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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

More than merely verbal disputes

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Abstract

It is fundamental that, in philosophy, we make sure that we are not mistaking merely verbal disputes, or "conceptual" disputes, for substantive ones. This essay presents a tripartite framework that is useful for clarifying cases where it is difficult to tell whether we are engaged in substantive or non-substantive disputes. For this purpose, the essay offers some combinatorial possibilities between the following levels: verbal, conceptual, and objectual. We need to distinguish whether we are arguing about the world, concepts, or words to avoid talking at cross-purposes and to recognize when our disputes are not worth the time. Distinguishing between these three levels can also throw light and guide research on conceptual engineering, metalinguistic negotiations, metaontology, and so on.

KEYWORDS

conceptual disputes, conceptual engineering, disagreement, metaontology, verbal disputes

1 | INTRODUCTION

It is reasonable to think that philosophers are involved, at least sometimes, in "non-substantive disputes or discussions" (I use both terms interchangeably). A pair of philosophers employ the same word but refer to different things. This situation creates the illusion that they are involved in a substantive dispute, but they only have a merely verbal dispute (MVD) or a verbal dispute (VD).[1] Some cases are hard to classify. Imagine that a pair of Renaissance philosophers, *A* and *B*, use the word "gravity," but each associates a different concept with it. While *A* associates a Newtonian concept with "gravity," *B* is thinking of an Einsteinian one. For all we know, they

[1]In what follows, I refer to non-substantive disputes in virtue of language as MVDs and to the general phenomenon of verbal disputes as VDs.

refer to the same phenomenon. But is theirs a substantive dispute or a merely verbal one? Is it a conceptual dispute? I think that these questions are important to get a better understanding of these issues. And this requires that we distinguish between terms (the linguistic level), concepts (the conceptual level), and ontology (the objectual level).

Dissolving merely verbal disputes improves philosophical research. As Chalmers notes, "here we can see the diagnosis of verbal disputes as a tool for philosophical progress. If we can move beyond verbal disagreement to either substantive agreement or to clarified substantive disagreement, then we have made progress" (2011, 517). A careful distinction between the kinds of possible disputes is very likely to improve our understanding of some heated philosophical debates.

It is tempting to regard all ontological disputes about what things there are as MVDs (Are objects wholly present at all times or are they sequences of temporal parts?), that is, disputes about words (Hirsch 2005; 2008; 2009; 2011). But sometimes it would be better to see them as instances of conceptual (or metalinguistic) disputes (Belleri 2017; 2018; Knoll forthcoming) or as truly substantive ones (Balcerack-Jackson 2013) because they would deal with concepts or objects. So, although there is a growing body of philosophical literature concerning verbal and merely verbal disputes (see, e.g., Balcerack-Jackson 2013; 2014; Belleri 2017; 2018; Chalmers 2011; Jenkins 2014; Vermeulen 2018), the essential distinction between the linguistic level and the objectual level can be enriched by the introduction of new and sharper distinctions at the ontological, conceptual, and linguistic levels. If these distinctions are useful, then we can anticipate some interesting consequences. It would be clear that the phenomenon of verbal disputes is more complex and requires more than considering only the relationship between linguistic expressions and their subject matter. We must be more precise. We need to distinguish between linguistic expressions, concepts, and the subject matter under discussion.

The structure of the essay is as follows. In section 2, I present the main characteristics that philosophers have detected concerning MVDs (and VDs), and I argue that there is room to improve this standard characterization. In section 3, I try to do so by suggesting a more fine-grained characterization of MVDs that distinguishes them from conceptual disputes (CDs) and substantive ones. This improved understanding of MVDs can help us to figure out how to conceive the relationship between MVDs and substantive ones in new ways.

2 | VERBAL DISPUTES AND NON-SUBSTANTIVE DISCUSSIONS

In this section, I introduce the current general definition of "merely verbal dispute." The central idea is that the distinction between language and subject matter explains when a dispute is merely verbal and when it is not. But, as we will see, this distinction is not sufficiently fine-grained for explaining some kinds of non-substantive disputes that are potentially important for clarifying philosophical controversies.

First, let me make some stipulations. I understand a dispute as the activity of disagreeing and a disagreement as espousing conflicting beliefs. As we will see below, there are several kinds of disagreement (and therefore of dispute). We can mention disagreements that are merely verbal and others that are substantive. A verbal dispute differs from a merely verbal one because the first can be substantive when terms are the subject of discussion (I focus on merely verbal disputes for most of this essay). I also take for granted the influential psychological theory of concepts that takes concepts to be representational mental states.[2] I do not give a

[2]Carey 1985; Pinker 2007; see also Isaac 2021 and Thagard 1990; 2008. I take concepts to be psychological states of individuals or communities rather than abstract entities (see Margolis 2007).

detailed description of the relationship between concepts, ontology, and linguistic expressions; a sketch is sufficient to establish and clarify the central purposes of the present analysis.[3] The examples I present in the third section take place between individuals, but they can occur between, for example, communities or experts (indeed, the most relevant cases occur at the community or the expert level). Hence, the terms, concepts, and subject matter can vary contextually.

