

“That’s not the issue”: against a lightweight interpretation of ontological disputes

A significant number of papers have been published recently on the use of metalinguistic negotiations in giving deflated analyses of ontological disputes. The philosophers who have authored these papers are Delia Belleri (Belleri 2017), Mirco Sambrotta (Sambrotta 2019) and Amie L. Thomasson (Thomasson 2017). Stemming from different semantic analyses but similar metaontological commitments, these three philosophers have given an account of ontological disputes as metalinguistic negotiations, specifically, metalinguistic negotiations with metaontological deflationist commitments. Metalinguistic negotiations are those metalinguistic disputes which consist in normative debates about what a word should mean (Plunkett 2015, 837), metalinguistic disputes being those in which at least one of the disputants make a metalinguistic usage of a term (Plunkett 2015, 835).

The objective of this interpretation of ontological disputes has been made explicit by Thomasson (Thomasson 2017, 20). This consists of two aims: firstly, maintaining deflationist metaontological commitments and, secondly, making sense of what disputants are doing in relation to their ontological disagreement. As for the first purpose, maintaining deflationist commitments is to avoid any understanding of ontology in which this branch of knowledge is a sort of scientific enterprise, in the sense that ontologist work consists of discovering certain ontological facts of the world.

Regarding the second objective, what these deflationist philosophers intend is to make sense of the intuition that ontological parties are having a disagreement (Belleri 2017, 2215), which means making sense of what disputants are doing (Thomasson 2017, 20). In conclusion, what these philosophers intend is to give an account of ontological disputes that maintain their cognitive value without having to resort to polemical thesis on metaphysics and epistemology.

The three readings (by Mirco, Delia and Thomasson) that are using metalinguistic negotiations to interpret ontological disputes have much in common. All of them share what I call “lightweight interpretation of ontological disputes” (hereinafter LIOD).

Throughout this paper, I will defend that LIOD does not work with most ontological debates. The main reason for this is that, contrary to what its proponents think, LIOD does not account for what participants are doing in these disputes.

In order to demonstrate so, I will use an argument which has analogies with “What’s at issue?” (Gibbard 2008, 23) argument by Moore: the “That’s not the issue” argument. I will use this argument against two possible applications of LIOD to classical ontological disputes, “Do numbers exist?” and “Does free will exist?”. This will show the inadequacy of LIOD as an interpretation criterion for ontological disputes.

1. Metalinguistic negotiations

Plunkett defines a metalinguistic negotiation as a normative metalinguistic dispute (Plunkett 2015, 837). A metalinguistic dispute is a dispute in which at least one of the disputants uses a metalinguistic usage of a term, meaning that the disputant uses the term

in order to say something about its meaning, or its correct usage (Plunkett 2015, 834). In the case of metalinguistic negotiations, this metalinguistic usage expresses how a term should be, or not should be, used in terms of the fulfilling of some value or values that are stated, explicitly or implicitly, as those to be pursued in a certain context.

An example of metalinguistic negotiation that is always used in the literature is a dispute in which the parties elucidate if a famous racehorse called “Secretariat” is one of the greatest athletes of the twentieth century. Suppose that this dispute moves to the next couple of assertions:

A: Secretariat is an athlete.

B: Secretariat is not an athlete.

If we suppose that both disputants agree in every relevant property instantiated by Secretariat, in the actual meaning of the word “athlete”, and we still think that there is a real disagreement here, this is a metalinguistic negotiation: one which concerns how we should or should not use the term “athlete”. This means that metalinguistic negotiations on “X” (“athlete”) are about answering the question of which concept of X (ATHLETE or ATHLETEE) must be employed¹. In this particular case, the question is what concept should we associate with the term “athlete”, thus making or not worthy of respect every animal which, as Secretariat, instantiates certain characteristics. This disagreement could continue by A giving moral reasons to explain how certain animals should be recognized as athletes, or aesthetic reasons to support the thesis that a specific aesthetical feature of

¹ Following Burgess and Plunkett (Burgess and Plunkett, 2013), concepts are named with small caps.

horses, justifies broadening of the meaning of the term “athlete” to include certain horses in it.

In any case, there is a metalinguistic negotiation going on. The dispute would be a metalinguistic negotiation so long as the thesis over which is the concept that we should associate with certain term, are expressed by a metalinguistic use of this term, rather than citing it. In this context, the reasons that are used in a metalinguistic negotiation, have to be read as giving their logical support, not to certain conflicting wordly issues (that Secretariat is or is not an athlete), but to a conclusion concerning which concept (ATHELETE or ATHLETEE) we should attach to the relevant term.

