No, a tomato is not a fruit.

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[1] See Plunkett and Sundell 2013, p. 15, 16, 19, 20, 22.

[2] Two sports reporters are discussing a horse in a race. One is calling it an athlete, whereas the others point out that only humans can be athletes. This example is originally from Ludlow (2008). See Plunkett 2015, p. 840–845.

Before going on, it is worth pointing out that there is an innocuous variant of these examples. Consider (1) again. Bob might associate the same criteria A_1, …, A_n with Alice's use of 'good' but disagree about the claim that capitalism satisfies them. I call this case the *direct content-based disagreement*.[3] It is not problematic and will not be discussed further. Instead, I will discuss readings of the examples according to which Alice and Bob implicitly disagree about the right meaning or interpretation of the predicative complex in the given context, and maybe also disagree about the meaning of the logical subject of predication like 'capitalism' in (1).[4] These readings give rise to a metalinguistic analysis like it has been suggested by Sundell (2011), Burgess (2013), Burgess and Plunkett (2013), Plunkett and Sundell (2013, 2014), and Plunkett (2015). My central thesis is that although there are such metalinguistic disputes, Burgess, Plunkett and Sundell's (in short: BPS) metalinguistic negotiation view (aka 'Conceptual Ethics') paints a skewed, or at least incomplete, picture of them. According to BPS, it is often not the existing social role or function of the expressions under consideration that motivates the dispute, but the speakers' concern with a shared reality. In that respect, I shall argue, metalinguistic value disputes are not substantially different from many other disputes about general terms, singular terms for abstract objects and their corresponding predicate expressions.

2 APPROACHES TO VALUE DISAGREEMENT

There are some semantic positions in the philosophy of language that need to be mentioned to put the current debate into the proper historical perspective, even though I agree with BPS they ultimately

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[3] By 'content' I mean content in the sense of Kaplan's character/content distinction, that is, the notion of semantic content that is the result of saturating indexicals and evaluated with respect to circumstances of evaluation. The above characterization does not necessarily apply to broader notions of semantic content which may have their place in other approaches. What is important for the current purpose is that Alice and Bob disagree on the basis of the same meaning and the same contextual resolution of indexical expressions.

[4] To keep things simple, I will assume in what follows that the meaning of either the logical subject expression or the predicative complex is fixed. In principle, however, a metalinguistic dispute can be about both expressions at the same time.

fail as an adequate explanation of the types of disputes in examples like the ones above.

2.1 CONTEXTUALISM

First, what Alice and Bob have 'in mind' in example (1) could be spelled out in contextualist terms in a framework based on Kaplan (1989). In a context with Alice as evaluator, the semantic content of (1–a) would yield a semantic content with her criteria, whereas in a context with Bob as evaluator the semantic content would contain his criteria.

However one spells out the details of this approach, it does not seem to be adequate in general, though, since it merely restates the problem in a particular contextualist framework: According to this semantics Alice and Bob associate different semantic contents with Alice's original utterance, and so they do not really disagree and are talking past each other. Whatever attitude Bob has about *his* content could be compatible with any attitude about *her* content, and vice versa.

2.2 RELATIVISM

Second, as a solution to this problem a relativist semantics could be given, as it has been defended for predicates of personal taste and even evaluative language in general by various authors such as Kölbel (2002), Lasersohn (2005), MacFarlane (2005, 2014), and Egan (2014). There are many different brands of relativism and trying to characterize all of them would go beyond the scope of this article. Generally speaking, a typical assessment-relativist approach to value disagreement would stipulate that the same semantic content of (1) may be true with respect to Alice as a judge and false with respect to Bob as a judge.

Could this type of relativism be a solution to the problem of how to explain value disputes like (1)? As far as I know, nobody has ever seriously considered such semantics for disputes that are clearly value-based such as (1), (4), and (5), and with good reason. According to assessment-relativist semantics, the use of 'good' would be interpreted as 'good relative to a judge' – though not as part of the semantic content, but as part of the semantic evaluation mechanism. There are many metaethical theories with which this view is compatible, for example some forms of (ideal) appraiser subjectivism, but there are

also many moral theories with which it is plain incompatible such as value-absolutist readings of nonrelational good. Assessment-relativism of 'good' excludes those metaethical stances.

