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Why the current debate on (merely) verbal disputes is uninformative and unnecessary

Some philosophers believe that every two objects make up a third object. Other philosophers believe that there are no such mereological sums. And a third kind of philosophers thinks those other two do not have a substantial dispute. These philosophers would rather say that mereology consists of (merely) verbal disputes:¹ the disagreement is not over what objects exist, but over what is meant by words like ‘object’ and ‘exists’. This comes with a certain attitude towards mereology: if it consists of merely verbal disputes, it seems not worth our time. This worries the ‘serious ontologists’, who spend lots of time discussing topics like mereology: is this all for nothing?

Thus, the notion (*merely*) *verbal dispute* attracted attention. In this essay, I show that the discussion (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature takes a particular shape: there is a predilection for giving (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes. I also show that there is a rather uniform procedure in the arguments for and against these definitions. I argue that these definitions, when they are supported via this procedure, are uninformative and unnecessary with respect to their purpose.

There might be some confusion over what exactly my claim encompasses. Therefore, in the first section, I will explain what my claim exactly is, and differentiate it from other claims that I do not

¹In the literature, we find accounts of verbal disputes, merely verbal disputes, narrowly verbal disputes, and broadly verbal disputes. All these notions are intended to capture slightly different intuitions, but the underlying idea – that nothing ‘substantial’ is at stake; that the dispute only arise because of differences in language use – is the same. Therefore, I will write ‘(merely) verbal disputes’ when I intend to refer to disputes that arise, intuitively, from differences in language use. Here ‘merely’ is bracketed to indicate that the intended notion might be described by others as ‘verbal disputes’, ‘narrowly verbal dispute’, ‘broadly verbal dispute’, ‘merely verbal dispute’, or any similar expression.

make.

In the second section I show what, according to the current philosophical literature on the topic, the purpose is of giving a definition of (merely) verbal disputes. I find that one widely cited purpose is that a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes can help in separating ‘shallow’ ontology – metaphysical debates that consist of merely verbal disputes based only on linguistic differences – from ‘deep’ ontology – metaphysical debates about substantial issues that are ‘worth our time’. Another purpose that is sometimes mentioned is that a clear account of (merely) verbal disputes can provide insights into phenomena like *language* or *meaning*.

In the third section, I show that most of the discussion in the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes revolves around giving a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes, and that there is a common procedure in the reasoning provided in this literature. This procedure consists of (roughly) three steps: (1) an intuitively plausible (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes is given; (2) a counterexample is presented: a dispute that is (merely) verbal according to the given definition, but substantial according to intuitions (or vice versa); (3) the given definition is rejected in favour of a new definition to which the counterexample does not apply. This section consists of several excerpts from the current philosophical literature in which this common procedure is employed, followed by a discussion on whether these excerpts do justice to the debate on (merely) verbal disputes as it is found in the current philosophical literature.

In the fourth section, I argue that, given the purposes identified in section 2, the (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the procedure common to the discussion about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature are uninformative in the sense that they do not go beyond or above the input intuitions – they do not enable us to do more than we could on the basis of the input intuitions alone.

In particular, the definitions generated by the procedure run three risks. First, they run the risk of

being ad-hoc, since they are amended for *any* counterexample. Second, they run the risk of being extensional, – being nothing more than a list of all disputes that are (merely) verbal – since they are amended for *all* counterexamples. Third, they run the risk of being incomplete, since nothing can guarantee that we have considered *every* (potential) counterexample. I argue that these three risks point at the low likelihood of there being any underlying systematicity to the (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the common procedure.

With respect to separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology: the procedure relies on intuitions that determine whether a (potential) counterexample is a substantial or (merely) verbal dispute. If we allow ontological disputes to count as (potential) counterexamples, the intuitions that the procedure relies on already tell us that these disputes are cases of ‘deep’ or ‘shallow’ ontology. Therefore the definition provides us nothing above or beyond what we got from the intuitions alone. If we do not allow ontological disputes to count as (potential) counterexamples against a proposed definition, it is unclear why this definition should be applicable to ontological disputes at all: any reason for excluding ontological disputes from being counterexamples is also a reason to exclude ontological disputes from the scope of the definition at all. Either way, the generated definitions are uninformative with respect to separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology.

With respect to providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*: it is unlikely that (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes can provide insights into these notions if there is no underlying systematicity. Given that it is unlikely that there is such underlying systematicity in the definitions that result from the common procedure, it is likely that such definitions are uninformative with respect to providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*.

In the fifth section, I argue that (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the procedure common to the discussion about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature are unnecessary with respect to the purposes identified in section 2. With the help of three examples, I demonstrate that we already have a good intuitive grasp on the notion

of (*merely*) *verbal dispute*, and that this suffices both for separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology and for providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*.

Thus, I conclude that the discussion in the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes provides us with (more or less strict) definitions that are uninformative and unnecessary for the purported purposes. In the next section, I will explain what this conclusion encompasses exactly.

1 The claim

In this section I clarify the claim I want to make in this essay. This claim is: in the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes, there is a common procedure that takes intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes as input, and outputs a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes, but this procedure is uninformative (in the sense that it does not allow us to do more with the output than we could on the basis of the input) and unnecessary (in the sense that we can already do with the input what we want to do with the output on the basis of the input) with respect to the purposes of separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology and of providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*.

I first explain that I am not against the use of intuitions in philosophy. Second, I discuss the trade-off between informativeness and well-foundedness, and illustrate this with help of Carrie Jenkins’s “Merely Verbal Disputes” (2014a). Third, I make a distinction between conceptual clarification as mere rephrasing and as actual refinement. In making these distinctions, it becomes clear what I do and do not claim.

It might seem that the argument against the way in which the debate about (merely) verbal disputes is currently conducted is as follows: the current debate employs a particular procedure which takes as input intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes and outputs (more or less strict) definitions of

(merely) verbal disputes, however since nothing more than intuitions goes in, nothing more than intuitions can go out, and therefore the procedure effects nothing. In short: the current debate is pointless, for it does not deliver us more than the intuitions we started with. But this argument is flawed, and it is not the argument I want to make.

To be clear: I do not want to argue against the use of intuitions in the debate about (merely) verbal disputes; the problem is not that the conclusions of the discussions about (merely) verbal disputes rely (exclusively) on intuitions.² Indeed, one might object against such an argument that it is unreasonable and not in accord with (philosophical) practice. One might argue that procedures such as the one that is (according to this essay) employed widely in the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes move this debate forward by refining and developing our intuitions. In the case of (merely) verbal disputes, we might have implicit knowledge of the notion – for instance we implicitly know its application conditions; we implicitly know when we are dealing with a (merely) verbal dispute – but we may have not yet explicated that idea; we may have not yet found a good, explicit formulation. Such explication is needed, it might be argued, for conceptual clarification – we clarify a concept by making explicit the knowledge we implicitly have of it.³ Indeed, one might even argue that this is simply what philosophers do: they take some intuitions about a phenomenon – in this case (merely) verbal disputes – and refine these into a (more or less strict) definition.

I do not want to claim that such conceptual clarification cannot be obtained. What I want to claim is that such conceptual clarifications involve a trade-off between informativeness and well-foundedness.

Below, I illustrate this trade-off with Carrie Jenkin’s “Merely Verbal Disputes” (2014a).⁴

²On the contrary, I have argued elsewhere that every conclusion must ultimately rely on intuitions.

³Thanks to A.P. de Jong for his remarks on this point.

⁴I give an in-depth analysis of Jenkins’s “Merely Verbal Disputes” (2014a) in appendix A.

1.1 Informative or well-founded

In “Merely Verbal Disputes” (2014a), Jenkins wants “to understand what counts as a merely verbal dispute, when we should conclude that a dispute is merely verbal, and whether it is *appropriate* to end discussion upon reaching that conclusion” (Jenkins 11). Her “aim is to move towards a better understanding of these and related issues” (Jenkins 11). According to her abstract, her paper “point[s] out some problems with existing approaches, and develops a new proposal which builds upon their strengths” (Jenkins 11). Concretely, she “attempt[s] to give a characterizing necessary and sufficient condition for *Parties A and B are having a merely verbal dispute*” (Jenkins 11).

Already we can ask two questions about Jenkins’s methodology as it is presented in her text. First, the new proposal in this paper is supposed to build upon the strengths of previous proposals. This invokes the question how these strengths are evaluated: what makes a proposal for (a (more or less strict) definition of) (merely) verbal disputes, or a certain aspect of such a proposal, strong? Second, we can ask how we are to judge a certain condition necessary or sufficient. Here looms a paradox of analysis: in order to judge that some putative necessary or sufficient condition is truly a necessary or sufficient condition for *A* and *B* to have a merely verbal dispute, then we already need to know (or *intuit*) what a merely verbal dispute is. Since we thus determine the necessary or sufficient conditions on the basis of this prior knowledge (or on the basis of prior intuitions), we cannot expect these conditions to be informative: they only iterate what was already known (or intuited).

However, iteration is not necessarily uninformative: as teachers know, repeating the same thoughts in different forms often enhances understanding. So we might have a prior idea of what merely verbal disputes are and still learn something new when we spell out the necessary and sufficient conditions for *A* and *B* to have a merely verbal dispute. The important thing to notice is that this involves a trade-off between being well-founded and being informative: if the conditions we spell out stray too far from the prior idea of verbal disputes on the basis of which these conditions

were conceived, they are very informative, but not well-founded. On the other hand, if we spell out the conditions by literally repeating our prior idea, then they are very well-founded, but not very informative. For example, if I were to say that a necessary condition for a verbal dispute is that it looks like a dispute for one of the parties involved, then this would be well-founded: it is clearly based on our prior understanding. However, it would not be very informative: it seems that we learn, upon learning of this necessary condition, something we did not know already from our prior understanding. On the other hand, if I were to say that a necessary condition for a verbal dispute is that one of the parties must be eating pudding, then this would, were it true, be very informative: it tells us something very new about verbal disputes, something not readily available in our prior idea of verbal disputes. However, it is not very well-founded: it is seemingly not based on any prior understanding of verbal disputes.

This trade-off between being well-founded and being informative poses a problem for Jenkins's methodology (and, as I argue in this essay, for the procedure common to the debate on (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature). Recall the question asked: how are we to judge proposed necessary and sufficient conditions? Why does *looking like a dispute* seem a good candidate for a necessary condition and *involving pudding* not? What is the 'data' to which the proposed account of (merely) verbal dispute must be tested? This ties in with the first question: how are we to evaluate the strength of a proposed definition? – what is the 'data'? Now we might evaluate any proposed definition, account, or necessary or sufficient condition by taking prior ideas of (merely) verbal disputes as 'data': strong accounts resemble the prior ideas; good conditions align with the prior ideas. However, this just makes the proposed definitions, accounts, and conditions well-founded with regard to the prior idea, and this trades-off against informativeness (as became clear in the previous paragraph); we end up with very well-founded definitions, accounts, and conditions, but they are not very informative.

What we want is an account of merely verbal disputes that is both informative and well-founded. To find out whether this is possible, we should perhaps ask the question: founded on what? The

previous paragraphs make clear that founding an account of merely verbal disputes on a prior conceived idea of merely verbal disputes jeopardizes its informativeness. So if we want an account of (merely) verbal disputes that is both informative and well-founded, it should not (solely) be founded on prior conceived ideas about (merely) verbal disputes. This is precisely the problem in Jenkins’s text: the definition she offers (which she labels MVD+) does not go beyond the intuitions it is founded on; it is well-founded, but since it is founded on prior intuitions, it is not informative. Similarly for her criticism of other accounts of (merely) verbal disputes: they are levelled from the standpoint of someone who has already a strong intuition about what (merely) verbal disputes are, and as such these criticisms are, although well-founded (that is, not without a base – this base being the prior intuitions), uninformative.⁵

In “Serious Verbal Disputes: Ontology, Metaontology, and Analyticity” (2014b), Jenkins applies the insights from “Merely Verbal Disputes” (2014a) to ontology. She gives the following two advantages of MVD⁶: first, MVD “makes good sense of why disputes end when they are agreed to be merely verbal” (Jenkins 456); and, second, MVD makes good sense “of why recasting a dispute in alternative vocabulary available to both parties can sometimes (but not always) be a method for establishing that a dispute is merely verbal” (Jenkins 456). But note that these are only advantages if we have a prior intuition about what (merely) verbal disputes are supposed to be. In particular, for these points to be advantages of MVD, we must have the intuition that, first, disputes actually do or should end when they are discovered to be merely verbal; and, second, that recastability in alternative vocabulary is indeed a mark of (merely) verbal disputes. Without these prior intuitions, it is unclear why MVD making good sense of the endability and recastability of merely verbal disputes is an advantage – if we have contrary intuitions (i.e. that verbal disputes should continue, and that the ability to recast them in alternative vocabulary signifies their being non-merely-verbal) MVD seems to be a very bad characterization. This is all to say that even the

⁵As can be seen in appendix A, most arguments we encounter in “Merely Verbal Disputes” (2014a) indeed take this form: account *X* is a good/bad account of merely verbal disputes, because it classifies as merely verbal or substantive the same/different disputes as we intuitively do.

⁶In “Serious Verbal Disputes: Ontology, Metaontology, and Analyticity”, Jenkins only introduces MVD, not MVD+. I assume she would say that the advantages MVD has are also advantages for MVD+.

advantages Jenkins herself cites for MVD come down to the claim that MVD aligns with our prior intuitions about merely verbal disputes.

The same holds for MVD+. Indeed, MVD+ follows our intuitions very closely (if not exactly – after all, that is how it was designed) about merely verbal disputes, but, since we already had these intuitions, what did it add? What do we learn from MVD+? It seems that MVD+ is, although well-founded, uninformative: it perfectly aligns with prior intuitions, but does nothing more.^{7,8}

In this essay, I claim that something similar happens throughout the debate on (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature: the results are uninformative because they are solely based on prior intuitions. The results are well-founded, but not informative. Again, it might be said that this is just philosophical practice: conceptual clarification is simply the refining of prior intuitions; to demand that we can do more with the result than we can do with the input intuitions is simply the paradox of analysis. However, there is a clear distinction between mere rephrasings and actual refinements. For instance: we might have the intuition that mereology rests on (merely) verbal disputes. Now we can say that (merely) verbal disputes are (1) disputes over mereological sums, or (2) disputes over things that cannot be empirically investigated. Intuitively, (1) is a mere rephrasing of the intuition, whereas (2) constitutes a refinement. (Also note that (1) being more informative than (2) trades-off against it being less well-founded.)

We thus have seen that informativeness trades-off against well-foundedness, and that this trade-off poses a problem for ‘the method of conceptual clarification’. But we can also gather something useful from this trade-off: if we want to gain in informativeness, we have to loose on well-foundedness. That is: a refinement of an intuition, in order to be less well-founded than a mere rephrasing, has

⁷You might say that at least MVD+ presents our intuitions about merely verbal disputes in a clear way – in a single sentence with a neat label. However, looking closely at MVD+, what we see is not much more than a simple conjunction of our intuitions.

⁸It must be noted that there are some texts that give an account of (merely) verbal disputes that is not (solely) based on intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes. For example, see Karen Bennett’s “Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology” (2009); see footnote 28 for her argument on (merely) verbal disputes that does not rely on intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes.

to add something ‘extra’. It is this something extra that makes a refinement more informative and less well-founded than a mere rephrasing. With this insights, we can now ask: what constitutes the difference between a mere rephrasing and an actual refinement?

1.2 Rephrasing or refining

What constitutes the difference between mere rephrasings and actual refinements? An intuition which will frequently return in sections 4 and 5 is that refinements are possible when there is some (underlying) *systematicity*. I use “systematicity” as the name for a property of a collection of intuitions (or statements in general). Systematicity is supposed to be the measure of (non-trivial) (logical) relations between the intuitions in the collection. The idea is that this systematicity is the ‘something’ extra a refinement uses to be more informative (and less well-founded) than a mere rephrasing. Thus, if we discern some (underlying) systematicity in a collection of intuitions, then we can use this when we rephrase the intuitions. This ‘extra’ information then makes the result an informative refinement. On the other hand, if we have a collection of intuitions with no or little systematicity, then no rephrasing will constitute a refinement: there is nothing ‘extra’ added in the rephrasing.

For example, giving necessary or sufficient conditions can constitute an informative refinement, e.g. if these conditions nicely package a hitherto extensional definition. For instance, we can improve the extensional definition of *boson*, which is just a list of all bosons (photons, W^+ , W^- , Z^0 , etc.) by giving the necessary and sufficient condition of having integer spin. But giving necessary or sufficient conditions can also be uninformative, e.g. if we give as necessary condition just a disjunction of everything mentioned in an extensional definition. The differences between these two cases is that in the former, the refinement employs the systematicity in the input: the input intuitions (a photon is a boson, W^+ is a boson, etc.) are all related by having integer spin. In the latter case, there is no systematicity, hence it constitutes only a rephrasing.

We should also note that whether a certain procedure constitutes a refinement or a rephrasing of intuitions depends on the purpose of the procedure and its outputs. For example, look at *knowledge*. We can have the intuitions about some beliefs that they are cases of genuine knowledge. On the basis of these intuitions, we can give a (more or less strict) definition of knowledge by, for instance, finding something that all these cases have in common. Indeed, it seems we are then using the systematicity in the input intuitions. But this does not guarantee that the procedure constitutes a refinement of our intuitions, rather than a mere rephrasing? This depends on the purpose of the resulting definition. If we want a tool that helps us distinguishing genuine knowledge from mere belief, then a (more or less strict) definition based on something all the cases about which we have intuitions have in common constitutes a refinement of these intuitions: it delivers us insights we could not gain directly from the intuitions of the individual cases – the idea is that in giving a (more or less strict) definition via this procedure, we have enabled ourselves to do more than we could do on the basis of the intuitions alone. However, if we want to determine whether one of our original cases – one we had an intuition about – is a case of genuine knowledge, the procedure gives us merely a rephrasing of the original intuition: although we can use the (more or less strict) definition that resulted from the procedure to determine whether this case is a case of genuine knowledge, we also already could do that with the original intuition (after all, this was precisely the intuition that this case is a case of genuine knowledge). So we can do nothing more with the resultant definition than we could with the input intuitions.⁹

Now it might be argued that whether a procedure constitutes a refinement or a mere rephrasing does not really depend on its purpose, for as long as there is at least one purpose conceivable for which it is a refinement, it simply counts as a refinement. Another way of saying this is as follows:

⁹Another example: human rights. We might have intuitions about what human rights are. We might also conceive of a procedure that eliminates the notion of *human* from these intuitions, and end with a (more or less strict) definition of human rights that does not explicitly mention humans. Whether this is a refinement or a rephrasing depends on the purpose of the resulting definition. If we want to use it to discuss animal rights, it is a refinement: the resultant definition, since it does not explicitly mention humans, enables us to say something about human rights applied to a broader class of beings, e.g. animals. However, if we want to use the resultant definition to discuss the rights of a particular group of humans, the procedure was nothing more than a mere rephrasing: the procedure only eliminated the notion of *human* from the original intuitions, and this makes no difference for discussing the rights of a group of humans.

as soon as a procedure enables us to do *anything* more than we could do on the basis of the input intuitions, it constitutes a refinement. However, if we leave the purpose out of the picture, we run the risk of triviality: we can conceive of procedure that lets us trivially do more than we could on the basis of the input intuitions. For instance, if we have intuitions about X , we can ‘refine’ this intuition by adding that X is distinct from all things that are not X . This enables us to do more: the original intuition only provided insights about X , whereas after the procedure we are in addition provided with ‘insights’ about everything else. But adding tautologies to an intuition feels more like rephrasing it than refining it – we can do more things, but these things are trivial. This could be amended by saying that a procedure constitutes a refinement if we can do more *relevant* (or non-trivial) things than we could on the basis of the input intuitions. But since relevance is determined by purpose, this move just amounts to saying that whether a procedure is a refinement or a mere rephrasing depends on its purpose.

In the above discussion, we can also see why procedures that are mere rephrasings are uninformative: they do not help us further, for they do not enable us to do more than we already could. Such rephrasing are rather pointless: why should we go through the procedure if it only allows us to draw conclusions we could already have drawn on the basis of the input intuitions? Here, again, it might be objected that the drawing of conclusion on the basis of the input intuitions simply is what the (or any) procedure amounts to. Above, it was said that a refinement, as opposed to a mere rephrasing, allows us to do more than we could on the basis of the input intuition. But are not the things we do with the result of the procedure also things we do, ultimately, on the basis of the input intuition? That is: what is the difference between doing things on the basis of input intuitions, and doing things on the basis of a (more or less strict) definition that resulted from a procedure that took these intuitions as input? The distinction seems superficial. If this remark is directed against the distinction between the input intuitions and the resultant definition, then I agree. But this is not the relevant distinction: the relevant distinction is between applying and not applying the procedure. The claim is that we can do more if we apply the procedure to the input

intuitions than we can if we do not apply the procedure to the input intuitions. So there is indeed a sense in which we can do exactly the same things with the resultant definitions as with the input intuitions: this is the case when we take into account that applying the procedure to the input intuitions and doing things with the result also counts as doing things with the input intuitions.

So the phrasing of the claim at the beginning of the previous paragraph should rather be: rephrasings are pointless. Why should we go through the procedure if it allows us to draw conclusions we could already have drawn without applying the procedure to the input intuitions? It might be said that such procedures are processes of conceptual clarification: the input intuitions constitute our implicit knowledge about a certain notion of phenomenon; the procedure outputs explications of this implicit knowledge. But is this useful?¹⁰ – this question is what the discussion above amounts to. And the answer emerging from the above discussion is simply: it depends on the purpose.

1.3 Claim

I do not claim that conceptual clarification can never work; nor do I claim that intuitions have no place in philosophy. I do not claim there is no value in (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes, or that there is no value in the common procedure. I do not even claim that there is no value in (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the common procedure. I do not claim that the purposes of separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology or of providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning* are unattainable, nor do I claim that it is bad to give (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes in order to fulfil these purposes.

Rather, the main claim of my essay is this: in the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal

¹⁰One might here discuss the notion *usefulness*: when is an explication useful? If it has certain theoretical virtues? Before leaping to these theoretical concerns, I think we should consider a very straightforward answer: an explication is useful if it serves its purpose (well). It is precisely in this sense that I argue that the procedure found in the current literature on (merely) verbal disputes is not useful. It does not serve its purpose (well), or in any case it does not help any more than the input intuitions do – hence the procedure is uninformative.

disputes, we find a common procedure that takes intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes as input, and outputs a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes. These resultant definitions are intended to help with separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology, and to provide insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*. However, the common procedure and its resultant definitions are uninformative with respect to the intended purposes, because the resultant definitions do not go beyond or above the input intuitions – they do not enable us to do more than we already could on the basis of the input intuitions without applying the procedure. The common procedure and its resultant definitions are also unnecessary with respect to the intended purposes, because we can already fulfil these purposes on the basis of the input intuition without applying the procedure.

2 Purpose of discussions on (merely) verbal disputes

In this section, I will discuss some texts from the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes. I show that they are mostly concerned with giving an account of (merely) verbal disputes in order to say something about deflationism.¹¹ As we will see, the thought is that such an account can help in separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology. I also note that we can identify a second purpose of discussing (merely) verbal disputes in David Chalmers’s “Verbal Disputes” (2011). As we will see, Chalmers uses his account of verbal disputes to shed light on phenomena like *language* and *meaning* – for instance through giving an account of *analyticity* based on (merely) verbal disputes.

2.1 Jenkins

Carrie Jenkins, in her “Merely Verbal Disputes” (2014a), notes that sometimes “parties to what once appeared to be a substantive dispute come to agree that the disputes in question was ‘merely

¹¹Deflationism is the position that some (or all) metaphysical disputes ‘shallow’: they consist only of (merely) verbal disputes based only on linguistic differences.

verbal' [...]" (Jenkins 11). Furthermore, "reaching such a verdict will often end [the] discussion" (Jenkins 11). Thus, she claims, "it is of methodological importance to understand what counts as a merely verbal dispute, when we should conclude that a dispute is merely verbal, and whether it is *appropriate* to end the discussion upon reaching that conclusion" (Jenkins 11). Indeed, diagnosing a dispute as merely verbal helps in determining whether the discussion is worthwhile. For instance, Jenkins discusses Amie Thomasson's views on the "*existence of ordinary objects*" (Jenkins 454) in "Serious Verbal Disputes: Ontology, Metaontology, and Analyticity" (2014b), and argues that in Thomasson's view "the extant disputes [about the existence of ordinary objects] are merely verbal, and [that] once we clear up the kinds of misunderstandings that result in these merely verbal disputes, questions about the existence of ordinary objects turn out to be trivially easy to settle" (Jenkins 455). Here, according to Jenkins, Thomasson's metaontological view that disputes about the existence of ordinary objects are merely verbal influences her view on ontological issues. As Jenkins puts it: "I do think that understanding what counts as a merely verbal dispute can help suggest lines of inquiry" (Jenkins 456). Against Thomasson, Jenkins uses the same method: she "bring[s] a [new] metaontological perspective to the table [which] delivers a different verdict on the first order debate" (Jenkins 455).

