(Metalinguistic) Value Disagreement

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Overview

The basis of this talk

In this talk:

- Rast (2017): Metalinguistic Value Disagreement. *Studia Semiotyczne*, Vol. XXXI, Nr. 2, pp. 139–159.
- Rast (2020; fc.): The Theory Theory of Metalinguistic Disputes. *Mind & Language*, forthcoming, DOI doi.org/10.1111/mila.12355, 1–19, publ. online first.

Related work by me:

- Rast (2017): Value Disagreement and Two Aspects of Meaning. *Croatian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 17 No. 51(3) (2017), pp. 399–430.
- Rast (2022): Contextual Meaning and Theory Dependence. In Stewart, Ian & Wuppuluri, Syam (eds.): *From Electrons to Elephants and Elections*. Springer, pp. 39–64.
- Rast (fc.): Metalinguistic Disputes, Semantic Decomposition, and Externalism. *Linguistics & Philosophy*.

▷ **In this talk, I focus on the first two papers but some reference to the more recent work will be unavoidable.**

- Plunkett & Sundell (2013): Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms. *Philosophers' Imprint 13(23)*, pp. 1–37, December 2013.
- Burgess & Plunkett (2013): Conceptual Ethics I&II , *Philosophy Compass 8(12)*, pp. 1091–1110.

▷ **Metalinguistic disputes may concern the meaning of terms, corresponding contextual norms, and the social role of terms. They are rarely 'merely verbal' and often substantive and worth having. They are often implicit in the sense that terms are used rather than mentioned.**

Examples

(1) a. That chilly is spicy.
     b. No it's not spicy at all!

(2) a. Tomato is a fruit.
     b. No, tomato is not a fruit.

(3) a. Secretariat is an athlete.
     b. Secretariat is not an athlete.

(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.

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- Content-based disagreement: Everybody agrees on the meaning of *waterboarding* and *torture*, and the disagreement is about the factual matter whether waterboarding is torture.

- Descriptive metalinguistic disagreement: The dispute concerns whether the meaning of *torture* is such that waterboarding falls under it (according to common understanding).

- Normative metalinguistic disagreement: The dispute concerns whether *torture* should have a meaning that includes all cases of waterboarding.

▷ ① **The meaning of *waterboarding* may also be controversial but we can hold it fixed for the sake of the argument. ② Mixtures of the above types of disagreement are possible. ③ Caveat: Plunkett & Sundell often talk about appropriate uses of terms, not about their meanings.**

Value Disagreement

Uses of the paradigmatic thin value predicate *good*:

(6)   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 / . . . }.

▷ ① **There is an optional argument place for a benefactor.** ② **There are different metaethical stances about how meaningful different benefactors in (6-c) are.**

Note that there can also be another additional argument place for a purpose:

(7)   This is knife is good for me for carving wood, but not good for you.

(8) a. Alice: Waterboarding is torture$_1$.
     b. Bob: No, it isn't torture$_2$.

Suppose Alice and Bob have different meanings of *torture* 'in their minds.'
Problems:

- Lack of Disagreement Objection
    - The positions could be compatible and co-tenable: Bob's beliefs concerning torture$_1$ could be compatible with Alice's.
    - How do they not just talk at cross-purposes then?
    - How can Alice and Bob understand each other? Or are metalinguistic disputes merely verbal disagreements (pace Plunkett & Sundell)?
- Externalist objections (Putnam, Kripke)
- Objections related to analyticity (Quine)

(9)   a.   Waterboarding is torture [relative to Alice as assessor].

            b.   Waterboarding is not torture [relative to Bob as assessor].

Assessor-relativism has been proposed by Lasersohn (2005) for predicates of personal taste, and for various other purposes by MacFarlane (2014).

(10)   a.   This burger is tasty.

            b. $M, c, i \vDash Tasty(burger)$

            c. $M, c, j \vDash \neg Tasty(burger)$

where the circumstances of evaluation are $i = \langle w, t, Alice, \dots \rangle$ and $j = \langle w, t, Bob, \dots \rangle$.

▷ ① **The semantic content (meaning in context) of the utterance can be the same for Alice and Bob if it is a function of the context. ② This approach is implausible as a general solution for value-based metalinguistic disputes because it allows for 'faultless disagreement.' Both Alice and Bob can be right, though only relative to their assessments respectively.**

(6)   a.   Capitalism is good.