By the same token, a contextualist semantics for 'good' that always stipulates a hidden argument place for a benefactor would exclude any metaethical stance that asserts that certain uses of 'good' can be nonrelational, stating that 'x is good' is true if and only if x is good at the time of utterance, false otherwise.

This raises a question: Can the semanticist tell moral philosophers that they are wrong? There can certainly be scenarios in which a semanticist may inform a moral philosopher that there is a logical problem with a certain moral conception or that it does not conform with what speakers ordinarily associate with the meaning of given value terms, and there are metaethical stances like quasi-realism whose express purpose is to make prima facie implausible metaethical theories compatible with semantics and our common-sense intuitions. In general, however, the answer must be No. Semantics can put weight and pressure on certain philosophical constructions but cannot decide them. If semantics provided a knockdown argument to a certain moral stance, for instance, then it would be moral philosophy in disguise, and the same can be said about any other claims of priority over domain-specific knowledge. For example, semantics cannot tell us whether atoms can be split or not. I will come back to this topic later.

In addition to this general worry, relativism also seems to be generally less plausible than ordinary contextualism, because it needs to come up with a complicated story to explain uses of value terms that explicitly involve a benefactor PP of the form 'for X', like in the following examples:

(7)   Alice: Capitalism is good [for us].

(8)   Alice: This sandwich is tasty [for the customers].

In both cases, it is not hard to come up with a scenario in which the PP with the benefactor needs to be inferred from the context. For example, in (8) it could be part of the common ground that Alice is a cynical chain restaurant manager who despises their own sandwiches and talks about the new product line *for the customers*. Examples like this are hard to explain from a purely relativist stance because they seem to require, at least in the most straightforward setting, a way

to accommodate the content of the PP at the level of Logical Form, which should propagate into the semantic content – which prima facie conflicts with the plain relativist semantics. But even if this problem can be solved technically, the general philosophical worry about expressions like 'good' in (7) is that these have clear-cut absolute uses, as the following variant of (1) indicates:

(9)   **a.** Alice: Capitalism is good.
            b. Bob: You mean for yourself?
            c. Alice: No, I meant good {for us / in general / for everyone / for our country / for you / simpliciter / …}.

In light of the many options, claiming that 'good' is 'good for the speaker' or 'good for (some) assessor' by default seems philosophically dubious.[5] For 'good' in particular an ambiguity thesis that stipulates both a relational and nonrelational meaning seems more appealing, but even if only relational uses are allowed, then an indexicalist position according to which the benefactor is present as an open argument place that can be filled by a PP, or bound from the context, would explain examples like (9–c) much better. The burden of proof is on the relativist here, and at the same time there is nothing philosophically compelling about a relativist semantics for evaluative terms in general, even though it may be adequate for certain predicates of personal taste in spite of examples like (8).

<center>2.3 SOCIAL EXTERNALISM TO THE RESCUE?</center>

Putting relativism aside as being both empirically and philosophically unsatisfying, let me turn to general error theories. The kind of error theory I have in mind is not the one by Mackie (1977), but rather one based on some exaggerated form of social externalism. In this view, both Alice and Bob in (1) have the wrong lexical decomposition in mind, they are both wrong about the 'correct' meaning of her particular use of 'good' in the given conversational situation. Instead, like with 'elm' or 'arthritis', experts on goodness fix the meaning of 'good' in examples like (1). Maybe Alice agrees with the experts, maybe Bob agrees with the experts, but they might also both be mistaken if they

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[5] Note that benefactor and assessor need not be the same and that the for-PP is primarily used to indicate a benefactor.

are themselves not experts on 'good'. Whatever they have in mind, according to the proposed view Alice's utterance ultimately means whatever the experts on goodness and democracy explain it means.

