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Metasemantic Ethics

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Abstract

The idea that experts (especially scientific experts) play a privileged role in determining the meanings of our words and the contents of our concepts has become commonplace since the work of Hilary Putnam, Tyler Burge, and others in the 1970s. But if experts have the power to determine what our words mean, they can do so responsibly or irresponsibly, from good motivations or bad, justly or unjustly, with good or bad effects. This paper distinguishes three families of metasemantic views based on their attitudes towards bad behaviour by meaning-fixing experts, and draws a series of distinctions relevant for the normative evaluation of meaning-determining actions.

key words: anti-individualism, experts, metasemantics, metasemantic ethics, semantic externalism

The idea that experts (especially scientific experts) play a privileged role in determining the meanings of our words and the contents of our concepts has become commonplace since the work of Hilary Putnam, Tyler Burge, and others in the 1970s. Hilary Putnam calls this idea *the division of linguistic labour*, and advanced the hypothesis that the division of linguistic labour was a universal human trait: ‘Every linguistic community [...] possesses at least some terms whose associated ‘criteria’ are known only to a subset of the speakers who acquire the terms, and whose use by other speakers depends upon a structured cooperation between them and the speakers in the relevant subsets’ (1975: 228). In defence of this claim, Putnam might observe it is plausible that ‘chimpanzee’ as I use it is correctly applied to chimpanzees (rather than, say, orangutans or bonobos) even if I cannot tell the difference between chimpanzees, orangutans, and bonobos. Philosophers who think that meaning depends on upon social facts often argue that I can succeed in talking about chimpanzees only because I can rely on experts — primatologists, perhaps — who can tell the difference.

The examples that seem to motivate this (alleged) phenomenon — arthritis, water and XYZ, and so on — have been extensively discussed in the literature. My excuse for raising them again is that the division of linguistic labour raises important ethical issues that have

been ignored in the literature.¹ If experts have the power to determine what our words mean, they can do so responsibly or irresponsibly, from good motivations or bad, justly or unjustly, with good or bad effects. In short, they can exercise this power rightly or wrongly. For example:

The Meaning-fixing Conspiracy

The clock strikes midnight; the wind howls through the trees as the chair of the International Association of Experts in Arthritis calls the secret plenary meeting to order. ‘We meet to enter into a conspiracy. The world has ignored us for too long. Henceforward we will use the word “arthritis” to apply to a range of disease of the joints, bones, and muscles. Thus will we increase the profits at our clinics.’ The meeting ends with a solemn vow never to reveal the conspiracy. The plan works: patients defer to their doctors as always, and thereby come to use ‘arthritis’ to pick out a range of diseases of the joints, bones, and muscles. Through a pattern of lies, the doctors convince patients who notice the change that the new usage is a result of a scientific discovery (i.e., that they discovered that all of these ailments are the results of common cause).²

I have presented the case of meaning-fixing conspiracy in a somewhat flippant way, but the issues are a serious ones: many speakers seem to think that something rather like this meaning-fixing conspiracy has affected the meaning of ‘planet’ (so that the experts have conspired to (attempt to) make it the case that ‘Pluto is a planet’ expresses a falsehood), and it is not hard to find online discussions of (for example) same-sex marriage or trans issues that suggest or outright assert that there is a conspiracy to change the meanings of familiar words.

These cases raise two kinds of question. There are *metasemantic questions*, questions about what makes it the case that our words have the meanings they do. The most basic of these is the question of success:

Metasemantic Success: Would the conspiracy work? I.e., have the conspirators succeeded in making it the case that ‘arthritis’ is correctly applied to diseases of the joints and muscles?³

The aim of section 1 of this paper is to show that there are at least two families of metasemantic view that agree in emphasising the importance of experts but will give different

¹ Of course, this is not to say that there is no literature of any relevance at all; only that the issues have not been discussed in the context of metasemantic theorising in the tradition of Putnam and Burge. See, for example, Tirrell 1993 for some relevant discussion in a feminist context, and Crewe and Ichikawa forthcoming for discussion of the metasemantics of contextual parameters; see also the literature on ‘conceptual engineering’ (e.g., the essays collected in Burgess et al 2020) for discussion of normative features of concepts and words, which might be relevant to the discussion of wrongs of metasemantic ends in section II.1. Some popular work is also relevant; for example, Orwell’s reflections on Newspeak in *1984* (see Ball forthcoming).

² The use of ‘arthritis’ in this case is of course an allusion to Burge 1979.

³ Suppose that a conspiracy can succeed. A further interesting question is whether the success of a conspiracy results in a change of meaning: have the conspirators made it the case that ‘arthritis’ is correctly applied to diseases of the thigh even though it was not correctly so applied before --- or have they made it the case that ‘arthritis’ was correctly applied to diseases of the thigh all along, even before the conspiracy took place? For discussion of this question, and defense of ‘temporal externalist’ views that might lead one to the latter conclusion, see Jackman 1999, Ball 2020.

answers to these questions about metasemantic success. In section 2 I turn to questions in *Metasemantic Ethics*:

Metasemantic Ethics: What are the main ethical issues associated with metasemantics? For example, what (if anything) is wrong with a meaning-fixing conspiracy? What is wrong with the use of coercion or force in determining meaning? Are there normative issues associated with determining the meaning of particular words?