Finally, is important to note that metalinguistic negotiations are implicit conceptual ethics debates (Burgess and Plunkett 2013, 109). A debate in conceptual ethics is a normative dispute concerning the use of concepts. In this sense, is natural that all metalinguistic negotiations are constituted, as every normative dispute, by arguments that try to demonstrate that some action (this time conceptual choices) is the one which best satisfies some set of values and/or purposes which are the most relevant in deciding what to do.

2. Lightweight interpretation of ontological disputes

An ontological dispute is a type of philosophical dispute in which conflicting answers are given to the question “Do Xs exist?” In this context, LIOD consists of two theses: 1) ontological disputes are metalinguistic negotiations and 2) they are concerned with the pursuit of practical objectives and not with discoveries eminently metaphysical.

The former thesis requires interpreting ontological disputes as metalinguistic negotiations. However, in these metalinguistic negotiations the question is, instead of which concept we should use for a given term, if a certain term has to be used at all (*). Therefore, under LIOD, when disputants say “There are numbers” or “There are no numbers” what they really are communicating is “We should use number terms” and “We shouldn’t use number terms” respectively. Of course, defending some use of a term (“free will”), is to defend a specific concept attached to it; normally this implies a decision among other alternatives: for example, saying “Free will exists” in order to defend the concept of COMPATIBILIST FREE WILL instead of FOLK FREE WILL.

As for the second thesis, these debates concern the pursuing of practical objectives, so that arguing for conceptual tools is never realized towards the discovery of metaphysical facts. Under this view, ontologists do not discuss which concept carves nature at the joints (Sider 2011) or represents what “really” exists in any other similar way. For this reason, LIOD is the interpretation criterion for ontological disputes that is used by metaontological deflationists to give an account of the nature of ontological disputes. An example of this type of goal could be fighting against racial discrimination (Haslanger 2012), or employing the most efficient, clear and fruitful language in some domain of investigation, in a way similar to Carnap in “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” (Carnap 1956).

To sum up, under LIOD, we have one disputant who argue for the use of a term, hence, to some concept associate with it, because it is seen as the best action for fulfilling certain practical purpose; and we have another disputant who argue, through normative reasons, against the use of that term at all.

Some disputes can be seen as practical metalinguistic negotiations correctly interpreted by LIOD. Consider two disputant A and B. Both disputants agree in the fact that there is not any natural kind that difference between human groups and can be called “race”, however, they have the following dispute:

A: There are races because there is racial discrimination.

B: I understand the type of discrimination that you have in mind, but there are no races. Saying that there are is to be with racist people.

This dispute could be successfully interpreted by LIOD as a metalinguistic negotiation concerning the term “race”, where one of the disputants argue for the use of the term by attaching to it certain concept (SOCIOLOGICAL RACE), and the other argues against using that term at all. A defends that her use of the term “race” is the one which best fits the aim of fighting racial discrimination, while B argues against using this term at all².

Assuming that this is not all the dispute, once we arrive at the conclusion that this is a metalinguistic negotiation and with information concerning contextual factors and other utterances, we could reach through LIOD to the most caritative reading of this dispute: this would imply an assignation of practical reasons to the agents involved in this dispute that support their respective conceptual ethics thesis on the use of the term in question. For example, it could be assigned to A the claim that we have to assign the concept

² Sally Haslanger’s work (Haslanger 2012) aligns with this analysis.

SOCIOLOGICAL RACE to our use of the term “race” because it correctly tracks the phenomena that we usually call “racial discrimination”, which is essential to fight against it. On the other hand, it could be assigned to B the claim that we do not have to use the term “race”, because that would amount, in some sense, to sustain the ideology behind the phenomena of racial discrimination. Of course, determining which specific set of practical reasons is assigned depends also on other additional theses added to LIOD (a LIOD’s extension), as LIOD consist in two thesis that cannot give a complete interpretation of concrete ontological disputes.

Its seems hard not to think that, in disputes that could be correctly interpreted through LIOD, most of the reasons that are actually used before the interpretation would have some reinterpretation through the assignation of reasons that is given by this interpretation criterion; that is, only few reasons that are actually used by disputants would be discharged and not reinterpreted in any way by LIOD.

Although the example from above shows that LIOD could be used in some cases, most ontological disputes are not of this kind. Normally, ontological disputes have to do with the existence of abstracta, possible worlds or moral properties. The reasons that are normally used in these disputes to defend the existence or non-existence of what is disputed are metaphysical instead of practical; the former reasons are not used to argue in favor of some conceptual choice that best fulfills certain practical objectives, but to state what really is the case or, in case we have a metalinguistic negotiation with metaphysical commitments, if a concept should be used to speak in terms that carve nature at the joints (Sider 2011) or genuinely reflects the world in some other way.