Social externalism (Burge 1979): We defer to experts what *arthritis* means and can use *arthritis* competently without knowing the right meaning. Why not treat *good* and *torture* the same way? Problems:

- It is implausible to assume that experts 'fix' the meaning of value predicates and other value-laden terms.
- There is persistent disagreement about values (Mackie 1977).
- There is also persistent disagreement about who counts as an expert.
- For example: Who would be the relevant expert about torture? Donald Rumsfeld? The Pope? Some philosophers? Some legal scholars?
- Disputes among experts are also meaningful.

▷ **The position amounts to claiming that normative metalinguistic disputes don't really exist and are descriptive metalinguistic disputes in disguise. This is implausible.**

Primitivism

- Based on Moore (1903), primitivism about *good* takes it to express a primitive property, similar to *yellow*.
- Moore claims that such properties cannot be further analyzed.
- Note: Moore's point was not about language but the property of being good.
- But similar claims could be made for certain value terms.
- The corresponding view about word meaning is called *semantic atomism*, see Fodor & Lepore (1992).

▷ ① **The position is another form of externalism in the sense that both Alice and Bob can be wrong and make some form of systematic error when they attempt to define or characterize the meanings of value terms. ② My claim: Primitivism and semantic atomism are not plausible in general, for example concerning words like *torture*, *to lie*, *freedom*, and *democracy*.**
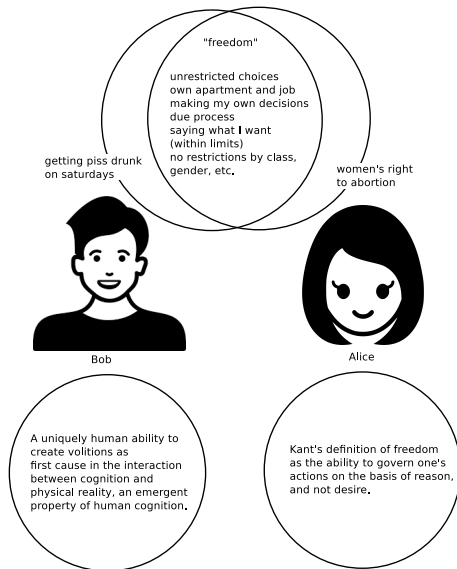
1. **Distinction between core meaning and noumenal meaning:** Core meaning serves as a common denominator and for communication but is semantically underdetermined. Noumenal meaning represents what an expression *really* means. Metalinguistic disputes are usually about the noumenal meaning.

2. **Indirect meaning characterization thesis:** Theories and opinions may indirectly characterize and constrain the meaning of terms used in expressing these even when no explicit definitions are given.

3. **Semantic underdetermination of value terms:** Value terms are particularly underdetermined. Experts usually cannot resolve disputes about them. However, this is not so special; it is also true of other philosophical uses of expressions.

4. **Rejection of semantic atomism:** General terms, adjectives, verbs and other expressions can have meanings that are based on complex combinations of other meanings. These can be characterized using definitions, paraphrases, law-like statements, and so forth.

5 **Rejection of global holism:** If the meaning of one term changes, this does not necessarily influence the meaning of all other terms.

6 **Acceptance of local holism:** Meaning changes for one term may cause meaning changes of other terms within a theory or set of related opinions.

7 **Topic continuity:** Topic continuity is warranted by shared core meaning and measurement operations that roughly pick out the same extensions, and also stipulated by using the same term (nominal topic continuity).

8 **Paraconsistent attitudes / tracking of theories:** We can keep track of other peoples beliefs, opinions, world views, and theories without endorsing them and even when they contradict ours.

Core Meaning versus Noumenal Meaning

"freedom"

unrestricted choices
own apartment and job
making my own decisions
due process
saying what I want
(within limits)
no restrictions by class,
gender, etc.

getting piss drunk
on saturdays

women's right
to abortion

Bob

Alice

A uniquely human ability to
create volitions as
first cause in the interaction
between cognition and
physical reality, an emergent
property of human cognition.

Kant's definition of freedom
as the ability to govern one's
actions on the basis of reason,
and not desire.

