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# WHAT METALINGUISTIC NEGOTIATIONS CAN'T DO<sup>1</sup>

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## *abstract*

*Philosophers of language and metaethicists are concerned with persistent normative and evaluative disagreements – how can we explain persistent intelligible disagreements in spite of agreement over the described facts? Tim Sundell recently argued that evaluative aesthetic and personal taste disputes could be explained as metalinguistic negotiations – conversations where interlocutors negotiate how best to use a word relative to a context. I argue here that metalinguistic negotiations are neither necessary nor sufficient for genuine evaluative and normative disputes to occur. A comprehensive account of value talk requires stronger metanormative commitments than metalinguistic negotiations afford.*

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## *keywords*

*metalinguistic negotiation, evaluative disagreement, verbal disputes, metanormative commitments*

**1. Introduction** In recent work, David Plunkett and Tim Sundell have explored a new answer to the problem of persistent normative and evaluative disagreement – how to explain the persistence of intelligible disagreements in spite of agreement over descriptive facts? This is a problem that both philosophers of language and metaethicists are concerned with. In this paper, I raise doubts about the explanatory range of metalinguistic negotiations, and argue that they are neither sufficient nor necessary for evaluative and normative disputes of the right kind to occur. An account of value talk should accommodate the possibility of discourse that is literally evaluative or normative.

The explanation of evaluative and normative disagreement raises questions that metanormative theories must address. As Mike Ridge says,

[W]e must now ask the question “What is a moral judgment?” On the one hand, we assess people’s moral judgments as true or false, we subject them to epistemic norms, and they can figure in rational inferences. These features suggest that moral judgments are beliefs. On the other hand, moral judgments can guide action without the help of an independently existing desire. Furthermore, *intelligible moral disagreement can persist beyond agreement on the relevant facts*. These considerations suggest that moral judgments are desires (Ridge 2006, p. 304, my emphasis).

Ridge argues that hybrid expressivist theories are an attempt to offer a cohesive answer to this set of questions. Metaethical hybrid expressivist theories are theories about the nature of ethical discourse and judgment that combine cognitivism about ethical thought and talk, and expressivism about such judgments and claims. Cognitivist theories state that ethical claims express beliefs that can be true or false, whereas expressivist theories state that ethical claims

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express attitudes that are not beliefs, but desires, preferences, intentions to act, etc., i.e., they express attitudes that are action-guiding.

Other areas of discourse raise similar questions, and have also invited expressivist approaches. Aesthetic and personal taste statements are normally assessed as true or false, can figure in rational inferences, can guide action and experience, and intelligible aesthetic disagreement can persist beyond agreement on the relevant descriptive facts. Legal statements can also be assessed as true or false, are subject to epistemic norms and to other norms of rationality, they guide action, and there are important persistent intelligible legal disagreements.

Legal theorists, after H.L.A. Hart (2012), have assumed that legal statements present a sort of ambiguity: they can be internal, i.e. normative or prescriptive statements made from the point of view of the participants in a legal system, or they can be external, i.e. uncommitted descriptions of what the law is at jurisdiction. Any legal sentence can in principle be interpreted either way, e.g. 'The Fourteenth Amendment allows states to regulate bakery employees' work hours'. Theorists like Kevin Toh (2005, 2011) have argued for expressivism about legal discourse. In his 2005 paper, for instance, Toh offers an expressivist interpretation of internal legal statements where, by making a statement, a legal official expresses her acceptance of a fundamental rule of recognition of the legal system of her community, and presupposes that other members of the community accept the same fundamental rule. This expressivist approach would help explain how judges and lawyers may sometimes agree on all factual questions but still disagree on the fundamental rules of their legal system.

Expressivism has been defended in other domains. For instance, several authors have defended that knowledge is a normative concept, and that knowledge claims are expressive of the speaker's acceptance of certain norms. Blackburn (1998) claimed that the primary role of knowledge talk is to indicate that a judgement is beyond revision. Gibbard (2003) held that knowledge attributions indicate that the knower's judgments are reliable, and Field (1998) held that epistemic claims express commitments to sets of norms for belief formation. More recently, Chrisman (2007) has made the case that disputes over knowledge attributions suggest that knowledge attributions, e.g., 'Sally knows that the bank will be open on Saturday', display similar features to those that Ridge identified in the moral domain. Chrisman argued that disagreement can persist in spite of agreement on the fact that Sally has a (justified) true belief that the bank will be open tomorrow. He suggests that the disagreements in question concern which standard should be accepted.