Section 2 introduces a series of distinctions that constitute the beginning of a framework for discussing these questions, and expands the discussion to include words for phenomena that play a deep role in people's values and self-conceptions (for example, words related to personhood, justice and freedom, or to gender and race); and cases in which meaning is determined in a problematic way not as a result of an intentional conspiracy, but as a result of (possibly implicit) bias. In section 3, I discuss the notion of consent, which has potential implications both for metasemantic ethics and for metasemantics itself. I conclude by turning (briefly and inconclusively) to the normative significance of metasemantic ethics.

I. SUCCESS IN CONSPIRACY

Would the conspiracy work? There is a way of continuing *The Meaning-fixing Conspiracy* in which it seems clear that it would:

Long-term Conspiracy

After decades of effort, the vast majority of speakers (including medical authorities and so on) are disposed to accept sentences like 'Arthritis occurs in bones and muscles', these sentences appear in medical textbooks and dictionaries (and sentences like 'Arthritis occurs only in joints' do not), and so on. Eventually the conspiracy is entirely forgotten.

In *Long-term Conspiracy*, it seems clear that the vast majority of speakers have come to use the word 'arthritis' in such a way that it is correctly applied to diseases of the bones and muscles.

The fact that the success of the long-term conspiracy could be accepted even by those who doubt or deny that experts play a distinctive metasemantic role should give us pause. No one thinks that it is a basic fact about the universe that a particular sound 'arthritis' is correctly applied (by a certain speaker) to some things and not to others; everyone agrees that the facts about the correct application of 'arthritis' are a result of the attitudes and dispositions of the speaker, the attitudes and dispositions of other members of her community, her environment, and so on. In other words, everyone agrees that the facts about linguistic meaning are *constitutively* explained by something else. But there is a good deal of disagreement about exactly what constitutively explains the facts about linguistic meaning. In particular, Putnam's idea that what I mean is determined in part by the views of experts is controversial; others — metasemantic *internalists* — maintain that what a speaker means by her use of a word is determined entirely by facts internal to her — for example, by her own dispositions to apply the word.

In one sense, internalists deny that the views of experts determine what I mean: only my own dispositions do that. But the views of experts might still be relevant to what I mean, because they can play a causal role in determining my dispositions. (The distinction between causal and constitutive explanations is a familiar one, though it is a difficult matter to give a theoretically adequate account of it — compare the constitutive explanation of the presence

of water in my glass in terms of the presence of H₂O in my glass and the causal explanation in terms of my having poured it there.) When the experts tell me, ‘Arthritis can occur outside of joints’ and I believe them, I acquire the disposition to apply ‘arthritis’ to phenomena outside of joints. If everyone has acquired the disposition, then even the internalist will agree that the conspiracy has (via its causal influence on the facts that constitutively explain meaning) succeeded.

In short, we need to distinguish two success claims:

(1) *Constitutive Success*: The conspirators succeed in making it the case that ‘arthritis’ (as used by certain non-experts) is correctly applied to diseases of the bones and muscles, because the conspirators’ own attitudes and practices partially constitutively explain the meaning of the non-experts’ uses.

(2) *Causal Success*: The conspirators succeed in making it the case that ‘arthritis’ (as used by certain non-experts) is correctly applied to diseases of the bones and muscles, because the conspirators’ own attitudes and practices have had a causal influence on the facts that constitutively explain the meaning of the non-experts’ uses.

A wide range of metasemantic views might accept the possibility of causal success, while only views that accept something in the vicinity of Putnam’s division of linguistic labour will accept the possibility of constitutive success.

With the distinction between constitutive and causal explanation in mind, let’s revisit Putnam’s division of linguistic labor. As that doctrine is usually interpreted, it amounts to something like this:

Expert Dependency: the meaning of certain words (as those words are used by non-experts) *constitutively* depends upon the way other speakers – the experts – use those words, and on the relation between the non-experts and the experts.

This way of describing things suggests several questions. First:

(i) What is meaning?

A comprehensive answer to this question is impossible within the scope of this paper, but a very simple view, which ought to be amenable to a wide range of theorists, will suffice for our purposes. Words — or at least, the kind of words that are the focus of our discussion — are correctly applied to some entities and not to others; for example, as I use ‘chimpanzee’, it is correctly applied to chimpanzees but not to orangutans. Call the set of all of the entities to which a word (as used in a particular context) is correctly applied its *extension*. A very wide range of views have it that there is more to meaning than extension; but many agree that difference of (actual) extension is sufficient for difference in meaning.