Now, when we face a dispute that seems to be merely verbal, we typically think that there is nothing substantive at stake. The parties agree on the facts, entities, or any other subject matter, but they have been misled by language into believing they were having a substantive dispute. According to Chalmers, "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*" (2011, 522). Balcerak-Jackson suggests that a merely verbal dispute is a defective conversational exchange that "shares with cases of genuine dispute the fact that the parties endorse contradictory sentences. But unlike cases of a genuine dispute, we cannot identify a mutually agreed-upon question that both parties attempt to address" (2014, 42).

More recently, some philosophers have suggested that MVDs are a pragmatic phenomenon due to the speakers' linguistic or conceptual differences. For example, 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" (2014, 11) And, according to Vermeulen, "a verbal dispute has two core features . . . (1) It arises due to some linguistic confusion such that (2) parties do not actually disagree on the issue at hand, but merely appear to be disagreeing" (2018, 333). The parties show disagreement only at the linguistic or the conceptual level. (See also Knoll 2020; forthcoming; and Pinder 2019.)

If we examine the previous quotes, we can appreciate that the authors recognize two main features of MVDs. First, in an MVD, the parties do not share the same subject matter (meaning for Chalmers, agreed-upon question for Balcerak-Jackson, subject matter for Jenkins, and issue for Vermeulen). Second, these kinds of disputes have the appearance of dealing with a shared subject matter because the parties have been misled by language into believing that they are disputing the same issue (whereas they are just employing the same linguistic expression to refer to different things or to express different concepts). The subject matter is usually a fact (objects falling) or an entity (a table), but at times it may be a linguistic expression ("pencil") or a concept (PENCIL). Those involved in an MVD are not discussing the same thing.

Why, then, do they seem so convinced that they are genuinely contradicting each other? The reason is that they are employing the same word, a synonymous expression (that they know to be synonymous), or a homonymous expression (that they do not know to be homonymous) to refer to what they believe is the subject of their discussion. *A* and *B* might be employing the word "fish" in the sentence "A whale is a fish." While, for *A*, whales fall in the extension of "fish," they do not fall in it for *B*. Although they are using the same word, the extension differs because *A* employs "fish" in an ordinary sense but *B* uses it in a more biological sense. Then, their disagreement is not about the same subject matter: fish. If they were to know what the other party refers to when using their word, they would recognize the absence of a substantive dispute. There remains only an MVD (of course, a substantive dispute may take place if, after knowing what falls in the extension of their respective uses of "fish," they still disagree about what falls in the extension of "fish").

[3]Telling what concepts are is difficult, but psychologists like Carey (1985; 1991), diSessa (2006), and Posner and colleagues (1982) propose valuable approaches. Philosophers like Kitcher (1978), Nersessian (1989; 2008), Rusanen and Pöyhönen (2013), and Thagard (1990; 2008) have done the same.

This characterization of MVDs captures their central characteristics. But I suggest that we can make it more precise if we make finer distinctions. To see why, let us look at the following example. Suppose that *A* and *B* have different beliefs about "kangaroo" (this example draws on Balcerack-Jackson 2013). This expression conveys different concepts to the minds of both. *A* believes that the word "kangaroo" stands for a mammal endemic to Australia with powerful hind legs and a strong tail. In contrast, *B* believes that this word stands for a mammal endemic to Australia with powerful hind legs and a strong tail that is a marsupial. That is, for *B*, this species belongs to a reduced group of mammals that (among other peculiar characteristics) carry their offspring in their pouch.

If we follow Jenkins (2014), Vermeulen (2018), and Belleri's (2018) characterization of an MVD, we may be inclined to believe *that A* and *B* are having a merely verbal dispute because both use the same word ("kangaroo") but associate different meanings or concepts with it. Language is misleading them into believing that they share the same concept. *A* and *B* apparently disagree that "a kangaroo is a marsupial endemic to Australia and New Guinea." *A* says yes, *B* says no because, for him, "kangaroo" does not include in its meaning the property of being a marsupial. But both are alluding to the same animal.[4] We would also want to say that they have a genuine dispute because the same extension falls under the word "kangaroo." In some sense, both agree that "a kangaroo is a marsupial endemic to Australia and New Guinea." So it seems that we ought to make a sharper distinction to capture the complexity of what is going on here.