In this context, by metaphysical reasons I understand those reasons that try to prove states of facts about certain objects as substances, properties, values, possible worlds or abstracta, considering them as things that are in the world and not just related to our conceptual schemes or linguistic structures. This is also the case when a disputant uses metaphysical reasons in metalinguistic negotiations, as long as those reasons are used to argue for some concept to be the one that represent most closely how the world really is. Disputants who give these reasons see themselves as taking on a task similar to that of science, namely, describing the world on some of its aspects. Metaphysical reasons are familiar tools for every standard metaphysician.

This being the case, when LIOD is applied to interpret ontological debates where metaphysical reasons are being used, it interprets the debate as a metalinguistic negotiation, but also and more importantly, substitutes metaphysical reasons for practical ones: metaphysical reasons cannot be accepted by LIOD as such, as long as these reasons are not the type of reason that is used in order to argue for a practical aim, in the sense stated above. By using this reinterpretation on most debates in ontology (those were disputants use metaphysical reasons), LIOD proponents believe to be making sense of the disputants' intentions, explaining what disputants in most ontological disputes would have literally communicated if they knew how their words work.

However, LIOD does not make sense of what disputants in most ontological disputes are doing because it does not capture what is "at issue" between them. Explaining this will be my aim in the next section.

3. That's not the issue

Before putting forward my argument, I would like to consider a similar one: the “What’s at issue?” (Gibbard 2008) argument given by Moore. This argument seeks to demonstrate that “good” cannot be reduced to any natural or supernatural property. The argument consists in stating that if “X is good” is the same that for X to instantiate some property, we couldn’t make sense of the disagreement between disputants which have different theories on what is good. Suppose that A is a utilitarian and B a Kantian deontologist. They have the following dispute:

A: To lie is sometimes good.

B: To lie is never good, but sometimes produces the biggest amount of pleasure.

Here, we have a disagreement. However, if it was the case that “good” meant “what produces the biggest amount of pleasure,” it would be impossible to make sense of our strong intuitions to be in front of a disagreement: because B would be saying “To lie never produces the biggest amount of pleasure, but sometimes produces the biggest amount of pleasure”. The same applies to any property that is claimed to mean the same as “good”.

A very similar thing happens with the “That’s not the issue” argument, regarding the application of LIOD to ontological disputes when disputants use metaphysical reasons. The “That’s not the issue argument” is an argument that shows that any type of substitution of metaphysical reasons with practical ones, made by any extension of LIOD, produce the impossibility of making sense of these ontological disagreements. The

similarity between “what’s at issue?” and “that’s not the issue” is that both arguments demonstrate the falsity of a particular interpretation of certain items showing that, if this is the case, then we cannot give an account of certain situations when we are sure that there is a disagreement between two agents on some issue.

Now, the argument. Imagine two disputants A and B. Concerning the question “Do mathematical objects exist?” A says that they exist because of the Fregean argument, B says that mathematical objects do not exist because of the epistemological argument.

The Fregean argument (Linnebo 2018) is the argument which concludes the existence of numbers by means of two theses. The first one is that the singular terms in mathematical statements refer to mathematical objects. The second one is that mathematical statements are true. As from classical semantics, the truth of a statement requires that its singular terms refer successfully to objects and, therefore, mathematical objects exist.

The epistemological argument (Linnebo 2018) states that mathematical objects cannot exist because, if they did, we would systematically know things about non-spatiotemporal entities, which are completely disconnected from us in its abstract realm.

Having this in mind, we have the following dispute:

A: Mathematical objects exist because of the Fregean argument.

B: I grant you that mathematical language is better for any practical concern than nominalistic one, but mathematical objects do not exist because of the epistemological argument.

Here we have a disagreement; A says that mathematical objects exist, and B says that they do not. However, suppose we reinterpret this dispute through LIOD. By some extension of LIOD, this dispute is now a metalinguistic one: the dispute is really over the use of singular terms for mathematical objects³. A's Fregean argument is substituted by an argument which defends that mathematical language is more efficient than nominalistic one, being "nomalistic language" understood as one in which there is no singular terms referring to mathematical objects. At the same time, B's epistemological argument is now substituted by an argument which says that nominalistic language satisfies some set of aims better than mathematical language. If we do this, we cannot make sense of "what's at issue" here: B is in contradiction with herself, as long as she asserts that nominalistic language satisfies some aims better than mathematical language and, at the same time, she says that mathematical language satisfies all aims better than nominalistic one. If B contradicts herself, there is no disagreement here. Hence, we can conclude that the reinterpretation of this debate does not track the disagreement, the issue in this dispute. This argument is independent of which specific interpretation is given by some LIOD extension of the metaphysical arguments that are in place: as long as B accepts that mathematical language is better in every practical task than nominalistic language, the argument remains the same.