Putnam’s own formulation of the division of linguistic labor speaks of ‘criteria’ associated with words; but we can accept his basic idea even if we deny that words are in general associated (by anyone, even the experts) with necessary and sufficient conditions (other than disquotational ones, such as ‘*water*’ *applies to something just in case it is water*), or with reliable (still less infallible) ways of recognising whether something is in the extension or not. All we need to assume is that some words are correctly applied to some entities and not to others; *Expert Dependency* then insists that something experts do constitutively makes a difference to how certain words are correctly applied. But this raises two further, closely related questions:

- (ii) To which words (or which words as used by which speakers) does Expert Dependency apply?
- (iii) Who are the experts?

Prototypical answers to (ii) ('arthritis', 'chimpanzee') are technical terms of some science; and this strongly suggests that the relevant experts are scientists (or at least those with scientific training, such as doctors. But similar phenomena seem to attach to other words; Burge notes:

People sometimes make mistakes about color ranges. They may correctly apply a color term to a certain color, but also mistakenly apply it to shades of a neighboring color. When asked to explain the color term, they cite the standard cases (for 'red', the color of blood, fire engines, and so forth). But they apply the term somewhat beyond its conventionally established range—beyond the reach of its vague borders. They think that fire engines, including that one, are red. They observe that red roses are covering the trellis. But they also think that those things are a shade of red (whereas they are not). Second looks do not change their opinion. But they give in when other speakers confidently correct them in unison. (1979: 81-2)

The views of colour scientists do not seem especially relevant here; the 'experts' with respect to the extension of 'red' are simply 'other speakers'. (This makes it much harder to imagine a conspiracy regarding 'red', though perhaps a very large group of speakers might aim to shape the meaning of 'red' without informing some minority.)

The fact that the experts seem to have different features in different cases — scientific knowledge or authority seems relevant in the 'arthritis' case but not in the 'red' case — suggests a further question:

- (iv) In virtue of what are the experts (with respect to a particular word) experts (with respect to that word)?

One characteristic feature of the cases we have considered ('red', 'chimpanzee'), as well as Burge's original 'arthritis' case, is our attitudes toward the experts' testimony. Before the experts correct us, we intend to use the word as they do; we are disposed to defer to them on the matter. Moreover, we do in fact accept their correction once it is given: we believe the primatologist when she explains that that is not a chimpanzee, we 'give in when other speakers confidently correct [us] in unison'.

This suggests that the feature that makes one an expert — that gives one the power to determine what we mean — is *being able to convince us*. On this view, the experts are simply those people who have the power to get us to accept their testimony, to adopt their ways of speaking. (Of course, they will have other kinds of power as well — for example, in the Conspiracy Scenario, have a kind of institutional power conveyed by their status as doctors, their membership in the International Association of Experts in Arthritis, and so on. But (plausibly) this institutional power is not in itself metasemantically significant; it makes a metasemantic difference only to the extent that those who have it are more likely to be believed.)

But there is more to the ordinary notion of expertise than this. An expert is not simply someone who convinces us: even a know-nothing can do that. To be an expert requires some positive epistemic status with respect to a subject matter. Experts on arthritis have

knowledge about arthritis; they understand arthritis; they may know how to diagnose and treat it; and so on. And this is also a feature of the familiar cases: we trust primatologists precisely because we regard them as knowledgeable about primates; we trust doctors because we think they understand arthritis; and we trust ordinary speakers because we think they know about basic colour categories. One who is sceptical about the possibility of Constitutive Success would likely locate the problem in the conspiracy case precisely in the fact that the meaning-fixing actions of the conspirators are not based in their knowledge.

This suggests that there are two families of perspectives on what makes one an expert:

Power Metasemantics: To be an expert requires only the ability to convince. The experts are simply those whose testimony we will accept — those who can convince us to adopt their usage.

Virtue Metasemantics: To be an expert requires some positive epistemic position with respect to the subject matter.

There are many possible variations on both Power Metasemantics and Virtue Metasemantics. One might, for example, distinguish versions of Power Metasemantics that emphasise power over individuals (you have the power to determine what I mean just in case you can convince me) from versions that emphasise power over a community (which may not require convincing every member of the community).

And one might distinguish different versions of Virtue Metasemantics. The view that knowledge is all it takes to determine meaning is not very plausible. Surely a knowledgeable person may fix meaning for others only if she interacts with them in some way; a hermit might learn a lot about arthritis, but if she never speaks to anyone her knowledge is metasemantically inert. Or, consider again the *Meaning-fixing Conspiracy*; in that case, the experts have knowledge (understanding, know-how, etc.), but their attempts to fix meaning are not grounded in these positive epistemic statuses (but rather in their desire for profit). So a well-worked out Virtue Metasemantics will presumably need to specify that the experts are those who take certain actions (interacting with other speakers), and that those actions are the result of their positive epistemic status. (Further refinements will be needed, both to say exactly what actions will do, and to ensure that the actions result from positive epistemic states in a non-deviant way.)