Consider also the case where two persons collect pieces of jade to analyze their mineral properties. *A* employs the word "nephrite" when pointing to a group of rocks that are superficially similar to jade. *B*, who does not know what this word stands for, applies the word "jade" when looking at the rocks. Now suppose that, although their terms differ, they share the same concept JADE: a hard and green ornamental mineral, mostly used in oriental art. The piece of rock that has caused *A* to utter "nephrite," however, differs intrinsically from the piece of rock that has incited *B* to utter "jade." While *A* is looking at a piece of nephrite, *B* is looking at a piece of jadeite. It follows that they are not alluding to the same object. The sameness of psychological states does not determine the sameness of extension.

If we were to assess this example through the characterization above, this would count as an MVD because language (the words "jade" and "nephrite") misleads the speakers into thinking that they are talking about different objects. *A*'s vocabulary includes both "nephrite" and "jade," but these two words mean different things for him, and so *A* thinks that *B* is entertaining a different concept (the same holds for *B*). The distinct terms induce the individuals to believe that they are not talking about the same thing, though they share the same concept. They disagree, for example, about the statement "Jade is a hard and green stone used for ornaments." When they get to know that both words express the same concept, the dispute will evaporate. If they dissolve this non-substantive dispute, there remains another one: they think that they are talking about the same objects because of their shared concept, but when they analyze the mineral properties of both pieces, *A* will assert: "Jade is made of sodium and aluminum," and *B* will deny it (because he will find out that nephrite is made of calcium and magnesium). A substantive dispute seems to remain regarding the correct mental representation of the minerals in question. In the next section, I suggest that we need to distinguish between linguistic expressions, concepts, and ontology. This distinction could help us make better descriptions of what is going on when we face a seemingly verbal dispute.

[4]Notice that we can understand concepts and meanings as the modal extension of terms (in that case, "refer" will have two different meanings: referring to the same animal in the actual world but referring to different animals in different possible worlds). It would be an interesting development to expand the combinatorial possibilities represented in Figure 1 by establishing the corresponding modal concepts and referents. But I will not attempt to develop such a framework here.

3 | VERBAL, CONCEPTUAL, AND ONTOLOGICAL DISPUTES

In this section, I try to improve on the bipartite definition of MVD given above. To achieve this goal, we need to distinguish between language, concepts, and objects. The lack of clarification of the relevant roles of concepts, terms, and objects is a potential source of confusion.[5] I do not, however, maintain that we can know the whole story of what is happening when these three domains interact. It might be possible that we cannot sufficiently disentangle them to satisfy our theoretical ambitions. Yet, one hopes, we can achieve a better grasp of the issues at hand, and therefore we can expect to improve our treatment of philosophical issues.

3.1 | The verbal, conceptual, and objectual levels

To avoid any misunderstanding, I assume a representational view of concepts (Carey 1985; Pinker 2007). Following Plunkett, I take "the *meaning* of a given word (where this is about the *semantics* of that word) to be given by the concept that it expresses" (2015, 846). Concepts contribute to the meaning of sentences. I also evaluate the relationship between terms, concepts, and objects from a realistic point of view (even if realism is false and we are continually deceived by some powerful and malign forces, I believe that the tripartite distinction will prove useful). The simplest and most widespread conception of realism that I have in mind identifies two main properties that characterize the objectivity of things in the world (see Brock and Mares 2007, chap. 1). In the first place, the reality of facts and objects consists primarily of their existence (this contrasts with non-realist views such as fictionalism, instrumentalism, and error theories). Second, this existence should be mind-independent (it avoids idealism, social constructivism, and other non-realist positions).[6] For simplicity of exposition, I also use "object" for the thing or things referred to, including facts and properties.[7]

There is a difference between a kangaroo, the term "kangaroo," and the concept KANGAROO. Ordinarily, we assume that our speaking takes place at the objectual level. We assume that when we talk about the habitat, bodily characteristics, and behavior of kangaroos, we are speaking about the animal. But it is reasonable to think that, sometimes, we are talking about the concept KANGAROO. Indeed, we may be discussing this concept and thinking that we are talking about the object. In still other cases, we may find ourselves engaged in a verbal dispute (but a substantive one) discussing the morphological, syntactic, and phonetic structure of a given term, using the term "kangaroo" but, unwillingly, associating different concepts with it.

There are complex combinations between the three different levels of discourse. But we can simplify this complexity a little if we consider the combinatorial possibilities represented in Figure 1.

There are eight possible combinations that give us different kinds of disputes. In the first horizontal row, we have the general structure of the paradigmatic substantive dispute. In this case, each party employs a term that is associated with only one concept that, in turn, represents only one object. *A* and *B* employ the same term ("Mona Lisa"), the same concept

[5]Of course, some objects might depend on judgment. One might think that aesthetic properties depend on our concepts. But, even if this is true, the distinction between the objectual, conceptual, and verbal levels is still useful insofar as it puts us in a better position to assess the substantiveness of these particular disputes. Even if we cannot completely distinguish the conceptual level from the objectual level, knowing this fact warns us to deal more carefully with these cases. It pushes us to investigate to what extent the objectual level can be considered mind-independent.