A common feature in these various domains – the moral, the aesthetic, the legal, or the epistemic – is that the general description applies; there is an intelligible disagreement of kind X that can persist beyond agreement on the relevant descriptive facts surrounding X. In recent individual and joint work, Plunkett and Sundell have offered a new explanation of some of the disagreements that meet this very condition. Their explanation starts by pointing out that some phrases or expressions can be used metalinguistically. After Sundell (2011), they state that metalinguistic uses can also convey disagreements. They then distinguish between *descriptive* metalinguistic disagreements, and *normative* metalinguistic disagreements – disagreements about what the linguistic facts should be, which they label *metalinguistic negotiations*. Sundell (2016) further argues that aesthetic and personal taste *evaluative* disputes, for example, evaluative disputes about whether some food is tasty or about whether some piece of music is lyrical, could be entirely explained as metalinguistic negotiations.

There are three desiderata that an account of evaluative or normative disagreements should satisfy. First, it should characterize evaluative or normative disputes as *normative*, and not, for instance, as *factual* disputes about whether the interlocutors share the same standards. Second, the explanation of an evaluative dispute in domain X must be based on considerations pertaining to that very domain. For instance, we should be able to characterize an aesthetic

dispute based on issues that are, by their nature, intrinsic to aesthetic aspects of the topic in focus, and not, say, to comedic aspects. Third, an evaluative disagreement should be a *disagreement* and not an attempt to coerce or manipulate others into sharing one's point of view.<sup>2</sup>

Metalinguistic negotiations concern what the linguistic facts should be. This, Plunkett and Sundell claim, is a “distinctive normative” question. But this normative question is not evaluative in any sense, and, *qua* normative question, it can be of the wrong kind. It depends on the interests, intentions, and goals of the interlocutors of the context. If speakers are moved by specific concerns over values, metalinguistic uses can introduce those concerns in the negotiation over how to use a word. But nothing about metalinguistic negotiations requires such concerns to be taken into account, or to exist, when nothing about the meaning of the words used mandates that speakers should be concerned with values, as the examples discussed in the following sections illustrate. The main problem with Sundell's generalized suggestion, as I'll argue, is that metalinguistic negotiations are neither necessary nor sufficient for genuine evaluative and normative disputes of the right kind to occur.

### 2. Metalinguistic Uses and Negotiations

The notion of a metalinguistic negotiation was developed from the notion of *metalinguistic* or *context sharpening* uses of gradable adjectives. Barker (2002) noted that a speaker may assert a sentence like ‘Feynman is tall’ either to give information about Feynman's height, or to give information about the threshold for height in a context. The latter is a metalinguistic use of ‘tall’. Sundell (2011) in turn suggested that if information can be communicated through metalinguistic uses, then the information thus conveyed could also be the focus of disputes. So-called metalinguistic uses are common. For instance, there are apparent metalinguistic uses in sentences like (1). The material in the scope of the negation is not used literally, but echoically or metarepresentationally. There is a wide range of foci of metarepresentational disputes, including the right pronunciation of ‘tomatoes’ in (2):

- (1) It's not a car. It's a Volkswagen.
- (2) You like tom[eiDouz] and I like tom[a:touz].<sup>3</sup>

Plunkett and Sundell make their case for metalinguistic negotiations on the basis of examples like (3) and (4) below. Normally, (3) would be used in order to add to the common ground new information concerning Feynman's height. But Feynman's height may be common knowledge, and (3) could instead be uttered to provide information about the threshold of ‘tall’ in the context; it is a “context-sharpening use” (Barker, 2002, p. 1). A different example is given by Ludlow (2008). He describes a debate he heard on sports radio about the greatest athletes of the 20th century, and the question under discussion was whether that list should include the racehorse Secretariat.

- (3) Feynman is tall.
- (4) Secretariat is an athlete.

Secretariat's case does not concern the sharpening of gradable adjectives, and ‘athlete’ is not a context-dependent word. However, the dispute over whether Secretariat is an athlete

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2 Kevin Toh highlighted the importance of these three desiderata for accounts of fundamental legal disputes in a conference presentation of 2016.

3 The examples are based on cases discussed in Horn (1989).

does not concern factual matters about the horse's race performance, over which people agree. Plunkett and Sundell say that a dispute over whether Secretariat is an athlete may be a dispute between two people with different conceptions of what 'athlete' means, and disputants can disagree about which competing concept 'athlete' should express (one that includes non-human animals in its extension, versus another that does not) (Plunkett and Sundell, 2013a, p. 16).<sup>4</sup>

Plunkett and Sundell discriminate between two kinds of metalinguistic disagreements: the descriptive and the normative. Descriptive metalinguistic disputes are disagreements about what the linguistic facts actually are. Normative metalinguistic disputes, or negotiations, are negotiations over what the linguistic facts *should be* in a given context. This, as they say, is a distinctive normative question.