Jenkins thus holds that there is a connection between diagnosing a dispute to be merely verbal and ending it, and we have seen that she has identified this connection in Amie Thomasson's work.¹² Now "[o]ne obvious explanation of the methodological connection between deciding that one is engaged in a merely verbal dispute and ending discussion averts to the fact that merely verbal disputes are generally regarded as being neither substantive, nor important, nor deep" (Jenkins 12), nor even a dispute or disagreement at all (Jenkins 12-13). This, then, is "one reason why merely verbal disputehood is methodologically important" (Jenkins 13): "philosophers take seriously the possibility that merely verbal disputes are not real disputes and/or do not involve any real disagreement" (Jenkins 13). That is: philosophers take seriously the possibility that ontology

¹²In particular, Jenkins reacts to Thomasson's *Ordinary Objects* (2007) and her "The Controversy over the Existence of Ordinary Objects" (2010).

(which is thought of as being ‘deep’) is actually ‘shallow’. Jenkins believes that an account of (merely) verbal disputes can help in making this distinction.

2.2 Manley

We find this connection between (merely) verbal disputes and deflationism in many places. David Manley, in his introduction to *Metametaphysics* (2009), writes that “[o]rdinary verbal disputes are accompanied by a distinct odor of superficiality, an odor that some philosophers claim to detect in the ontology room” (Manley 8), and that “it would be helpful to go beyond this phenomenological similarity if we want to discover whether metaphysical disputes are in fact merely verbal” (Manley 8). According to Manley, this is what *strong deflationists* try to do (Manley 4): “motivated in part by intuitions of shallowness, they argue that the dispute is merely verbal” (Manley 4). Thus an account of (merely) verbal disputes can help in discovering whether a certain ontological dispute is ‘deep’ or ‘shallow’.

2.3 Bennett

Karen Bennett also connects ‘dismissivism’¹³ (Bennett 38-40) to (merely) verbal disputes in “Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology” (2009): one “thing that a dismisser might have in mind when she brushes off the question about whether there [are] any *F*s [is that] [t]he dispute about whether there are *F*s is purely verbal” (Bennett 40). Again, an account of (merely) verbal disputes is supposed to help the ‘dissmiser’ in saying that a certain ontological dispute is ‘shallow’.

¹³Bennett uses “‘dismissivism’ as the generic label for the view that there is *something* deeply wrong with [certain metaphysical] debates” (Bennett 39) – according to the ‘dissmiser’, certain metaphysical disputes are ‘shallow’ (Bennett 38-40).

2.4 Hirsch

At several places, Eli Hirsch uses the diagnosis of (mere) verbalness to defend common sense ontology against revisionary ontology. The argument is roughly as follows: first, establish that a dispute is (merely) verbal; second, conclude that the question “which side speaks plain English?” is the only relevant question; third, since any revisionary ontologists dissents with sentences that are true in plain English, the common sense ontologist wins on the basis of interpretive charity. For instance, in “Physical-Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense” (2005), Hirsch claims that “many familiar questions about the ontology of physical objects are merely verbal[;] [n]othing is substantively at stake in these questions beyond the correct use of language” (Hirsch 2005, 67). According to Hirsch, this implies that “the position of common sense ontology must be correct” (Hirsch 2005, 69). Again, the diagnosis of disputes as (merely) verbal is used to deflate ontological debates.

Hirsch makes the same point less straightforwardly in “Ontological Arguments: Interpretive Charity and Quantifier Variance” (2008b), in the beginning of which he distinguishes two levels: “[a]t one level we use the language of our community [...] to make assertions about various philosophical topics[,] [while] [a]t another level we may be thinking about the nature of language, in particular about how linguistic behavior determines meaning” (Hirsch 2008b, 367). According to Hirsch, “[t]he interaction between these two levels can become problematical when we find ourselves at the second level disagreeing about the meanings of our own assertions at the first level” (Hirsch 2008b, 367). This is what happens when we say that “[t]he disagreement between mereological essentialists, four-dimensionalists, and defenders of common sense is [...] merely verbal – merely a matter of language” (Hirsch 2008b, 376), but still want to hang on to a revisionist ontology: language-level considerations indicate that common sense ontology is right on the object-level – against first-order revisionist claims.

Again, diagnosing a dispute to be (merely) verbal helps Hirsch in claiming that the common sense

position wins. For example, Hirsch looks at “the famous debate between Locke and Butler about the identity of a tree” (Hirsch 2008b, 367). According (Hirsch’s rendition of) Locke, “[a] tree may lose a branch and still retain its identity as that same tree” (Hirsch 2008b, 367), whereas according to (Hirsch’s rendition of) Butler, we have a different tree, since “no object can persist through a change of parts” (Hirsch 2008b, 367). Now Hirsch’s “own immediate intuitive feeling [is] that this dispute [...] is not substantive, [but] that it is in some sense merely verbal” (Hirsch 2008b, 367):

Locke and Butler agree that we are faced with a situation in which some tree-composing masses of matter are related to each other in certain qualitative, spatiotemporal, and causal ways. They don’t seem to disagree at all about what these relations are. [...] [T]hey are merely disagreeing about whether a situation in which masses of matter are interrelated in certain agreed-upon ways ought to be described in our language with the words “It’s the same tree,” or with the words “It’s a different tree.”

(Hirsch 2008b, 367-368)

Hirsch then introduces “Lockean English” and “Butlerian English”, two languages whose semantic rules tell us to use “same tree” and “different tree” respectively for a tree that loses a branch. “Then it seems that all these philosophers can be disagreeing about is whether the language we speak is in fact [Lockean or Butlerian English]” (Hirsch 2008b, 368): they seem to agree on the ‘facts in the world’, so what they must disagree over is the way we (actually) describe these fact; they disagree over what language (Lockean or Butlerian English) we (actually) speak. Of course, we (actually) speak plain English, but this is just the name for the language we (actually) speak; what Locke and Butler disagree over (according to Hirsch) is whether plain English is Lockean or Butlerian English (or which of the two is closest to plain English). To finish his argument, Hirsch claims that “[c]onsiderations of interpretive charity seem to indicate decisively that Lockean English is plain English” (Hirsch 2008b, 376), hence Locke wins.

The example of the dispute between Locke and Butler makes clear that Hirsch’s notion of (merely) verbal disputes plays an important role in his defence of common sense. This also becomes appar-

ent in Hirsch’s “Ontology and Alternative Languages” (2009), in which he gives a condition that (merely) verbal disputes satisfy. “Much of [...]his paper is an attempt to clarify this condition” (Hirsch 2009, 231), but this is to reinforce the “central part of [his] project[:] defend[ing] common sense” (Hirsch 2009, 232).¹⁴ Here, too, an account of (merely) verbal disputes is supposed to help with separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology – the latter being, in Hirsch’s story, the kind of ontology in which common sense wins the debate due to linguistic considerations.

2.5 McGrath

Matthew McGrath, in “Conciliatory Metaontology and the Vindication of Common Sense” (2008), conjures up the following imagery: “[a]ny self-respecting ontologist worries on occasion, “are the disputes I engage in and spend my career thinking about verbal?”” (McGrath 482). This seems an important question for McGrath, for “[t]he verbalness of a dispute is certainly a reason to bring the dispute to a halt, and would seem, *prima facie*, to be a reason to take all the sides to be on equal footing as far as the facts are concerned” (McGrath 482). So, it seems to McGrath, “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” (McGrath 482). Hence the importance of accounts of (merely) verbal disputes: if our best account of (merely) verbal disputes determines that most disputes in ontology are (merely) verbal, ontology might seem shallow – a waste of time.

¹⁴In most representations of Hirsch’s defence of common sense, his argument includes a step in which a dispute is established to be (merely) verbal; e.g. in McGrath’s “Conciliatory Metaontology and the Vindication of Common Sense” (2008), or Kitsik’s “Trees and Tables *versus* Crackpot Ontology: Jury Still Out” (2012). However, for completeness sake it should be noted that Hirsch sometimes formulates his defence of common sense without explicitly relying on the mere verbalness of a dispute; see for instance “Quantifier Variance and Realism” (2002b), “Against Revisionary Ontology” (2002a), and “Comments on Theodore Siders’s *Four Dimensionalism*” (2004).

2.6 Balcerak Jackson

Similarly, Brendan Balcerak Jackson, in “Verbal Disputes and Substantiveness” (2014), claims that “[o]ne way to challenge the substantiveness of a particular philosophical issue is to argue those who debate the issue are engaged in a merely verbal dispute” (Balcerak Jackson 31). However, Balcerak Jackson argues that “mere verbalness [...] does not imply that the question either party is attempting to address is a non-substantive one” (Balcerak Jackson 31). He argues this by giving an account of (merely) verbal disputes: “we should see mere verbalness as a certain kind of discourse defect” (Balcerak Jackson 31). A similar argument can be found in Jackson’s “Metaphysics, Verbal Disputes and the Limits of Charity” (2013), in which he in particular argues against Eli Hirsch’s deflationism: “a dispute can meet Hirsch’s conditions for being merely verbal even in cases where, intuitively, both sides are expressing fully substantive claims” (Balcerak Jackson 2013, 414). In these two texts we thus also find that (merely) verbal disputes are studied with the aim of commenting on deflationism – the issue of whether ontology is ‘deep’ or ‘shallow’.

2.7 Chalmers

David Chalmers, in “Verbal Disputes” (2011) gives two reasons why philosophers are, or should be, interested in (merely) verbal disputes. “First, they play a key role in philosophical method” (Chalmers 517). According to Chalmers, “the diagnosis of verbal disputes has the potential to serve as a sort of universal acid in philosophical discussion, either dissolving disagreements or boiling them down to the fundamental disagreement on which they turn” (Chalmers 517); the idea is that a clear conception of verbal disputes helps us focusing research on disputes that do not solely turn on linguistic matters. This is again what we have seen above: all cited papers implicitly or explicitly show that (merely) verbal disputes are studied in order to separate the ‘deep’ ontological questions from the ‘shallow’ ontological questions.

Chalmers gives a second reason why philosophers are, or should be, interested in (merely) verbal disputes): “[r]eflection on the existence and nature of verbal disputes can reveal something about the nature of concepts, language and meaning” (Chalmers 517). For instance, Chalmers argues that “[t]he notion of a verbal disputes is connected [...] to the notion of analyticity” (Chalmers 557), and goes on to “use [a notion of verbal dispute] to characterize certain notions of analyticity” (Chalmers 557). As Chalmers notes: “one can use the notion of verbal dispute to do at least some of the work that notions of analyticity have been used to do” (Chalmers 559). Other notions that are characterized with help of his account of verbal disputes are *bedrock disputes* (“a substantive [i.e. not (merely) verbal] dispute for which no underlying dispute can be found” (Chalmers 545)), *bedrock concepts* (“concepts that generate bedrock disputes” (Chalmers 549)), and *translucency* (an analogue of analyticity¹⁵). Generalizing, we can see how an account of (merely) verbal disputes can provide insights into phenomena like *language* or *meaning*.

2.8 Two purposes in discussing (merely) verbal disputes

In this section, I have identified in the current philosophical literature two purposes of discussing (merely) verbal disputes. First, we have seen that most participants to the debate given an account of (merely) verbal disputes in order to say something about deflationism. The thought here is that such an account can help in separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology. Second, we have seen that Chalmers uses his account of (merely) verbal disputes to shed light on phenomena like *language* and *meaning* – for instance through an account of *analyticity* based on (merely) verbal disputes.

¹⁵One can use the notion of a verbal dispute to introduce “a useful notion of *translucency*” (Chalmers 559): “a sentence *S* is translucent with respect to a set of sentence *T* iff, necessarily, if two competent users of the sentences in *T* agree (nonverbally) on all these sentence, then any dispute over *S* (where at least one uses *S* competently) is verbal” (Chalmers 559).

3 The current procedure

In the previous section, I have identified two purposes of discussing (merely) verbal disputes. In this section, I continue to examine the current philosophical literature; this time to show what the discussions of (merely) verbal disputes look like. I show that most discussions revolve around giving a (more or less) strict definition of (merely) verbal disputes, and that there is a common procedure in the reasoning supporting these definitions. This section consists of several excerpts from the current philosophical literature in which this common procedure is employed, followed by a discussion on whether these excerpts do justice to the debate on (merely) verbal disputes as it is found in the current philosophical literature.

3.1 Jenkins

Carrie Jenkins, in her “Merely Verbal Disputes” (2014a) wants “to understand what counts as a merely verbal dispute, when we should conclude that a dispute is merely verbal, and whether it is *appropriate* to end discussion upon reaching that conclusion” (Jenkins 11). Her “aim is to move towards a better understanding of these and related issues” (Jenkins 11). According to her abstract, her paper “point[s] out some problems with existing approaches, and develops a new proposal which builds upon their strengths” (Jenkins 11). Concretely, she “attempt[s] to give a characterizing necessary and sufficient condition for *Parties A and B are having a merely verbal dispute*” (Jenkins 11).

From my in-depth analysis of the methodology of her text, which can be found in appendix A,¹⁶ we can see that it mostly consists of the following procedure. First, identify an account of verbal disputes. Then, find a case which intuitively is a substantial dispute, but according to the proposed account is merely verbal, or vice versa. Finally, dismiss the proposed account. It is clear that

¹⁶Part of the text of this subsection below reoccurs in appendix A.

intuitions about what verbal disputes are play a major role in this procedure: they allow Jenkins to select counterexamples.

For example, we look at Chalmers's 'gloss' on (merely) verbal disputes and Jenkins's problems with this gloss. According to Chalmers, in "Verbal Disputes" (2011),

[a] dispute over S is (broadly) verbal when for some expression T in S , the parties disagree about the meaning of T , and the dispute over S arises wholly in virtue of this disagreement regarding T .

(Chalmers 522)

According to Jenkins, the problem with this gloss, were it used as definition of (merely) verbal disputes, is that it also classifies disputes in which there is an appearance of disagreement about the portion of language that is actually responsible for the dispute, as (broadly) verbal. To bring this out, Jenkins uses two examples. First, she uses the example of Tim and Tom: "Tim and Tom are plausibly 'disputing over' the sentence 'bring' is a noun'; call this sentence S " (Jenkins 15), and they both mean noun with 'noun'. According to Jenkins, the 'Chalmers gloss' might, contra Jenkins's intuitions, classify this example as merely verbal, depending on whether Chalmers "would count the word 'bring' as being *in S* in the sense that the gloss requires" (Jenkins 15). The second example brings out the same point: Mick and Mark "are arguing about how to translate 'bring'. Mick thinks it is a noun, Mark thinks it is a verb" (Jenkins 15). Mick says that you can wear a bring on your finger, and that 'bring' thus must be a noun. Mark denies that there is such a thing as a bring. According to Jenkins,

the Mick/Mark dispute is *verbal and nothing else* – it is obviously a dispute motivated by linguistic difference, and indeed in some senses it is 'about' language. But it does not seem to me to fall into the same category as the[...] dispute between Tim and Tom, or disputes between those who say geese live by the bank (meaning river bank) and those who say geese do not live

by the bank (meaning financial institution).

(Jenkins 16)

Jenkins’s problem with the Chalmers gloss is that “[a]lthough the dispute between Mick and Mark meets the condition discussed by Chalmers, it is not entirely comfortable to describe it as a ‘merely verbal dispute’ in the philosophers’ sense” (Jenkins 16).¹⁷

Thus, the first point of criticism Jenkins levels against the ‘Chalmers gloss’ is that it classifies (intuitively substantial) disputes about language as ‘broadly verbal’. In effect, Jenkins’s reasoning is the same as in her discussion of the first theme: she identifies an account of merely (or in this case, broadly) verbal disputes, and then shows that there are cases which this account ‘misclassifies’, in the sense that it classifies disputes which are intuitively substantial as (merely) verbal, or vice versa. Again, the ‘data’ which are supposed to support our intuitions about these cases are just examples of these cases. There seems to be the presupposition that we have an intuition about “ ‘a merely verbal dispute’ in the philosophers’ sense” (Jenkins 16), which is brought out by citing examples: the Tim/Tom and Mick/Mark disputes are just stipulated to be merely verbal (or substantive) – no argument for these judgements is offered.

Jenkins also gives her own proposal for a definition of (merely) verbal disputes, and this proposal is also motivated by the intuitions that fuel her criticism of Chalmers. I will not explain this definition here,¹⁸ but only mention it:¹⁹

MVD: Parties *A* and *B* are having a merely verbal dispute iff they are engaged in a sincere prima facie dispute *D*, but do not disagree over the subject matter(s) of *D*, and merely present

¹⁷According to Jenkins, Chalmers says “something along these lines” (Jenkins 16) in “Verbal Disputes” (2011): “One might also require [...] that a merely verbal dispute is one in which usage of the key term is not itself a central object of concern” (Chalmers 525; fn.8).

¹⁸See appendix A for a full treatment.

¹⁹Since Jenkins believes that “the phrase ‘merely verbal dispute’ is contextually shifty” (Jenkins 21), she “want[s] to claim that the sentence labelled ‘MVD’ above comes out true in every context of utterance” (Jenkins 21); this is what she calls ‘MVD+’. In this subsection, I ignore this and only speak of MVD; see appendix A for remarks on MVD+.

the appearance of doing so owing to their divergent uses of some relevant portion of language.

(Jenkins 21)

Jenkins explains the reasoning behind every component of MVD, but here I only discuss her reasoning for the ‘disagreement over subject matter’-part.²⁰ According to Jenkins, “[i]t is very natural to report the fact that *A* and *B* do not disagree about the subject matter of their prima facie dispute by saying that they are not ‘really’ disagreeing” (Jenkins 22). The ‘subject matter’-part of MVD thus brings out the “lack of substantive, relevant, ‘real’ disagreement between the parties” (Jenkins 22) we intuitively find in a (merely) verbal dispute. In particular, MVD classifies the Tim/Tom disputes in the same way as we intuitively do.

In sum, we thus see that Jenkins uses prior intuitions both to dismiss other definitions of (merely) verbal disputes, and to support her own definition.

3.2 Hirsch

Eli Hirsch’s account of verbal disputes relies on his notion of quantifier variance.²¹ However, the possibility of quantifier variance is defended, in “Ontological Arguments: Interpretive Charity and Quantifier Variance” (2008b) by an appeal to examples of intuitively (merely) verbal disputes. Here is one: “Locke held that [...] [a] tree may lose a branch and still retain its identity as that same tree [...]. Butler insisted, on the contrary, that [...] no object can persist through a change of parts” (Hirsch 2008b, 367). Now Hirsch’s “own immediate intuitive feeling [is] that this dispute between Locke and Butler is not substantive, that it is in some sense merely verbal” (Hirsch 2008b, 367). To bring this out, Hirsch imagines “Lockean English” – the language in which Locke’s statements above are true – and “Butlerian English” – the language in which Butler’s statements above are true – and invokes a ‘principle of charity’ to argue that we ought interpret Locke and Butler as

²⁰Again, appendix A for the full treatment.

²¹See e.g. his “Ontology and Alternative Languages” (2009).

speaking these languages respectively.²² The intuitive support is for the assumption “that we can make intelligible to ourselves the two imagined versions of English” (Hirsch 2008b, 373). The idea is that we can imagine these versions of English if we can make sense of *quantifier variance*: the meaning of quantifier expression (e.g. ‘there is (something)’) can vary between languages. Now besides pointing back at the Locke/Butler example, and introducing the debate over “*four-dimensionalism*” (Hirsch 2008b, 375) as an intuitively (merely) verbal dispute, Hirsch gives no positive support for the possibility of quantifier variance. Instead he shifts the burden of proof: “the opponents of quantifier variance must squarely face the burden of showing why there could not possibly be languages related to each other in the manner of Lockean and Butlerian English” (Hirsch 2008b, 374) – and Hirsch himself “do[es not] see how this burden can be met” (Hirsch 2008b, 374). The argument here seems to be that quantifier variance is possible because it is intuitively possible, as demonstrated by the Locke/Butler and four-dimensionalism debates, and there is nothing to defeat this intuition. This intuition that quantifier variance is possible for these debates (that is, the intuition that we can imagine these alternative languages) seems rooted in the intuition that these debates are (merely) verbal.²³

Now given that Hirsch’s account of (merely) verbal disputes relies on the possibility of quantifier variance, Hirsch’s conclusion about the Locke/Butler and four-dimensionalism debate is that they are (merely) verbal disputes (partly) because quantifier variance is possible – but this possibility was just an uncontested intuition, which was moreover part of the larger intuition that these debates are (merely) verbal. The argument reduces thus: the debates are (merely) verbal on Hirsch’s account (partly) because we have the intuition that they are.

We might say that Hirsch’s account of (merely) verbal disputes at least gives us some insight in the structure of such disputes: from Hirsch’s account we learn that verbal disputes have something to

²²See the first section of “Ontological Arguments: Interpretive Charity and Quantifier Variance” (2008b).

²³Indeed, even before introducing alternative languages or quantifier variance, Hirsch announces his “own immediate intuitive feeling that this dispute between Locke and Butler is not substantive, that it is in some sense merely verbal” (Hirsch 2008b, 368) – Hirsch even seems to use quantifier variance as a way of explaining his feeling.

do with quantifier variance. However, if we look at the argument as presented above, we see that the only support for the possibility of quantifier variance comes from intuitions about the (mere) verbalness of certain example disputes. So it seems Hirsch is here not better off than Jenkins in the previous section: the account he gives of (merely) verbal disputes is supposedly adequate or even favoured above other mostly on the basis of prior intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes.

3.3 Balcerak Jackson

More examples of arguments regarding (merely) verbal disputes that are mostly supported by prior intuitions about such disputes we find with Brendan Balcerak Jackson. In his “Verbal Disputes and Substantiveness” (2014), Balcerak Jackson attempts to “clarify the relationship between mere verbalness and substantiveness” (Balcerak Jackson 31). In particular, he argues “that mere verbalness [...] does not imply that the question either party is attempting to address is a non-substantive one” (Balcerak Jackson 31); that is: diagnosing that a dispute is merely verbal is not sufficient for any deflationary conclusions. Looking at the text, we see that it relies mostly on examples – and hence on our intuitions about those examples – to make its point.

According to Balcerak Jackson, the “clearest cases of merely verbal disputes, and those that serve as the model for linguistic deflationists, are cases in which the parties are simply “talking past each other”” (Balcerak Jackson 33). He illustrates this kind of cases with an example in which “Kermit is only familiar with the philosopher’s use of ‘metaphysics’, while Gonzo is only familiar with the spiritualists’ use” (Balcerak Jackson 34), yet both agree that the bookstore only sells spiritual books. This is, according to Balcerak Jackson, “what David Chalmers calls a *narrowly verbal dispute*” (Balcerak Jackson 34), whose salient features “are the following: the sentence under dispute expresses different propositions p and q for the two parties, so that by uttering the sentence on party asserts p , while by uttering its negation the other party asserts $not-q$; moreover, the parties agree on the truth-value of p and $not-q$ ” (Balcerak Jackson 34).

However, Balcerak Jackson claims that “it is by now a familiar point that not every merely verbal dispute qualifies as narrowly verbal” (Balcerak Jackson 34), and he gives “two examples that illustrate the point” (Balcerak Jackson 34). First, a dispute in which both parties “intend to use ‘billion’ with the meaning that it has in the wider English-speaking community” (Balcerak Jackson 35), but in which one party is confused about what this meaning is. Now according to Balcerak Jackson, this “dispute is intuitively merely verbal” (Balcerak Jackson 35), yet it “fails to meet the conditions for being narrowly verbal” (Balcerak Jackson 35). The second example involves one party mistakenly using the name ‘Kirk Douglas’ in an attempt to refer to Burt Lancaster. Balcerak Jackson comments: “Here, too, the conditions of the simple account are not met; but here, too, the dispute is intuitively merely verbal” (Balcerak Jackson 35). He concludes that “mere verbalness is not, in general, as closely tied to the facts about literal meaning as are cases of narrow verbalness” (Balcerak Jackson 35).

Similar to Jenkins, we here see Balcerak Jackson rejecting an account of merely verbal disputes (i.e. Chalmers’s account of narrowly verbal disputes) on the basis of prior intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes.