[6]I will leave aside the issue of whether there are substantive disputes about non-existent or mind-dependent objects.

[7]This is called the "umbrella view" (Rettler 2017).

(MONA LISA), and refer to the same object (the *Mona Lisa*). Consequently, they have a substantive dispute about the statement "The *Mona Lisa* is in the Louvre Museum." In another situation, *A* and *B* could genuinely disagree that "Mount Everest is the highest mountain in the world." The term "Mount Everest" expresses the concept EVEREST, which in turn represents the highest mountain of the Himalayas, and both individuals share all three.

	Terms	Concepts (meaning)	Extension (objects)	Example sentences	Type of dispute
	Identical	**Identical**	**Identical**		
1	• "Mona Lisa" • "Mona Lisa"	• MONA LISA • MONA LISA	• The *Mona Lisa* • The *Mona Lisa*	*A* and *B* disagree that "the *Mona Lisa* is in the Louvre Museum"	A classic case of a substantive dispute
	Different	**Different**	**Different**		
2	• "Mona Lisa" • "Eiffel Tower"	• MONA LISA • EIFFEL TOWER	• The *Mona Lisa* • The Eiffel Tower	*A* and *B* do not have a dispute because the sentences are different. *A* asserts that "the *Mona Lisa* is in the Louvre Museum," and *B* asserts that "the Eiffel Tower is made of iron."	Absence of dispute
	Identical	**Different**	**Different**		
3	• "fish" • "fish"	• FISH1 (including whales) • FISH2 (excluding whales)	• The aquatic vertebrates that live in water and have fins (including whales) • The aquatic vertebrates that live in water and have fins (excluding whales)	*A* and *B* apparently disagree that "whales are fish"	A classic case of an MVD

FIGURE 1 Combinatorial possibilities of the three levels of discourse

	Different	**Identical**	**Identical**		
4	• "Caesar Augustus" • "Gaius Octavius"	• AUGUSTUS • AUGUSTUS	• The first Roman emperor • The first Roman emperor	*A* and *B* apparently disagree that "Gaius Octavius was the first Roman emperor"	A non-classic case of an MVD
	Different	**Different**	**Identical**		
5	• "kangaroo" • "koklan"	• KANGAROO1 (including the property of being a marsupial) • KANGAROO2 (excluding the property of being a marsupial)	• A marsupial mammal endemic to Australia and New Guinea that has powerful hind legs and a strong tail • A mammal endemic to Australia and New Guinea that has powerful hind legs and a strong tail	Given their different terms, *A* and *B* apparently disagree that "a kangaroo is a marsupial endemic to Australia and New Guinea." (It is a partial MVD.) Given their different concepts, *A* and *B* also apparently disagree that "a kangaroo is a marsupial endemic to Australia and New Guinea." (It is also a partial MCD.)	A combination of a partial MVD (because it is also a partial conceptual dispute and there is a substantive dispute in the vicinity of the VD), a partial merely conceptual dispute (MCD), a substantive conceptual dispute, and a possible underlying substantive dispute about objects

FIGURE 1 Continued

In contrast, in the second horizontal row, there is not any dispute whatsoever. *A* and *B* share the terms "Mona Lisa" and "Eiffel Tower" and the concepts MONA LISA and EIFFEL TOWER. *A* and *B* also refer to the *Mona Lisa* and the Eiffel Tower, respectively. Both agree when *A* says that "the *Mona Lisa* is in the Louvre Museum," and when *B* says that "the Eiffel Tower is made of iron." Likewise, while *A* employs the term "Mount Everest" to express the concept EVEREST, which, in turn, represents the highest mountain of the Himalayas, *B* employs the term "wolf" to express the concept WOLF, which represents a member of the *Canidae* family. Assuming that each party shares these terms and concepts and refers to the same objects, *A* and *B* agree at the three levels of discourse.[8] There is no disagreement.

[8]Of course, the parties could associate different concepts with the term "Mount Everest" or the term "wolf," but this dispute is not the original one. It is a different dispute that can be evaluated considering the subsequent rows in Figure 1.