³ Singular terms for mathematical entities imply the use of lots of concepts, so speak in terms of a language is better than speak in terms of a concept (FIVE) assigned to every mathematical singular term.

“That’s not the issue” shows that what B wants to say by the use of the epistemological argument cannot be substituted for any set of practical reasons in favor of nominalistic language. She does not use that metaphysical reason to say that nominalistic language is better for some task or another than mathematical language: B says that, even though mathematical language is better for everything, mathematical entities do not exist.

We can also look at another example, now in other ontological debate: one concerning the existence of free will.

Imagine two disputants A and B. Concerning the question “Does free will exist?” A says that it exists because of an argument from introspection. B says that free will does not exist because of the consequence argument.

By “argument from introspection” (O’Connor, Timothy and Franklin 2020), I refer to a simple argument which points to the fact that we have inner experience concerning the performance of our own actions, which shows that we are free when we act, at least, under certain conditions.

The “consequence argument” (O’Connor, Timothy and Franklin 2020), states that we live in a deterministic world and laws of nature and events that happened before we were born determine our present behavior. As long as this behavior was determined before our own existence, the argument continues, and we cannot change past nor natural laws, our behavior is not up to us, therefore, we are not free.

The dispute:

A: Free will exist because of an argument from introspection.

B: The concept of free will (FREE WILL) is the best for any practical aims that we have (as in law, ethics and political philosophy), specifically, is a necessary concept for assigning responsibilities, justifying punishment, and related issues (Thomasson 2017, 16). However, free will does not exist because of the consequence argument.

Again, we have a disagreement; A says that free will exists and B says that it does not. Through some extension of LIOD, this is a dispute over the use of the term “free will”, with one party arguing for the use of the term with a specific concept of free will attached to it (FREE WILL⁴), and other arguing against any use of the term. LIOD’s extension substitutes the argument from introspection of A, for an argument which supports the use of “free will” as FREE WILL, arguing that the latter is an essential concept for making sense of individuals responsibility for their actions. Also, LIOD substitute the Consequence Argument of B by an argument which supports the thesis that we have abandon the use of that term, as long as it is useless, even harmful for some relevant practical aims.

One more time, the disagreement has disappeared, B contradicts herself: she says that certain use of “free will” (FREE WILL) is the best for any relevant practical aim and, at the same time, she denies this proposition. Once more, the disagreement that we encountered before we applied LIOD has disappeared.

⁴ In using the expression FREE WILL, I try to remain neutral in respect of the specific concept of free will that is being defended.

LIOD, again, does not tell us what the issue between A and B is. What I mentioned before regarding the replication of this argument for any other extension of LIOD, can be repeated here: what the agents want to say through their use of metaphysical reasons, cannot be reinterpreted by LIOD.

4. Conclusion: LIOD is wrong

These examples show not only that LIOD cannot be applied to two ontological debates, one concerning the existence of mathematical objects and the other the existence of free will, but also that LIOD is of no use for reinterpreting ontological disputes where metaphysical reasons are being used (which are most ontological disputes). Metaphysical reasons are not used to implicitly argue for the utility, efficiency, or satisfaction of some practical aim by one concept or another, but for stating what the case is in the ontological realm or, at least, to implicitly argue for the metaphysical truthfulness of one concept over another, if we are in a metalinguistic negotiation. In this sense what a disputant want to communicate when she use a metaphysical reason cannot be substituted by any set of practical ones. This being the case, it is easy to conclude that LIOD does not make sense of what disputants are doing in most ontological disputes. Therefore LIOD, as interpretation criteria for reinterpreting most ontological disputes, is wrong.

Not making sense of what disputants in ontological debates are doing is a very important problem regarding deflationist stands in metaontology. It forces these metaontological positions to have a much more aggressive and non-caritative stance against a big amount

of ontological disputes that are happening today and have been happening through the history of philosophy. As LIOD does not work, metaontological deflationists are saying that these apparent debates are not disagreements at all as these positions have lost their interpretation criteria for making sense of what disputants are doing in most ontological disputes. These are not good news for deflationism in metaontology.

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