According to Plunkett and Sundell, metalinguistic negotiations have two fundamental components. First, they are disputes not directly about the truth of the semantic content conveyed by a used sentence. Second, metalinguistic negotiations involve "conceptual ethics",<sup>5</sup> a normative activity that "concern(s) a distinctive normative question – how best to use a word relative to a context". Possible metalinguistic disputes over the cases above fall under the range of disputes about how (if at all) to use a word in a context. These processes may be sensitive to moral considerations and reasoning, although various concerns may push towards one or another way of making a given word more precise, or of fixing the meaning of a word that was previously undetermined.

In a recent article, Sundell (2016) takes the extra step of arguing for a more radical thesis about aesthetic and taste predicates. He argues that semantic theories for ordinary relative gradable adjectives (e.g. 'tall' or 'large') can fully account for the semantic properties of apparent value words, like personal taste or aesthetic predicates. On his newest proposal, the context-sensitivity of these adjectives is of the same kind as that of relative gradable adjectives. Aesthetic and personal taste adjectives are not semantically evaluative and do not require context to determine an aesthetic, personal taste, or experiencer parameter.

Kennedy (2007) identified three features of relative gradable adjectives: to exhibit contextual variation in truth-conditions, to have borderline cases, and to give rise to Sorites paradoxes. Sundell claims that taste and aesthetic adjectives have all of these features. He suggests that aesthetic and taste adjectives are relative gradable adjectives, and a theory of aesthetic and taste adjectives should give an explanation of why we tend to associate them with evaluations. The application of semantically gradable adjectives like 'tall' is complicated, he notes.

Speakers may dispute which scale or comparison class should be applied in context; they can dispute how much weight to give to different scales or comparison classes; they can dispute the threshold of application of the adjective; or speakers may agree on the relevant scale or comparison class, agree on what weight to give to different dimensions, agree on the threshold of application of the predicate, and use tallness claims to dispute someone's height (pp. 16 ff.). Sundell concludes, thus, that there is a fairly complex range of possible *foci* of disputes involving gradable adjectives. Given the case for recognizing that aesthetic and taste adjectives are also relative and gradable, all the complexity of uses of taste and aesthetics adjectives could be explained with the resources available to explain the context-sensitivity of relative gradable adjectives. The account would anyway allow speakers to agree on the relevant scale, comparison class, etc., and use taste (or beauty) claims to dispute *directly*

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4 I have expressed doubts about this interpretation of the case before (Marques, 2017), but those doubts are not crucial for the present paper.

5 See Burgess and Plunkett (2013) for further development of the notion.

something's taste (or something's beauty). Strange as it may seem, these latter disputes would be *descriptive*, and not *normative or evaluative*.

Sundell further proposes that metalinguistic negotiations over how to use aesthetic and taste adjectives account for their apparent normativity by allowing speakers to disagree about what the threshold, the weighing of scales, or the comparison class should be. A metalinguistic negotiation over how to use a word in a context is guided by the fact that the word in question plays a specific functional role in our lives and interactions. This role is bound by our preferences, motivations, and goals.<sup>6</sup> Since metalinguistic negotiations concern a “distinctively normative” question, the seeming normativity of personal taste or aesthetic discourse would be inherited from the normativity of the metalinguistic negotiation itself, or from the normative concerns that motivate and guide speakers in the conversational context. An advantage of this account is that the resulting semantic theory would be metaphysically neutral and compatible with a range of different metanormative views.

In summary, Sundell claims that

- (i) Aesthetic and personal taste adjectives are not semantically evaluative, they are semantically descriptive – there's no implicit parameter for an aesthetic/taste standard, and there's no experiencer parameter;
- (ii) The meaning of aesthetic and personal taste adjectives is not relativized to an experiencer or standard.
- (iii) Evaluative aesthetic and personal taste disagreements are metalinguistic.

Presumably, these central claims could be generalized to any other evaluative and normative domains, for instance all those that have invited hybrid expressivist solutions, like those discussed earlier, e.g. knowledge attributions or internal legal statements. It would be a further strength of Sundell's proposal if it generalized to other normative or evaluative domains of discourse.

### **3. The Value Neutrality of Metalinguistic Negotiations**

I think that metalinguistic negotiations are neither necessary nor sufficient to account for core evaluative disagreements. I will argue for this claim in the remainder of the paper.