	Identical	**Different**	**Identical**		
6	• "kangaroo" • "kangaroo"	• KANGAROO1 (including the property of being a marsupial) • KANGAROO2 (excluding the property of being a marsupial)	• A marsupial mammal endemic to Australia and New Guinea that has powerful hind legs and a strong tail • A marsupial mammal endemic to Australia and New Guinea that has powerful hind legs and a strong tail	Given their different terms, *A* and *B* apparently disagree that "a kangaroo is a marsupial endemic to Australia and New Guinea." (It is a partial MVD.) Given their different concepts, *A* and *B* apparently disagree that "a kangaroo is a marsupial endemic to Australia and New Guinea." (It is also a partial MCD.)	A combination of a partial MVD, a partial MCD, a substantive conceptual dispute, and a possible underlying substantive dispute about objects
7	**Identical** • "jade" • "jade"	**Identical** • JADE (A hard and green ornamental mineral, mostly used in oriental art) • JADE (A hard and green ornamental mineral,	**Different** • A hard and green ornamental mineral, mostly used in oriental art and made of sodium and aluminum • A hard and green ornamental mineral, mostly used in oriental art and made of calcium and magnesium	When *A* and *B* individually analyze the mineral properties of their respective pieces of rock, *A* and *B* will apparently disagree that "jade is made of sodium and aluminum." (It is a partial MVD.) When *A* and *B* individually analyze the mineral properties of their respective pieces of rock, *A* and *B* will also apparently disagree that "jade is made of sodium and aluminum." (It	A combination of a partial MVD, a partial MCD, and an underlying substantive dispute about concepts

FIGURE 1 Continued

		mostly used in oriental art)		is also a partial MCD.)	
	Different	**Identical**	**Different**		
8	• "jade" • "nephrite"	• JADE (A hard and green ornamental mineral, mostly used in oriental art)	• A hard and green ornamental mineral, mostly used in oriental art and made of sodium and aluminum	When *A* and *B* analyze the mineral properties of their chosen pieces of rock, *A* and *B* will apparently disagree that "jade is made of sodium and aluminum." (*A* would assert it, and *B* would deny it. It is a partial MVD.)	A combination of a partial MVD, a partial MCD, and an underlying substantive dispute about concepts
		• JADE (A hard and green ornamental mineral, mostly used in oriental art)	• A hard and green ornamental mineral, mostly used in oriental art and made of calcium and magnesium	When *A* and *B* analyze the mineral properties of their chosen pieces of rock, *A* and *B* will also apparently disagree that "jade is made of sodium and aluminum." (*A* would assert it, and *B* would deny it. It is also a partial CD.)	

FIGURE 1 Continued

In the third horizontal row, we see the classical case of an MVD. Remember that the current understanding of an MVD (Belleri 2018; Jenkins 2014; Vermeulen 2018) states that both parties employ the same word but that the subject matter is different. Here, both parties employ the same word. This usage prompts them to think that they are talking about the same thing and that they are employing the same concept. But they only share the use of the same linguistic expression. Both *A* (a native speaker of American English) and *B* (a native German speaker) employ, to take Vermeulen's example (2018, 334), the term "beamer" to express the different concepts BMW and VIDEO PROJECTOR, which, in turn, represent a BMW (the car) and a video projector. Their disagreement is merely linguistic. The example in the third row is similar. *A* and *B* use the same term, "fish," but their concepts and referents differ. *A* entertains the concept of FISH1 and refers to aquatic vertebrates that live in water and have fins, including whales, but *B* entertains the concept of FISH2 and refers to aquatic vertebrates that live in water and have fins, excluding whales. They have an apparent dispute about the sentence "Whales are fish." *A* says yes, *B* says no. The tripartite distinction here gives the same results as the classical notion of

an MVD, but it is more specific. It identifies the contribution of the morphological component and that of the conceptual component; the sameness of the terms plus that of the concepts misleads the parties into thinking that they are talking about the same object.

We find another and very common case of an MVD in the structure represented in the fourth horizontal row. Language again misleads the parties into believing that they are discussing different issues. While *A* employs the name "Caesar Augustus," *B* employs the name "Gaius Octavius." They disagree that "Gaius Octavius was the first Roman emperor." Although both share the same concepts and refer to the same object (they agree on the conceptual and the objectual level), they disagree on the verbal level. Once they know what concept and object the other party associates with the two names, the dispute will vanish. We encounter cases like this all the time when a person has two or more names (such as "David Ryan" and "Mary Jo"), and we only know one of them. I propose to classify this kind of VD as a kind of an MVD that differs from the classical notion of MVD because, in the first case, the parties do not think that they are talking about one common subject. In this novel notion of VD, concepts are not playing a misleading role. The misleading role is *purely merely verbal*. The morphological characteristics of the terms make the parties think that they are talking about different objects.