I argue in the next section that this account is more plausible than it might seem at first glance, but in the crude form presented so far it remains unacceptable. As Plunkett and Sundell (2013, p. 26–28) lay out, it is implausible to presume that experts generally fix the meaning of value terms, as they are the ones who most persistently disagree about these terms. Moreover, there may be no experts on 'good' and we also disagree about who counts as an expert. Would that be me or the Pope? Who decides? The problem becomes even more apparent with example (4). Who counts as an expert on torture? The one who tortures a lot? Donald Rumsfeld? Moral philosophers in general, or one in particular? Legal experts? To cut a long story short, although social externalism probably plays an important role in settling certain factual matters about 'elms' and the biological contexts in which a 'tomato' definitely *is* a fruit, it is implausible as a *general* solution to metalinguistic value disputes.

2.4 SEMANTIC PRIMITIVISM

There are two more interesting and influential responses to the problems raised by examples of metalinguistic value disagreement. The first one is *semantic primitivism*. As I understand this position, it states that value terms are not lexically decomposable in the sense that the predicates into which the term is decomposed exhaustively define the meaning of the value term.[6] For 'good' this position can be attributed to Moore (1903). In Moore's opinion 'good' cannot be defined by separate criteria, as I have suggested in the initial example, but

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[6] Moore does not claim that a decomposition of 'good' and similar value terms in the sense of providing dictionary definitions is not possible, but rather that such a definition never provides a fully satisfying analysis of the term. This is compatible with the claim that a dictionary definition provides 'the' meaning of the term in question. However, in a truth-conditional setting does it follow from Moore's thesis that the decomposition does not exhaustively represent the truth-conditional contribution of the term and that the term must therefore have some primitive meaning in addition to whatever decomposition one proposes. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for comments that helped in making this formulation and the subsequent passage more precise.

rather has some primitive meaning. Words like 'good' are in Moore's view very similar to color predicates like 'yellow'. Although 'good' may be given some explanation in the form of a dictionary entry, this decomposition in Moore's opinion does not *define* the meaning of 'good'. In the more general context of contemporary truth-conditional semantics (which was of no concern to Moore), semantic primitivism asserts that a decomposition only explicates its meaning but does not deliver its full truth-conditional contribution. Consequently, there cannot really be any metalinguistic disagreement about such terms, at least not a form of disagreement that could be settled by a dispute about which lexical decomposition represents the correct or adequate meaning for a particular use of the term. Maybe speakers could resolve the disagreement in other ways, by pointing to instances of good things, for example, just like you may point to yellow objects in order to teach someone who speaks a language that does not have a lexically realized predicate for yellow what English 'yellow' means.[7] But it seems more plausible in such an account to stipulate that one or both of the speakers in value disputes like (1) fail to recognize the primitive property of being good that corresponds to Alice's use of 'good' or disagree about the question whether capitalism falls under it. In the first case one or both speakers are not fully competent and in the second case the disagreement is directly content-based. In both cases, the disagreement is not metalinguistic and our intuition has been explained away that value disputes like (1), (4) and (5) are at least partially about the terms involved.

The 'Paradox of Analysis' and Moore's Open Question argument have been used to argue for that position, and there is also a general worry that semantic decomposition could lead to a definitory vicious circle. Many attempts of defusing the 'paradox of analysis' have been made such as, for instance, Neo-Fregean approaches first proposed by Church (1946) and laid out in detail by Jacquette (1990), and since I believe that all of them are more or less successful and that there is no paradox, I will not further discuss the Paradox of Analysis in general here. The more specific open question argument is based on

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[7] There are obvious concerns based on Quine (1964) about such an attempt, but we can ignore these for the sake of the argument. There are better reasons to reject Moore's conception that will be laid out below shortly.

