

A Pragmatist Take on the Puzzle of Verbal Disagreements

Abstract of a talk to be held at the Young Scholars Pragmatism Conference in Paris 18-19 January 2018 – raffael.joggi@gmail.com

What is my talk going to be about

What I am proposing is a novel characterisation of verbal disagreements from a different angle. The talk at hand shall discuss the difficulties to find the necessary and sufficient conditions under which a disagreement is verbal or not in order to then suggest a pragmatist solution to it.

Why are verbal disagreements important

Verbal disagreements are an everyday discursive phenomenon that recently gained a lot of philosophical attention but so far resisted any attempt to provide a sound definition of it. Philosophical concerns about verbal disagreements first arose in meta-ontology when philosophers began to critically evaluate certain ongoing debates in metaphysics. These philosophers suspected many disputes in metaphysics – and probably elsewhere in philosophy too – to be ‘merely verbal’ in the sense that they are merely about the words involved so there is nothing interesting there worth disputing about. Consequently, if a certain philosophical disagreement should turn out to be verbal, philosophers better dismiss it as rather pointless, or so the idea goes.

What is the puzzle of verbal disagreements

What makes verbal disagreements philosophically puzzling is at least twofold. On the one hand, there is its vexing nature: given our intuitions about verbal disagreements it turned out surprisingly hard to say what conditions must be satisfied in order for a disagreement to be verbal – let alone providing any sound definition of it. On the other hand, there is its centrality for philosophy of language: thinking of discursive disagreements which arise solely due to *matters of language* not *matters of fact* seem to jeopardise the idea of a clear-cut distinction of language and reality.

It is the vexing nature, or more precisely, the lack of any such condition which shall concern us here and to which I am referring to as the *puzzle of verbal disagreements*.

Why is pragmatism promising

The suggested solution to the puzzle of verbal disagreements is derived from the theory of *inferentialist semantics* and *normative pragmatics* programmatically called *inferentialism*. Inferentialism, in the way it has been developed by Robert Brandom, is, compared to the received view in philosophy of language, a radically different and pragmatist approach to linguistic meaning with the aspiration to give a full-fledged account of how we humans discursively communicate. Although inferentialism has not yet become part of semantic orthodoxy it has certain benefits compared to standard semantic theories as it provides novel solutions to old problems in the philosophy of language. It is, however, fair to say that to some extent inferentialism trades these benefits for some well-founded intuitions about meaning, most prominently, *truth-conditionality*. What inferentialism does is to not recur to truth or falsity in order to explain a sentence's meaning. From an inferentialist point of view *a sentence expresses a commitment* a speaker might be willing to take. From a speaker's commitments other commitments can be *inferred*. Details aside, the *sum of all inferences* a sentence is involved in constitutes that sentence's meaning.

This being said not relying on heavy-duty philosophical concepts such as *extension*, *reference* and *truth* has some explanatory benefits as we, after all, seeking for an explanation without presupposing what we indeed wish to explain: namely how human linguistic practise does establish extension in, reference of and truth about the world.

What is the inferentialist take on the puzzle

The inferentialist tackles the *puzzle of verbal disagreement* by articulating the demarcation of verbal and substantial disputes not primarily along the lines of disagreements as such but in terms of a disputant's commitment.¹ Here are the inferentialist ingredients for characterising disagreements:

In any disagreement its participants arrive at a *set of commitments they agree upon* (the subject matter); from that set of commitments a participant infers an *additional commitment* (the sentence under dispute); at least one other participant does not accept that additional commitment and, thus, *questions the inference* being made in order to arrive at that additional commitment (the question under discussion).

In a *substantive* disagreement the participants furthermore think that accepting the con-

¹ Besides *commitments*, *entitlements* also play an important role in the inferentialist picture. However, for the discussion at hand these technical details should not concern us here.

controversial additional commitment would require them to add or remove commitments they had accepted before and that would lead to an *alteration of the personal inferential relations* (the web of beliefs).

In a *verbal* disagreement, however, the opposite is the case: the participants – although still not accepting the controversial additional commitment – think that accepting it would *not* require them to add or remove commitments of theirs in a significant way and so *no alteration of the personal inferential relations* is necessary. In such cases, as David Chalmers' saying goes, 'nothing turns on the verdict'.

To sum up, the condition for a disagreement to be merely verbal might be defined in inferentialist terms thus:

A disagreement is verbal iff it is a disagreement where a participant does not accept an inference being made from the set of agreed commitments to an additional commitment and that participant, at the same time, thinks that acceptance of that additional commitment would not require updating her own inferential relations.

What is it all good for

The foregoing is of course a cursory sketch of what the inferentialist take on the puzzle of verbal disagreements amounts to. However, some merits of the proposal at hand can already be noted:

Firstly, the setup above is agnostic towards the question whether 'the participant' of a disagreement is an actual disputant or merely an observer of it since every participant evaluates the questionable inference on her own and then decides whether that commitment requires alteration of inferential relations. This is well in accord with the observation that in practise it often depends on the standpoint whether a disagreement is considered verbal or substantial.

Another benefit of the inferentialist take is that it seems to generalise: a characterisation could, for instance, be extended to verbal *agreements*. This might be decisive for future discussions of superficial discourse in general as it is far from clear why we should restrict ourselves to cases of *disagreement* when there are good reasons to think that our discursive practise comprises of many instances of superficial *agreements* too.