The fifth and sixth horizontal rows show mixed cases. They are compounds of MVDs and what I call, following Jenkins (2014, 12), "merely conceptual disputes (MCDs)."[9] What is peculiar about these disputes is that once the partial MVD (it is a partial MVD because words play only part of the misleading role, as we will see below) and the partial MCD (it is a partial conceptual dispute because concepts also play only part of the misleading role) are dissipated, there remains a substantive dispute at the conceptual level and a possible substantive dispute at the objectual level. This notion of a partial MVD is also different from the traditional notion of MVD because the first is a seeming dispute due to the different morphological characteristics of the terms (*A* and *B* think that "Caesar Augustus" and "Gaius Octavius" mean and refer to different things). I propose to classify it as a particular kind of MVD (its misleading role is purely merely verbal).

In the fifth horizontal row, both words and concepts play a misleading role; they force the parties to think that they are discussing different topics at the objectual level, but they only diverge at the linguistic and conceptual levels.[10] After they recognize their compatibility at the objectual level, there remains a mismatch between this level and the other two levels. While *A* (a native speaker of American English) employs the term "kangaroo," *B* (a native Czech speaker) employs the term "klokan." Given their different terms, they apparently disagree that "a kangaroo is a marsupial endemic to Australia and New Guinea" (it is a partial MVD). And while *A* associates the concept KANGAROO1 (a *marsupial* mammal endemic to Australia that has powerful hind legs and a strong tail), *B* does associate the concept KANGAROO2 with the term "klokan." KANGAROO1 differs from KANGAROO2 because only the use of the first ascribes to kangaroos the property of being marsupials. Given their different concepts, they *also* apparently disagree that "a kangaroo is a marsupial endemic to Australia and New Guinea" (it is also a partial MCD).[11] The first disagreement is partly verbal, the second partly conceptual. Both can occur independently or simultaneously (note that *A* and *B* can equally disagree that "a koklan is an animal endemic to Australia and New Guinea" on the verbal and conceptual levels). The

[9]Jenkins defines merely conceptual disputes as "disputes in which mental representation plays the role played by language in a merely verbal dispute" (2014, 12). These kinds of discussions cause "conceptual disagreements," where we "are not just attaching the same word to different concepts but are in fact quarreling over how to best conceive of the concept attached" (Kompa 2015, 147).

[10]As Brown (1999) suggests, some philosophical disputes may result from the use of divergent concepts.

[11]Frege's example for demonstrating the difference between sense and reference is one of the cases that have the structure of the fourth case. Phosphorous and Hesperus are distinct terms that express different concepts that refer to Venus.

illusion of having a substantive dispute will be greater if the disagreements occur at the same time.

The translation of "klokan" into English will close the gap between words and objects. It will dissolve the MVD. To close the gap between concepts and objects—to dissolve the MCD—we would also need to make some adjustments (or replacements) to one or both concepts.[12] Perhaps we would need to do some "conceptual engineering."[13] Then they will have a substantive dispute about concepts (it is the same as, or quite similar to, a metalinguistic negotiation).[14] And there remains a possible substantive dispute if the parties still disagree that "a kangaroo is a marsupial endemic to Australia and New Guinea." They may still dispute whether there are kangaroos in New Guinea.

The sixth horizontal row also presents a case of an MVD and an MCD (and a possible underlying substantive dispute because the parties are talking about the same objects). It is a case of a partial MVD because, although they use the same word ("kangaroo"), they disagree conceptually. Given their identical terms, *A* and *B* apparently disagree that "a kangaroo is a marsupial endemic to Australia and New Guinea." *A* asserts it, but *B* denies it because, for him, "kangaroo" does not include in its meaning the property of being a marsupial. It is also a case of a partial MCD because, although they use different concepts (whereas *A* entertains KANGAROO1, *B* entertains KANGAROO2), they are talking about the same object. As in the MVD, given their different concepts, *A* and *B* apparently disagree about the same sentence: "A kangaroo is a marsupial endemic to Australia and New Guinea" (*B* denies it, and *A* asserts it). Thus, a partial verbal dispute arises when the use of "kangaroo" seems to imply the use of shared concepts. Once this confusion is dispelled, there remains a partial merely conceptual dispute. Again, both parties have the false belief that they are mentally representing different objects (that would be true only if the concepts are sufficiently dissimilar), in which case they require a revision of one or both concepts so that they fit with ontology. There remains a possible substantive dispute if the parties still disagree that "a kangaroo is a marsupial endemic to Australia and New Guinea." Again, they may still dispute whether there are kangaroos in New Guinea. Using different concepts with the same reference causes disputes in various areas. Philosophers often engage in partial MCDs when they discuss democracy, freedom, truth, and so on. They disagree on whether "democracy is superior to monarchy," "freedom is essential for human responsibility," and "*S* speaks the truth."[15]