the idea that one would need to justify any given decomposition for a use of 'good' into a logical combination of other criteria why the application of these criteria counts as good. For example, if being good is analyzed as whatever is commendable, one would have to ask the question why whatever is commendable counts as being good, thereby reasoning in circles. This is another version of the alleged paradox and in my point of view no more convincing than other formulations of it. On the contrary, if we explicate the meaning of a particular use of 'good', then we do not have to ask the additional question why the logical decomposition counts as being good, since that decomposition already explicates the meaning of that use of 'good'. The individual parts of such an explication do not even have to count as good, just as in an analysis of 'capitalism' each of the individual characteristics that together constitute a capitalist economic system do not themselves have to be counted as capitalist. When a general term, predicate, or term for an abstract object is explicated by semantic decomposition, then that complex meaning is constituted by the network of constraints of its individual parts and inferences that can be drawn from them within a holistic network of other such specifications of lexical meanings, much in the way computational ontologies work. Even if individual entities of such an ontology form part of another, more fine-grained ontology or are related in some systematic ways with another ontology, this does not constitute a vicious circle. Instead, the purpose and theoretical goals of the semantic analysis or explication dictates, from a practical point of view, how many levels of decomposition are appropriate and whether relations to other ontologies need to be explored. For semantics in general the very first level of decomposition is adequate; for a more philosophical analysis it is possible that further fine-grained analyses and ontological reductions would be more suitable. Much more would have to be said about this reply to semantic primitivism, but for lack of space I would like to leave it as is. This critique does not imply that there cannot be any primitive concepts, although perhaps their primitiveness is always relative to a given ontology.[8]

Let me end this section on semantic primitivism by pointing out that the burden of proof is on the primitivists side, and at least for value predicates their story seems unconvincing. Apart from more

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[8] I would like to remain agnostic about this issue in this article.

general philosophical arguments against Moore on 'good' such as
Geach (1956), there is also pervasive linguistic evidence that many,
if not most, evaluative predicates are multidimensional, which puts
them further at odds with a semantic primitivism that does not take
into account multiple dimensions as part of the primitive meaning.[9]

2.5 METALINGUISTIC NEGOTIATION

A more compelling position takes the metalinguistic aspect of the
examples discussed seriously. Burgess, Plunkett and Sundell have
proposed a position they call 'Conceptual Ethics' in a series of papers
with exactly that aim – see Burgess (2013), Burgess and Plunkett
(2013), Plunkett and Sundell (2013), Plunkett and Sundell (2014),
and Plunkett (2015). In their opinion, the disagreement in examples
(2)–(6) is metalinguistic and they call the activity of discussing and de-
termining how we *should* use words or concepts 'conceptual ethics',
because it concerns normative issues. Such disputes are often worth
having, they argue at length, because they are based on a concept's "…
sociological facts about its sociological role" (Plunkett, Sundell 2013,
p. 25), because there is something "…substantive at stake in how the
relevant terms are used in the context […] and the speakers recognize
this fact" (ibid.). As they lay out, these disputes also survive paraphras-
ing, a test devised by Chalmers (2011) to distinguish substantive from
merely verbal disputes, so metalinguistic disagreement need not be
merely verbal. According to their view, "…certain words (largely in-
dependent of which specific concept they express) fill specific and
important functional roles in our practices" (Plunkett, Sundell 2013,
p. 20), and discourse participants *negotiate* the best use of a term or
concept on the basis of these existing functional roles. As Plunkett puts
it, "[…] a metalinguistic negotiation […] is a dispute in which speakers
each use (rather than mention) a term to advocate for a normative
view about how that term should be used" (Plunkett 2015, p. 832).

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[9] See Kennedy (1999), Kennedy and McNally (2005), Sassoon (2013), Sassoon
and Fadlon (2017), McNally and Stojanovic (2017). It is unclear in which sense
a meaning based on multiple dimensions could still be regarded as primitive,
since it needs to somehow take into account different qualitative or quantitative
orderings and their aggregation. In contrast to this, Moore considers 'good' to
stand for a unary, natural predicate like 'yellow' does, for example.