The Meaning-fixing Conspiracy raises a further issue for Virtue Metasemantics. On one common view, someone may choose to fix the meaning of their own words by stipulation, so that merely saying ‘Henceforward we will use the word “arthritis” to apply to a range of diseases of the joints, bones, and muscles,’ makes it the case that arthritis as the speakers use it is correctly applied to a range of diseases of the joints, bones, and muscles. Having made a stipulation of this kind, it seems that the conspirators would speak knowledgeably when they tell patients, ‘Arthritis can occur outside of joints’. Therefore, it seems that even Virtue Metasemantics — as we have stated the view thus far — predicts that the conspiracy would succeed.

There are a number of ways that one might try to formulate a version of Virtue Metasemantics that does not have this consequence. One interesting possibility would be to emphasise epistemic states other than propositional knowledge: doctors not only know facts about arthritis, but also understand arthritis, know how to treat it, and so on. The conspirators’ attempts to determine meaning may be grounded in their own (stipulation-based) knowledge, but they are presumably not grounded in their understanding and know-how.

Working out the details of different versions of Virtue Metasemantics would be an interesting task; but pursuing it further would lead us astray from the normative issues that are a further aim of this paper. I take it that enough has been said to make it plausible that there are a range of views on which the views and actions of experts play a constitutive metasemantic role, and which will give different answers to Metasemantic Success.

Evaluating which view is correct is a difficult matter. It is not clear that appeal to cases will resolve the matter: plausible versions of Power Metasemantics and Virtue Metasemantics will agree in their verdicts about the standard cases — water, aluminium and molybdenum, beeches and elms, arthritis, sofas, and so on — and the cases on which they disagree — for example, *the Meaning-fixing Conspiracy* — are also cases about which it is difficult to form a pretheoretical judgement.⁴

To the extent that we find the idea that conspirators might manipulate the meanings of our words (or worse, the contents of our thoughts) difficult to accept, we may find Virtue Metasemantics appealing. However, I would caution against drawing metasemantic conclusions on the basis of wishful thinking; the fact that we do not like the idea of a meaning-fixing conspiracy does not entail that such a conspiracy is impossible. It is plausible that meaning can be manipulated — through propaganda, coercion, and subtle bias, if not by conspiracy — and explaining how this happens may be among our explanatory ends. By denying the possibility that what we mean be constitutively determined in such bad ways, Virtue Metasemantics removes a tool that may prove useful or essential in pursuing those ends.

I return to questions of explanatory role in the concluding section of this paper. In the next section, we turn our attention to ethical issues. Many of the ethical questions we will consider arise even if experts have only a causal metasemantic role. Since Power Metasemantics and Virtue Metasemantics agree that causal success is possible, we will abstract away from the distinction between these two families of views to begin our discussion; the distinction will become relevant again in section II.2.

II. METASEMANTIC ETHICS

This section begins to map the normative territory associated with metasemantics. I draw three key distinctions: between meaning-determining actions that are wrong because of the semantic ends they promote, and those that are wrong because of the means they use; between cases in which the meaning-fixing experts are the perpetrators and those in which they are the victims; and between those cases in which meaning is fixed intentionally and those in which it is not.

II.1 Means and ends

What, then, is wrong with meaning-fixing conspiracy?

⁴ Goldberg (2009) argues that what he calls *knowledge domain experts* are relevant to the determination of meaning, on the grounds that they play a role in articulating the application conditions of words that are crucial to our practices of learning through testimony: ‘Given that these terms are terms of a public language, their determinate application is given by the standards of the public language. Because these standards articulate the terms’ application conditions to worldly entities and properties, the standards themselves are best articulated by those who are most expert in the nature of the relevant entities and properties themselves—the *relevant knowledge domain experts*’ (2009: 590). I agree that it would be best if knowledge domain experts are allowed to fix meaning; we will generally be in the best position to achieve good epistemic and rational outcomes when we listen to the knowledge domain experts. But it is compatible with this that non-knowledge domain experts *can* determine standards (even if allowing them to do so is not best). So I do not see anything in Goldberg’s paper that would settle the issue between Power and Virtue Metasemantics.

I want to suggest that the problem is not with what ‘arthritis’ is intended by the conspirators to come to mean. There is nothing especially problematic about having a word that applies to a wider range of diseases, as long as this has no practical consequences for medical research and the practice of medicine. (The experts might take steps to ensure that their patients continue to be diagnosed and treated appropriately and that medical research continues apace, for example by drawing distinctions between different types of ‘arthritis’.)

Similarly, I do not think that the problem is with the experts’ intentions and aims. The desire to increase profits at their clinics is not in itself especially problematic (or, if it is, we can modify the case to ascribe them some more purely beneficent motive).

Instead, I suggest, what is problematic is the means they have chosen to achieve their intended semantic aim. Making it the case that ‘arthritis’ applies to diseases of the muscles is permissible. Lying to achieve this end is not.