The seventh and eighth rows are more controversial but may be useful for clarifying purposes. They present non-substantive disputes because the parties are talking about different objects—their apparent disputes take place at the verbal and conceptual levels—but there is an underlying substantive dispute about concepts. In the seventh horizontal row, we face a partial MVD and a partial MCD. Both language and concepts make the parties think that they are talking about the same object, but they are not (in that case, we need to change words and concepts to fit with ontology). Now, both *A* and *B* use the same word, "jade," and associate the same concept JADE with different objects: while *A* thinks about a hard and green ornamental mineral, mostly used in oriental art and made of sodium and aluminum, *B* thinks about a hard and green ornamental mineral, mostly used in oriental art and made of calcium and

[12]As Plunkett puts it, "[T]he different concepts that each speaker is using play a kind of *representational* role, such that they are each categorizing things in the world *in a different way*." KANGAROO and KANGAROO* are, then, "different ways of representing the world. Each partition the world into ways that are in accordance with that representation, and those that are not" (2015, 842). The problem is the lack of accord between concepts and the world.

[13]For an overview, see Cappelen 2018; 2020 and Cappelen and Plunkett 2020. See also Brun 2016; Floridi 2011; Isaac 2020; and Nado 2019 for some interesting discussions of important features of conceptual engineering.

[14]Belleri 2018; Plunkett 2015; Plunkett and Sundell 2013; and Thomasson 2017.

[15]If the concepts are similar "enough," we can judge that the dispute is substantive rather than merely conceptual. One's judgment depends on how similar the concepts are (thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention).

magnesium. When *A* and *B* analyze the mineral properties of their chosen pieces of rock, *A* and *B* will apparently disagree that "jade is made of sodium and aluminum" (*A* would assert it, and *B* would deny it; it is a partial MVD). In the same way, after the analysis of the mineral properties of their chosen pieces of rock, *A* and *B* will also apparently disagree that "jade is made of sodium and aluminum" (*A* would assert it, and *B* would deny it; it is also a partial CD). There remains a substantive dispute at the conceptual level: what would be the properties that the concept JADE has to represent?

In this kind of case, the difficulty is not that they are talking at cross-purposes (words do not mislead them into thinking that they are talking, or are not talking, about the same object) but that their concepts make their sentences give different descriptions of reality. The partial MVD will disappear if they use two different terms. To eliminate the partial MCD, the parties need to modify one or both of their concepts (it is a substantive CD). These disputes are not common but are of special interest for philosophical analysis. Despite Putnam's conclusion that meaning is not only in the head, one may classify Putnam's twin earth thought experiment, and similar ones, as exemplifying the structure of the seventh horizontal row. *A* and *B* use the same term ("water") and the same concept (WATER) but refer to different objects (H_2O and XYZ).

The last horizontal row also entails the possibility of having a partial MVD, a partial MCD, and an underlying substantive conceptual dispute. First, this case is a partial MVD because the use of different words suggests that we do not share the same concepts. Once that difficulty is dispelled, there remains the mismatch between concepts and objects (a partial MCD): the use of the same concepts makes us think that we are talking about the same object, but we are not.

Imagine again that *A* uses the word "jade" and *B* uses the word "nephrite." Since the terms differ, *A* and *B* think that they do not share the same concepts. They are involved in a partial MVD at this point. Yet, since they share the same concept (JADE) when they utter their respective words, they think of a green ornamental mineral, mostly used in oriental art. Once they get to know that they share the same concept, the partial MVD will dissolve. Suppose, however, that *A* and *B* are looking at a group of minerals, *A* points to a part of that group that is jadeite, and *B* points to a part that is nephrite. When *A* and *B* individually analyze the mineral properties of their respective pieces of rock, they will apparently disagree that "jade is made of sodium and aluminum" (again, this is a partial MVD, due to their different terms). In the same way, when *A* and *B* individually analyze the mineral properties of their respective pieces of rock, *A* and *B* will also apparently disagree that "jade is made of sodium and aluminum" (again, this is also a partial MCD, due to their use of the same concept). It follows that their dispute is not ontological and that they share a concept that is not sufficiently fine-grained to make the necessary distinctions in the world.[16] Therefore, they need to fix one or both of their concepts. It is a substantive conceptual dispute.

3.2 | Verbal and conceptual disputes at the objectual level (morphological change, conceptual engineering, and metalinguistic negotiations)

Finally, let me explain how the theoretical framework introduced above works when the terms or concepts are the subjects of discussion. The examples above suggest a tripartite conception of discussions that distinguishes three levels: verbal, conceptual, and objectual. But what happens when the entity at the objectual level is a concept or a word? Some theorists will, undoubtedly, desire to analyze the concept MIASMA even if there is not anything in the world that

[16]Notice that although it is less likely than in the fifth and sixth cases, the dispute could continue at the objectual level if the parties still disagree about other sentences about one of the two objects.

instantiates it. Alternatively, some theorists would want to study the phonetic, morphological, and syntactic structure of this word.