Balcerak Jackson continues by looking at Chalmers’s gloss on broadly verbal disputes, from Chalmers’s “Verbal Disputes” (2011).²⁴ According to Balcerak Jackson, “Chalmers’s characterization arguably captures the cases we have considered so far” (Balcerak Jackson 38), but on the other hand, “the feature identified in Chalmers’s account are clearly not essential to merely verbal disputes” (Balcerak Jackson 38). Again, this is illustrated with an example: this time, “Kermit and Gonzo might have exactly the same beliefs about the meaning of ‘metaphysics’ [...] and yet they might make conflicting assumptions about what [a] *third party* takes ‘metaphysics’ to mean when [they] pose the question [“Where can I find books on metaphysics?”]” (Balcerak Jackson 38). Balcerak Jackson’s assessment: “Intuitively, th[is] dispute is no more genuine than in the original case; [Kermit

²⁴Chalmers’s gloss was already cited when we discussed Jenkins’s text. I cite it again here, for reference: “[a] dispute over *S* is (broadly) verbal when for some expression *T* in *S*, the parties disagree about the meaning of *T*, and the dispute over *S* arises wholly in virtue of this disagreement regarding *T*.” (Chalmers 522)

and Gonzo] endorse contradictory sentences merely because of their conflicting assumptions about what the questioner is asking [...]. But in this case there is no disagreement between [Kermit and Gonzo] about what ‘metaphysics’ means” (Balcerak Jackson 38), hence Chalmers’s gloss does not characterize it as broadly verbal. Again, an account of (merely) verbal disputes is dismissed because it does not align with prior intuitions regarding an example.²⁵

Balcerak Jackson also discusses Hirsch’s account of (merely) verbal disputes – which he summarizes as the “concordant interpretation criterion” – and dismisses it because it too does not characterize the example of the last paragraph in the same way as Balcerak Jackson’s intuitions do: “the dispute will fail to meet the concordant interpretation criterion[,] [b]ut the dispute is clearly merely verbal” (Balcerak Jackson 40). In “Metaphysics, Verbal Disputes and the Limits of Charity” (2013), Balcerak Jackson also dismisses Hirsch’s account. He argues that “a dispute can meet Hirsch’s conditions for being merely verbal even in cases where, intuitively, both sides are expressing fully substantive claims” (Balcerak Jackson 2013, 414). Unsurprisingly, Balcerack Jackson offers an example of a sentence which, “as we understand it, is intuitively a paradigm example of a sentence that expresses a substantive claim” (Balcerak Jackson 2013, 421), yet over which a dispute can be constructed that “straightforwardly satisfies the conditions for being merely verbal [on Hirsch’s account]” (Balcerak Jackson 2013, 421).

In “Verbal Disputes and Substantiveness” (2014), Balcerak Jackson also offers his own take on (merely) verbal disputes by giving an account of “*genuine*, rather than merely verbal” (Balcerak Jackson 41) disputes. The strength of his account, Balcerak Jackson finds in the fact that his

²⁵Balcerak Jackson notes that “[t]his case would probably not trouble Chalmers: he concedes that his characterization should be thought of as only a rough guide to mere verbalness” (Balcerak Jackson 38). Here, it might seem that Balcerak Jackson is aware that his methodology – dismissing accounts of (merely) verbal disputes on the basis of prior intuitions – is bad: it seems he does not outright dismiss Chalmers’s account. But in fact Balcerak Jackson only makes it worse. According to him, “cases like these illustrate that an account of mere verbalness in terms of disagreement about meaning cannot be anything *more* than a rough guide” (Balcerak Jackson 38). That is, instead of dismissing one account on the basis of prior intuitions regarding an example (regarding “cases like this”), he dismisses *a whole class* of accounts on the basis of prior intuitions regarding an example – “accounts of mere verbalness in terms of disagreement about meaning”. He fails to see that any account in terms of whatever cannot be anything more than a rough guide – if this is the professed methodology! As I argue in this essay, as long as (next to) nothing is added to our intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes, accounts build on those intuitions (via assessments of examples) cannot tell us anything beyond those intuitions. And these intuitions are at best a rough guide.

account, and subsequent observations, “help account of the diagnosis of mere verbalness in cases that do not meet the semantic conditions required for being narrowly verbal” (Balcerak Jackson 42). That is: his account does characterize his example in the same way as his intuitions do.

So with Balcerak Jackson we have another example of the reasoning prevalent in the debate about (merely) verbal disputes: old accounts are dismissed because they classify an intuitively substantive dispute as (merely) verbal (or vice versa), and new accounts are created that do classify these examples in the same way as our prior intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes do.

3.4 Chalmers

Another example: Chalmers’s “Verbal Disputes” (2011); in particular section two. In this section, Chalmers converges to his own ‘gloss’ on broadly verbal disputes by examining and rejecting a number of older accounts. He dismisses these accounts because they do not fit with intuitions regarding some examples, and ultimately advertises his own characterization as one “that has the potential to cover all of these cases” (Chalmers 522).

First a “common proposal for characterizing verbal disputes” (Chalmers 518) in terms of *definitional equivalence* is dismissed because “[m]any expressions do not have clear definitional analyses” (Chalmers 519). The example here is the dispute between Ishmael and Linnaeus over whether whales are fish: “[t]hey simply differ on the broadly verbal matter of whether to use ‘fish’ for the superficial kind or the scientific kind[,] [b]ut there need not be any clear definitional gloss of ‘fish’ either for Linnaeus or for Ishmael” (Chalmers 519). So here we have an account, and there we have a case that the account cannot handle. Hence the account is dismissed.

Next, Chalmers discusses an account according to which the different parties in the dispute express different compatible propositions with their assertion and denial of the disputed sentence. The

example Chalmers uses to take this account down is a variation of James’s story of the squirrel²⁶: “the *deferential squirrel case* [...] combines the original squirrel case with the stipulation that the quarrelling parties both use the expression ‘go round’ with deference to their linguistic community” (Chalmers 519). In this way, the parties will “express the same proposition, and one will deny the same proposition that the other asserts” (Chalmers 520). However, since “the debate still seems clearly to be a verbal dispute, in that the first-order disagreement is grounded in a metalinguistic disagreement” (Chalmers 520), this account is also dismissed.

Chalmers then discusses Hirsch’s account, which, according to Chalmers, “provides a useful heuristic for cases of semantic deference [...], but does not cover the problem cases stemming from other sorts of semantic externalism” (Chalmers 521). That is: Hirsch’s account can deal with the deferential squirrel, but not with other examples, and therefore must be dismissed.

Thus, with Chalmers too we see the same pattern: accounts are raised and dismissed because intuitive substantial disputes that are classified as (merely) verbal (or vice versa), in favour of a new account which does classify the counterexample in accordance with our intuitions – until a counterexample is found against this new case, and the process repeats.

3.5 Bennett

Karen Bennett, in her “Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology” (2009), also argues against Hirsch’s account of (merely) verbal disputes on the basis of intuitions, albeit somewhat less straightforwardly. Her target is Hirsch’s “necessary condition on a dispute’s being verbal” (Bennett 51): “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 true” (Hirsch 2005, 82), regimented in the following form:

²⁶Even though in that case, Chalmers claims, “it is far from obvious that the two parties assert and deny distinct propositions” (Chalmers 519).

a dispute over the truth of a sentence D is merely verbal if ‘there are two undisputed sentences U_1 and U_2 , one true and one false, such that one side holds that D is (*a priori* necessarily) equivalent to U_1 and the other side holds that D is equivalent to U_2 ’ (2005, 83).

(Bennett 51)

However, Bennett claims, presumably on the basis of some intuition about (merely) verbal disputes,²⁷ that “it is central to the notion of a verbal dispute that the two parties disagree about the *meaning* of the disputed sentence” (Bennett 53), which, according to her, “requires [...] that the equivalences be analytic” (Bennett 53), besides being *a priori* necessary. Here we see Bennett dismissing an account of (merely) verbal disputes on the basis of it being counterintuitive – intuitively, analytic equivalence is required, but this is not the case in Hirsch’s account.²⁸

3.6 McGrath

In the first section of his “Conciliatory Metaontology and the Vindication of Common Sense” (2008), Matthew McGrath “state[s] Hirsch’s criterion for verbalness and then consider[s] in detail how it is used to argue that the composition dispute is verbal” (McGrath 483). In the second section of his text, he “provide[s] a two-part objection, which [he] take[s] not merely to cast doubt

²⁷Bennett further only says about this point that “presumably the relevant criterion should require that [the $U_i \leftrightarrow D$ ($i = 1, 2$) equivalence] also be *analytic* in the mouth of one of the disputants” (Bennett 53). I assume that this is just an intuition about (merely) verbal disputes.

²⁸Bennett continues with an amended form of Hirsch’s account, according to which “in one [disputant’s] side’s language D is *a priori*, necessarily, and analytically equivalent to U_1 , and in the other side’s language D is *a priori*, necessarily, and analytically equivalent to U_2 ” (Bennett 53). Again, she dismisses this account on the basis of prior intuitions, *but these are not intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes*. As such, this dismissal does not fit the theme of this section; I include it here nevertheless for completeness sake. She claims that “the participants in the first order debates do not think that the relevant conditions are analytic, and indeed, there is strong reasons to think that they *cannot* be” (Bennett 54). Bennett appears to give only one such strong reason. Suppose that the dispute is between a ‘high-ontologist’ and a ‘low-ontologist’: the former believes in the existence of objects the latter does not believe in (e.g. temporal parts in the perdurantism vs. endurantism debate; arbitrary mereological sums in debates about mereology). According to Bennett, saying “that the high-ontologist’s linking conditionals [$U_1 \leftrightarrow D$] are analytically true in here language, and analytically false in the low-ontologist’s language [amounts to saying] that it makes perfectly good sense for the high-ontologist to have the power to define things into existence” (Bennett 56-57). This she rejects as absurd. Hence the equivalences cannot be analytical and thus the amended Hirsch’s account of (merely) verbal disputes fails. Note that it still fails on the basis of some intuitions – but these are intuitions regarding the possibility of ‘defining things into existence’, not regarding (merely) verbal disputes.

on Hirsch’s argument for verbalness but to provide positive reason to think the composition dispute is nonverbal, at least if Hirsch’s own criterion for verbalness is correct” (McGrath 483). It seems that McGrath thus wants to claim that the composition dispute is nonverbal on Hirsch’s account of (merely) verbal disputes. There are two conclusions possible for him now: either Hirsch’s account is correct and the composition dispute is nonverbal; or the composition dispute is (merely) verbal and Hirsch’s account should be dismissed. The second conclusion is of the type we saw in every instance above: dismiss an account of (merely) verbal disputes on the basis of some intuition regarding (a particular instance of a) (merely) verbal dispute(s).

Now McGrath only wants to “object[...] [against] the verbalness of the composition dispute” (McGrath 489); he does not draw either of the two conclusions above, but stops at the conditional: “Hirsch’s own criterion for verbal disputes, if correct, can be used to show that the composition dispute is nonverbal” (McGrath 495). However, I think it is telling that an obvious reaction to McGrath’s argument is to defend the link Hirsch’s wants to establish between the (mere) verbalness and the dismissal of the composition dispute by giving a different account of (merely) verbal disputes on which the composition dispute does come out as (merely) verbal. This reply is the same move we saw in most text’s above: an account of (merely) verbal disputes (in this case, Hirsch’s) does not fit our intuitions (in this case, the intuition that the composition debate is (merely) verbal), hence we change the account so that it does fit with our intuitions. Again, McGrath himself does not argue this, but I think it is telling for the debate on (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature that this move shows itself directly; I would not be surprised if anyone made it already.²⁹

²⁹Hirsch replies to McGrath’s text in “Language, Ontology, and Structure” (2008a), but he (understandably) does not make this move – he is content with sticking to his account of (merely) verbal disputes and discrediting McGrath’s arguments against it. (In particular, McGrath’s objection relies on the assessment that “if the sides [to a dispute] follow Hirsch’s advice, they will violate charity to expressibility” (McGrath 495) – Hirsch replies: “it does not seem to me that “charity to expressibility” can bear the weight he want to place on it” (Hirsch 2008a, 511).)

3.7 Common procedure

As the examples above show, it is a widely spread practice in the debate about (merely) verbal dispute to argue for or against a certain account of (merely) verbal disputes on the basis of prior intuitions regarding (merely) verbal dispute. In this subsection, I make two general points about these examples. First, I show that the participants to the debate on (merely) verbal disputes are giving (more or less) strict definitions of (merely) verbal disputes, despite the fact that some of the participants explicitly say they do not intend as much. Second, I show the procedure common to most of the argumentation in this debate.

3.7.1 (More or less strict) definitions

In the previous subsections, we highlighted several instances from the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes. In these discussions, we never saw someone giving a strict definition of (merely) verbal disputes: all participants were quick to point out that their account of (merely) verbal disputes should not be taken as necessary or sufficient condition, but merely as a “gloss” (Chalmers 522), “woolly characterization” (Jenkins 11), “first approximation” (Chalmers 522), or “simplest paradigm” (Hirsch 2005, 83). However, when they discuss their opponents accounts, they do treat them as (more or less strict) definitions – sometimes under the guise of ‘showing that these accounts cannot be constructed as necessary or sufficient conditions’. Now I can interpret the debate in two ways. One way has me interpreting the participants to be genuine when they say that they accept that their opponent intends their account of (merely) verbal dispute to be not a strict definition. But then it seems strange to me that they spend entire papers showing that their opponents account indeed cannot be taken as a strict definition – who are they trying to convince? Certainly not their opponents, for it is, on this interpretation of the debate, understood by all participants that the accounts are not intended to be strict definitions anyway. This way thus has me interpreting most texts as containing mostly straw man arguments: they argue against

positions no one actually defends – they argue against strict definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that no one actually intends to give. This seems to me a rather uncharitable interpretation of the debate.

Instead, I choose to interpret the debate as follows (this is the second way of interpreting the debate): the participants do intend to give (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes, and the claim that their accounts should not be taken as necessary or sufficient condition, but merely as ‘gloss’, ‘woolly characterization’ or ‘simplest paradigm’ is just a convoluted way of saying something like: “I know this definition of (merely) verbal disputes is not complete or wholly satisfactory, so please consider its strong points and do not dismiss it too quickly.” For instance, Chalmers’s account of (merely) verbal disputes features “an *explanatory* “in virtue of”” (Chalmers 523) between metalinguistic and first-order disputes, but Chalmers says that “it is best not to take the in-virtue-of gloss as providing a stipulative definition of a broadly verbal dispute” (Chalmers 525), because “an analysis of the explanatory priority between metalinguistic and first-order disputes [...] would turn on numerous disputed thesis” (Chalmers 524). I interpret what happens here as follows: it is easy to dismiss Chalmers’s account of (merely) verbal disputes by pointing out that it includes the poorly understood notion “in virtue of”. Chalmers knows this, but hopes to entice the reader not to raise this objection by claiming that his account is only a “first approximation” (Chalmers 522) or a “gloss” (Chalmers 522).

As we saw, Chalmers is explicit about this plea. I interpret the other participants in the debate on (merely) verbal disputes to make, implicitly, a similar plea – this interpretation, when weighed against the one discussed two paragraphs ago, seems to me the most charitable way of interpreting the current philosophical literature. That is: I interpret every participant who gives an account of (merely) verbal disputes to intend this as a (more or less strict) definition. I believe this interpretation is justified, because, as I claimed two paragraphs ago, the participants seem to interpret their opponents this way too (albeit it sometimes under the guise of ‘showing that they cannot intend their accounts to be definitions’)

3.7.2 Procedure

Having established that the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes revolves mainly around giving (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes, I now turn to the procedure leading to these definitions that is common in the debate. As we saw in the various highlights of the debate on (merely) verbal disputes, all arguments seem to employ prior intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes to draw conclusions about (merely) verbal disputes. In particular, accounts of (merely) verbal disputes are dismissed because they classify an intuitively substantial dispute as merely verbal (or vice versa). The follow up is often that a new account of (merely) verbal disputes is created by amending the dismissed one in such a way that it does classify the previously problematic case in accordance with our intuitions.

We can roughly summarize this procedure in three steps:

- (1) An intuitively plausible (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes is given;
- (2) A counterexample is presented: a dispute that is (merely) verbal according to the definition given in (1), but substantial according to intuitions (or vice versa);
- (3a) The definition given in (1) is rejected in favour of a new definition to which the counterexample given in (2) does not apply – the new definition classifies the case offered in (2) in accordance with intuition.³⁰

Now we can repeat this procedure with the new definition given in (3a): again we can try to find a counterexample, and if we find one, we can again create a new definition.

We have seen the full procedure most clearly in our discussion of Jenkins's text. In the other examples, we have mainly seen step (2). Again and again, we have seen intuitively plausible definitions

³⁰I label this step as (3a) instead of plainly (3), for, as I show in the next section, there is an alternative third step (which I will label (3b)).

being overturned in favour of other intuitions regarding the mere verbalness or substantiveness of certain disputes. It should be clear that all the intuitions that fuel step (1) and (2) are intuitions regarding (merely) verbal disputes. The definition given in (1) is plausible because we intuitively think a (merely) verbal disputes should be characterized as such – as we have seen, the main support for these definitions comes from the fact that they classify certain disputes in accordance with our intuition. The case given in (2) is a counterexample because we intuitively think it to be a merely verbal (or substantive) dispute. The debate about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature thus runs primarily on intuitions regarding (merely) verbal disputes. In the next section, we will see what risks this entails.

3.8 Have I done justice to the debate?

In this section, I draw two conclusions about the debate on (merely) verbal disputes as it is found in the current philosophical literature. First, I conclude that it revolves around given (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes. Second, I conclude that there is a common procedure that can be identified in this debate for giving such definitions. These conclusion are supported by selected fragments of texts from the current philosophical literature about (merely) verbal disputes. Now the question might be asked: have I done justice to the debate on (merely) verbal disputes as it is found in the current philosophical literature? The suspicion might be that I only presented an unrepresentative and gerrymandered selection of examples from the current literature. That is: it might be that the debate about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature does not revolve around (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes, and that the ‘common procedure’ is not that common at all, but can only be identified in these specific unrepresentative excerpts from the debate.³¹

³¹A similar accusation can be made regarding the first section. There, I claim that there are two purposes of the debate on (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature: separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology; and providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*. My reaction to this accusation will be similar to my reaction below: I would reformulate my claim as an antecedent, so that my overall claim becomes: *if* the debate on (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature is concerned with giving (more or less strict) definitions

I can give three reactions to this accusation. First, I would be very happy if this accusation is true, for that would mean that the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes is occupied with a project that is not uninformative and unnecessary with respect to the project's purpose. Indeed, if the accusation is true, then this essay can be read as a warning: using the common procedure to give (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes is uninformative and unnecessary with respect to the purpose of separating 'deep' from 'shallow' ontology and the purpose of providing insights into notions like *language* or *meaning*, so the debate on (merely) verbal disputes should not take this form.

However – and this is the second reaction – is this accusation true? I claim that the debate about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature takes a certain shape, and gave evidence for the truth of this claim in the form of passages from the current philosophical literature. I like to believe that the burden of proof is now on the accuser: I have shown that the debate takes a certain shape, and I will reconsider if, but only if, you can provide at least some evidence to the contrary. I do not feel obligated to provide this evidence.

Although – and this is the third reaction – I can anticipate this evidence. In particular, I anticipate three arguments from a possible accuser. One: regarding my claim that the debate revolves around giving (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes, it might be said that the authors themselves do not believe that this is what they are doing. It might be that the authors themselves rather say that, instead of giving (more or less strict) definitions, they are rather 'exploring' or 'explicating' the notion (*merely*) *verbal dispute*. I would say that it indeed might be the case that this is what they believe. However, if we look at the whole debate about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature, we see that this is not how their texts are treated: their 'explorations' or 'explications' are treated as (more or less strict) definitions by other authors. I

via the common procedure for the purposes of separating 'deep' from 'shallow' ontology and providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*, then these resultant definitions are uninformative and unnecessary with respect to these purposes. However, before such reformulation of my claim, I will first try to shift the burden of proof to the accuser.

have already argued that it would be uncharitable to interpret all the participants to the debate on (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature as talking past each other, and that it is more charitable (from the viewpoint of the whole debate, not necessarily from the viewpoint of individual authors) to interpret them as genuinely reacting to each other, even if that means that they have faulty beliefs about what they are doing themselves. In response to the possible accusation, I would add that the beliefs of the author might be evidence for the accusation that I did not adequately represent the intentions of the authors, but that it does not suffice as evidence for the accusation that I did not adequately represent the actual debate on (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature.

Two: at least two of the authors treated in this section are interpreted by other philosophers to give a heuristic for determining whether a dispute is (merely) verbal or substantive, rather than a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes. For instance, in *Varieties of Logic* (2014), Stewart Shapiro interprets Hirsch's and Chalmers's texts as giving a "test" (Shapiro 156), "heuristic" (Shapiro 160), or "technique" (Shapiro 160) for (merely) verbal disputes.³² According to Shapiro, Hirsch (in "Physical-object ontology, verbal disputes, and common sense" (2005)) "proposes a test for verbal disputes" (Shapiro 156); and Chalmers (in "Verbal Disputes" (2011)) offers his "*method of elimination*" (Chalmers 526), as a "heuristic for detecting and dealing with verbal disputes" (Shapiro 160). These readings of Hirsch and Chalmers might count as evidence against my claim that I adequately represented the debate on (merely) verbal disputes as it occurs in the current philosophical literature.

However, it should first be noted that Shapiro seeks to apply insights into the notion (*merely*) *verbal dispute* to a question about logical pluralism, and that he thus is better construed as participating

³² *Varieties of Logic* "articulate[s] various kinds of pluralism and relativism concerning logic, and [...] defend[s] some of them" (Shapiro 1); in the fifth chapter, Shapiro "turn[s] [his] attention directly to the matter of meaning-shift, to whether the word "not," for example, has the same meaning for a classicist as for an intuitionists and a relevantist" (Shapiro 126). For Shapiro, "[o]ne way to formulate one of the main issues addressed in th[a]t chapter [...] is whether the "dispute" between advocates of different logics (when they are pursuing different mathematical theories) is merely verbal" (Shapiro 155). However, he finds the results emerging from Hirsch's and Chalmer's heuristics applied to this issue "less conclusive than we would like" (Shapiro 159).

not in the debate on (merely) verbal disputes, but in the debate on logical pluralism. That is: I would like to think that citations from Shapiro's *Varieties of Logic* do not alleviate the burden of proof that my accusers face (as I stated in my second reaction above). Participants in the debate on (merely) verbal disputes interpret Hirsch and Chalmers as giving (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes, and I already pointed out that it would be charitable to interpret them in that way.

Second, even if it is undeniably the case that Hirsch and Chalmers give a heuristic, then they might still *also* give a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes. In that case, my claim will just be that *insofar* as participants to the debate on (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature are concerned with giving (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes via the common procedure for the purpose of separating 'deep' from 'shallow' ontology and the purpose of providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*, their activities are unnecessary and uninformative.

Third, even if all Hirsch and Chalmers do is give a heuristic, then I still suspect that this heuristic is unnecessary and uninformative with respect to the purposes of separating 'deep' from 'shallow' ontology and of providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*. Here is not the place to develop this suspicion into a full blown argument, so I just note that Chalmers too seems to believe his heuristic is not all too useful:³³

Th[e] heuristic is not intended to provide a reductive definition of a verbal dispute or a wholly mechanical procedure for determining when a dispute is verbal. These ambitions are out of the

³³So when is Chalmers's heuristic useful? According to himself, "the method is a heuristic device that allows us to use clear cases of substantive or verbal disputes to help adjudicate the status of unclear cases" (Chalmers 529). This might be true: the heuristic might indeed help us determine whether a certain dispute is (merely) verbal or substantive in the case that we have no (or conflicting) intuitions about that dispute. But this does not automatically make the dispute informative or sufficient for the purpose of separating 'deep' from 'shallow' ontology or the purpose of providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*. Like the common procedure, I think Chalmers's heuristic is uninformative and unnecessary with respect to these purposes precisely because it relies on prior intuitions regarding these purposes. Chalmers thinks his heuristic for (merely) verbal disputes can help with separating 'deep' from 'shallow' ontology and provide insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*, but it seems to me that he is putting the cart before the horse: I suspect that intuitions regarding 'deep' and 'shallow' ontology and notions like *language* and *meaning* are needed for the heuristic to work.

question, both because of the exceptions to the heuristic and because the method itself makes appeal to the notion of a verbal dispute.

(Chalmers 529)

Three: I have shown that many participants in the debate on (merely) verbal disputes as it is found in the current philosophical literature provide intuitions about particular disputes as evidence for their claims. However, so the accuser might say, this does not establish that these authors all employ the same common procedure – they themselves would probably say that they indeed do not employ this common procedure. Again, my reaction would be to reformulate my claim: *insofar* as the participants in the debate on (merely) verbal dispute employ the common procedure, their resultant definitions are uninformative and unnecessary with respect to their purposes.

Ultimately, I stand by my claim that I have done justice to the debate on (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature. In addition, with the above three reactions to possible accusations in place, I take it that the overall claim of this essay has sufficient survivability in the case that my claims about the debate on (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature happen come under attack.