This contrasts with other kinds of cases:

Big Brother

A totalitarian regime led by the dictator known only as Big Brother issues a decree: henceforward, the word ‘freedom’ shall be used in such a way as to be correctly applied to the condition of all people ruled by Big Brother. Anyone who uses ‘freedom’ in a way inconsistent with the decree is thrown into prison and tortured. And likewise anyone who uses another word to mean what ‘freedom’ meant before the decree is thrown into prison and tortured.

It is relatively clear that the decrees of Big Brother can play only a causal, and not a constitutive, metasemantic role. (Laws govern people’s behaviour, not (directly) the meanings of words. One cannot simply make a law that ‘cat’ means ‘dog’ and expect it to make it the case that ‘cat’ does mean ‘dog’. One could make a law that people must use ‘cat’ as though it were correctly applied to dogs; and that law might eventually make it the case that ‘cat’ means ‘dog’. (One might of course stipulate that for the purposes of a certain legal document, ‘cat’ means ‘dog’ — just as one might make a similar stipulation in an academic paper. This too might have a causal influence on what others mean, and perhaps at least sometimes a constitutive influence as well.)) But set this aside and suppose that the decree is causally successful: ‘freedom’ as used by the subjects of Big Brother comes to be correctly applied to the condition of all people ruled by Big Brother.

I take it that there are a number of normative problems with Big Brother’s actions. One problem is with the means that the regime has adopted to achieve its metasemantic end: I need not point out that locking people up and torturing them is morally problematic. But (unlike *the Meaning-fixing Conspiracy*), what is wrong with Big Brother’s action goes beyond the means chosen to bring about a metasemantic end. Here, the metasemantic end itself seems wrong. Roughly, Big Brother has deprived people of a word for speaking (and perhaps worse, a concept for thinking) about a phenomenon that is of very deep significance to their lives. The category is important, since it is closely connected — indeed, central to — many people’s core values and experiences. (Arguably, to deprive people of this concept is to subject them to a form of hermeneutic epistemic injustice — ‘the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization’ (Fricker 2007: 158) -- that is, due to inability to participate equally in practices that put us in a position to understand.)

These cases motivate drawing a distinction between two different kinds of metasemantic wrong. In cases like *the Meaning-fixing Conspiracy*, a wrong is committed in the course of performing an action that has a metasemantic effect. There is nothing especially problematic in the metasemantic effect, considered independently of the way it

came about (assuming, again, that it has no detrimental effect on medical research or on the treatment of patients).

In cases like *Big Brother* the problem is not only with the means by which the metasemantic ends are carried out. No doubt it is wrong to throw people in jail and torture them for their political speech; but even if every subject of *Big Brother* obeyed the law quite willingly, there is something sinister about the project of depriving people of a way of talking about freedom.

In other cases, problematic means can be used to bring about good ends:

Mental Disorder

In the late 1960s, the expression ‘mental disorder’ is widely applied to homosexuality. Many (sincere and well-intentioned) psychologists take it that this pattern of usage is justified by the evidence produced by their best research. A campaign of protests, intimidation, and disruption by gay rights activists leads the American Psychological Association to propose a new usage, according to which a condition is a mental disorder only if it is harmful to people affected by it. On the new usage, ‘mental disorder’ cannot correctly be applied to homosexuality.

In this case, means that might be seen as morally dubious are used to overturn a problematic pattern of linguistic usage. (The case is based on fact (see Bayer 1981: ch. 4); if the kinds of disruption and intimidation that in fact took place seem unproblematic, we could imagine a counterfactual case in which threats or terrorism are used to the same effect.) In this case, it is plausible that the ends justify the means; the activists were in the right.

Cases like *the Meaning-Fixing Conspiracy* show that some meaning-fixing actions are wrong in virtue of the actions that bring about a certain semantic fact. Cases like *Big Brother* show that some actions are ethically problematic in part because they bring about certain semantic facts (including quantified semantic facts, such as *that there is no word for freedom*). There is a distinction to be drawn here. But cases like *Mental Disorder* show that the distinction is not between ways that an action might be all-things-considered wrong; the activists in *Mental Disorder* are acting permissably, even though intimidation and disruption in many cases tend to be wrong. So the distinction we should draw is between kinds of features that tend to make actions wrong — *pro tanto* wrongs:

Wrongs of metasemantic means: An action is (*pro tanto*) wrong in virtue of metasemantic means to the extent that the actions that bring about, or are intended to bring about, a semantic fact are (*pro tanto*) wrong (regardless of whether the semantic fact is itself bad).

Wrongs of metasemantic ends: An action is (*pro tanto*) wrong in virtue of metasemantic ends to the extent that the semantic fact it brings about, or is intended to bring about, is bad.

II.2 Experts as victims, experts as perpetrators

So far, the cases we have discussed are ones in which a wrong is done by the experts — the people with the meaning-fixing power. But it is also possible to wrong someone by denying them the opportunity to determine what they mean. Power Metasemantics emphasises the need for experts to be listened to: it is having one’s testimony accepted that makes one an expert. Something similar will be true on many versions of Virtue Metasemantics; we left it open exactly what relations one needs to bear to a community in order to be a meaning-fixing expert, but many plausible variations of the view will require the community to go along.