Core Meaning

- mostly shared
- not truth-functionally complete
- common denominator
- relevant in communication, for
  coordinating actions
- "everyday" meaning
- prototypical information
- linked with common sense
  knowledgebase

Noumenal Meaning(s)

- what an expression really means
- an adequate take on reality
- often defined
- always theory-relative
- always contestable

Indirect Meaning Characterization Thesis

Whenever a term is not explicitly defined, a sentence in which the term occurs will indirectly characterize the meaning of that term, as long as the term is the subject of a predication or the implicit or explicit subject of quantification. (Rast 2020: p. 5)
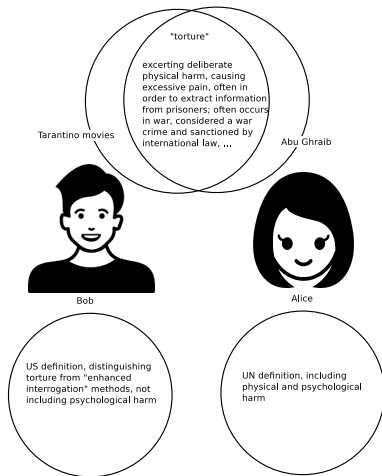
- Any law-like statement constrains the possible explicit definitions one could give to a term and implicitly characterizes its meaning.
- Terms are used to express theories, opinions, and world views, and at the same time theories, opinions, and world views characterize their meaning.

(11) a. Atoms are the smallest, indivisible building blocks of nature.
          [Theory A]
      b. Atoms are the smallest building blocks of nature with the
          characteristic properties of chemical elements. [Theory B]

▷ *Indivisible* **cannot be used to chacterize or define what** *atom* **means if Theory B is true. The transition from Theory A to Theory B may involve a meaning change.**

Value Disagreement Works the Same Way

"torture"

excerting deliberate physical harm, causing excessive pain, often in order to extract information from prisoners; often occurs in war, considered a war crime and sanctioned by international law, ...

Tarantino movies

Abu Ghraib

Bob

Alice

US definition, distinguishing torture from "enhanced interrogation" methods, not including psychological harm

UN definition, including physical and psychological harm

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▷ **Alice and Bob need to keep track of each other's definitions and indirect characterizations.**

Summary

- Unless defined explicitly and agreed upon, terms may have (subtly) different meanings in a metalinguistic value dispute.
- There is no clear-cut demarcation between a metalinguistic value disagreement and a content-based value disagreement. Disputes are always based on (seemingly) opposing theories, world views, opinions.
- To understand each other, we need to track the other person's 'value theories', including indirect characterizations and explicit definitions.
- As long as we can somehow represent these and translate into our own idiolect, there will be no talking at cross purposes.
- Understanding does not require endorsing theories, opinions, and world views.

References

- Burgess & Plunkett (2013): Conceptual Ethics I-II , *Philosophy Compass 8(12)*, pp. 1091–1110.
- Fodoor & Lepore (1992): Holism: A Shopper's Guide. Blackwell.
- Plunkett & Sundell (2013): Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms. *Philosophers' Imprint 13(23)*, pp. 1–37, December 2013
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John's Apples

John erroneously believes that pears were fruits similar to peaches but have long gone extinct. For some reason, he has learned the word *apple* and uses it in such a way that it refers to apples and pears. He later learns what pears really are and how to distinguish them from apples.

Learning About Pears: Not Everything Changes

What has changed: John's concept APPLE-OR-PEAR is refined to APPLE and PEAR. John's idiolect changes for *pear* and *apple*, the complex concept corresponding to his erroneous use of *pear* is removed from his ontology / substituted by the new PEAR concept. Various other beliefs and concepts change: apple cake, apple tart, apple juice, etc. His beliefs about fruits have changed.

What hasn't changed: John's beliefs about relations, logical connectives, quantifiers, physical vs. mental objects, numbers, movement, the nature of macrophysical objects, colors, etc., have not changed. John's beliefs about tires, atoms, galaxies, oceans, lakes, Relativity Theory, democracy, steaks, etc., have not changed either.

▷ **Ontologies are divided vertically by specificity and horizontally into theories. Centrality pertains to both specificity in the ontology and being characterized by law-like statements within theories with given topics. For example, *pear* is close to *apple* but not close to *tire* and *relation*.**