Value Disagreement and Dual Aspect Semantics

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Overview

The Problem of Value Disagreement

Example

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

- Alice: $good_1$ - a logical combination of criteria $A_1, A_2, \ldots, A_n$?
- Bob: $good_2$ - a logical combination of criteria $B_1, B_2, \ldots, B_m$?

⇨ Are Alice and Bob talking past each other?

Direct Value Disagreement

Not problematic is *content-based direct disagreement*:

Example

(2)   a.   Alice: Capitalism is good.

        b.   Bob: No, it isn't.

Suppose Alice's criteria for goodness in this case are $A_1, \ldots, A_n$ and Bob agrees with these but believes that capitalism does not satisfy $A_1, \ldots, A_n$. Then they directly contradict each other, i.e., the semantic content of Bob utterance is the negation of the semantic content of Alice's utterance.

⇨ Bob and Alice are in direct, content-based disagreement.

Sometimes Disagreement Is Not Direct

Examples due to Plunkett & Sundell (2013):

(3)   That chilly is spicy.

(4)   Tomato is a fruit.

(5)   Secretariat is an athlete. (Ludlow 2008)

(6)   Lying with the aim of promoting human happiness is sometimes morally right. In fact it often is!

(7)   Waterboarding is torture.

⇨ How does this non-content based, indirect disagreement work?

Relativist Semantics

Faultless disagreement:

Assessor	Sentence	Content in c	Extension in c, CEs
Alice	Capitalism is good.	p	true
	Capitalism is not good.	$\neg p$	false
Bob	Capitalism is good.	p	false
	Capitalism is not good.	$\neg p$	true

⇨ Only makes sense for expressions like predicates of personal taste for which a relativist semantics is justifiable. Many value predicates are not like this.

Moore / Semantic Primitivism

- Primitivism states that once ambiguities and other obvious contextual factors are resolved, no further lexical decomposition is possible.

- Value terms stand for primitive concepts.

- In *Capitalism is good*, 'good' stands for a primitive concept of goodness that cannot be further analyzed.

- Moore (1903): the Many Questions Argument, the Paradox of Analysis.

I reject this position as a *general* solution in the paper, because it (a) is empirically inadequate, and (b) there are many philosophical counter-arguments (cf. also Geach).

Social Externalism As The Only Response

- Social externalism: There is a linguistic labor division. Experts 'fix' the meaning of many expressions.

- So maybe Bob's and Alice's criteria to not represent the meaning of their utterances? What their particular use of 'good' means according to experts on goodness determines the truth-conditional contribution.

⇨ This stipulation might sometimes be justified, but as a general error theory this approach seems wholly implausible. There may be no experts on 'good' at all, there is disagreement about who counts as expert, and purported 'experts' on goodness disagree about the concept among each other.

Not Pinning Disagreement on Content at All

- The disagreement could be about presupposed content, implicated content or other types of pragmatic speech act content.

- For example, de Sa (2008) argues that relativist intuitions about PPTs can be explained pragmatically as disagreement about the presupposed degree of commonality.

- There might be other 'philosophical workarounds': Stipulating types of disagreement as an attitude that need not even be rational, e.g. talking about appropriate or fitting belief, attitudes towards utterance+content or towards the speaker, etc.

⇨ Perhaps many forms of disagreement are indeed not based on semantic content. However, it seems that 'going pragmatic' is more like an attempt to explain away a phenomenon rather than addressing the philosophical worry.

Metalinguistic Negotiation

Burgess, Plunkett, and Sundell have argued that the dialogues discussed so far are examples of *metalinguistic negotiation*.

- The disagreement may be about the terms involved.
- This does not indicate that the dispute is insubstantial or not worth having.
- The MN analysis also passes Chalmer's test for not involving 'merely verbal' disputes, because it survives paraphrasing.
- The discourse participants negotiate the appropriate use of a term or concept which must fit existing social and linguistic practices associated with this term.
- They negotiate which meaning fits the existing functional role, because there is something '...substantive at stake in how the relevant terms are used in the context [...] and the speakers recognize this fact.' [P&S: 25]

Critique of Conceptual Ethics (1)

Problem with the *negotiation* aspect of Conceptual Ethics.