3.9 A common procedure in a debate revolving around definitions

In this section, we have highlighted several pieces of the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes, and concluded that they revolve around giving (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes. We have also identified the procedure common to all these texts, consisting (roughly) of the following three steps: (1) an intuitively plausible (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes is given; (2) a counterexample is presented: a dispute that is (merely) verbal according to the given definition, but substantial according to intuitions (or vice versa); (3a) the given definition is rejected in favour of a new definition to which the counterexample does not apply.

4 Uninformative definitions

In the previous section, we concluded that the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes revolves around giving (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes, and that there is a common procedure that is employed almost everywhere in the discussion. In this section, I argue that, given the purpose identified in section 2, the (more or less strict) definitions given via this common procedure are uninformative, in the sense that the definitions, as end product of this procedure, provide us with nothing above or beyond the input intuitions of the procedure. I first review the three steps in the common procedure identified in section 3, and dismiss a suggestion that might exempt proponents of this procedure from my criticism. I then argue that the (more or less strict) definitions that result from the procedure runs the risk of being ad-hoc, extensional, and epistemologically unattainable, and further that they are uninformative with respect to the purposes identified in section 2: separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology, and providing insights in notions like *language* and *meaning*.

4.1 An alternative response

Recall the three steps of the common procedure: (1) someone gives an account of (merely) verbal disputes that characterizes them in accordance with (most of) our intuitions; (2) someone else finds a case that is intuitively a substantial dispute, but according to the account given in (1) a (merely) verbal dispute (or vice versa); (3a) the account given in (1) is rejected and a new account is made in such a way that the case offered in (2) is also classified in accordance with our intuitions. Then we are back at step (1) and the procedure repeats.

Now (3a) is not the only response to (2); we could also

(3b) claim that the case offered in (2), although intuitively a substantial dispute, actually is a

merely verbal one (or vice versa) and that our intuitions in (2) simply got it wrong.

That is, one might simply ‘bite the bullet’ and argue that a certain (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes is right, even though it classifies a case differently than we intuitively do. If (3b) is allowed as response to (2), my claim seems less plausible: it seems more plausible that the (more or less strict) definition that results from the procedure informative and does go beyond and above the input intuitions, since it is held up against one of the intuitions it might take as input. Indeed, if the resultant definition is a mere rephrasing of the input intuitions – including those intuitions we put in in step (2) – then it seems highly unlikely that we can successfully ‘bite the bullet’ on such an intuition when we want to uphold a certain (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal dispute. On the contrary, our definition must have ‘something extra’ to be able to withstand the counterexample offered in step (2).

The question in this subsection now is: can anyone who wants to claim that the (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the procedure common to the current debate on (merely) verbal disputes are *not* uninformative or unnecessary with respect to their purposes, choose option (3b)? I argue that this is not an option for such defenders of the common procedure, if they still intend their resultant (more or less strict) definition to *not* be uninformative and unnecessary for the purposes identified in section 2.³⁴

Here is why. Note that the (3b) response relies on the assumption that we can claim that our intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes are sometimes wrong – this enables the ‘bullet biting’. So assume that our intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes are sometimes wrong. Given that the intuitions employed by step (1) are also intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes, we must conclude that the intuitions in both (1) and (2) – that is to say *all the input intuitions* – might be wrong. We thus end up with a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes that resulted from a

³⁴For the remainder of this essay, ‘defenders of the common procedure’ will refer to those who indeed want to keep the procedure identified in section 3 in order to use the resultant definitions for the purposes identified in 2. My claims are not intended to apply to those who want to keep the common procedure for other purposes or to those who want to make (big) changes to the common procedure.

procedure that took as input intuitions that might be wrong. This is *not* what is problematic. The problems begin when, still assuming that our (input) intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes are potentially wrong, we choose to respond with (3b) instead of (3a) to a counterexample raised in (2). In effect, (3b) says that the intuition that gave rise to (2) is *actually* wrong. Now the question can be raised: why is *this* intuition actually wrong, rather than any of the other potentially wrong input intuitions? If there is no answer to this question – if there is no underlying reason for picking this rather than that intuition as the actually wrong one – then the whole procedure, and hence the resultant (more or less strict) definition, seem to be based on arbitrary choices.

Now to say that a (more or less strict) definition is arbitrary is not necessarily to say that it is uninformative. However, in this case it seems that it is. We have a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes that *arbitrarily* separates substantial from (merely) verbal disputes, so it seems that the only things we learn when we are told that a dispute is (merely) verbal (or substantive) according to this definition is that it is a case that accords with certain arbitrarily chosen intuitions and discords with other, even arbitrarily chosen intuitions. Which is just to say we learn next to nothing: the (more or less strict) definition is uninformative. If there is no reason why, in the genesis of this (more or less strict) definition, certain intuitions were rejected (when (3b) was chosen) and others were accepted (when (3a) was chosen), there is also no reason why a certain dispute is (merely) verbal (or substantive) according to this (more or less strict) definition, besides that it accords and discords with certain intuitions – that is, the (more or less strict) definitions provides us with nothing that we did not already have on the basis of the intuitions alone: an overview of cases that accord and discord with these intuitions.

Now it might be objected that when (3b) is chosen as response to (2), there *are* underlying reasons. That is: it might be objected that there is some consistent and systematic story about the separation between intuitions that are accepted (and for which (3a) is chosen) and intuitions that are rejected (and for which (3b) is chosen). A quick first reply to this objection is that if there is such an underlying systematic story, it seems not to surface in the discussions in the current literature on

(merely) verbal disputes. To remark that giving such a story is precisely the aim of the discussed papers is to miss the point: the story that separates the intuitions cannot be the one that is constructed on and supported with those intuitions. Such reasoning is plainly circular: “in this paper, I construct a story in which I define (merely) verbal disputes as X , and I’m justified to bite the bullet on any intuition that does not support my definition because of the story I am constructing in this paper.”

A second reply to the objection is as follows. Suppose there is indeed an underlying systematic story that separates the accepted from the rejected intuitions in step (2). Now either we can directly create a definition of (merely) verbal disputes from this systematic story, without the help of intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes, or we can only create such a definition on the basis of the intuitions.

Suppose first that we can directly create a definition on the basis of the underlying systematic story. It now seems that the procedure is slightly altered: the input in step (1) is not only intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes, but now also this underlying systematic story is used as input. We have two options.

One: we do not allow this, and judge the alteration in the procedure large enough to claim that this response is no longer a defence of the original procedure. In that case, I take it that I have shown that (3b) is not an option for defenders of the procedure – which is all I am after in this subsection.

Two: we allow that this underlying systematic story functions as input in step (1) of the procedure. That is, we allow acknowledge this altered procedure (altered because it now also takes the underlying systematic story as input) as the same common procedure that is to be defended. Then we must look closer at this underlying systematic story. It is highly likely that such a story, which has the power to separate the ‘right’ from the ‘wrong’ intuitions in step (2) – consist of systematic and general considerations regarding *language, meaning, and/or disputes*. That is, it seems highly

likely that such a systematic story contains insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*. So it is highly likely that any (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes that results from the common procedure when such a systematic story is (also) inputted, is uninformative and unnecessary with respect to providing insights into these notions – we already have these insights via our systematic story. Furthermore, it is likely that we can separate ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology on the basis of this systematic story alone, without needing to give a definition of (merely) verbal disputes first. After all, if the underlying systematic story can separate between the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ intuitions in step (2), it can likely separate substantial disputes from (merely) verbal disputes. And if it can do that, then it is likely that it can separate ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology, because these kinds of ontology intuitively consist of mostly substantial or mostly (merely) verbal disputes respectively. In sum: it is likely that any (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes that results from the common procedure when such a systematic story is inputted, is uninformative and unnecessary with respect to separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology. To conclude, if we allow a underlying systematic story to function as input in step (1) of the procedure, it is likely that the resultant (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal dispute is uninformative (in the sense that it does not enable us to do more than we already can on the basis of the input alone) and unnecessary (in the sense that we can already fulfil its purposes on the basis of the input alone) for the input is a systematic story of which it is highly likely that it consist of insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*, and which likely can be used directly to separate ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology. So if there is a systematic story which we can and do allow as input in step (1) of the common procedure, then it is likely the resultant (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes will be uninformative and unnecessary.

Now suppose that we cannot use the underlying systematic story directly to give a definition of (merely) verbal disputes. This is different from option ‘one’ above: there we stipulated that we could give such a definition on the basis of the systematic story, but not via the common procedure. In this case, we suppose that we cannot, *in any way*, give such a definition on the basis of the underlying

systematic story. However, what this systematic story can do is separate intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes into ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ones. This just seems highly unlikely, in particular when we consider, again, that it is highly likely that this systematic story consist of systematic and general considerations regarding *language, meaning, and/or disputes*. How can such a story be able to separate intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes, but not be able to directly create a definition about (merely) verbal disputes? It simply seems implausible that we first have to select, on the basis of a systematic story, the intuitions on which we base our definition of (merely) verbal disputes, instead of directly, on the basis of this systematic story, giving a definition of (merely) verbal disputes. What feature of these intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes makes this detour necessary? I conclude that it is highly unlikely that the systematic story will be such that we cannot use it to give a definition of (merely) verbal disputes directly.

So to conclude the second reply: if there is an underlying systematic story, then it is highly likely that the (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes that results from the common procedure is uninformative and unnecessary with respect to its purposes.

The question was: can anyone who wants to claim that the (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the common procedure is *not* uninformative or unnecessary with respect to their purposes, choose (3b)? We can now see that (3b) is not an option for defenders of the procedure. If they choose (3b), then either they are forced to arbitrarily select which intuitions they accept and reject in step (2), and therefore end up with an uninformative definition, or they are committed to the existence of an underlying systematic story that in all likelihood makes the resultant definition uninformative and unnecessary. Hence I conclude that (3b) is not an option for defenders of the procedure. That is: defenders of the common procedure *must consistently chose (3a)*. Indeed, this is what we saw in section 3: in the papers discussed there, (3a) is consistently chosen: we see proposals for (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that can account for the counterexamples raised in those papers against the definitions of found in other papers.

4.2 Three risks for definitions that result from the common procedure

In the previous subsection, we established that (3b) is not an option for defenders of the common procedure, and that (3a) must be chosen *consistently*: for any and every counterexample that is raised in step (2), (3a) must be the response. As a result, the (more or less strict) definitions generated by this procedure run the risk of being ad-hoc, extensional, and incomplete.

4.2.1 Ad-hoc

First, the (more or less strict) definitions resulting from the common procedure run the risk of being ad-hoc. Above, it was established that *every* and *any* case that is raised as counterexample in step (2) of the procedure must, if we are to follow step (3a) consistently, be incorporated into the new (more or less strict) definition. This seems rather ad-hoc: the definition changes in the face of *every* and *any* counterexample. Now perhaps there is some underlying (systematic, non-trivial) story that gives good reasons for every and any case to be incorporated into the new definition, but I take it that this is unlikely: given the enormous amount of cases such a story has to cover (indeed, *all* cases), I take it that it is more likely that there is no such story than that there is such story. Until I see some considerations to the contrary, I therefore take it that the (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes that results from the common procedure is likely ad-hoc.

Now if the (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal dispute is ad-hoc, it is uninformative. The argument is similar to the argument about the uninformativeness resulting from arbitrary choices between intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes above: it seems that the only thing we learn when we are told that a dispute is (merely) verbal (or substantive) according to an ad-hoc (more or less strict) definition is that it is a case that accords with *any* and *every* intuition about (merely) verbal disputes. This sounds informative, and it is if we do not have access to *every*

intuition about (merely) verbal disputes. However, if we have generated this (more or less strict) definition by iterating the procedure, we have access to all these intuitions – we have used them as input. We thus gain nothing by applying the procedure over not applying the procedure, and it is (again) in this sense that such ad-hoc definition is uninformative. It might be replied that the problem with the (more or less strict) definition then is not that it is ad-hoc, but that it tells us nothing beyond or above the input intuitions. I concede; but I do not claim that the definition is uninformative *because* it is ad-hoc. Rather, I propose to view the (likely) ad-hocness of the resultant definition as a warning sign: it indicates potential unformativeness, depending on the purpose of the definition.³⁵

4.2.2 Extensional

Second, the (more or less strict) definitions resulting from the common procedure run the risk of being extensional. Above, it was established that *every* and *any* case that is raised as counterexample in step (2) of the procedure must, if we are to follow step (3a) consistently, be incorporated into the new (more or less strict) definition. Given a large enough variety in counterexamples, it is likely that after enough iterations of steps (1)-(3a) we end up with just a list of all the cases raised in step (2), and a (more or less strict) definition which in effect defines (merely) verbal disputes as all and only the cases that are on this list. That is: we end with an extensional definition. Now we might hope that there is some systematicity in the counterexamples raised in step (2); if we find a consistent story underlying our intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes, we can make (in step (3a)) a new (more or less strict) definition with a general rule that captures many cases at once, instead of just listing all the former counterexamples. But upon iterating the procedure we might find exceptions – cases where our intuitions diverge from the general rule included in our definition. Just adding the exception to the list will ultimately amount to giving an extensional

³⁵Considered in isolation of its purpose, I think the definition's being ad-hoc is a theoretical vice (as opposed to a theoretical virtue). Since the aim of this essay is not to weigh theoretical virtues and vices of ad-hoc (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the procedure common to the discussion in the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes, I leave the point at this.

definition again. That we find such exceptions is very likely due to the imperative to consistently (remember, (3b) is not an option) opt for (3a): *any* counterexample must be accounted for. It is thus highly likely the (more or less strict) definition that results from the procedure is extensional.

An extensional (more or less strict) definition matches our intuitions perfectly, but seems rather uninformative. It tells us nothing about disputes besides which ones are (merely) verbal, and offers no general characteristics of these disputes besides that they are all (merely) verbal. As such, it offers no help in determine whether a certain dispute is (merely) verbal: if the dispute under investigation is (merely) verbal, we already knew that, because we encountered it when we were compiling the list that is our extensional (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes. (Assuming our list/definition is *complete* – see below.) More importantly, an extensional (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes is uninformative in the sense that it provides us with nothing beyond or above the input intuitions: all the intuitive cases of verbal disputes are included in the list that is our definition; nothing is added.

4.2.3 Incomplete

Third, the (more or less strict) definitions resulting from the common procedure run the risk of being incomplete. Above, it was established that *every* and *any* case that is raised as counterexample in step (2) of the procedure must, if we are to follow step (3a) consistently, be incorporated into the new (more or less strict) definition. But this procedure faces an epistemological problem: when are we done? There are really two problems here. One: there is the question whether we can possibly consider *every* and *any* counterexample. Given that these counterexamples just consist of a dispute that is intuitively (merely) verbal but that our (provisional) (more or less strict) definition classifies as substantive (or vice versa), and that intuitions might vary over time, it seems we have to consider not only present and past intuitions, but also future ones. All these intuitions must be considered (remember that (3b) is not an option).

Two: there is the problem of induction: how do we *know* our definition is complete? That is: how can we be certain that we have considered all counterexamples? This problem is independent of the risk that the (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes that results from the common procedure is extensional. One might think that if our definition is not just a list of every (merely) verbal dispute, there also is no worry about knowing whether this list is complete. But the problem is larger: our (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes is complete (if and) only if we have considered *all* counterexamples – that is, to use semantic ascent, “our definition is complete” is equivalent to “we have considered (and accounted for) *all* counterexamples”, and it is hard to be certain about the truth of such universal statements. So we might have an account of (merely) verbal disputes that satisfies all of the intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes we currently have, but who is to say there will not be a future philosopher who manages with some clever example to pump up some new intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes?

Incomplete (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes are uninformative with respect to determining whether a certain dispute is substantive or (merely) verbal. For suppose we have such an incomplete definition of (merely) verbal disputes, and we find that a certain dispute falls outside its extension. If the definition is complete, we could conclude that the dispute is, according to this definition, substantive. However, since the definition is incomplete, there is also the possibility that the dispute is (merely) verbal, but falls outside the extension of the definition because it was never offered as counterexample in the procedure that generated the definition. Incomplete definitions are thus useless for determining whether a certain dispute is substantive or (merely) verbal. Recall from section 2 that it was this power – the power to separate substantive from (merely) verbal disputes – that was supposed to make (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes helpful in separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology. We can conclude that incomplete definitions are not helpful with respect to this purpose – incomplete definitions of (merely) verbal disputes are uninformative with respect to separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology.

4.2.4 Three risks

To summarize: the procedure common to the discussions in the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes thus outputs (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that are potentially ad-hoc, potentially extensional, and potentially incomplete. Does this make these definitions uninformative in the sense that they add nothing beyond or above the input intuitions? Regarding ad-hocness: not necessarily, but the definition's being ad-hoc is a warning sign that it might be uninformative. Regarding extensionality: yes, an extensional definition of (merely) verbal disputes is just a list of all the (merely) verbal disputes, and, given the procedure followed, these were already intuitively known to be (merely) verbal disputes. Regarding incompleteness: not in the sense specified, but incomplete definitions are useless when it comes to determining of a certain dispute whether it is substantial or (merely) verbal.

The most important point to take to the next sections is that (3b) is not a viable response to step (2) in the common procedure for defenders of that procedure: they must consistently choose for (3a). As has been demonstrated, this imperative has as consequence that it is highly unlikely that there is any underlying systematicity in the resultant definitions; it is highly unlikely that there is an underlying systematicity that can account for *any* and *every* counterexample.

4.3 Separating 'deep' from 'shallow' ontology

In the previous section, we saw three risks for (more or less strict) definitions resulting from the procedure common to the discussion in the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes. We also clarified what we mean by saying that the definitions are uninformative in the sense that they do not go beyond or above their input intuitions – they do not enable us to do more than we already could on the basis of the input intuitions without applying the procedure. In this section, I show that this is the case with respect to one of the purposes, identified in section

2, of the debate on (merely) verbal disputes as it is found in the current philosophical literature: separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology.

We have already established that the input intuitions in step (1) and (2) are intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes. In section 3 we have seen that these intuitions concern both ‘ordinary’ disputes – e.g. over whether the bookshop sells books on metaphysics – as well as ‘philosophical’ disputes – e.g. over whether there are unrestricted mereological sums. Disputes of this second kind are found in those areas of ontology that the deflationists might want to mark as ‘shallow’. As we saw in section 2, a common deflationist strategy is to argue that a certain area of ontology consists of disputes that are (merely) verbal. Indeed, one of the purposes of studying the notion (*merely verbal dispute*) is to shed light on this deflationist practice: a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes can, it is thought, determine whether the disputes in a certain area are (merely) verbal or substantive, and hence whether the deflationist is right in marking that area as ‘shallow’ ontology. The question now is whether the (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the procedure common to the discussions found in the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes can really be used for this purpose. That is: are these definitions informative with respect to this purpose, in the sense that they add something beyond or above the input intuitions? Do they enable us to do more than we already can on the basis of the input intuition without applying the procedure? In particular: do they enable us to better separate ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology than we could on the basis of the input intuitions alone?³⁶

I argue they do not: the (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the procedure common to the discussions found in the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes are uninformative in the sense that they do not go beyond or above their input intuitions. The reason is that some of the input intuitions are intuitions about the same ontological

³⁶In either the quantitative sense (more disputes classified) or qualitative sense (disputes classified with ‘more certainty’ or something like that).

disputes which the (more or less strict) definition is supposed to classify as (merely) verbal or substantive. For instance, the definition is supposed to help determining whether mereology is ‘shallow’ or ‘deep’ ontology by determining whether the disputes about composition are (merely) verbal or substantive. However, intuitions about the dispute about composition are also used as input for the procedure that results in this definition. Hence whatever a definition resulting from this procedure says about the composition dispute, this information was already readily available to us in the form of an input intuition. If we have the intuition that the dispute about composition is merely verbal, and use this (in step (3a)) to create our definition of (merely) verbal disputes, and only then judge on the basis of the definition that the composition dispute is (merely) verbal, it seems we have taken an unnecessary³⁷ detour: the definition did not add anything to the input intuition; we could have concluded that the dispute about composition is merely verbal already from our intuition.³⁸ The resulting definition is thus uninformative with respect to separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology. Below, I present and rebut two objections against this conclusion.

Here is the first objection. One might say that the (more or less strict) definition that resulted from the common procedure did enable us to do something we could not do on the basis of the input intuition alone: it enables us to conclude that the dispute over composition is merely verbal ‘with more certainty’ (or something along those lines). The idea here is that without the definition, we only have intuitive evidence for our conclusion that the dispute about composition is (merely) verbal, whereas after following the common procedure, we also have the definition as evidence.

A quick first reply to this objection is that this is simply not true, because the definition constructed on the basis of the intuition, and hence conclusions supported by the definition are ultimately supported by the intuition. So conclusions supported by the definition are not better supported than conclusions supported by the intuition alone.

³⁷That is: unnecessary with respect to informativeness.

³⁸Note that the definition in this case is guaranteed to classify the dispute about composition as (merely) verbal: it will not classify it as substantial, for it was constructed via a procedure that ensures the definition accords with the input intuitions, so in particular with the intuition that the dispute about composition is (merely) verbal.

A second reply might give in to the objection somewhat and admit that the definition results from a procedure that takes multiple intuitions as input, and hence that conclusions supported by the definition indeed do seem to have a larger evidence base than conclusions supported by a single intuition. However, this argument only works if there is some systematicity in the definition; if there is some connection between the intuitions. For example, suppose we start with the intuition that the dispute about whether the bookshop sells books on metaphysics is (merely) verbal, and the intuition that the composition dispute is (merely) verbal. We can now use the first intuition as input step (1) in the common procedure, and the second intuition as input for step (2).³⁹ We end with step (3a), which delivers us as definition of (merely) verbal disputes: a dispute is (merely) verbal iff it is about whether the bookshop sells books on metaphysics or it is the composition dispute. Now we look at the composition dispute: we already had the intuition that it is (merely) verbal, but now it is also (merely) verbal according to our definition. Are we now ‘more certain’ (or something like that) about our conclusion? It hardly seems so: the dispute about the bookshop has nothing to do with the composition dispute, so how could intuitions about the bookshop dispute add something (‘certainty’) to conclusions based on intuitions about the composition dispute? However, if we suppose that (an intuition about) the bookshop dispute and (an intuition about) the composition dispute have something to do with each other, then it becomes more plausible that (an intuition about) the one adds something to conclusions based on (an intuition about) the other. That is: it becomes more plausible if there is some underlying systematicity in the definition that connects (in a systematic way) the intuitions that gave rise to it. It is this kind of systematicity that is missing in the ‘disjunctive’ definition above: (intuitions about) the bookshop and composition dispute seem to have nothing in common. Thus: we can do more with a definition that results from a procedure that takes multiple intuitions as input than we can on the basis of these input intuitions alone, but only if there is some systematicity in the resultant definition that connects (in a systematic way) the input intuitions.

³⁹Thus, in step (1) we create our initial definition of (merely) verbal disputes: a dispute is (merely) verbal iff it is about whether the bookshop sells books on metaphysics. In step (2) we remark that this initial definition does not classify the composition dispute as (merely) verbal, which goes against our intuitions.