A new area on this position is the attempt to combine a metalinguistic nature of disputes with the idea that these disputes are nevertheless substantial and worth having. However, despite the many examples they discuss, the function of the sociological role of a term or concept under discussion remains problematic in their approach. Suppose Alice presumes the definition of 'torture' preferred by the UN under which waterboarding would clearly fall under this concept, and Bob prefers the US definition that focuses on physical harm. Consider first that the prior sociological role of a word like 'torture' somehow could settle the dispute, i.e., plays the role of a corrigens and helps decide which is the 'right' definition. Then in a society in which torture is accepted and not sanctioned at all, waterboarding would be equally acceptable. So if the existing functional role ultimately settles the question, then Bob should have no problem with the UN definition, as long as he agrees with the existing practices, i.e., the lack of sanctions in this case. But it seems clear to me that this is not at all what Alice and Bob's are discussing in (4), the question under discussion in Alice's utterance is whether waterboarding *is* torture, irrespective of the existing social role of sanctioning torture. Consider second that the existing role does not settle the dispute in any way. Then it is not clear how the existing social role of 'torture' – that it is illegal, sanctioned, reprehensible, etc., in any civilized society – can help any of the discourse participants with their positions and why they do not merely talk past each other if they base their views on different definitions of what constitutes torture. Alice wants waterboarding to classify as torture, because she wants it to be sanctioned, and Bob does not want waterboarding to classify as torture, because he does not want it to be sanctioned. Since the social role does not settle the dispute in this scenario, they continue to talk past each other by propagating their favorite definition on the basis of different wants and desires.

It seems that a mixed approach is the most promising: The existing social and more broadly conceived functional role of a term or concept serves as a guideline for discussion, it partly settles the matter but in borderline cases a metalinguistic negotiation turns into a genuine value dispute.[10] The idea is perhaps that waterboarding is intuitively

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[10] See Plunkett (2015, p. 851–852, 867) about mixed cases in other kinds of metalinguistic disputes.

no less reprehensible than another, similar practices that have already been classified as torture, and so it should also be regarded as torture.

However, upon some reflection it becomes clear that this line of reasoning is fallacious and that neither Alice nor Bob should or would want to argue that way. Alice could attempt to argue that waterboarding is torture *because* waterboarding is morally reprehensible and should be sanctioned, but that would make for a lousy argument. She could also argue that waterboarding is morally reprehensible and should be sanctioned, but for that argument she does not necessarily need to refer to torture at all and so it cannot represent the metalinguistic dispute in the example. It is simply another dispute. Instead, she needs to argue, if she intends to convince Bob rationally, that there is something wrong with the US definition, that it does not capture all aspects of what we commonly conceive as torture, and in a second step, that waterboarding sufficiently elicits many of these aspects for it to qualify as torture in this sense. She may then go on to explain that this concept of torture is faithfully represented by the UN definition, but this is again a separate issue. So what is under dispute really is the question whether waterboarding *is* torture, and only in a second step, she may intend to convey pragmatically, by stating (4–a), that it should also be sanctioned like torture.

Generally speaking, under normal circumstances the social practices associated with a value term result from the evaluative component of the value term and not the other way around. By regarding the metalinguistic dispute as an instance of negotiation, Burgess, Plunkett and Sundell reverse this direction of justification. That is in my opinion the main problem with their 'Conceptual Ethics', which otherwise adequately reflects our intuition that the dialogues in question are cases of genuine metalinguistic disputes worth having.[11]

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[11] Sundell (2016) defends an even stronger thesis, that all value disputes can be explained as metalinguistic negotiation. This is criticized by Marques (2017), and apart from some assumptions about what counts as a possible explanation of value disputes (ibid., 42–43) that I consider too strong, I agree with her main objection that metalinguistic negotiation is neither necessary nor sufficient to have a value dispute and therefore cannot serve as the *only* explanation of value disputes. However, this critique only concerns the stronger thesis and not the weaker claim of Plunkett and Sundell (2013), Burgess and Plunkett (2013) , and Plunkett (2015) that many cases of value disagreement are metalinguistic. In my opinion, there is (at least) direct value disagreement, metalinguistic value disagreement based

In the next section I would like to offer a précis of their position that builds on this insight but brings something important back that metalinguistic negotiation, on the basis of an existing social role, cannot deliver: reality, insofar as it goes beyond social reality. I will also argue that metalinguistic disputes of the kind discussed so far occur in many other areas as well, almost inevitably whenever certain predicates, general terms and terms for abstract objects are involved, and that these types of disputes are a completely normal aspect of natural language use. They are part of the ordinary uses and functions of natural languages.