Those who are not listened to will therefore be denied the power to play a role in determine meaning.

In some cases, there are good reasons to treat others as less than credible, and to refuse to accept their testimony. But in other cases, some people are treated as less credible than they should be due to prejudice.

Expert as Victim

Dawn, a medical researcher, discovers that various painful ailments of the joints and muscles have a common underlying cause; the same phenomenon that causes arthritis also causes pain in thigh. She publishes a paper entitled, 'Arthritis can occur in the thigh'. Antecedent linguistic usage left it open whether the discovery was best described in these terms; either 'Arthritis can occur in the thigh' or 'The phenomenon that causes arthritis can occur in the thigh' could have become the accepted way of describing the facts.

Dawn's discovery is ignored because of her race. Other researchers eventually re-discover the phenomenon and announce: 'The phenomenon that causes arthritis can occur in the thigh'. Their paper is picked up in popular media, and their usage catches on.

Nor is this sort of phenomenon limited to cases in which the (would-be) expert speaks but is denied the chance to determine meaning because she is not believed. We can also consider cases in which someone recognises that they will not be believed and smothers their testimony (Dotson 2011), and no doubt many other sorts of case as well.

In *The meaning-fixing conspiracy, Big Brother*, and most of the other cases we have considered, it is the meaning-fixing experts who wrong the non-experts. *Expert as Victim* contrasts with this: here it is the non-meaning-fixers who wrong the (would-be) experts.

In characterising the notion of epistemic injustice, Fricker writes:

the project of this book is to home in on two forms of epistemic injustice that are distinctively epistemic in kind, theorizing them as consisting, most fundamentally, in a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower. (Fricker 2007:1)

The case of *Expert as Victim* suggests that one notion of metasemantic wrong may be characterised similarly, with respect to the capacity in which its victim is wronged:

Metasemantic Wrong (Expert as Victim): a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a potential meaning-fixing expert

Fricker suggests that wrongs done to someone in their capacity as a knower are injustices only when grounded in identity prejudice; and we might develop an analogous conception of metasemantic injustice.

There is no instance of metasemantic wrong (expert as victim) in *The meaning-fixing conspiracy*. There seem to be two ways of developing a notion of metasemantic wrong that is relevant to these cases. One possibility follows Fricker in stressing the capacity of the victim:

Metasemantic Wrong (Expert as Perpetrator) I: a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a deferential user of meaningful language (i.e., a user dependent on experts)

There may be some way of developing this notion of a metasemantic wrong. But for my own part, I find it unclear in particular cases whether someone is wronged in this capacity — or indeed, whether we should regard being a deferential user of meaningful language as a capacity in which it makes sense to suppose that someone might be wronged.

We can contrast Fricker's idea with *malpractice*: improper or negligent behaviour by a professional in the course of their professional practice. Malpractice is a category of wrong that is distinguished not by features of the victim, but by features of the perpetrator; it is an abuse of authority, a violation of the standards of a particular professional position. Likewise, cases like *The meaning-fixing conspiracy* involve the expert misusing her position, her metasemantic power. This suggests a second, perhaps more promising, way of developing a relevant notion of metasemantic wrong:

Metasemantic Wrong (Expert as Perpetrator) II: a wrong done by someone specifically in their capacity as a (potential) meaning-fixing expert

II.3 Meaning fixing, implicit and explicit

In most of the cases we have considered, people have acted to fix the meaning of a word *intentionally*. They view themselves as having the power to make it the case that the word has a certain meaning, and they make a conscious choice to exercise this power. But many cases do not work this way. If meaning is determined in part of the views and dispositions of experts, meaning will be shaped by changes in those views and dispositions; and our views and dispositions are typically not subject to our conscious control. For example:

The Discovery

Scientists studying arthritis discover that the same autoimmune condition that causes swelling and pain in the joints in cases of rheumatoid arthritis also sometimes causes swelling and pain in other parts of the body. They conclude that rheumatoid arthritis can occur outside of joints, and announce this discovery in medical journals and the popular press. Nothing in their antecedent practice dictated that the discovery be described in these terms; they could have equally well concluded that the same phenomena that causes arthritis also causes pain outside of joints. Although their research and announcements were made in good faith and on the basis of sound science, unbeknownst to them, they were subconsciously influenced by the desire to increase profits at arthritis clinics.

Two features of the case should be noted. First, it is plausible that as a result of the scientists' theoretical activities, the word 'arthritis' comes to be correctly applicable to diseases of the bones and muscles. But this is not due to some conscious decision to make it the case that 'arthritis' has a particular meaning. On the contrary: the scientists need never have thought about linguistic meaning. They engaged in various intentional actions: experiments, writing papers, and so on. These actions had the result that 'arthritis' took on a meaning on which it is correctly applied to diseases outside the joints. But the scientists did not intentionally fix the meaning of 'arthritis'; the determination of meaning was not an intentional action.