However, it was demonstrated in the previous subsection that the imperative to consistently opt for step (3a) instead of step (3b) in the common procedure has as consequence that it is highly unlikely that there is any systematicity in the resultant definition. Hence it is highly unlikely that such a definition provides us with something that the input intuition cannot provide; hence it is highly likely that the definition is uninformative in this sense.⁴⁰

Thus, it seems that if the input intuitions include intuitions about ontological disputes, the resulting definition is uninformative with respect to the purpose of separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology

⁴⁰The situation might be even worse. Suppose that there is some systematicity in a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes that results from the common procedure. And suppose that we have used all intuitions about all ontological disputes as input intuitions (but not exclusively intuitions about ontological disputes). Now insofar as it is plausible that such a definition contains some systematicity, it is plausible that it supports the conclusion that the dispute about composition is (merely) verbal with ‘more certainty’ than the intuition about the composition dispute alone. However, the purpose of the definition is not only to determine whether the dispute about composition is (merely) verbal or substantive (and hence whether mereology is ‘shallow’ or ‘deep’ ontology); its purpose is to determine this with most disputes in most areas of ontology. Considering most areas of ontology at once, the picture is as follows: our input intuitions are that disputes D_i (with i elements in some index set) are (merely) verbal, and that disputes E_j (with j elements in some other index set) are substantive. On the basis of our definition, we now conclude that disputes D_i are (merely) verbal, and dispute E_j are substantive. It seems that here too we gain nothing from the definition. Can we not claim that the definition, given its supposed systematicity, provides better evidence than just the collection of input intuitions does? It seems not: whatever systematicity there is in the definition is there in virtue of the input intuitions, so the systematicity is not provided by the definition, but already available in the input intuitions alone. After all, the systematicity would be different if we intuited one of the E ’s to be (merely) verbal instead of substantive. So if we suppose systematicity in the definition that resulted from the common procedure, then it seems we must also suppose this systematicity already present in the collection of input intuitions, for it is nothing but this particular collection of intuitions in virtue of which the systematicity emerges. A final point: above, we distinguished between intuitions about ‘philosophical’ disputes and intuitions about ‘ordinary’ disputes. What if the systematicity in the definition results from the input of intuitions about ‘ordinary’ disputes, and not from the input of intuitions about ‘philosophical’ disputes? In that case, it seems we can conclude that a certain ‘philosophical’ disputes is (merely) verbal or substantive on the basis of the definition with ‘more certainty’ than we could on the basis of the input intuitions alone: since the systematicity resulted from intuitions about ‘ordinary’ disputes, the argument goes, the systematicity was not already present in the input intuitions about ‘philosophical’ dispute. However, this argument likely does not work. If it is given that the systematicity in the definition results only from systematicity in (intuitions about) ‘ordinary’ disputes, then either (1) the systematicity in (intuitions about) ‘ordinary’ disputes has bearing on (intuitions about) ‘philosophical’ disputes or (2) it has not. In case (2), it is unlikely that the systematicity in the resultant definition has bearing on conclusions about ‘philosophical’ disputes made using said definition: it is hard to see how a disjunction of a systematic account of ‘ordinary’ (merely) verbal disputes and unconnected intuitions about ‘philosophical’ (merely) verbal disputes enables us to classify ‘philosophical’ disputes as (merely) verbal or substantive with ‘more certainty’ than just those unconnected intuitions. Hence it is likely that the argument does not work. In case (1), the definition ‘loses its advantage.’ We can classify ‘philosophical’ disputes as (merely) verbal or substantive on the basis of the definition, but we can also do it on the basis of (the input) intuitions about ‘philosophical’ disputes. According to the argument, the advantage of doing it on the basis of the definition is that we classify with ‘more certainty’ because the definition exhibits systematicity. However, it is likely that in case (1) we can reach the same measure of ‘certainty’ on the basis of the (input) intuitions alone: the systematicity in the (intuitions about) ‘ordinary’ disputes have bearing on the (intuitions about) ‘philosophical’ disputes; everything the definition can provide us with is already available. Hence it is likely that the argument does not work.

in the sense that we can already separate these two kinds of ontology on the basis of the input intuitions, without applying the common procedure to create a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes.

Here is the second objection. Above, we have distinguished between two kinds of disputes that generate the intuitions that are inputted in the common procedure: ‘philosophical’ disputes and ‘ordinary’ (i.e. ‘non-philosophical’) disputes. Up to now, it was assumed that intuitions about both kinds of disputes are used as input in the common procedure. However, one might argue that these have to be kept separate. In particular, one might defend the common procedure by restricting the input to only intuitions about ‘ordinary’ disputes. In this way, it seems we can do more with a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes that results from the common procedure than we can on the basis of the intuitions alone: the intuitions only allow us to conclude that a certain ‘ordinary’ (non-ontological) dispute is (merely) verbal or substantial, whereas the resultant definition allows us to conclude this also for ‘philosophical’ (ontological) disputes. Hence, such a resultant definition would be informative with respect to the purpose of separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology.

Note that for this objection to work, there needs to be some connection between the two kinds of disputes; a connection that enables conclusions about one kind of dispute to be drawn on the basis of a definition resulting from a procedure that takes only intuitions about the other kind of dispute as input. Trivially, this connection can be stipulated to be just the connection that enables these conclusions to be drawn. The important point is that the two kinds of disputes are thus connected. On the other hand, there needs to be some disconnection between the intuitions about the two kinds of disputes; a disconnection that enables us to separate the intuitions about ‘philosophical’ disputes from intuitions about ‘ordinary’ disputes. Trivially, this disconnection can be stipulated to be just the disconnection in subject matter of the disputes. The important point is that the intuitions about the two kinds of disputes are thus disconnected. Now we can see the crucial question for this objection: can we separate the intuitions about the two kinds of disputes sharply

enough while simultaneously retaining the required connection between the two kinds of disputes? It does not seem likely: whatever reason we give for connecting the two kinds of disputes, it is likely also a reason to not separate intuitions about these disputes. Furthermore, if we connect the two kinds of disputes, this might in effect already be a reason not to separate the intuitions. The other way around :whatever reason we give for separating intuitions about the two kinds of dispute, it is likely also a reason to disconnect the two kinds of disputes. Furthermore, if we separate the intuitions, this might in effect already be a reason to disconnect the two kinds of disputes. Thus, it is unlikely that the second objection works, because it is unlikely that the required connection between ‘philosophical’ and ‘ordinary’ disputes can be made while simultaneously separating the intuitions about the disputes.

Ultimately, we conclude that (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the procedure common to the discussions of (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature are uninformative with respect to the purpose of separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology. What we have effectively seen here is the earlier mentioned trade-off between well-foundedness and informativeness. If we prevent intuitions about ‘philosophical’ (ontological) disputes from being inputted in the common procedure, the resulting (more or less strict) definition is informative, in the sense that we can do more with the definition than we can on the basis of the input intuitions alone – we can conclude that a certain ‘philosophical’ (ontological) dispute is (merely) verbal (or substantive). However, as we have seen, such a definition is not well-founded: given that the definition resulted from the procedure in which only intuitions about ‘ordinary’ (non-ontological) disputes are inputted, it is unlikely that the definition applies to ‘philosophical’ (ontological) disputes too – on the contrary, we might even have reasons to think that the definition does not apply to such disputes. On the other hand, if we allow intuitions about ‘philosophical’ (ontological) disputes to be inputted in the common procedure, the resulting (more or less strict) definition is well-founded: given that the definition resulted from the procedure in which intuitions about both ‘philosophical’ (ontological) and ‘ordinary’ (non-ontological) disputes were inputted,

it is likely that the definition applies to both ‘philosophical’ (ontological) and ‘ordinary’ (non-ontological) disputes. However, the resulting (more or less strict) definition is uninformative with respect to the purpose of separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology: it does not allow us to do more than we can on the basis of the input intuitions alone – in particular, we can already separate ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology on the basis of the input intuitions, since these include intuitions about ‘philosophical’ (ontological) disputes. Hence, we conclude that with respect to the purpose of separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology, a (more or less strict) definition that results from the common procedure is uninformative.

4.4 Providing insights into other notions

In section 2, we saw that Chalmers uses his account of (merely) verbal disputes to shed light on phenomena like *language* and *meaning*. In this subsection, I show that also with respect to the purpose of providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*, the (more or less strict) definitions that result from the procedure common to the discussions about (merely) verbal disputes found in the current philosophical literature are uninformative in the sense that they do not go beyond or above their input intuitions – they do not enable us to do more than we already could on the basis of the input intuitions without applying the procedure.

A (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes either needs some underlying systematicity to provide insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*, or it does not need such underlying systematicity. If it does, then it seems highly unlikely that a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes that results from the procedure common to the discussions about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature will provide insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*, for we concluded from our discussion of the three risks that such definitions run that it is highly unlikely that there is any underlying systematicity in the (more or less strict) definitions that result from the common procedure.

If a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes does not need some underlying systematicity to provide insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*, then it seems unlikely that the definitions resulting from the common procedure are informative with respect to the purpose of providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning* in the sense that the definition can provide insights into these notions that the input intuitions alone cannot provide. This is because for the definition to be informative in this sense, the common procedure must ‘add something’ to the input intuitions; the resultant definition must have ‘something extra’. This ‘something extra’ is, ex hypothesi, not some underlying systematicity; that case we treated in the previous paragraph. But what could this ‘something extra’ be? It must be some feature of the definition that (a) is not a feature of the input intuitions – i.e. it is added to the input intuitions by the common procedure; (b) enables the resultant definition to provide insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*; and (c) is not some underlying systematicity. From our discussion of the three risks that definitions resulting from the common procedure run, we can infer that (a) likely entails (c): if the definition (a) results from the common procedure, it is likely that (c) there is no underlying systematicity in the resultant definition. So we can have a feature of the definition that satisfies (a) and (c), but can such a feature then also all three conditions? This seems unlikely, for it is likely that the insights into notions like *language* and *meaning* are *general* insights. Thus, if the feature has to satisfy (a) and (b), it is a feature that enables the definition to produce *general* insights from *particular* input intuitions. Now it is likely that such moves from the particular to the general are enabled by some underlying systematicity. Therefore, it is likely that the feature that enables the definition to make this move (from the particular to the general) is such underlying systematicity. Thus, if the feature satisfies (a) and (b), it is likely that it does not satisfy (c). However, we already established that if a feature satisfies (a), it likely satisfies (c), so if there is a feature that satisfies (a) and (b), it likely both does and does not satisfy (c). From this likely contradiction we conclude that it is likely that there is no feature that satisfies all three conditions. Since, in the case we are discussing in this paragraph, such a feature is needed for the definition resulting from the common procedure to be informative with respect to the purpose of providing insights into notions like *language* and

meaning, it is unlikely that such definitions are informative in this sense.

In sum, whether or not a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes that results from the common procedure needs some underlying systematicity to provide insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*, we can conclude that it is unlikely that such definitions can do so. On the one hand, it is unlikely that such definitions exhibit the required systematicity; on the other hand, it is unlikely that there is another feature that enables the definition to provide insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*.

This conclusion might be circumvented by pointing out that when we ask whether (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the common procedure provide insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*, we do not have to restrict ourselves to features of the definition itself. It might be that the input intuitions already provide some of these insights, and that hence the resulting definition provides these insights. However, if that is the case, such definitions seem uninformative with respect to the purpose of providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning* in the sense that they do not go beyond or above the input intuitions – the definitions do not provide more insights than the input intuitions.

Ultimately, we conclude that with respect to the purpose of providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*, the (more or less strict) definitions that result from the procedure common to the discussions about (merely) verbal disputes found in the current philosophical literature are uninformative in the sense that they do not go beyond or above their input intuitions – if the definitions provide insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*, they do not provide more insights than the input intuitions do.

4.5 Uninformative procedure and resulting definitions

In this section, I have argued that, given the purposes identified in section 2, the (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the procedure common to the discussion about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature are uninformative in these sense that they do not go beyond or above the input intuitions – they do not enable us to do more than we could on the basis of the input intuitions alone. Ultimately, we must conclude that the common procedure just does not work: it only delivers us (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that are uninformative with respect to their purposes. Zooming out, this should be no surprise: it seems that the common procedure in effect only allows us to give a (more or less strict) definition of something we (given the input the procedure needs) already have an intuitive grasp of. In the next section, I will indeed show that the procedure and its resulting definitions are not only uninformative, but that the whole procedure is unnecessary too, in the sense that its purposes can be fulfilled by the input intuitions alone (without applying the procedure).

5 Unnecessary definitions

In the previous section, we have seen that, given the purposes of the (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the procedure common to the discussion about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature, these definitions are uninformative in these sense that they do not go beyond or above the input intuitions – they do not enable us to do more than we could on the basis of the input intuitions alone. In this section, I show that such definitions are also unnecessary with respect to the purposes identified in section 2. The points are related. By arguing for the unformativeness of the (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the common procedure, I have shown that such definitions do not enable us to do anything more than we already could with the input intuitions, but I left it open whether we could

fulfil the purposes of these definitions with the input intuitions alone. This is what I argue in this section: the input intuitions alone, without applying the common procedure, are enough to fulfil the purposes identified in section 2: on the basis of the input intuitions, we can already separate ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology, and we are already provided with some insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*.

I first show, with help of examples, that we already have a good intuitive grasp on the notion of (*merely*) *verbal dispute*. I then argue that this grasp already helps us separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology and already provides insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*.

5.1 Examples

In this subsection, I discuss three examples of disputes that we intuitively classify as (merely) verbal. This discussion is meant to ‘pump some intuitions’ about (merely) verbal disputes. My intent is to show that we do have an adequate, albeit intuitive, grasp on the notion (*merely*) *verbal dispute*. In order to establish this, I relate the examples to the notion of *equivocality*. (I assume we have an adequate intuitive grasp on this notion: *equivocality* is the phenomenon that one word or sentence can have multiple different meanings; e.g. ‘bank’ can mean the financial institution or the riverside.) Using the notion *equivocality* is a more or less arbitrary decision; I could have used the notion *translation* as well, and perhaps some other related concepts – but I take it that showing how the examples relate to one notion suffices for my purpose.⁴¹ The three disputes I discuss are William James’s story of the squirrel, the dispute between platonism and nominalism (through Carnap’s “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” (1950)), and a disagreement concerning mereology (partly through Putnam’s *The Many Faces of Realism* (1987)).

⁴¹Also, there are the obvious considerations of space and time that prevent me from discussing all these notions.

5.1.1 The story of the squirrel

The first example of a dispute that is intuitively classified as (merely) verbal comes from William James's *Pragmatism: A New Name for an Old way of Thinking* (1907). James's 'story of the squirrel' shows, according to David Chalmers, "one of the central marks of a verbal dispute" (Chalmers 516). I quote the story in its entirety.

Some years ago, being with a camping party in the mountains, I returned from a solitary ramble to find every one engaged in a ferocious metaphysical dispute. The corpus of the dispute was a squirrel— a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree-trunk; while over against the tree's opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: *Does the man go round the squirrel or not?* He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go round the squirrel? In the unlimited leisure of the wilderness, discussion had been worn threadbare. Every one had taken sides, and was obstinate; and the numbers on both sides were even. Each side, when I appeared therefore appealed to me to make it a majority. Mindful of the scholastic adage that whenever you meet a contradiction you must make a distinction, I immediately sought and found one, as follows: "Which party is right," I said, "depends on what you *practically mean* by 'going round' the squirrel. If you mean passing from the north of him to the east, then to the south, then to the west, and then to the north of him again, obviously the man does go round him, for he occupies these successive positions. But if on the contrary you mean being first in front of him, then on the right of him, then behind him, then on his left, and finally in front again, it is quite as obvious that the man fails to go round him, for by the compensating movements the squirrel makes, he keeps his belly turned towards the man all the time, and his back turned away. Make the distinction, and there is no occasion for any further dispute. You are both right and both wrong according as you conceive the verb 'to go round' in one practical fashion or the other."

(James 22-23)

The central mark of verbal disputes that Chalmers distills from this story is the idea that “[o]nce we resolve an issue about language, the dispute over the non-linguistic domain evaporates, or at least should evaporate” (Chalmers 516). Intuitively, the dispute is merely verbal because who is right “depends on what you *practically mean*” (James 22); in a sense, both parties are right – in their own framework, as Carnap would want to say, or in their own language, as Eli Hirsch⁴² would want to say.

However, note that this is not a case in which two people are both right because they use different descriptions of the same thing. Rather, we have a single word or sentence that denotes a different fact for the two disputing parties. “The man goes around the squirrel.” denotes the fact that the man is first north, then west, then south, and finally east of the squirrel for one party, but it denotes the fact that the man is first in front, then left, then behind, and finally right of the squirrel to the other party.⁴³ Now both parties believe that the first fact obtains, while the second does not. So in the squirrel case, the two parties agree not only on the fact that they pick out by using the disputed sentence, but they also agree on the fact that their opponents pick out by using the disputed sentence. They are thus both right because they both correctly believe the first fact to obtain, while the second does not.

This makes the squirrel case a case of *equivocality*. Here, the sentence “The man goes around the squirrel” is equivocal: it can mean that the man is NWSE of the squirrel, or that he is FLBR of the squirrel.⁴⁴ Another example of an equivocality case that intuitively classifies as a verbal dispute is the dispute over the sentence “There are geese near the bank.”, in which one party takes ‘bank’ to

⁴²That is: only if we imagine them in a community of people who use language in exactly the same way as they do, and can charitably interpret these communities as speaking different languages. See e.g. Hirsch’s “Physical-Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense” (2005).

⁴³For the sake of readability, I, in the remainder of this essay, abbreviate “first north, then west, then south, and finally east” as “NWSE”, and “first in front, then left, then behind, and finally right” as “FLBR”.

⁴⁴It should be noted that this characterization of *equivocality* assumes that sentences (and words) are not individuated by their meanings. Otherwise “The man goes around the squirrel” and “The man goes around the squirrel” would be different sentences if the first means that the man is NWSE of the squirrel and the second means that the man is FLBR of the squirrel, despite their similar appearance. That is: a sentence individuated by its meaning necessarily means what it means, and cannot have a different meaning. So if sentences are individuated by their meanings, no single sentence can have multiple meanings.

denote the financial institution and the sentence to be false, while the other party takes ‘bank’ to denote the riverside and the sentence to be true. In both the squirrel case and the bank case, the intuition that the disputes are (merely) verbal might be rooted in the equivocality of the disputed sentence. We explore this intuition further with subsequent examples below.

5.1.2 Carnap on nominalism and platonism

Are there numbers? There is a lot of philosophical literature on this question⁴⁵, but in “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” (1950), Rudolf Carnap has the “suspicion that the[...] question is a pseudo-question” (Carnap 209). A similar sentiment might be expressed by saying that the dispute over whether there are numbers is (merely) verbal. The intuition is that whether “There are numbers.” is true depends on what we practically mean with this sentence: if we mean that numbers are everyday objects like chairs and table – i.e. concrete, spatio-temporally locate things – then the sentence is false; but if we mean that there are (inter alia) prime factors of six, then the sentence is true. Following this intuition, the platonist and nominalist disagree about what the sentence is supposed to mean.

Of course, both platonists and nominalists might say that they ask neither the question whether there are things like prime factors of six, nor the question whether numbers are things like chairs and tables. They might even agree that there are prime factors of six and that they are nothing like chairs and tables. But then what do they disagree over? “They might try to explain what they mean by saying that it is a question of the ontological status of numbers; the question whether or not numbers have a certain metaphysical characteristic called reality (but a kind of ideal reality, different from the material reality of the thing world) or subsistence or status of “independent entities”” (Carnap 209). Here intuitions might diverge: some might think that it is indeed sensible to question the ontological status of numbers, and hence that the dispute over the sentence “There

⁴⁵See e.g. the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entries on “Platonism in the Philosophy of Mathematics” (2013) and “Nominalism in the Philosophy of Mathematics” (2014).

are numbers.” is substantive. Others⁴⁶ might stick with Carnap and deny that questions about the ontological status of numbers are meaningful. For what would it mean to say that numbers have a certain metaphysical characteristic called reality or subsistence or status of ‘independent entities’? According to Carnap, philosophers who use these terms “have not succeeded in giving [them] any cognitive content” (Carnap 209). That is, the dispute over the sentence “There are numbers.” cannot be substantial, for the sentence has no single, cognitively clear, meaning.

To see where Carnap’s intuition that the dispute between platonists and nominalists is (merely) verbal comes from, we need to look at his account of linguistic frameworks. In “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” (1950), Carnap “recognize[s] a fundamental distinction between two kinds of question concerning the existence or reality of entities” (Carnap 207).

If someone wishes to speak in his language about a new kind of entities, he has to introduce a system of new ways of speaking, subject to new rules; we shall call this procedure the construction of a linguistic *framework* for the new entities in question. And now we must distinguish two kinds of question of existence: first question of the existence of certain entities of the new kind *within the framework*; we call them *internal questions*; and second, questions concerning the existence or reality *of the system of entities as a whole*, called *external questions*.

(Carnap 207)

For example, consider Carnap’s thing-world: “the spatio-temporally ordered system of observable things and events” (Carnap 206-207). Now “[o]nce we have accepted the thing language with its framework for things, we can raise and answer internal questions” (Carnap 207), e.g. whether tables exists, or whether unicorns exist. “These questions are to be answered by empirical investigations. Results of observations are evaluated according to certain rules as confirming or disconfirming evidence for possible answers.” (Carnap 207) These rules are (part of) what constitutes the linguistic

⁴⁶For instance Eli Hirsch in “Ontology and Alternative Languages” (2009): “My aim here is not to rebut Carnap’s claim that the issue between platonists and nominalists is in some sense verbal; in fact I would be inclined to look for some kind of defense of this position” (Hirsch 2009, 255).

framework.⁴⁷

The concept of reality occurring in these internal questions is an empirical, scientific, non-metaphysical concept. To recognize something as a real thing or event means to succeed in incorporating it into the system of things at a particular space-time position so that it fits together with the other things recognized as real, according to the rules of the framework.

(Carnap 207)

However, (some) philosophers who ask whether our everyday objects really exist do not mean to ask such internal questions; instead they are after “the external question of the reality of the thing world itself” (Carnap 207). According to Carnap, this question cannot be solved “because it is framed in a wrong way” (Carnap 207): “[t]o be real in the scientific sense means to be an element of the system; hence this concept cannot be meaningfully applied to the system itself” (Carnap 207). But perhaps this is also not what those philosophers mean; they “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” (Carnap 207): “[w]e have to make the choice whether or not to accept and use the forms of expression in the framework in question” (Carnap 207). That is, perhaps the realist and idealist, rather than disagreeing over the ‘existence of the thing world’, only disagree over whether the thing world is a useful linguistic framework. Carnap’s take on disputes concerning the reality of everyday objects thus is that they either concern internal questions – if the concept of reality is given by the framework the disputants both accept – or external practical questions – if the disagreement is about which framework to adopt – or senseless external theoretical questions – if the disagreement is neither inside a framework nor concerns practical issues about such frameworks; but then, due to the meaninglessness of the disputed sentence, it might not even be a dispute at all, but just two parties talking past each other.

⁴⁷As Carnap says: “[t]o accept the thing world [i.e. to accept the thing language (Carnap 207)] means nothing more than to accept a certain form of language, in other words to accept the rules for forming statements and for testing, accepting, or rejecting them.” (Carnap 208).

How about the dispute between platonists and nominalists concerning the existence of numbers? Carnap directs our attention to “the system of natural numbers” (Carnap 208). “The framework for this system is constructed by introducing into the language new expressions with suitable rules” (Carnap 208); for example numerals like ‘six’, the general term ‘number’, and functions like ‘plus’. But do these numbers *really* exist? “To begin with, there is the internal question which, together with the affirmative answer, can be formulated in the new terms, say, by “There are numbers[.]”” (Carnap 209) – but this is rather trivial, for it follows directly from the sentence “Six is a number.” and the rules of the framework. So “nobody who meant the question “Are there numbers?” in the internal sense would either assert or even seriously consider a negative answer” (Carnap 209). But the philosophers who ask the question will probably reply: “No[...]; we mean a question *prior* to the acceptance of the new framework” (Carnap 209) – “whether or not numbers have a certain metaphysical characteristic called reality [...] or subsistence or status of “independent entities”” (Carnap 209). However, according to Carnap, these philosophers fail to formulate “their question in terms of the common scientific language” (Carnap 209), and do “not succeed in giving to the external question and to the possible answers any cognitive content” (Carnap 209). Thus Carnap judges that “their question is a pseudo-question, that is, one disguised in the form of a theoretical question while in fact it is non-theoretical; in the present case it is the practical problem whether or not to incorporate into the language the new linguistic forms which constitute the framework of numbers” (Carnap 209).

So we already saw that we might classify the dispute between the nominalist and platonist as (merely) verbal; and now we can also see that the dispute between the realist and idealist might be classified as such. More importantly, we have seen that these intuitions might be rooted in a Carnapian account of ontology, in which “[t]o be real [...] means to be an element of the system” (Carnap 207). On this account, disputes over “There are numbers”, or disputes over the reality of the thing-world, can only be substantive if they concern internal questions: questions posed within a framework that gives meaning to the disputed sentences. Outside a framework, the sentence has

no meaning; the external theoretical question is senseless. That is, it makes no sense to ask whether the platonist or nominalist – or realist or idealist – is right: no one is, because it is a meaningless sentence that is being disputed.

Alternatively, we might say, parallel to the squirrel case: who is right depends on what is practically meant by the sentence. On Carnap's account, James's remark translates to: it depends on which linguistic framework is adopted. We might even say that both the platonist and nominalist – or realist and idealist – are right, in their own framework. Indeed, like in the squirrel case, there can be discussion about which meaning is most appropriate, that is, about which linguistic framework is most useful for the given situation. This is the external practical question: a matter of practical decision. Once this decision is made, the dispute is easily dissolved.

We saw that the squirrel case might be regarded as a case of equivocality. Can the same be said about the dispute over “There are numbers.”? On Carnap's account, we might say that the sentence is equivocal in the sense that it has a different meaning in different frameworks. Parallel to the squirrel case, in which James dissolves the dispute by pointing out the different meanings the disputed sentence has for the parties involved, on Carnap's account the dispute might be dissolved by pointing out the different frameworks the disputing parties accept. However, the important point of Carnap's story – the point that drives the intuitions about the dispute being (merely) verbal – is that the disputed sentence is meaningless outside/without a linguistic framework, but, at face value, the equivocal sentence “The man goes around the squirrel” does not exhibit such meaninglessness – on the contrary, it even has two meanings. So how does Carnap's account relate to equivocality?