3 CORE MEANING AND NOUMENAL MEANING

Putnam's seminal article *The Meaning of 'Meaning'* is famously known for his Twin Earth thought experiment, but Putnam (1975b) also put forward a positive solution to the puzzle based on what he called 'meaning vectors'. This proposal is relevant to the above discussion. To quickly recap what it was about: A meaning vector contains syntactic and semantic markers, a stereotype in the sense laid out by Putnam (1975a), and a description of the external content of a term. For example, 'water' is a mass noun for a dispersed liquid substance with a stereotype that could be paraphrased as 'a drinkable colorless liquid essential for all life on earth' (the details or adequacy of this description do not matter here). In addition, the meaning vector contains 'H_2O' as a description of the external content of 'water', and as Putnam argued, the twin earth scenario shows that the meaning of 'water' cannot be adequately represented by the markers and a stereotype alone. However, Putnam (1975b) made it clear that in order to count as a competent speaker you do not have to know the externalist

on semantic underdeterminacy, which I lay out further below, and implicit value disagreement that I have investigated in detail [...] and that forms the basis of Marques's main counter-argument against Sundell (2016); see Marques (2016, p. 47). However, if the central thesis of this article is correct, then there may be many more types of value disagreement anyway, since the noumenal meaning of value predicates is not fixed and people can endorse many different competing metaethical stances. Hence, the project of finding the necessary and sufficient conditions for an adequate explanation of any type of value disagreement seems to be doomed from the start.

content of a term, or otherwise nobody would have used the term competently before the rise of modern chemistry, and let us also not forget that at least in theory, as a remote possibility, it could happen that our views about chemistry are fundamentally mistaken and that water will turn out to be XYZ in the future.

Based on Putnam's proposal my suggestion is as follows. There is a *core meaning* that corresponds to the stereotype in his view. Mastery of this core meaning, be it implicit knowledge or an ability, is required by virtue of linguistic competence, but speakers only need to loosely converge on this type of meaning. It represents the lowest common denominator between competent speakers and primarily serves the purpose of communicating in order to solve cooperation problems. This type of meaning can be described in terms of truth-conditions like any kind of meaning, since the question of whether one should develop a truth-conditional semantics, as opposed to another type of semantics, primarily concerns methodology.[12] However, this type of meaning need not be truth-conditionally complete in the sense that the contribution of the core meaning of an expression to the whole meaning of the utterance will automatically make the utterance fully truth-conditionally evaluable. In a truth-conditional setting, the whole utterance may turn out to be a propositional skeleton (Bach 2004). In a more general understanding of meaning theory, geometrical approaches like Prototype Theory (Rosch 1983) and Conceptual Spaces (Gärdenfors 2000) may be more adequate for this type of meaning, because even though it is mandated by linguistic competence in a realistic approach different speakers will only converge imprecisely about a common core meaning.[13]

There is another kind of meaning that can be regarded a generalization of Putnam's specification of externalist content. I call it *noumenal meaning*, because it is directed towards external reality

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[12] From the point of view of (desirable) methodological pluralism this is not a very good question. See Dekker (2011) for a defense of methodological pluralism in semantics.

[13] There are open problems with the logical combination of geometrical meanings and quantification, so these approaches cannot really serve as full replacements, but some advances have been made, see for example Aerts et al. (2013) and Lawry and Lewis (2016). Note further that a truth-conditional approach based on 'loose bundles' or propositional skeletons with nearness measures defined between them will face similar problems.