The tripartite framework also works in these cases. Imagine that we are arguing about the concept MIASMA. *A* and *B* disagree about the statement "MIASMA means an infectious agent that causes heat stroke" (*A* believes that it is true, but it is false for *B*). We study this concept as an object. We represent this object by a further concept, say, MIASMA*. And we use the expression "the concept of miasma" (or the term "miasma") to refer to the concept MIASMA. Similarly, we may want to analyze other concepts like WATER, KANGAROO, JADE, GRAVITY, and so forth. To this end, we represent WATER by WATER* and call it "water*." We represent JADE by JADE* and use the term "jade*," and so on.

In many cases, we discuss concepts because we want to make sure that they carve reality at its joints (of course, we can use concepts to achieve non-representational goals too, but I will focus on the representational function). Scientists have focused on the accuracy of theories with concepts like GRAVITY and MATTER. In fact, science progresses because scientists are constantly improving the representational accuracy of the theories by improving the exactness of the concepts that occur in them.[17] It is now common knowledge that the theory of general relativity has considerably improved our (Newtonian) concept of GRAVITY and that the actual concept MATTER is more exact than the ancient Greek version. It also has been a substantial improvement of our concept WATER to know that this odorless, tasteless, and inorganic fluid is composed of H_2O.

Of course, we had to do research at the objectual level (the non-conceptual and non-verbal realm), and perhaps we were not particularly interested in improving this or that concept.[18] In those moments when we were evaluating the exactness of our representational apparatus, however, we were clearly assessing concepts as objects. We were doing what philosophers call "conceptual engineering" or "metalinguistic negotiations."[19] We were trying to improve the representational accuracy of our concepts.[20]

We can also discuss words as objects. For example, we can say of the word "genuine" that it is a word composed of seven characters and that its phonetic transcription is /ˈʤen.ju.ɪn/. We can add that this word derives from the Latin word "genuinus," which means "natural," "native," or "innate," which itself derives from the Latin word "genu," meaning "knee." This usage comes from the Roman custom of the father putting a newborn child on his knee in order to acknowledge his paternity.

It is clear that we can talk about words and concepts at the objectual level and we must be aware of it. After all, it is very important to know when the subject of our dispute consists not of concepts and words but of other, sometimes more interesting, objects like animals, spacetime, entities, properties, and so forth. Thus, it is useful to employ the tripartite distinction mentioned above to avoid mistaking verbal disputes for conceptual and ontological ones.

[17]In line with the dynamics of conceptual change that we saw above, I espouse the view that conceptual improvement is a matter of degree. Old concepts are replaced with better versions that preserve many of the representational characteristics of the previous ones.

[18]As Chalmers notes, when contextualists and skeptical non-contextualists discuss the right concept of knowledge, "[a]ny substantive differences between the proponents will turn out what they say about further properties of the referents. . . . Assessing these further properties requires going beyond the linguistic data" (2011, 540–41).

[19]For conceptual engineering see Cappelen 2018; Floridi 2011; Nado 2019; and Cappelen and Plunkett 2020. For metalinguistic negotiations see Belleri 2018; Plunkett 2015; Plunkett and Sundell 2013; and Thomasson 2017.

[20]Of course, conceptual engineering can improve our concepts to fulfill non-cognitive ends (see, e.g., Haslanger 2012 and Nado 2019). Concepts can play practical and social roles, but, as Belleri notes, "unless we had realist commitments . . . the prospects for regarding the metalinguistic negotiation as ontologically significant are bleak" (2017, 2216). It is hard to think of concepts that do not represent. But I will set aside these issues because, as I said in the Introduction, this essay aims primarily to throw some light on the relationship between the three levels of discourse.

4 | CONCLUSION

Distinguishing only between the verbal level and the subject matter is not enough. As we have seen, a tripartite distinction between the verbal, conceptual, and objectual levels can help us to acquire a better grasp of the nature of verbal, conceptual, and ontological disputes. We often face complex philosophical disputes that are hard to classify. Sometimes, it may happen that we would not be able to diagnose whether we are facing verbal, conceptual, or ontological disputes, much less solve them. But in other cases, having the capacity to recognize our situation would unquestionably put us in a better position to decide what our next move will be. Some of our disputes will require conceptual engineering, some will require rewording, and others will require more empirical investigation or any combination of these procedures. In still other cases, all we need is to identify that we are talking about words and concepts at the objectual level.

Perhaps the verbal, conceptual, and ontological levels blend in more intricate ways. In that case, we must strive to formulate a better or more fine-grained classificatory scheme. Even if it turns out that ontological disputes are irremediably complex or beyond our cognitive grasp, we had better strive to know when this is the case. But many current ontological disputes are intelligible.

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