In a sense, Carnap's concept of a linguistic framework is an extended form of the idea of equivocality. An equivocal sentence can have multiple meanings, but is, in use, surrounded by some context that picks out one of the multiple possible meanings. For instance, if someone says: “I was at the bank.”, they can mean that they were at the financial institution or at the riverside. Some context,

for instance the next sentence, can make it clear what is actually meant. Thus, if the sentence is followed by: “I gave money to the clerk.”, its meaning is determined to be that this person was at the financial institution. Other contextual clues are also possible: imagine this person opening a suitcase full of cash money. Now we can extend the idea of equivocality by considering every sentence to be equivocal, or, what is the same, by thinking of mistakes about the meaning of sentences as cases of equivocality. For instance, consider the sentence “The pen lies on the table.”; ordinarily, this sentence is not equivocal. But we might mistakenly believe that it means that the pen lies on the floor. Disregarding that this is a mistake, we can think of the sentence having two possible meanings: “The pen lies on the table.” can mean that the pen lies on the table, or it can mean that the pen lies on the floor. We can do the same for every sentence, and we can also extend the possible meanings beyond any actual mistake anyone has made or will make. With this extended sense of equivocality, we still have contextual clues that determine⁴⁸ one of the multiple possible meanings as the actual meaning. Now a linguistic framework can simply be thought of as a bundle of contextual clues that pick a meaning from among multiple possible ones.

Now one might object that on this view, there are no rules for what a sentence means: of course, the objection accuses, “The pen lies on the desk.” cannot mean that the pen lies on the floor; that is simply a mistake and does not constitute a possible meaning. My response is that there are certainly rules for *actual* meaning: that is precisely what a linguistic framework provides. As to *possible* meaning: I do not see how there can be any restrictions on those, except perhaps logical restrictions.⁴⁹ Of course, certain meanings are more straightforward than others, and perhaps no one mistakenly takes “table” to mean floor, but I do not see why this *in principle* could not happen. Every rule that restricts the meanings a sentence can have in effect rules out the possibility of making certain mistakes about the meaning of that sentence: ruling out floor as possible meaning

⁴⁸In the normative sense, not (solely) in the descriptive sense. As in: “The present state of the universe and the natural laws determine the future states of the universe.”, not as in: “With help of the handbook, I determine this plant to be related to the sunflower.”.

⁴⁹For example, the restriction that the meaning of a sentence cannot be a contradiction; for instance “I arrived at the bank at exactly eleven o’clock.” cannot mean that I arrived at the financial institution and the riverside at exactly eleven o’clock (assuming bilocation is (logically) impossible and the financial institution is not build at the riverside).

for “table” amounts to claiming that no one can possibly make the mistake of thinking that “table” means floor. Even if such mistakes are never actually made, it is still, intuitively, too strong to say that they are not even possible.⁵⁰

This is all to say that the same intuitions underlie the idea of equivocality as the concept of linguistic frameworks. This intuition is that the meaning of a sentence can vary, and that different people might take a single sentence to mean different things. In the case of equivocality, a single word or sentence can have different meanings; context determines the single actual meaning. Linguistic frameworks expand on this idea, by first scaling up the piece of language that is equivocal from a single word or sentence to, in effect, the whole language. Second, linguistic frameworks flag the contextual factors that pick out the single actual meaning from among the multiple possible ones. Thus, Carnap’s idea that being real is being an element of the system has the same intuitive support as the idea that single meaning of (a token of) an equivocal sentence is determined by contextual clues.

⁵⁰One might press the counter argument as follows: it is and always will be a mistake to take “table” to mean floor. Now this is just to say that “table” necessarily does not mean floor. Now either (1) for all X , except when X is the actual meaning of “table”, “table” necessarily does not mean X , or (2) there is a certain restricted class of X ’s for which “table” necessarily does not mean X . In the first case (1), meaning cannot change, which seems intuitively implausible (for instance, the word “awful” changed its meaning from awe-inspiring to horrible). Now this might be plausible if words are individuated by their meanings (i.e. different meaning implies different words), but that in effect just amounts to switching out one intensionality for another: equivocality in this case becomes an epistemological phenomenon, in which we have two different words which appear the same – “bank” (the financial institution) is different from, but appears the same as “bank” (the riverside). Here again, context gives us clues as to which of these two words we are dealing with (“I was at the bank to deposit money.” provides enough context to determine that we are dealing with the first “bank”.), and a bundle of these clues can make up a linguistic framework. The platonist and nominalist now have a (merely) verbal dispute because they disagree about what sentence they are discussing: the nominalist thinks they discuss “There are numbers.” (Numbers are like chairs and tables.); the platonist thinks they discuss “There are numbers.” (There are things like prime factors of six.). Of course they are both right and wrong depending on what sentence they think they are discussing. The Carnapian intuition now becomes that this dispute arises because the platonist and nominalist think that it is somehow given outside any particular framework – i.e. without any further context – which of the two sentences they both discuss. But just as in the original case where the (single) sentence has neither the platonist nor the nominalist meaning without a framework (or contextual clues) that provide this meaning, in this case the (single) appearance of the sentence is neither known to be the platonist nor known to be the nominalist sentence without a framework (or contextual clues) that provide this information. Note that it will not do to say that the appearance of the sentence is (say) the nominalist sentence all along even without the framework (and contextual clues); for what is at stake here is no longer what the sentence actually is, but what it is known (or rather: believed, if one can only have knowledge of what is true) to be – this corresponds in the original case with ‘what the (single) sentence is taken to mean’. Thus: even if words are individuated by their meanings, fact is that sometimes people take similar looking words (or sentences) to mean different things. Somewhere in the steps from the appearance to the meaning of the sentence, there must be a divergence. It does not matter where this divergence is: as long as it is there, the dispute is (merely) verbal. The second case (2) seems to require a criterion for the class of X ’s that are ruled out as possible meanings of “table”; again, I do not see what such a rule could be.

Ultimately, we can say about the platonist and nominalist that they, intuitively, have a (merely) verbal dispute because they adopt different linguistic frameworks – which, as we have seen, is just an expanded and more rigorous form of the intuition that the disputed sentence is equivocal. Again, the key intuition that lies underneath this example is there is a difference in meaning both parties assign to the disputed sentence (rather than a difference in the facts they hold to obtain).

5.1.3 Mereology

The Eiffel Tower is a thing. The Statue of Liberty is a thing. But are they both parts of a larger thing? This is a mereological question.⁵¹ Mereological universalists (‘universalists’ for the remainder of this subsection) say that everything is part of a greater whole. That is, every two things to make up a third thing – the mereological sum of those things. The Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty are both parts of the Eiffel-Tower-Statue-of-Liberty-sum⁵². However, according to mereological nihilists (‘nihilists’ for the remainder of this subsection), nothing has parts: there are no mereological sums, only ‘simples’ – wholes without parts. In effect, the nihilists hold that only the most fundamental entities exists – say a bunch of elementary particles. There is then no such thing as the Eiffel Tower, but only a bunch of elementary particles shaped as the Eiffel Tower. The question at stake here is what Peter van Inwagen, in *Material Beings* (2009), calls the “Special Composition Question” (van Inwagen 20): “[i]n what circumstances is a thing a (proper) part of something?” (van Inwagen 20)

Hilary Putnam, in *The Many Faces of Realism* (1987) illustrates the issue through what he calls ‘Carnap’s world’: “[c]onsider ‘a world with three individuals’ [...] x_1, x_2, x_3 . How many *objects* are there in this world?” (Putnam 18) One possible answer is that there are three objects:⁵³ $x_1, x_2,$

⁵¹Mereology is “the calculus of parts and wholes” (Putnam 18), which was, according to Putnam, “invented by Leniewski” (Putnam 18).

⁵²Not to be confused with the set or class that has the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty as elements – just as the set containing only the Eiffel Tower should not be confused with the Eiffel Tower itself.

⁵³“Well, I *said* “consider a world with just three individuals”, didn’t I?” (Putnam 18)

and x_3 . However, if we, “like some Polish logicians, [...] believe that for every two particular there is an object which is their sum [...], then [we] find that the world of ‘three individuals’ [...] actually contains *seven* objects” (Putnam 18): x_1 , x_2 , x_3 , $x_1 + x_2$, $x_1 + x_3$, $x_2 + x_3$, and $x_1 + x_2 + x_3$.⁵⁴ According to Putnam, “the classic metaphysical realist way of dealing with such problems [...] is to say that there is a single world (think of this as a piece of dough) which we can slice into pieces in different ways” (Putnam 19) – call this the “‘cookie cutter’ metaphor” (Putnam 19). Now when faced with the question what the parts of this dough are, Putnam points out that the answer “ x_1 , x_2 , x_3 , $x_1 + x_2$, $x_1 + x_3$, $x_2 + x_3$, and $x_1 + x_2 + x_3$ ”⁵⁵ is “not a *neutral* description” (Putnam 19): it is the description that the universalist,⁵⁶ but not the nihilist, will choose. This leads Putnam to say that “the logical primitives themselves, and in particular the notions of object and existence, have a multitude of different uses rather than one absolute ‘meaning’” (Putnam 19). This phenomenon Putnam calls “[c]onceptual relativity” (Putnam 17).

The intuition here is that the universalist and nihilist have a (merely) verbal dispute. Who is right depends on what they practically mean with their notions of object and existence. To think that this is a substantial dispute is “to make the mistake of supposing that ‘Which are the real objects?’ is a question that makes sense *independently of our choice of concepts*” (Putnam 20). The Carnap is strong with this one: it seems Putnam has similar intuitions as Carnap regarding the meaning of sentences. In both we find the idea that sentences get their meaning in relation to a linguistic framework that provides these concepts, and gives meaning to the sentences we use to express the facts.

We can see Putnam’s Carnapian intuitions when we look at his treatment of the cookie cutter metaphor. According to Matti Eklund, in *The Picture of Reality as an Amorphous Lump* (2008), “the view is that the world considered in itself is just like some amorphous dough, and the concepts

⁵⁴ “Some Polish logicians would also say that there is a ‘null object’ which they count as a part of every object. If we accepted this suggestion, and added this individual (call it O), then we would say that Carnap’s world contains *eight* objects.” (Putnam 18-19)

⁵⁵ And O , see footnote 54.

⁵⁶ Regarding Carnap’s world, the Polish logician is the universalist.

employed are like cookie-cutters carving out cookies from the dough” (Eklund 385). Putnam explains further: “[t]he things independent of all conceptual choices are the dough; our conceptual contribution is the shape of the cookie cutter” (Putnam 33). However, according to Putnam, this metaphor is a poor way of explaining his idea of conceptual relativity: “[t]ake it seriously, and you are at once forced to answer the question, ‘What are the various parts of the dough?’” (Putnam 33). But the point of conceptual realism is that this is a senseless question; the dispute over whether there are three or seven (or eight) objects in Carnap’s world is (merely) verbal. According to Eklund, Putnam’s reasoning here must be this:⁵⁷ “[i]f the dough picture is right, it can be recognized as being so from any perspective” (Eklund 385). This means that the ‘dough’ of Carnap’s world – the objects that there are – must be able to accommodate both the view that it has three, and the view that it has seven (or eight) objects. “But that, in turn, is sufficient for there actually to be seven [or eight] objects – for it is sufficient for a purported object to exist that a concept carving it out could exist. (Because otherwise we would be forced to say that objects

⁵⁷But Eklund is wrong. Or, if he is right, Putnam is not tracing Carnap close enough. The Carnapian intuition is precisely that the ‘rightness’ of any particular picture *cannot* be recognized as being so from any perspective. For it are not only existential notions (“existence”, “object”, “thing”, “there is”, “ \exists ”) that get their meaning only within a linguistic framework/conceptual scheme, but evaluative concepts (e.g. *right* and *true*) also need linguistic frameworks/conceptual schemes. Eklund says that Putnam reasons as follows: “If the dough picture is right, it can be recognized as being so from any perspective; hence also from the perspective of [the mereological nihilist]. But the dough picture says that it is possible to carve out seven objects from the dough. But that, in turn, is sufficient for there actually to be seven objects – for it is sufficient for a purported object to exist that a concept carving it out could exist. (Because otherwise we would be forced to say that objects are *created* by our carving them out.) Hence the more ontologically decadent scheme – in this case, the Polish Logician’s scheme – is the accurate one. But then the dough picture misfires. For there is a proper way to carve the dough after all: the way of carving it that yields as many objects as there can possibly be.” (Eklund 385). Eklund then sees himself justified to use a similar argument against what he takes to be Putnam’s ontological pluralism (roughly, in the case of mereology, the idea that the universalist and nihilist are both right): “[i]f ontological pluralism is true, its truth can be appreciated from any perspective. Hence also from that of, say, [the mereological nihilist]. So already, from [this] perspective, the permissibility of saying that there are seven objects can be appreciated. But already, if it is permissible to say that there are seven objects, it is true to say that there are seven objects.” (Eklund 386). According to Eklund, “[t]he crucial step is the last. This step may seem simply to beg the question against Putnam’s ontological pluralism.” (Eklund 386). He then goes on explaining why the step can be taken nevertheless. However, it seems Eklund fails to see that the really crucial step is the first: the assumption that “[i]f ontological pluralism is true, its truth can be appreciated from any perspective” (Eklund 386). The Carnapian intuition is that this is simply wrong. Each linguistic framework defines its own truth, and there are, on this intuition, no inter- or extra-framework truth conditions. That is, the truth of ontological pluralism – the ‘everyone is right’ feeling – is not acknowledgeable from *within* a certain linguistic framework/conceptual scheme; it is not to be appreciated from any framework. For now, we can hang on to Eklund’s reasoning, for it gives us an easy way to see why the ‘dough picture’ misfires, even though it might not represent Putnam’s or Carnap’s reasoning. For the latter two, the cookie cutter metaphor misfires rather because it invokes the picture of some substance that is independent from a linguistic framework/conceptual scheme, whereas their point is that without a linguistic framework/conceptual scheme, one cannot even begin to speak about what there is.

are *created* by our carving them out.)” (Eklund 385) As Putnam says: “[i]nsisting that this is the correct view of the metaphysical situation is just another way of insisting that mereological sums *really* exist” (Putnam 33) – for it in effect says that what there *really* is, is the dough that can be cut up in three or in seven (or eight) objects; hence must have at least seven (or eight) objects as part (otherwise cutting it up in so many objects would not be possible). “But then the dough picture misfires” (Eklund 385): Putnam precisely wants to deny “that this is *more* the ‘right’ way to view the situation than is insisting that only [three] ‘individuals’ really exist” (Putnam 33).

If we take the cookie cutter metaphor too seriously, it thus seems the Polish Logician is right – against the idea of conceptual realism, according to which there is no right view on Carnap’s world. Putnam strengthens this intuition – that there is no right view on the matter – by showing how, conversely, the nihilist can easily account for and “explain the success of the Polish Logician” (Putnam 33) in describing Carnap’s world. Instead of the cookie cutter metaphor, the nihilist should focus on *reinterpretation*: they should claim that the utterances of the Polish Logician must “be understood as a useful *façon de parler*, rather than as something which is ‘literally true’” (Putnam 33). For instance, if, in Carnap’s world, x_1 is red and x_2 is black, we can give a translation scheme that translates the sentence “There is an object that is part red and part black.”, as uttered by the Polish logician who thinks of the ‘object’ $x_1 + x_2$, into the sentence “There is a red object and there is a black object.”, which is acceptable even if, as the nihilist has it, x_1 , x_2 , and x_3 are the only objects in Carnap’s world. However, “[t]o claim that such a translation scheme shows what is ‘really going on’ is just a way of insisting that mereological sums *don’t* ‘really exist’” (Putnam 34).

Instead, what we should take away from the nihilist’s strategy – *reinterpretation* – is that “the existential quantifier itself can be used in different ways – ways consonant with the rules of formal logic” (Putnam 35). However, we should not “then go on to single out *one* use of the existential quantifier [...] as the only metaphysically *serious* one” (Putnam 35). Rather, we should think about Carnap’s world in this way:

take the position that one may *either* treat [the nihilist]’s Version as ‘correct’ and interpret the Polish Logician’s Version as *façon de parler* in the manner illustrated by the reinterpretation of [the sentence “There is an object that is part red and part black”], or treat the Polish Logician’s Version as ‘correct’ and interpret [the nihilist]’s version as a language in which the range of the individual variables is restricted to atoms (as suggested by the Cookie Cutter Metaphor). That is, take the position that one will be equally ‘right’ in either case.

(Putnam 35)

The Carnapian intuition here is that both parties in a dispute over the Special Composition Question can be equally right: their dispute is (merely) verbal.⁵⁸

It should be clear how these intuitions fit the idea of equivocality: in the dispute about Carnap’s world, the sentence “There are seven objects.” is equivocal: it means that there are seven simples for the mereological nihilist, whereas for the mereological universalist, it means that there are seven simples or sums. Regarding the broader Carnapian intuitions discussed through this example, the conclusions drawn in the discussion of the previous example apply: words and sentences differing in meaning across frameworks is just an expanded and more rigorous form of equivocality. Given this equivocality, we (intuitively) see that the dispute about the Special Composition Question is (merely) verbal.

5.1.4 Intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes

With the discussion of the examples above, I take it that I have shown that we have an adequate intuitive grasp on the notion (*merely*) *verbal dispute*, which can be channelled through the notion

⁵⁸ Besides the Carnapian intuitions regarding meaning, there is another intuition that fuels the idea that the Special Composition Question just leads to (merely) verbal disputes. Imagine nihilism is true, and look at the Eiffel Tower. Now imagine universalism is true, and look at the Eiffel Tower. What is the difference? The intuition is that universalism and nihilism only provide us with two different ways of looking at the same Eiffel Tower, not some substantial truths about what there is and how it works. Indeed, the Eiffel Tower does not seem affected by us calling it an object or merely a heap of simples arranged tower-wise. That is, whether the Eiffel Tower is just a heap of simples or something over and above such a heap seems just a matter of words – thus it seems disputes concerning the Special Composition Question are merely verbal. This intuition is explored further in appendix B. For now, I ignore this naive empiricism.

of *equivocality*. In the next section, I show that this intuitive grasp of (merely) verbal disputes and equivocality can help us to separate ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology, and provides us with insights in notions like *language* and *meaning*. Having show this, I argue that the (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes resulting from the procedure common to debate about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature are unnecessary for these purposes.

5.2 Intuitions already fulfil the purposes

In the previous subsection, it was shown that we have an intuitive grasp on merely verbal disputes, for instance trough the notion of *equivocality*. In this subsection, I argue that this intuitive grasp is sufficient for separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology and that this intuitive grasp already provides us with insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*. Since these are precisely the purposes identified in section 2 of the (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the procedure common to the discussions about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature, and since the intuitions inputted in this common procedure are precisely the intuitions of which our intuitive grasp of (merely) verbal disputes consists, I conclude that the common procedure and its resultant definitions are unnecessary with respect to their purposes.

5.2.1 Separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology

Is mereology a case of ‘deep’ or ‘shallow’ ontology? Is there really something substantial at stake in the Special Composition Question? According to the intuitions pumped in the third example discussed above, mereology consists of (merely) verbal disputes; “There are seven objects.” is equivocal between meaning that there are seven simples and meaning that there are seven simples and sums. Intuitively, we can conclude that mereology is ‘shallow’ ontology. There might be intuitions to the contrary; there might be intuitions that mereology consist of substantial disputes.

(See appendix B for examples of such intuitions.) Hence we might conclude on the basis of these intuitions that mereology is ‘deep’ ontology. However, what is important for the purposes of this essay, is that regardless of what our intuitions about the Special Composition Question actually are, these intuitions yield a conclusion regarding the status of mereology (‘deep’ or ‘shallow’ ontology).

Similarly for the debates between platonists and nominalists, or between realists and idealists we encountered in the discussion of the second example above. There, we intuitively concluded that these disputes are (merely) verbal, and on the basis of these intuitions we can conclude that they belong to ‘shallow’ ontology. If we had concluded that they are intuitively substantial, then we can conclude on the basis of these intuitions that the debates belong to ‘deep’ ontology. Again, what matters is that our intuitions about these cases yield a conclusion regarding the status of the debates (‘deep’ or ‘shallow’ ontology).

We thus have seen three ontological disputes (mereology, platonism vs. nominalism, realism vs. idealism) about which we have intuitions. We have also seen that on the basis of these intuitions, we can conclude something about the status of the debates (‘deep’ or ‘shallow’ ontology). It is important to note that nowhere in the reasoning from intuitions to conclusion we used a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes, let alone one that resulted from the procedure common to the discussions about (merely) verbal disputes found in the contemporary philosophical literature.⁵⁹ So at least for these three ontological disputes such a definition is unnecessary to conclude something about whether they are part of ‘deep’ or ‘shallow’ ontology.

Inducting from these three instances, we can say that (it is likely that) such (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the common procedure are unnecessary for drawing conclusions about whether a certain dispute is part of ‘deep’ or ‘shallow’ ontology. That is, the common procedure and its resultant definitions are unnecessary for separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology: the input intuitions alone are sufficient for this purpose. If there are sceptical

⁵⁹Carnap’s “Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology” and Putnam’s *The Many Faces of Realism* are hardly *contemporary* philosophical literature.

doubts regarding this induction from three instances in which we separate ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology on the basis of intuition alone, then at least it is shown that there are at least three instances in which ‘deep’ and ‘shallow’ ontology are separated on the basis of intuition alone. I take it that the burden now lies with the sceptic to provide a case in which intuitions about a dispute are not sufficient to classify it as either ‘deep’ or ‘shallow’ ontology and in which a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes resulting from the procedure common to the debate about (merely) verbal disputes in the contemporary philosophical literature would suffice.

It might be objected that although (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the common procedure are not strictly necessary for the purpose of separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology, they at least enable us to separate ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology ‘with more certainty’ (or something along those lines). However, in section 4 it was argued that such definitions that result from the common procedure are uninformative with respect to separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology. This means that the objection simply does not hold: such definitions do not allow us to separate ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology with ‘more certainty’, because such definitions are uninformative with respect to this purpose.

One can press the objection by making the standards for support higher, so that mere intuitions are inadequate to support a conclusion; in this way, the objection becomes that intuitions alone do not allow us to draw conclusions regarding the status (‘shallow’ or ‘deep’ ontology) of ontological debates, and that the (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes resulting from the common procedure are needed. That is: the objection becomes that intuitions alone are not sufficient for separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology, and that the definitions are needed. However, as was argued in section 4, (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the common procedure are uninformative in the sense that they do not enable us to do more than we could on the basis of the input intuitions alone. Hence, if the input intuitions are not sufficient to separate ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology, then such definitions are also not sufficient for this purpose, for such definitions do not enable us to do more than we already could on the basis

of the intuitions alone.

Thus, with respect to the purpose of separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology, (more or less strict) definitions that result from the procedure common to the discussions about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature are unnecessary, for the input intuitions alone are already sufficient for this purpose.

5.2.2 Providing insights into other notions

In the discussion of the three examples in the previous subsection, we did not formulate a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes via the procedure common to the discussions about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature. However, we did end up with some insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*: from the story of the squirrel, we gained the insight that there are cases of equivocality. From the discussion of the dispute between the platonist and the nominalist, we gained the insight that a sentences need to have a ‘single, cognitively clear, meaning’ in order to constitute a substantial dispute, and that such meanings might be provided by linguistic frameworks. That is, we have gained the insight that sentences are meaningless outside linguistic frameworks. From the discussion of the dispute between the realist and the idealist, we gained the insight that differences between linguistic frameworks – and hence difference between languages – can be thought of as extended cases of equivocality. We also gained the insight that the actual (or intended) meaning of an equivocal sentence can be determined by contextual clues. From our discussion of mereology, we gained the insight that language might not be neutral with respect to ontology, and that the quantifier might have multiple, equally right, meanings.

Now it might be that all these insights are wrong. But what matters for the purposes of this essay is that we gained these insights on the basis of intuitions alone – we did not need to formulate a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes via the common procedure in order to gain these insights. We can thus conclude that such definitions are unnecessary with respect to the

purpose of providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*.

It might be objected that although (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the common procedure are not strictly necessary for the purpose of providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*, such definitions at least allow us to gain the *right* insights into these notions (as opposed to, so the argument goes, the *wrong* insights stated above). However, in section 4 it was argued that such definitions that result from the common procedure are uninformative with respect to providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*. This means that the objection simply does not hold: regardless of what the *right* or *wrong* insights are, if we can gain them from (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the common procedure, then we can gain them from the intuitions inputted in this procedure, because such definitions are uninformative with respect to providing these insights.