while at the same time not necessarily corresponding to something that exists in reality. In the case of natural kind terms that Putnam discusses in response to Kripke (1972) the noumenal meaning coincides with a description of externalist content and only denotes the natural kind provided that our current scientific theory is correct – the actual extension is fixed indexically. In his theory, Putnam does not need an externalist description of the extension of *other* general terms. In contrast to this, I understand noumenal meaning as that kind of meaning that reflects what a general term *really* means, i.e., it is intended to single out some particular aspect of reality that I call *noumenon*, following a long tradition in philosophy The noumenal meaning of 'water' is arguably H_2O, and the noumenon is H_2O in this case, provided that our current knowledge of physics and chemistry is correct. But it is important to realize that the story of Putnam-style semantic externalism cannot be extended to general terms and value predicates in general. Indexicalist externalism may be adequate for proper names and natural kind terms on the basis of current assumptions about science, whereas the meaning of other terms such as 'phlogiston' cannot be explained by reference to the actual world – phlogiston does not exist and consequently there is nothing like H_2O that represents its physical microstructure.

Going beyond what Putnam stated when he laid out his version of externalism, I would like to suggest now that according to the way we talk, in our actual linguistic practice, we commonly assume that expressions have a noumenal meaning that describes, singles out or otherwise captures an aspect of reality, but that we also often disagree about this meaning, and that this explains the above kind of metalinguistic disputes about value terms. Simply put, judging from the way we talk and the way language is supposed to work, we are all externalists by default but at the same time often disagree about what lexical decomposition of a term adequately describes an aspect of reality – and we even disagree about what counts as reality itself, one may add though, I will not address this more philosophical concern any further in what follows.

Take for instance the general term 'atom'. Its contemporary core meaning is something like 'extremely small building block of matter which can bundle together with similar building blocks to form molecules and is often depicted like a tiny solar system but is in fact way

more complicated'. Something like this. Its noumenal meaning used
to be 'particle-like smallest indivisible building block of matter', but at
some point there was disagreement about this lexical decomposition.
Nature has informed us that atoms are divisible, so something with the
original definition must have been wrong and the noumenal meaning
had to be revised. In turn, this has likely triggered a revision of the
core meaning, but probably rather slowly, because everyday talk was
not under strong pressure to conform with reality in this case. It is our
strife to get reality right that primarily motivates such disagreements.

Value disagreements like (1), (4), and (5) do not substantially
differ from other cases of implicit or explicit metalinguistic disagree-
ment. They are implicit in the examples but could be made explicit
by a discourse participant at any time by asking questions like "What
do you mean by 'good'?" or "How do you define 'torture'?" Under
normal circumstances we strive for reality in such disputes *on the basis
of a presumed shared existing core meaning* when we realize that the core
meaning does not adequately capture reality in the context of the dis-
cussion. If we do not realize this, on the other hand, then there will
be no explicit metalinguistic disagreement. As mentioned earlier, core
meaning often suffices for our communicative purposes. There is no
need to know exactly what the nature of time is when you ask "What
time is it?" and want to catch the 18:30h train. I once ordered two
tickets for a public outdoor swimming pool by uttering "Two tickets for
normal adults, please." and the attendant answered: "Well, what does
'normal' really mean?" The joke was successful, because no noumenal
meaning was under discussion; the core meaning sufficed for the co-
operative behavior of selling and buying a ticket without any perks.

Although sometimes noumenal meaning depends on the larger
theoretical context, for example definitions of 'normal' in the statisti-
cal sense versus 'normal' in the sense of a prototype, and sometimes
operational definitions based on primarily practical considerations
may be more or less appropriate and partly negotiable, noumenal
meaning is generally directed towards reality and we generally intend
it to be directed towards reality. We talk about numbers as if there was
a Platonic realm of numbers, about values as if there were absolute
values that we somehow perceive or intuit, and some of us talk about
a particular god as if he or she existed. As the case of 'phlogiston'
or 'Vulcan' reveal, however, the fact that we commonly assume that

certain expressions have a noumenal meaning does not imply that this meaning picks out a corresponding aspect of reality.

How does this theory explain value disagreement? The main difference to the contextualist position is that in a dual aspect theory linguistically competent speakers do agree on the core meaning and therefore never merely talk past each other. At the same time they do not merely negotiate how to best modify concepts in a way that suits prior social roles, though. Their disagreement can be about the noumenal meaning of value terms, which is not necessarily part of a shared lexicon, although experts may agree on the noumenal meaning of many expressions within their area. For value terms there may not be any such widespread agreement even among experts, but the way in which different speakers argue for and justify specific lexical decompositions that are supposed to reflect what a value term *really* means, i.e. decompositions representing noumenal meaning, is generally directed towards reality.