- Case 1: Existing social practices determine the correctness of a given MN interpretation.
    - That makes MN disputes factual and possibly rest on the wrong kind of facts.
    - Example: In a society in which waterboarding is normal and generally not considered torture, waterboarding is not torture.
- Case 2: Existing social practices do not determine the correctness of a given MN interpretation.
    - Then what is the correctness criterion?
    - We fall back to talking past each other, like in a contextualist view.

Critique of Conceptual Ethics (2)

- Case 3: A mixed approach.
  - MN interpretations must somehow loosely fit/match the existing social role of terms, but borderline cases can become genuine value disputes.
  - So they are partly factual, partly value disputes and the latter presumably makes them substantial.
  - But this does still not explain what is negotiated. Negotiation still seems too arbitrary.
  - Bob could reply to Alice: Fine, waterboarding is torture$_2$. But it is still not torture$_1$.

Why do we (often, normally) assume that a general term denotes *one* concept when people persistently disagree about its lexical decomposition?

The Dual Aspect Approach

Word meaning concerns three different issues:

Core meaning: Shared meaning on which speakers of a linguistic community loosely converge ('bundle view', truth-conditionally incomplete) by virtue of being competent speakers. It is the common denominator.

Noumenal meaning: What individual speakers (ideolects) and groups of speakers (jargon, sociolect) consider the *real* meaning of an expression. What 'X' really means. / What really is *X*.

The noumenon: That actual or imaginary aspect of reality that an expression is supposed to capture.

The noumenon is not a meaning-constituing entity and it may or may not exist, may or may not be real. Hence the term 'dual aspect semantics'. N.B. a superficial similarity to DATs for propositional attitudes from the 70s, but this one has almost the opposite purpose.

The Roles of the Aspects

- Core meaning serves for successful communication when agents need to cooperate. It need not be truth-conditionally complete and only 'match' reality insofar as reality is relevant for successful cooperation. Example: Water is a transparent colorless drinkable liquid essential to all life on earth.

- Noumenal meaning represents what speakers and groups of speakers consider the 'real' meaning of an expression, how they *intend* to capture an aspect of reality. Example: Water is H_2O, plus sometimes a few minerals and other impurities.

- A noumenon is that purported aspect of reality that a given noumenal meaning is supposed to capture. Example: H_2O (or XYZ, or whatever water *really* is)

Putnam's Meaning Vectors

Putnam made similar suggestions in *The Meaning of 'Meaning'* and *Is Semantics Possible?* A meaning vector contains:

Internalist Components:

- Semantic and syntactic markers: e.g. proper noun with a given gender, mass term
- Stereotype: e.g. transparent colorless drinkable liquid

Externalist Component:

- Extension: H_2O (or a correct description thereof?); fixed indexically; investigated by experts

N.B.: According to Putnam (1975), a competent speaker does *not* need to have implicit knowledge of the extension!

How DAT Applies to Value Disputes

- We use *every* expression *as if* it captured an aspect of reality that goes beyond a mere need to cooperate, unless it is explicitly marked as standing for something that doesn't exist or is not real.

- Example: We use 'good' as if there was something in reality like an absolute value or a social fact to which the use corresponds in the given conversational context.

- Compare: We used 'Vulcan' as if there was something in reality to which it corresponds in the given conversational context – until we found out that the planet does not exist.

- Competent speakers agree about the core meaning and disagree about the noumenal meaning.

- The dispute is metalinguistic insofar as noumenal meaning is concerned but based on a prior shared agreement about the core meaning that determines existing social practices.

Summary

- The above value disputes are not substantially different from other disputes about the noumenal meaning of terms.

- Disputing the noumenal meaning of an expression on the basis of its core meaning is a normal function of natural language.

- Such a dispute may be substantial because it affects the core meaning (e.g. prior social role), but it may also be substantial because it concerns whatever speakers believe about reality.

- DAT is based on the constant strife to adjust our conceptual network to reality, going beyond of what is required for the coordination of behavior.

- The existence of noumenal meaning and the assumption of a corresponding noumenon does *principally not* imply that such a noumenal entity exists or is real in any other sense.

- Any reductionist position is compatible with DAT.

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