One can press the objection by making the standards for providing insights higher, so that mere intuitions are inadequate to provide insights – the insights that are listed above are actually ‘pseudo-insights’. In this way, the objection becomes that intuitions alone do not provide us with insight into notions like *language* and *meaning*: intuitions alone are not sufficient for this purpose. However, as was argued in section 4, (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the common procedure are uninformative in the sense that they do not enable us to do more than we could on the basis of the input intuitions alone. Hence, if the input intuitions are not sufficient to provide insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*, then such definitions are also not sufficient for this purpose.

Thus, with respect to the purpose of providing insights into notions like *meaning* and *language*, (more or less strict) definitions that result from the procedure common to the discussions about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature are unnecessary, for the input intuitions alone are already sufficient for this purpose.

5.3 Unnecessary procedure and resulting definitions

In section 4, we have seen that, given the purposes of the (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the procedure common to the discussion about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature, these definitions are uninformative in these sense that they do not go beyond or above the input intuitions – they do not enable us to do more than we could on the basis of the input intuitions alone. In this section, we have seen that such definitions are also unnecessary with respect to the purposes identified in section 2: separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology and providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*.

6 Concluding Remarks

After four sections, I conclude that the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes revolves around giving (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes via a common procedure, for the purpose of separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology, and for the purpose of providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*. I also conclude that, with respect to these purposes, these definitions are uninformative in the sense that they do not go beyond or above the intuitions inputted in the procedure – they do not enable us to do more than we can on the basis of the intuitions alone – and unnecessary in the sense that the intuitions alone are already sufficient to fulfil the purposes mentioned above.

6.1 First section

In the first section, I have clarified the claim of this essay through a discussion of the trade-off between informativeness and well-foundedness, and through a discussion of the distinction between conceptual clarification as mere rephrasing and as actual refinement.

6.2 Second section

In the second section, we have seen what, according to the current philosophical literature on the topic, the purpose is of giving a definition of (merely) verbal disputes. We have identified two purposes. First, we have seen that most participants to the debate given an account of (merely) verbal disputes in order to say something about deflationism. The thought here is that such an account can help in separating ‘shallow ontology’ (metaphysical debates consist of merely verbal disputes, based on linguistic differences) from ‘deep ontology’ (metaphysical debates about substantial issues that are ‘worth our time’).

Second, we have seen that Chalmers uses his account of (merley) verbal disputes to shed light on phenomena like *language* and *meaning* – for instance through an account of *analyticity* based on (merely) verbal disputes.

6.3 Third section

In the third section, we have seen that most of the discussion in the current philosophical literature on (merely) verbal disputes revolves around giving a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes. We have seen that there is a common procedure for giving such (more or less strict) definitions. We have identified the three steps of this procedure: (1) an intuitively plausible (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes is given; (2) a counterexample is presented: a dispute that is (merely) verbal according to the given definition, but substantial according to intuitions (or vice versa);(3a) the given definition is rejected in favour of a new definition to which the counterexample does not apply. In this section, I discussed several excerpts from the current philosophical literature in which this common procedure is employed, and I gave some reactions to the possible accusation that I did not do justice to the debate on (merely) verbal disputes as it is found in the current philosophical literature.

6.4 Fourth section

In the fourth section, we have seen that, with respect to the purposes identified in section 2, the (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the procedure common to the discussion about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature are uninformative in these sense that they do not go beyond or above the input intuitions – they do not enable us to do more than we could on the basis of the input intuitions alone.

In particular, we have seen that such definitions run three risks. First, they run the risk of being ad-hoc, since they are amended for *any* counterexample. Second, they run the risk of being extensional, – being nothing more than a list of all disputes that are (merely) verbal – since they are amended for *all* counterexamples. Third, they run the risk of being incomplete, since nothing can guarantee that we have considered *every* (potential) counterexample. We have seen that these three risks point at the low likelihood of there being any underlying systematicity to the (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the common procedure

With respect to separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology: we have seen that the procedure relies on intuitions that determine whether a (potential) counterexample is a substantial or (merely) verbal dispute. If we allow ontological disputes to count as (potential) counterexamples, the intuitions that the procedure relies on already tell us that these disputes are cases of ‘deep’ or ‘shallow’ ontology, and therefore the definition provides us nothing above or beyond what we got from the intuitions alone. If we do not allow ontological disputes to count as (potential) counterexamples against a proposed definition, it is unclear why this definition should be applicable to ontological disputes at all: any reason for excluding ontological disputes from being counterexamples is also a reason for excluding ontological disputes from the scope of the definition altogether. Either way, the generated definitions are uninformative with respect to separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology.

With respect to providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*: we have seen that it is

unlikely that (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes can provide insights into these notions if there is no underlying systematicity. However, we have also seen that it is unlikely that definitions resulting from the common procedure exhibit such underlying systematicity. Hence, we concluded that it is unlikely that such definitions can provide the required insights.

6.5 Fifth section

In the fifth section, we have seen that (more or less strict) definitions of (merely) verbal disputes that result from the procedure common to the discussion about (merely) verbal disputes in the current philosophical literature are unnecessary with respect to the purposes identified in section 2. With the help of three examples, I have demonstrated that we already have a good intuitive grasp on the notion of (*merely*) *verbal dispute*, and that this suffices both for separating ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology and for providing insights into notions like *language* and *meaning*.

6.6 An alternative

I want to conclude this essay with some remarks on a possible alternative way of conducting the debate about (merely) verbal disputes, so that we do not end up with (more or less strict) definitions that are uninformative and unnecessary with respect to their purpose. I think it is clear that I am in favour of abandoning the whole procedure altogether. But what should we do instead? Recall that in section 4, I argued that choosing for (3b) instead of (3a) in the procedure is not an option for defenders of the procedure. The reason was that they either end up with an arbitrary selection of intuitions about (merely) verbal disputes on the basis of which they have to construct their definition, which thus ends up uninformative, or they are committed to the existence of an underlying systematic story of which it is highly likely that it already contains sufficient insights into notions like *language* and *meaning* to separate ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ ontology, so that they again end up with an uninformative (and unnecessary) definition.

I think that the ‘underlying systematic story’ is the way to go – it is unproblematic for me, since I do not want to defend the common procedure. But there is more to it. In section 5, we have seen how our intuitions about particular disputes already enable us to draw conclusions about ‘deep’ and ‘shallow’ ontology, and that such intuitions already provide us insight into notions like *language* and *meaning*. There is no need to give a (more or less strict) definition of (merely) verbal disputes. What counts, what philosophers are really after (or should be after, at least), is the underlying systematic story. We want a systematic account of *meaning*, and the notion of (*merely*) *verbal dispute* can help. But not in the way Chalmers envisages it: we should not try to *define* a notion of *meaning* or *analyticity* in terms of (merely) verbal disputes. (Merely) verbal disputes are only a small phenomenon, but they are very useful as a testing ground for intuitions about *meaning*. However, we should not mistake them for the main event. It is true that the current metaphilosophical trend places a lot of emphasis on (merely) verbal disputes because there is the worry that some, or perhaps all, ontology is ‘shallow’. But we should not forget that this is part of a larger question about *meaning* too. The philosophical question is how we can say what there is and how it works; the metaphilosophical question is how we can say the philosophical question. “Meaning” is merely the name of these mysteries. *Meaning* is the fundamental concept of metaphilosophy, philosophy, and, not coincidentally, of life.

A In-depth analysis of the methodology of Jenkins’s “Merely Verbal Disputes”

In this appendix, I give an in-depth analysis of the methodology of Carrie Jenkin’s “Merely Verbal Disputes” (2014a). The aim of this close reading is to show that Jenkins (too) employs the procedure common to the debate on (merely) verbal disputes as it is found in the current philosophical literature.

Jenkins says she wants “to understand what counts as a merely verbal dispute, when we should conclude that a dispute is merely verbal, and whether it is *appropriate* to end discussion upon reaching that conclusion” (Jenkins 11). Her “aim is to move towards a better understanding of these and related issues” (Jenkins 11). According to her abstract, her paper “point[s] out some problems with existing approaches, and develops a new proposal which builds upon their strengths” (Jenkins 11). Concretely, she “attempt[s] to give a characterizing necessary and sufficient condition for *Parties A and B are having a merely verbal dispute*” (Jenkins 11).

Jenkins suggests that “we characterize a merely verbal dispute as occurring when the two parties do not disagree about the subject matter(s) of their (putative) dispute, but merely present the appearance of doing so owing to their divergent uses of language” (Jenkins 11). According to Jenkins, this is a “rather woolly characterization” (Jenkins 11), but she claims that this woolliness is precisely what makes the definition “fit for purpose” (Jenkins 12).

Returning to the methodological question: what is the ‘data’ on which Jenkins’s proposed definition is founded? Jenkins examines existing “develops a new proposal which build on the[...] strengths” (Jenkins 11) of earlier proposals. Thus we find her, in section three of her text,

consider[ing] a number of extant conditions – some putatively necessary, some putatively sufficient, some putatively necessary and sufficient – on something’s being a merely verbal dispute.

[She] also consider[s] some properties which have been or could be considered *diagnostic* or *symptomatic* of a merely verbal dispute.

(Jenkins 13)

The emerging points she categorizes in three themes. Since we are interested in the methodological question, I only highlight the way in which she assesses the earlier proposals.

First, the “idea of absence of disagreement, or at least of ‘real’ or ‘substantive’ disagreement” (Jenkins 13). Where does this idea come from? According to Jenkins, the idea was “aforementioned” (Jenkins 13) in her paper, so presumably she distills it from the preceding pages in her text. There, we find some comments on the use of the term ‘verbal dispute’ and ‘merely verbal dispute’ in other philosophical papers,⁶⁰ and a small intuitive appeal⁶¹ to the idea that *disputes* concern behaviour whereas *disagreement* concerns beliefs.⁶² This then, is the initial ‘data’: some evidence of philosophical use of ‘merely verbal dispute’, supplemented with an intuition or assumption, aspects of which are summarized in the idea of absence of disagreement.

What does Jenkins do with this ‘data’? First, she gives two “[w]ays of cashing out this idea of lack of (substantive) disagreement” (Jenkins 14). One way would be to say that a dispute is merely verbal if “the participants have no conflicting *beliefs*” (Jenkins 14). Another way would be to say that a dispute is merely verbal if “the participants agree on all the *facts*” (Jenkins 14). However, Jenkins notes that necessary conditions like these are in need of three amendments.

First, “the quantifiers involved must be restricted to range only over beliefs and facts that are *not about language*” (Jenkins 14). The reason for this amendment is that “participants to a merely

⁶⁰In particular, she cites Swan’s “A Metaethical option for theists” (2006) and O’Connor’s *Routledge philosophy guidebook to Hume on religion* (2001), as well as the Stanford Encyclopedia entries on “Belief”, “Concepts” and “Moral non-naturalism”.

⁶¹She “take[s]” (Jenkins 13) things to be the case – this might be an intuition, it might also be an assumption. Which of these two does not matter for my essay; assumptions are just intuitions you merely pretend to have.

⁶²“I shall take it that disputes are to be characterized at least partly in behavioural terms. [...] There may be other conditions as well, and indeed some of these may be at least partly responsible for preventing merely verbal disputes from being genuine disputes [...]. I take that disagreement, by contrast, has everything to do with belief and nothing (or almost nothing) to do with behaviour.” (Jenkins 13)

verbal dispute may presumably have conflicting beliefs about, and may disagree on facts about, the meaning of certain terms” (Jenkins 14).⁶³ The ‘data’ supporting this amendment thus is the (intuitively plausible) presumption that merely verbal disputes may involve disagreement over language.

Second, “[w]e surely do not want to claim that participants to a merely verbal dispute must agree about *everything other than language*” (Jenkins 14); “[i]t is only with respect to certain *relevant* non-linguistic beliefs and/or certain non-linguistic facts that they should fail to disagree” (Jenkins 14). In introducing this amendment, Jenkins cites an example that, presumably, must pump intuitive support:

Two philosophers can be engaged in a merely verbal dispute about ontology despite the fact that they don’t agree about whether or not *The Legend of Korra* is better than *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

(Jenkins 14)

This example consist of a case (two philosophers disagreeing about a tv-series and disputing about ontology) which is, according to the necessary conditions for verbal dispute given up to this second amendment, not a merely verbal dispute. However, so the reasoning seems to be, the case might, intuitively, involve a merely verbal dispute (the dispute about ontology might not involve disagreement, for the disagreement that was stipulated might have no connection to the dispute), hence the necessary condition we have up to this point should be amended. Thus, the ‘data’ here is just an intuition pumped by an example.

Third, “[w]e want to restrict attention to beliefs and facts about a certain salient portion of language: the portion that (intuitively speaking) *underlies* or *gives rise to* the dispute” (Jenkins 15). The reason for this amendment is that “apparent dispute in the presence of agreement on all the non-

⁶³Jenkins is not committed to the claim that merely verbal disputes always involve this kind of disagreement: “I do not say that this will *always* happen when a dispute is merely verbal, but surely it *sometimes* can” (Jenkins 14).

linguistic facts isn't sufficient for a merely verbal dispute" (Jenkins 15). To illustrate this, Jenkins gives two examples. In both examples, Tim says that 'bring' is a noun, while Tom says it is not. In the first example, "by 'noun' Tim intends roughly what normal English speakers intend by 'verb', while Tom attaches the normal English sense to 'noun'" (Jenkins 15). In the second example, "Tim and Tom both use the word 'noun' just as you and I do" (Jenkins 15).⁶⁴ Like the example cited to support the second amendment, these examples consists of a cases which is, according to the sufficient conditions for verbal dispute given up to this third amendment, are both merely verbal disputes (for in both cases, "Tim and Tom agree in all their non-linguistic beliefs and with respect to all the non-linguistic facts" (Jenkins 15)). However, so the reasoning seems to be, only the first case is, intuitively, a merely verbal dispute, whereas the second case is, intuitively, not a verbal dispute. Hence the sufficient condition we have up to this point should be amended. Thus, the 'data' here is, again, just an intuition pumped by an example.

Jenkin's concludes the first theme she discusses – the "idea of absence of disagreement, or at least of 'real' or 'substantive' disagreement" (Jenkins 13) – with the remark that, in the necessary and sufficient conditions for merely verbal disputes, "[w]hat seems to be required is some distance between th[e] underlying linguistic difference, and the (apparent) surface dispute" (Jenkins 15). We can conclude after Jenkin's discussion of her first theme that her conclusion here is based solely on intuitions, or on intuitively plausible assumptions. Furthermore, we can see that little transformative effort was needed to turn this 'data' into the conclusion: all the examples and reasoning in Jenkins's discussion of the first theme does is constitute a counterexample against the negation of the conclusion. That is, the reasoning here is that the conclusion holds, because there are intuitively plausible counterexamples against the negation of the conclusion.

The second theme Jenkins discusses continues where here discussion of the first ended: "the idea that, when two parties are engaged in a merely verbal dispute, it is some difference about language which underlies, generates, and/or even perhaps constitutes that dispute" (Jenkins 15). She first

⁶⁴That is: (presumably) Tim and Tom both use the word 'noun' in the normal English sense.

constructs her discussion around David Chalmers’s “gloss on what counts as a verbal dispute (‘at least to a first approximation’)” (Jenkins 15), as found in his “Verbal Disputes” (2011):

A dispute over S is (broadly) verbal when for some expression T in S , the parties disagree about the meaning of T , and the dispute over S arises wholly in virtue of this disagreement regarding T .

(Chalmers 522)

I will not discuss Chalmers’s ‘gloss’ here, but only focus on what Jenkins does with it.

Jenkins remarks that what she is “saying here is not offered as a criticism of Chalmer’s project on its own terms” (Jenkins 15), but nevertheless she proceeds to point out “why the Chalmers gloss won’t serve [her] purposes” (Jenkins 15). She makes two points here.

First, “a merely verbal dispute is one where there is an appearance of disagreement about something *other* than the portion of language which is actually responsible for dispute (where this ‘something’ could be entirely non linguistic, or it could be some *other* portion of language)” (Jenkins 16). The problem with ‘Chalmers gloss’ is that it also classifies disputes in which there is an appearance of disagreement about the portion of language that is actually responsible for the dispute, as (broadly) verbal. To bring this out, Jenkins uses two examples. First, she uses the example of Tim and Tom in its non-merely-verbal form: “Tim and Tom are plausibly ‘disputing over’ the sentence “bring’ is a noun’; call this sentence S ” (Jenkins 15), and they both mean noun with ‘noun’. According to Jenkins, the ‘Chalmers gloss’ might, contra Jenkins’s intuitions, classify this example as merely verbal, depending on whether Chalmers “would count the word ‘bring’ as being *in S* in the sense that the gloss requires” (Jenkins 15). The second example brings out the same point: Mick and Mark “are arguing about how to translate ‘bring’. Mick thinks it is a noun, Mark thinks it is a verb” (Jenkins 15). Mick says that you can wear a bring on your finger, and that ‘bring’ thus must be a noun. Mark denies that there us such a thing as a bring. According to Jenkins,

the Mick/Mark dispute is *verbal and nothing else* – it is obviously a dispute motivated by linguistic difference, and indeed in some senses it is ‘about’ language. But it does not seem to me to fall into the same category as the merely verbal version of the dispute between Tim and Tom, or disputes between those who say geese live by the bank (meaning river bank) and those who say geese do not live by the bank (meaning financial institution).

(Jenkins 16)

Jenkins’s problem with the Chalmers gloss is that “[a]lthough the dispute between Mick and Mark meets the condition discussed by Chalmers, it is not entirely comfortable to describe it as a ‘merely verbal dispute’ in the philosophers’ sense” (Jenkins 16).⁶⁵

Thus, the first point of criticism Jenkins levels against the ‘Chalmers gloss’ is that it classifies (intuitively substantial) disputes about language as ‘broadly verbal’. In effect, Jenkins’s reasoning is the same as in her discussion of the first theme: she identifies an account of merely (or in this case, broadly) verbal disputes, and then shows that there are cases which this account ‘misclassifies’, in the sense that it classifies disputes which are intuitively substantial as (merely) verbal, or vice versa. Again, the ‘data’ which are supposed to support our intuitions about these cases are just examples of these cases. There seems to be the presupposition that we have an intuition about “ ‘a merely verbal dispute’ in the philosophers’ sense” (Jenkins 16), which is brought out by citing examples: the Tim/Tom and Mick/Mark disputes are just stipulated to be merely verbal (or substantive) – no argument for these judgements is offered.

We see the same pattern recurring when Jenkins levels her second point of criticism: “a further issue for the Chalmers condition (when construed as a necessary and sufficient condition on merely verbal disputes, and maybe even for its originally intended purposes) is that there seem to be some merely verbal disputes in which the linguistic item that is intuitively responsible for the dispute is never used by the participants and does not appear in the disputed sentence(s)” (Jenkins 16).

⁶⁵According to Jenkins, Chalmers says “something along these lines” (Jenkins 16) in “Verbal Disputes” (2011): “One might also require [...] that a merely verbal dispute is one in which usage of the key term is not itself a central object of concern” (Chalmers 525; fn.8).

Again, Jenkins offers an example of such a case: one philosopher says scepticism is not mistaken, because failure to rule out all non- p possibilities renders a subject's position with regard to p epistemically defective; another philosopher says that scepticism is mistaken because no one cares for ruling out deception by evil demons. According to Jenkins, “[s]upposing this dispute to be a merely verbal one which arises in virtue of a disagreement about the meaning of the word ‘knows’, this is a case in which parties to a merely verbal dispute never explicitly use the portion of language which underlies it” (Jenkins 17). The reasoning is, again, that Chalmers condition is mistaken, for it would not count this case as (merely) verbal, even though it, *ex hypothesi*, is.

It might be said that the methodology Jenkins applies in making her second point against the ‘Chalmers gloss’ differs substantially from the one applied in making the first point: in making the first point, Chalmers’s condition was said to fail because it did not align with our *intuitive* judgement about the examples, whereas the second point seems to offer a case in which intuitions do not play a role. The argument there is that the Chalmers condition fails to appropriately classify a dispute that *ex hypothesi* is merely verbal. However, intuitions do tacitly play a role in this argument: it makes an appeal to intuitions in supposing that these kinds of merely verbal disputes (possibly) occur. Indeed, one might reject the assessment of the dispute about scepticism Jenkins makes,⁶⁶ and argue that since there cannot be verbal disputes of these kinds, the ‘Chalmers gloss’ works just fine. Only if we have the intuition that these kind of verbal disputes can exist, Jenkins’s second point of criticism goes through. Thus, both points of criticism of the Chalmers condition are rooted in intuitions about merely verbal disputes.

Despite Jenkins’s criticism of the ‘Chalmers gloss’, “there is certainly something useful for our purposes that is brought out by [it]: the notion of a dispute arising *in virtue of* a difference related to language or meanings” (Jenkins 17). According to Jenkins, Chalmers “intends ‘in virtue of’ to indicate some kind of explanatory connection” (Jenkins 17), and she sees this foreshadowed in

⁶⁶It should be made clear that Jenkins is not “*defending* this sort of supposition about sceptics and their opponents” (Jenkins 17).

David Manley’s introduction to *Metametaphysics* (2009). There, Manley presents the following account of verbal disputes:⁶⁷

a dispute is verbal just in case the speakers only disagree because they semantically deviate from each other. Put differently: if we hold fixed the facts about which they are actually disputing[...], the closest world where they do not semantically deviate is on in which they agree.

(Manley 14)

According to Jenkins, the ‘because’ here plays a similar role as Chalmers’s ‘in virtue of’: it “capture[s] explanatory connections” (Jenkins 17).

However, Jenkins is also not satisfied with Manley’s way of bringing out the idea that verbal disputes are those that arise in virtue of (or because of) linguistic differences. She presents three worries about Manley’s proposal. First, “the parties to what Manley calls a ‘verbal’ dispute do, or at least may, really disagree with each other” (Jenkins 18). According to Jenkins, Manley’s idea is “that both parties are speaking a public language, so the meanings of their each [sic] party’s terms are settled a certain way regardless of what each *thinks* her terms mean” (Jenkins 18). However, Jenkins claims that “disagreement [...] has more to do with what the parties *believe*, with what they *think* they are saying, and perhaps with the utterer’s meaning of their utterances, than what their utterances mean in any shared public language” (Jenkins 18). Jenkins does not offer further commentary on why she favours this position regarding meaning and disagreement rather than Manley’s position besides the statement that she “want[s] to respect the tradition that gives rise to the first theme of this section (the non-disagreement theme)” (Jenkins 18). This makes the basis for Jenkins first worry about Manley’s proposal effectively the same as the basis for the first theme she discussed: the ‘data’ are simply some intuitions regarding verbal disputes.

Jenkins’s second worry about Manley’s proposal is that it is “unsuccessful” (Jenkins 18): “[o]ther

⁶⁷“Let us say that two speakers *semantically deviate* from each other with a term just in case distinct semantic values are assign to that term when we consider two communities that have their respective linguistic dispositions and patters of use” (Manley 14).

wholly verbal disputes would be picked up as well” (Jenkins 18). That is: “we cannot use [Manley’s] criterion to distinguish the merely verbal Tim/Tom case from the non-merely-verbal Tim/Tom case” (Jenkins 18). Again, the method employed here is the same as we saw in Jenkins’s discussion of Chalmers’s condition: it is concluded that the condition fails because it classifies an intuitively substantive dispute as merely verbal or vice versa.

This method recurs in the discussion of Jenkins’s third worry about Manley’s proposal. According to her, “semantic deviations can sometimes be causally and/or explanatorily responsible for disputes without those disputes being merely verbal” (Jenkins 18). To support this claim, Jenkins offers an example about Fred and Freda, who “semantically deviate with regard to whether or not the word ‘naff’ is complimentary” (Jenkins 18), and thus disagree over whether most people are friendly. Since “their disagreement would only have arisen because of their semantic deviation from each other” (Jenkins 19), Manley’s criterion classifies the dispute as verbal, but, the argument presumably goes, Fred and Freda, intuitively have a substantial dispute.

Ultimately, we see an uniform method in the Jenkins’s discussion of the second theme. Both Chalmers’s and Manley’s proposed accounts of verbal dispute are said to fail because they classify intuitively substantive disputes as merely verbal or vice versa. The ‘data’ that supports the dismissal of these accounts are just the intuitions about the examples.

Before Jenkins discusses her third theme, she applies this methodology once again, now to dismiss an account of merely verbal disputes proposed by Theodore Sider in his “Quantifiers and Temporal Ontology” (2006):

To say that a dispute over sentence ϕ is merely verbal is to say that disputants do not mean the same thing by ϕ , and that what one says in uttering ϕ is consistent with what the other says by uttering $\neg\phi$.