Second, we can nonetheless normatively evaluate their meaning-fixing activity. In this case, they were acting in a biased way. Such evaluations are important, since explicit conspiracies and the like about metasemantic matters are relatively rare. (Even cases in which the meaning of a word is governed by an explicit stipulation are the exception rather than the rule.) What is more common is that what we mean is determined in the course of

other linguistic and theoretical activity. This can include cases that are of great practical and normative significance:

The Racist Investigation

A colonial power invades a continent. Many people live on the continent, but their language and customs are very different from the invaders'. The invaders dispatch their best scientists and philosophers. The scientists and philosophers attempt to study the indigenous people in a thorough and epistemically responsible way (and would explicitly reject any racist motives if asked); but they are hopelessly embedded in their own racist culture. They conclude that the indigenous people, though members of the species *homo sapiens*, are not persons. Their theory becomes so widely believed that eventually it is taken to be an analytic or definitional truth that the indigenous people are not persons; anti-racist campaigners advocate abandoning the word 'person'.

Under what circumstances a person can be held responsible for biases of this kind is an interesting question that we cannot take up here (see Holroyd et al 2017). The key point is simply that the determination of meaning often simply happens in the course of inquiry. It is not that we consciously make a decision to use a word in a particular way, or that we consider a range of possible meanings and make a conscious decision as to which one would be best. In many or most cases, there is no separate decision to use a word in a certain way; there is only the formation of beliefs, the creation of theories, and meaning follows in their wake. We can normatively evaluate such non-intentional or implicit meaning-fixing nonetheless.

III CONSENT

There is an additional troubling feature of *The Racist Investigation*, a feature shared with a number of actual cases (notably emphasised in the circumstances surrounding *Mental Disorder*, and also much discussed with respect to trans issues and with respect to disability and psychiatric disorder). The case is one in which the experts are theorising using a word for a phenomenon that is of deep significance to people's lives — a word that bears in fundamental ways on people's attitudes of trust and respect toward each other, the way people treat each other, the opportunities available to them, and so on. Call words for such phenomena *significant words* (recognising that the category has been defined very imprecisely). The troubling feature of the case is that the experts are theorising in ways that affect the meaning of significant words, and they are doing so without the participation of the people they are theorising about.

There are a wide range of things that can be done to a person permissibly only given their consent. If I transport you from one place to another, that is kidnapping; impermissible (other things equal) unless I have your consent, in which case I am just giving you a ride. If I come on to your property, that is trespassing; impermissible (other things equal) unless I have your consent, in which case I am your guest.

These cases may seem to have an analogue in the cases that motivate Expert Dependence. For in accepting the experts' judgment, and letting that guide my retrospective assessments am I not consenting to let their views determine what I mean?

Let's suppose that this is rightly regarded as a form of consent. There is a further analogy in that consent is generally thought to do its 'moral magic' (Hurd 1996) only if it is informed. A doctor who convinces me to undergo a surgical procedure by misleading me about the risks involved has not obtained my consent (in the morally relevant sense), even if I have said, 'Yes', and even if I have signed some relevant document. And this may suggest a

reason for thinking that *The metasemantic conspiracy* is problematic: in this case we are fooled and our consent is not adequately informed.

The analogy is suggestive. But there are several complications. The standard view has it that our consent is necessary for the experts' views and patterns of use to play a *metasemantic* role; if we withhold our consent, then the experts' views and usage fail to determine what we mean. It is much less clear that our consent plays a normative role comparable to the role it plays in transforming kidnapping into giving a ride or trespassing into being a guest. For example:

Opt out

Ansel thinks that the word 'plant' is correctly applied to mushrooms and other fungi. In the face of attempts to correct his usage by other speakers (armed with dictionaries), and even biologists, he stubbornly sticks to his view.

Two points should be made about this case. First, consent does not seem to have much normative significance: there is nothing wrong with biologists or other speakers using the word 'plant' in the normal way. The fact that some speaker declines to accept ordinary norms with respect to this word hardly makes the uses of other speakers impermissible. They might fail to fix the meaning of 'plant' as the obstinate speaker uses it; but there just doesn't seem to be anything wrong with that. Attempting to kidnap you (to transport you without your consent) is deeply problematic — no doubt there are cases which it is the thing to do all things considered, but in a very wide range of cases there are strong *pro tanto* reasons not to do it. Attempting to 'kidnap' the meanings of your words (to determine what you mean without your consent) just doesn't look analogously problematic — not, at least, as long as we are talking about fungi or arthritis.

The case of significant words seems different. If we are talking about words related to personhood, freedom, race, gender, disease, and so on, it is very plausible that something like consent makes an important normative difference. Explaining exactly why this is so is a pressing theoretical task, but a task for another paper.