Finally, I would like to turn to the question of whether noumenal meaning is meaning at all, for an obvious critique off such a dual aspect theory is that only a core meaning is genuine meaning, since noumenal meaning is not required by linguistic competence and need not be shared or fixed. I believe this question to be ill-conceived, though, since Plunkett and Sundell (2013) and Plunkett (2015) show convincingly that many examples of metalinguistic disputes are clearly about the meaning of the terms involved. Should it be regarded as *linguistic* meaning? The answer can only be Yes, because noumenal meaning is associated with and tied to the terms involved, and by their existing core meaning also connected with the existing social role of a term. If the candidate for a noumenal meaning of a term deviates too far from its social role or core meaning, then we get jargon or technical definitions, or the candidate will be rejected. However, noumenal meaning is not linguistic in the sense of being understood by competent speakers on the basis of a shared lexicon, and for certain predicates, general terms, and terms for abstract objects there is also an important difference to Putnam's specifications of externalist content: When speakers dispute what an expression really means, then they need to have their own candidate for the noumenal meaning of that expression 'in mind', however that is spelled out in the detail; only then can the disagreement be considered implicitly or explicitly metalinguistic.

4 SUMMARY

How much does my proposal differ from Conceptual Ethics? Plunkett readily concedes that on the surface many metalinguistic disputes look like object-level discourse[14] and that it is possible that "[…] issues in conceptual ethics are settled by fully objective, mind-independent normative facts […] or that they are largely settled by facts about what the objective joints of reality really are […]" (Plunkett 2015, p. 860/1) while at the same time disputing "[…] the interpretation that takes them to be canonical disputes centered at object-level issues." (ibid., p. 867) However, as I have laid out above, BPS also focus on the social role of expressions and regard metalinguistic dispute cases of negotiating the best use of a term or concept, where they tend to couple the best use to a certain social role or function propagated by a discourse participant. I have argued that this way of looking at these disputes is inadequate in general, because it ultimately cannot explain why they are rational and substantive. If discourse participants merely battle their conflicting wants and desires of how to connect a term with some concept on the basis of an existing or a desired social role of that term, then they continue to talk past each other. So although BPS agree that some metalinguistic disputes might be based on the factual question whether the concepts used are more or less adequate to capture a relevant aspect of reality, their metalinguistic negotiation view emphasizes a normative aspect of these disputes that tends to make them irrational and mostly rhetoric. Instead, my suggestion is to take the 'best' in 'best use of a term or concept' to primarily mean 'best from an epistemic point of view', from the point of view of the theory of sciences, since in the end a general term has to capture a relevant aspect of reality adequately in order to be useful for theorizing about the world and for our conceptual systems.

To describe this general aspect of metalinguistic disputes in more detail, I have suggested, based on Putnam (1975b) and augmenting his original suggestion, that lexical meaning principally has two different aspects. When using sentences with general terms or terms for abstract objects speakers often implicitly or explicitly disagree about their *noumenal meaning*, since not even experts can be convincingly

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[14] See Plunkett (2015, p. 828–830).

said to be able to determine what the respective terms *really* mean. This disagreement, however, always takes place on the basis of a prior agreement about the *core meaning* of the expressions involved, which is the meaning that is required by virtue of linguistic competence. When we use value terms like 'good' and value-laden terms like 'torture' we do not always know what these really mean in the given context of use, but we have a prior loose understanding of their core meaning. Disagreement about the noumenal meaning of terms is based on our strife to capture important aspects of reality that often go beyond the existing social function of these expressions associated with the core meaning. These types of disagreements are metalinguistic, because they implicitly concern the meaning of linguistic expressions. They can be substantial not only because of the prior social role of those expressions but also because our conceptual systems may capture relevant aspects of reality more or less adequately, and this adequacy is contested in corresponding metalinguistic disputes.

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