(Sider 2006, 76)

Jenkins offers the example of Bertie, saying “I’m hungry”, and Gertie, saying “I’m not hungry”; they “are perfectly well aware that ‘I’m hungry’ expresses something different in each of their mouths, but each of them *also* mistakenly believes that the state of affairs of Gertie’s not being hungry is inconsistent with the state of affairs of Bertie’s being hungry” (Jenkins 19). Sider’s proposal classifies this as a verbal dispute, but intuitively, it is not.

The moral Jenkins draws from Sider’s proposal “is that we need to incorporate into our criteria for a dispute’s being merely verbal some way of ensuring that, when we discount any disputes arising from (and/or identical to) language-related differences, there is no relevant *residual* dispute or disagreement between the parties” (Jenkins 19-20). This moral “combines the first theme [she discussed]: that there is no substantive, relevant disagreement between the parties to a merely verbal dispute, with the second theme: that a merely verbal dispute is one that arises in virtue of differences concerning language” (Jenkins 20). Again, we see how this moral emerged more or less directly from intuitions regarding an example.

The third theme Jenkins discusses “is centred on the idea that when a dispute is merely verbal it will be possible to cash out the parties’ apparently opposing views in alternative (‘neutral’) vocabulary, such that the parties will agree about the matter when expressed in those alternative terms” (Jenkins 20). She finds this theme in Eli Hirsch’s “Physical-object ontology, verbal disputes, and common sense” (2005). There, Hirsch claims that⁶⁸

[t]he simplest paradigm of a verbal dispute [...] is where, for each disputed sentence D , there are two undisputed sentences $U1$ and $U2$, one true and one false, such that one side holds that D is (a priori necessarily) equivalent to $U1$ and the other side holds that D is equivalent to $U2$.

(Hirsch 2005, 83)

⁶⁸Jenkins remarks that Karen Bennett, in her “Composition, collocation, and metaontology” (2009), “points out that the ‘equivalence’ ought to be something rather more like *analytic* equivalence than a priori *necessary* equivalence, and she is surely right about this. As she says, in the absence of any criterion of *analytic* equivalence, nothing follows about whether or not the two parties *mean the same* by D , and this seems to be important for determining whether or not they are engaged in a merely verbal dispute” (Jenkins 20). I do not discuss this remark on Hirsch’s proposal further; I just focus on Jenkins’s methodology.

However, according to Jenkins, Hirsch's condition "fail[s] to be a *necessary* condition for a dispute's being merely verbal" (Jenkins 20), for it "cannot accommodate cases where there are no suitable candidates for $U1$ and $U2$ " (Jenkins 20). Another problem Jenkins sees with Hirsch's proposal is that "there could be situations where participants *should* hold that $U1$ and $U2$ are equivalents to their readings of D but irrationally refuse to do so" (Jenkins 20), or "situations where participants hold that $U1$ and $U2$ are equivalent to their respective readings of D but should *not* do so" (Jenkins 20). A solution that naturally suggests itself is to make Hirsch's criterion normative (both sides to the dispute *should* hold D to be equivalent to $U1$ and $U2$ respectively),⁶⁹ but "even the normative variant does not get matters quite right" (Jenkins 20): according to Jenkins, still "[s]ometimes there will be no alternative vocabulary that the parties should accept as providing the needed 'neutral' take on the apparently disputed subject matter" (Jenkins 21).

Jenkins thus seems to dismiss Hirsch's condition, but takes away from her discussion that "there is *some* kind of defeasible connection between a dispute's being merely verbal and there being some alternative vocabulary available to the parties such that expressing their positions in that neutral vocabulary would render it normatively appropriate [...] for the parties to resolve their dispute and/or cease disagreeing" (Jenkins 21). What about Jenkins's methodology here? Her methodology in the discussion of the third theme is different from that employed in her discussion of the first two themes. Rather than dismissing proposed accounts of verbal disputes on the basis of intuitive counterexamples, as we saw in her discussion of the first two themes, Jenkins's dismissal of Hirsch's account in her discussion of the third theme is based on a more structural worry: the potential lack of neutral vocabulary. Of course, intuitions are at work here too: one might defend Hirsch's proposal by arguing that such a lack of neutral vocabulary is precisely the mark of substantial disputes, contra the supposed intuition that there are verbal disputes for which such lack of neutral vocabulary arises. Following this latter intuition, we can construct an argument similar to the ones offered in the discussions of the first two themes: Hirsch's condition fails because

⁶⁹However, we then face "the difficult question of what kind of normativity it is supposed to be (epistemic? pragmatic? something more specific?" (Jenkins 21).

it classifies verbal disputes for which there is no neutral vocabulary available as substantial. But it is not clear that Jenkins wants to make this argument in her discussion of the third theme.

In any case, we can in general say about Jenkins's discussion of the three themes that the methodology mostly, if not exclusively (depending on how she intends the argument in her discussion of the third theme to run), consists of the following procedure. First, identify an account of verbal disputes. Then, find a case which intuitively is a substantial dispute, but according to the proposed account is merely verbal, or vice versa. Finally, dismiss the proposed account. It is clear that intuitions about what verbal disputes are play a major role in this procedure: they allow Jenkins to select counterexamples. As we will see below, these intuitions also play a large role in the creation of Jenkins's own account of merely verbal disputes.

As repeatedly mentioned, this section only treats of methodology, not of content. We can thus be short about Jenkins own proposal: I will mention her account, and then show the reasoning that she uses to support it. Jenkins first defines “[a] prima facie dispute [a]s something that, at first glance, would appear to be a dispute” (Jenkins 21), and then gives “a first-pass characterization of merely verbal disputes” (Jenkins 21):

MVD: Parties *A* and *B* are having a merely verbal dispute iff they are engaged in a sincere prima facie dispute *D*, but do not disagree over the subject matter(s) of *D*, and merely present the appearance of doing so owing to their divergent uses of some relevant portion of language.

(Jenkins 21)

Since Jenkins believes that “the phrase ‘merely verbal dispute’ is contextually shifty” (Jenkins 21), she “want[s] to claim that the sentence labelled ‘MVD’ above comes out true in every context of utterance” (Jenkins 21); this is what she calls ‘MVD+’.

In what follows, Jenkins explains the reasoning behind the components of MVD+. First, ‘disagreement over subject matter’: “[i]t is very natural to report the fact that *A* and *B* do not disagree

about the subject matter of their prima facie dispute by saying that they are not ‘really’ disagreeing” (Jenkins 22). The ‘subject matter’-part of MVD+ thus brings out the first theme Jenkins discussed above: “lack of substantive, relevant, ‘real’ disagreement between the parties” (Jenkins 22). In particular, MVD+ classifies the Tim/Tom disputes in the same way as we intuitively do.

The second theme Jenkins discussed finds its way into MVD+ via its last clause: “owing to their divergent uses of some relevant portion of language” (Jenkins 21) – according to Jenkins, this shows verbal dispute’s “explanatory connection with linguistic difference” (Jenkins 22).

Finally, “[t]he word ‘sincere’ appears in MVD+ in order that it not incorrectly classify all sorts of *insincere* disputes as merely verbal disputes” (Jenkins 23).

A strength Jenkins finds in her own proposal is that it “can handle the case of Fred and Freda” (Jenkins 24).

In these remarks, Jenkins methodology becomes clear, and we can see that our earlier assessment still holds: Jenkins considerations regarding MVD+ are based on a certain prior intuition about merely verbal disputes. MVD+ respecting the conclusions of the first two themes Jenkins discussed effectively means that MVD+ is designed to align with the intuitions uncovered in the discussion of those themes. The remark on the ‘sincere’ component and the capability of handling the Fred/Freda dispute is again an appeal to intuitions: the argument seems to be that MVD+ is a good account over merely verbal disputes because it aligns with the intuitions we already have about merely verbal disputes.

That Jenkins methodology amounts to this appeal to prior intuitions becomes also clear in her explication of ‘subject matter’: again her considerations about what should count as the subject matter of a prima facie dispute are based on prior intuitions regarding merely verbal disputes – indeed in such a way that MVD+ comes out as an apt characterization of merely verbal disputes, and then again apt in the sense that it aligns with our intuitions. Below I list four points Jenkins

makes about the subject matter of a prima facie dispute; the focus of my discussion is the support or reasoning Jenkins gives for these points.

First, subject matter(s) “need to be reasonably finely individuated” (Jenkins 22). Jenkins supports this point by reciting the example about scepticism (Jenkins 16-17). The reasoning is that intuitively this is a merely verbal dispute, but when we coarsely individuate the subject matter of the dispute as *epistemology*, MVD+ might characterize it as substantial, for the disputing parties “might have lots of genuine disagreements about other topics in epistemology besides Cartesian scepticism” (Jenkins 22). The reasoning thus is: we must finely individuate subject matters of prima facie dispute, because otherwise MVD+ does not align with our intuitions regarding merely verbal disputes.

In contrast, the second point she makes – subject matter(s) “cannot straightforwardly be identified with the subject matter(s) of any or all of the statements sincerely made during the course of that prima facie dispute by the parties to it” (Jenkins 24-25) – is not supported by the kind of reasoning that makes up the bulk of Jenkins method. However, especially since this second point is “a negative point” (Jenkins 24), this does little to alleviate my criticism on Jenkins methodology as it appears in the rest of her text.

Third, “the parties’ intentions, interests and other mental states seem very important for determining the subject matter of a prima facie dispute” (Jenkins 25), to the effect that “the subject matter of a dispute cannot be identified in [a] simple disquotational way” (Jenkins 25). Jenkins supports this point with a counterexample that she finds in Karen Bennett’s “Composition, colocation, and metaontology” (Bennett):

[consider] the purist who says that only cocktails made of gin or vodka, dry vermouth, and perhaps an olive or two count as martinis, and the sorority girl who calls practically anything a martini as long as it is served in the classic V-shaped glass. If these two are seated at a table on which such a glass contains some nonsense made of sour green apple liqueur, the latter will

say that there is a martini there, and the former will deny it.

(Bennett 50)

According to Jenkins, it is “fairly natural to describe them as disagreeing over *whether the drink is a martini* because one of them believes it is and the other believes it isn’t” (Jenkins 25). However, with *whether the drink is a martini* as subject matter of the prima facie dispute, MVD+ classifies it, contra intuition,⁷⁰ as a substantial dispute – the intuition here being that the purist and sorority girl do not disagree over the fact that there is some nonsense in a V-shaped glass on the table, but just use ‘martini’ to denote different things. Again, we see that Jenkins reasoning rests on prior intuitions regarding merely verbal disputes.

The fourth point Jenkins makes about subject matter is that “facts about the *ascriber* – that is, the person *describing* a prima facie dispute as a ‘merely verbal dispute’ – can impact upon what counts as ‘the subject matter’ of a prima facie dispute (by affecting the context of utterance and hence the extension of that phrase)” (Jenkins 27), to the effect that “exactly what counts as ‘the subject matter’ of [a] prima facie dispute can vary with the context of utterance of ‘subject matter’” (Jenkins 27). As support for this point, Jenkins offers another example: Bill says that there are such things as roses, while Bob says that there are no such things as roses. Now depending on the context, the Bill/Bob dispute is, intuitively, classified as substantial or merely verbal: “[w]hen we are thinking of ‘the subject matter’ of Bill and Bob’s prima facie dispute as linguistic [e.g. *whether ‘rose’ is a noun*], we should say that they are *not* engaged in a ‘merely verbal dispute’” (Jenkins 27), but “when we are thinking of ‘the subject matter’ of Bill and Bob’s prima facie dispute as the non-linguistic one, namely whether or not roses exist, we should say that they are engaged in a ‘merely verbal dispute’” (Jenkins 28). The reasoning is thus that MVD+ should be sensitive context, or else it classifies disputes that are intuitively substantial as merely verbal or vice versa.

Like most of her reasoning, the reasoning supporting the first, third and fourth point Jenkins makes

⁷⁰And contra Bennett, who calls her example “a paradigm case of a verbal dispute” (Bennett 50).

about the subject matter of a prima facie dispute rests on prior intuitions regarding merely verbal disputes. The same holds for the reasoning behind the explication of the “divergent uses of some relevant portion of language” (Jenkins 26) part of MVD+. According to Jenkins “pretty much *any* kind of divergence in usage that is capable of giving rise to the appearance of disagreement about a certain subject matter in the absence of any such disagreement can count” (Jenkins 26) as the required ‘divergent use of some relevant portion of language’. This is backed-up by two examples of disputes which are intuitively⁷¹ merely verbal, and hence should be characterized as such by MVD+. Again, the reasoning is that the claim should hold because otherwise MVD+ misaligns with our intuitions about merely verbal disputes.

Concluding, we see that most arguments we encountered in Jenkins’s text take the following form: account X is a good/bad account of merely verbal disputes, because it classifies as merely verbal or substantive the same/different disputes as we intuitively do. We can see this clearly in Jenkins’s text “Serious Verbal Disputes: Ontology, Metaontology, and Analyticity” (2014b), in which she applies the insights from “Merely Verbal Disputes” to ontology. There, she gives the following two advantages of MVD⁷²: first, MVD “makes good sense of why disputes end when they are agreed to be merely verbal” (Jenkins 456); and, second, MVD makes good sense “of why recasting a dispute in alternative vocabulary available to both parties can sometimes (but not always) be a method for establishing that a dispute is merely verbal” (Jenkins 456). Of course, these are only advantages if we have a prior intuition about what (merely) verbal disputes are supposed to be. In particular, for these points to be advantages of MVD, we must have the intuition that, first, disputes actually do or should end when they are discovered to be merely verbal; and, second, that recastability in alternative vocabulary is indeed a mark of (merely) verbal disputes. Without these prior intuitions, it is unclear why MVD making good sense of whether the endability and recastability of merely verbal disputes are advantages – if we have intuitions to the contrary (i.e. that verbal disputes

⁷¹As Jenkins writes about one of the examples: “I am inclined to diagnose merely verbal dispute here” (Jenkins 26).

⁷²In “Serious Verbal Disputes: Ontology, Metaontology, and Analyticity”, Jenkins only introduces MVD, not MVD+. I assume she would say that the advantages MVD has are also advantages for MVD+.

should continue, and that the ability to recast them in alternative vocabulary signifies their being non-merely-verbal) MVD seems to be a very bad characterization. This is all to say that even the advantages Jenkins herself cites for MVD come down to the claim that MVD aligns with our prior intuitions about merely verbal disputes. The same holds for MDV+. Indeed, MVD+ follows our intuitions very closely (if not exactly – after all, that is how it was designed) about merely verbal disputes, but, since we already had these intuitions, it seems MVD+ is uninformative.

Ultimately, we see that Jenkins (too) follows the procedure common to the current debate on (merely) verbal disputes, and that, as a result, the definition she ends up with (MVD+) is unnecessary and uninformative (with respect to its purpose).

B Empiricist intuitions

In section 5, we discussed the Carnapian intuitions (regarding meaning) that fuel the idea that the Special Composition Question just leads to (merely) verbal disputes. As announced in footnote 58, in this appendix, I want to discuss another intuition that might compel us to draw this conclusion, as well as some intuitive pushback against this intuition.

Imagine nihilism is true, and look at the Eiffel Tower. Now imagine universalism is true, and look at the Eiffel Tower. What is the difference? The intuition is that universalism and nihilism only provide us with two different ways of looking at the same Eiffel Tower, not some substantial truths about what there is and how it works. Indeed, the Eiffel Tower does not seem affected by us calling it an object or merely a heap of simples arranged tower-wise. That is, whether the Eiffel Tower is just a heap of simples or something over and above such a heap seems just a matter of words – thus it seems disputes concerning the Special Composition Question are merely verbal.

On the other hand, we can push back a little against the naive empiricism that this intuition uncovers. The intuition might be granted that the issue about whether the Eiffel Tower is a heap of

simples or an object over and above such a heap is not empirical – there is no *empirical* investigation that can decide the issue. But we need not conclude that the issue is (merely) verbal from the lack of empirical decidability alone: this only follows if every non-empirical issue is a purely verbal issue. That is: it only follows if we only allow disagreements to be either about the meaning of words or sentences, or about facts that can be empirically verified or falsified – this the old empiricist stance that disallows disagreements about facts that cannot be empirically verified or falsified. But we need not acknowledge this sharp binary between verbal and empirical issues; we might leave room in between for issues that are neither empirical nor verbal – moral issues might be an example of these.^{73,74}

The ‘pushback intuition’ is that in maintaining that issues are either (wholly) empirical or (merely) verbal, we are disqualifying certain topics beforehand; for instance metaphysical topics, in particular mereology. That is: we fail to understand both the nihilist and the universalist, who take position on an issue which they take to be neither verbal nor empirical. So contra the intuition that the universalist and nihilist have a (merely) verbal dispute because their views are empirically equivalent, there is the intuition that two parties can have a substantive dispute about some non-empirical issue – that is: the intuition that two empirically equivalent views can substantially differ, i.e. differ about the things meant by the words and sentences employed (instead of (merely) differing over what is meant by these words and sentences). The example of Carnap’s world would, according to this ‘pushback intuition’, not be comparable to James’s squirrel case, in which both parties are both right and wrong because they take the disputed sentence to mean different things (e.g. the nihilist takes “There are seven objects in Carnap’s world.” to mean that there are seven simples (for they believe simples are the only objects), whereas the universalist take the sentence to

⁷³For the sake of example, I assume that they are below.

⁷⁴We find an example of the view that mereology deals with issues that are neither wholly empirical nor wholly verbal in James Van Cleve’s “A Defense of Mereological Universalism” (2008). He refers to Cian Dorr and Gideon Rosen, who in “Composition as Fiction” (2002), argue that mereological disputes are “not straightforwardly empirical nor straightforwardly conceptual” (van Cleve 333). On the one hand, “[r]egardless of which side is right, the course of our experience will be the same” (van Cleve 333). On the other hand, “we cannot settle it by an analysis of the meaning of ‘part’ (or other relevant terms) that shows that the thesis propounded by one side to be analytic (and the opposed thesis therefore contradictory)” (van Cleve 333).

mean that there are seven simples or mereological sums in total (for they believe that both simples and sums are objects)). Instead, the case of Carnap's world would, according to the 'pushback intuition' be a case in which the two parties maintain to have a substantial dispute, even though there is nothing empirical at stake.

According to the 'pushback intuition', the case of Carnap's world is like the following case: suppose *A* and *B* have a dispute over the sentence "There is a golden coin in *B*'s room.", where, unbeknownst to *B*, *A* has hidden a golden coin in *B*'s room. The sentence is true according to *A*, but false according to *B*. Intuitively, this is a substantial dispute, and *B* is simply wrong. That is: we do not have the intuition that *A* and *B* evaluate the sentence differently because they take it to mean different things. Of course, we might say that *B* takes the sentence to mean that there is at least one *non-hidden* golden coins in *B*'s room, whereas *A* takes it to mean that there is at least one, *possibly hidden*, golden coin in *B*'s room. But intuitively – and this is the 'pushback intuition' – this is not what is happening here. Similarly, the nihilist and universalist might say that, although it is possible to tell a story about them taking the disputed sentence to mean something different, this is not what is happening when they disagree over "There are seven objects in Carnap's world." – according to the nihilist and universalist, their dispute is just as substantive as the dispute between *A* and *B* about the presence of a golden coin.

The 'pushback intuition' thus is the intuition that empirically equivalent views can substantially differ; the intuition that there is no sharp distinction between verbal and empirical issues. Where does this 'pushback intuition' come from? I identify two sources. A first source is the idea that there are matters which are neither empirical nor verbal. To see this, consider the example of the hidden golden coin again, and ask where the 'pushback intuition' comes from. We might say that the intuition that *A* and *B* have a substantial dispute over the sentence "There is a golden coin in *B*'s room." comes from the empirical verifiability of the fact under discussion: the dispute is substantial, because it concerns a state of affairs which we can check, and which determines who is right and who is wrong. But there are two ways of placing emphasis in this intuition. We might

say that the debate is substantial because *there is* an empirically verifiable state of affairs which determines who is right and who is wrong. We might also say that the debate is substantial because there is an *empirically verifiable* state of affairs which determines who is right and who is wrong. With the first emphasis, the intuition only requires disputes to concern states of affairs in order to be substantial – as opposed to disputes concerning only the words used to denote said state of affairs. With the second emphasis, the intuition also requires this, but in addition requires the state of affairs to be empirically verifiable, thus effectively excluding the possibility of substantial disputes concerning non-empirical matters. For example, the second emphasis on the intuition rules out moral debates (assuming that moral truths cannot be empirically ascertained). To flesh out this example, imagine a situation in which *C* takes the sentence “Murder is morally good.” to be true, while *D* takes it to be false. Intuitively, this is a substantial dispute, and *C* is simply wrong. That is: we do not have the intuition that *C* and *D* evaluate the sentence differently because they take it to mean different things. Of course, we might say that *C* takes the sentence to mean that respecting others is morally good, and therefore takes this sentence to be true, whereas *D* takes it to mean that murder is morally good, and therefore takes it to be false. With the first emphasis, the intuition is that this is not what is happening here: intuitively, the dispute is substantial, because it concerns a state of affairs (namely the moral status of murder), instead of the words and sentences used to denote said state of affairs. On the other hand, with the second emphasis, the intuition is that this dispute is not substantive, for the moral status of murder is not *empirically verifiable*.⁷⁵

The second emphasis on the intuition that the debate between *A* and *B*, between *C* and *D*, and between the universalist and nihilist is substantial because there is an *empirically verifiable* state of affairs which determines who is right and who is wrong is precisely the naive empiricist intuition against which we are now pushing back. On the other hand, the first emphasis brings out the first source of the ‘pushback intuition: the idea that *there are* state of affairs over which disputes can be had, even though these are not empirical matters. Again, moral disputes might be an example

⁷⁵Again assuming that moral truths are not empirically verifiable.

hereof. This first source shifts the focus from the opposition between verbal and empirical matters to an opposition between verbal and ontological matters. Concurrent with this shift of focus is the claim that there are ontological matters which are not empirical – only this claim makes this shift of focus not a mere play on words. The opposition we have in focus now distinguishes questions of ontology, rather than questions of empirical verifiability, from questions regarding the meaning of words and sentences. It separates the question about what there is, rather than the question what there verifiably is, from the question about what words and sentences we use to denote what there is. On this picture, the universalist and nihilist have a discussion the number of things in Carnap’s world, not about the words and sentences they use to denote the things in Carnap’s world. Therefore, their debate is substantial, not (merely) verbal; never mind that none of their statements regarding Carnap’s world can be empirically verified: the focus lies on the opposition between ontology and language. This focus is then the first source of the intuition that pushes back against a naive empiricist view.

The second source of this ‘pushback intuition’ is the dissolution of the opposition between verbal and empirical matters. Whereas the first source only consists in a shift of focus, the second source is the outright rejection of any opposition. This is where we encounter Quine and the like: it is a dogma of empiricism to presuppose that we can “speak of a linguistic component and a factual component in the truth of any individual statement” (Quine 1951, 39). If we follow the Quinean line of thought and reject any distinction between linguistic and factual components – between verbal and factual (ontological, empirical) matters, every dispute becomes substantive, for we effectively blend the realm of meaning with the realm of facts, thereby foregoing any criterion on the basis of which we can classify disputes as (merely) verbal. This Quinean point of view is thus not only a second source of the ‘pushback intuition’, but also fuels the stronger statement that there are no (merely) verbal disputes at all. Of course, it trivially follows from this second source that the universalist and nihilist have a substantial dispute regarding the number of things in Carnap’s world.⁷⁶

⁷⁶Indeed, they fit the Quinean paradigm quite well, for their question “What is there?” can easily be rephrased

According to the ‘pushback intuition’, the universalist and nihilist have a substantial dispute about the number of things in Carnap’s world, even though there is no empirical investigation that can determine who is right. As we saw in the previous section, Carnap himself would judge that “they have not succeeded in giving to the external question and to the possible answers any cognitive content” (Carnap 209). From an empiricist point of view, the ‘pushback intuition’ is precisely the intuition Carnap ascribes to those who want to answer the theoretical external question: it is the intuition that says that we can make sense of statements which are not empirically verifiable, without having to say that any (consistent) interpretation of those terms are right. Indeed, according to the empiricist-Carnapian line of thought, only empirical statements are meaningful. Here then, we see a blending of “Carnap’s” empiricist thoughts and “Carnap’s”⁷⁷ linguistic framework thoughts. In order to facilitate a clear discussion on (merely) verbal disputes, I think we should clearly distinguish between these lines of thought. In particular, I propose to leave out discussions regarding empiricism. I am inclined to believe that rigorous empiricism makes the whole debate on (merely) verbal disputes utterly uninteresting: it comes with a ready-made conception of which disputes are substantial, namely those concerning empirical ascertainable facts.

as the question “What do we quantify over?” – the nihilist of course quantifying only over simples, the universalist quantifying over simples and sums.

⁷⁷Scare-quotes because Carnap is not the only, nor the whole source of these thoughts.

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