The second point to make about *Opt out* is related to metasemantic success rather than metasemantic ethics. A standard judgment about cases like *Opt out* is that Ansel does not use the word 'plant' with its ordinary meaning; he does not mean what the experts mean. This is one motivation for views along the lines of Power Metasemantics. But if accepting the testimony of experts in these cases amounts to consent, then there is another possible view:

Consent Metasemantics: The experts are those who can obtain our consent.

In order to distinguish consent metasemantics from power metasemantics, we need to say more about consent. Consider the perpetrator of a Ponzi scheme, who convinces me to transfer my life savings into her bank account. The transfer cannot be performed without my undertaking certain actions — perhaps issuing instructions to a bank teller, or making a series of clicks on a website. I am under no illusions as to the short-term effects of these actions: the balance of my account will go down, the balance of another account will go up. In taking these actions, I am in some sense *agreeing* to the Ponzi schemer's plan. I may also agree in other ways — for example, by saying, 'Yes' or 'I agree'. But agreement is a weaker notion than consent; none of these actions constitute consent, since they are obtained on the basis of deception: I agree to the schemer's request only because she has led me to believe that she has a sustainable programme of investment that will result in my getting the money back, and more. (That is why the Ponzi schemer's actions constitute theft — the taking of property

without consent.) Nor is deception the only factor that can undermine consent: force, threats, manipulation, and so on, can have the same effect.

Consent metasemantics therefore may be attractive to those who want to resist the possibility of metasemantic success in cases of conspiracy and the like. But it is plausible that there are cases in which meaning is determined without explicit consent being given. For example:

Life-long ignorance

Anita believes that the word ‘plant’ is correctly applied to mushrooms and other fungi. She has normal attitudes toward biologists (and other English speakers) and would accept correction on this matter. But she rarely has occasion to discuss mushrooms, and she dies without her misconception ever having been revealed.

Those who accept the idea of Expert Dependence are likely also to accept the idea that when Anita says, ‘Mushrooms are plants’, she is using ‘plant’ with its usual meaning and hence saying something false, even though she has not given her consent.

In some circumstances, one may give *tacit* consent to something. (For example, by knowingly stepping into a boxing ring, one is consenting to being hit.) But the notion of tacit consent is extremely problematic in other cases; moreover, the possibility of Opting Out shows that it is not the case that one consents to meaning what the experts mean merely being a part of a linguistic community, and it is not clear what else could constitute one’s tacit consent in this case.

Hypothetical consent likewise seems to matter in some cases. (If I am brought unconscious into a hospital, the fact that I would give my consent to treatment if I could seems relevant to the permissibility of treating me). Consent Metasemantics would most likely require the idea that in cases like *Life-long ignorance*, hypothetical consent has been given. But working out the details will be difficult. Even setting aside the significant challenges in making sense of hypothetical consent (see Enoch 2017 for one attempt), one would have to worry about exactly what we are disposed to consent to: for example, we may be disposed to consent to different (seeming) experts in different circumstances, which might threaten to push what we mean by a word in different and incompatible directions.

IV CONCLUSION: SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT METASEMANTIC ETHICS?

This paper has aimed to introduce some key distinctions between metasemantic views on which experts play a constitutive metasemantic role, and to introduce some basic theoretical tools for discussing normative issues related to metasemantics. I want to conclude by re-considering the importance of these theoretical tools.

Fricker contrasts her preferred notion of epistemic injustice with a broader notion that would include ‘distributive unfairness in respect of epistemic goods’:

Given how we normally think about justice in philosophy, the idea of epistemic injustice might first and foremost prompt thoughts about distributive unfairness in respect of epistemic goods such as information or education. [...] When epistemic injustice takes this form, there is nothing very distinctively epistemic about it, for it seems largely incidental that the good in question can be characterized as an epistemic good. (Fricker 2007:1)

Fricker’s idea in this passage seems to be that we can give an adequate characterisation of the normative features of this kind of situation without appealing to a distinctive notion of epistemic justice.

One might have a similar worry about the metasemantic cases that we have been discussing. It seems clear in *the Metasemantic Conspiracy* that the experts are doing something wrong. But exactly what is it? Is it just that they are lying (and doing so in circumstances in which lying is wrong)? If so, their wrong does not seem especially related to metasemantics; one can lie about more or less anything, and lies are wrong (when they are) more or less independently of their metasemantic import or lack thereof. If we say only that they are lying, are we missing something? Have we left out any crucial normative feature of the situation?

I do not have a recipe for answering these questions; it is just unclear to me how we are supposed to detect whether various actions and situations are instances of an important normative kind ‘consisting, most fundamentally, in a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower’ — or in their capacity as a meaning-making expert. In my opinion, epistemic justice has proven its value by its fruits, both theoretical and practical; those introduced to the notion have developed it in a range of ways and detected it in their own experience. I would advocate a similar treatment for the various notions of metasemantic wrong developed here. Whether they will bear fruit is of course an open question.

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