The normative dimension of metalinguistic negotiations – conceptual ethics – concerns what the *linguistic facts should be* in a conversational context. In this respect, ‘conceptual ethics’ is a misleading title. First, because conceptual ethics is not necessarily conceptual; it is one thing to disagree about how to pronounce ‘tomatoes’, another about whether Volkswagens are great cars. Neither hinges on strictly conceptual issues, nor do context-sharpening disputes about ‘tall’. When I say that neither hinges on conceptual issues, what I mean is that if we are disagreeing about how to pronounce ‘tomatoes’ (either as tom[eiDouz] or as tom[a:touz]), we are not disagreeing about which concept ‘tomato’ expresses. Likewise, when someone states that a vehicle is not a car, but a Volkswagen, she does not question which concept we should deploy in uttering the word ‘car’.

Second, because conceptual ethics is not ethics. All the normative questions involved in negotiating how to use a word at a context can respond to mere practical reasons, i.e. to prudential or procedural reasoning, given the interlocutors' current goals and interests. Nothing about the meaning of the words used mandates that speakers should be concerned with *value*, and nothing about the nature of metalinguistic negotiations (as described) requires such concerns to be taken into account. Thus, whether or not a child counts as tall may

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance Sundell (2016, p. 21).

depend on whether speakers are deciding whether she's tall enough to go on a roller coaster, or whether she is healthy for her age group. It is true that 'tall' can be used normatively, for instance, to assess if a child is developing correctly. But nothing about the semantics of 'tall' requires such a use.

For the same semantic treatment to be relevant for 'tasty' or 'beautiful', it would have to be the case that claims of taste or beauty are entirely dependent and determined by the occurrent interests, goals, and intentions of speakers in a conversational context. That is what follows from the assumption that taste and aesthetic adjectives are semantically context-sensitive in the same way as relative gradable adjectives.

Sundell's proposal could be extended to other presumably evaluative or normative domains, as I mentioned in the introduction, e.g. to knowledge attributions, moral statements, or legal statements. If nothing requires speakers to introduce an intrinsically evaluative or normative dimension that is not required by the semantics, then, for instance, the question of how best to use 'know' may not address the motivation to treat knowledge attributions as normative. Yet, epistemic expressivists are concerned with the essential normative status of knowledge attributions: that the primary role of knowledge talk is to indicate that a judgment is beyond revision (Blackburn), that knowledge attributions indicate that the knower's judgments are reliable (Gibbard), or that epistemic claims express commitments to sets of norms for belief formation (Field). There may be resilient *epistemic* disputes about whether *S* knows that *p*, and an explanation of these resilient disputes as normative ought to capture their intrinsically epistemic character.

The main problem with Sundell's claim about aesthetic and taste adjectives, and with its possible application in other domains, is that metalinguistic negotiations are neither necessary nor sufficient for genuine evaluative and normative disputes *of the right kind* to occur. For instance, in a certain context there may be prudential or procedural reasons to say 'That is a beautiful painting' that respond to the interests and goals of the speakers in the conversation, but do not respond to any genuine aesthetic reasons or values.

Imagine an art critic *A* that has always refused to give positive reviews of artist *B*'s work. We can further imagine that *B*'s work is exceptional. Her paintings are beautiful, and that is the view of the majority of the art world and the public. In fact, the reason why *A* does not give positive reviews of *B*'s paintings is that *A* is not a very good art critic: he is a superficial critic, he is ignorant of art history and current trends, he is a sexist, and he is in the business motivated merely by the power, fame, and money that surrounds the art world. Now, imagine that the artist, *B*, has seduced the critic, *A*. *A* is finally willing to write a positive review of *B*'s work. *A*'s infatuation with *B* has led him to see everything she does with a positive valence:

(5) The author's painting is beautiful.

In writing (5), the art critic is responding to the wrong kind of reason.<sup>7</sup> His use of 'beautiful' responds to reasons that, in the conversational context, do not respond to aesthetic features of the painting. Yet, the reasons that motivate him to write (5) do respond to the interests and goals of the speakers in the conversation. If nothing about the meaning of 'beautiful' as applied to an artwork requires an evaluative aesthetic standard, then a metalinguistic negotiation about how 'beautiful' should be used in the context need not require any such standard. It follows that metalinguistic negotiations are not sufficient for disputes to be about aesthetic value.

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<sup>7</sup> On the wrong kind of reasons problem, see for instance Hieronymi (2005).

Metalinguistic negotiations are also not necessary for evaluative aesthetic disputes. It is part of Sundell's argument that aesthetic adjectives are not semantically evaluative, and that their context-sensitivity is like that of relative gradable adjectives. However, there are reasons not to regard aesthetic adjectives as relative gradable adjectives. In recent work, Liao *et al.* (2016) show that the standard relativity of aesthetic adjectives is not dependent on the immediate situational context, unlike that of 'large', 'long', or 'tall'. In their paper, they report recent experimental work that found that aesthetic adjectives behave neither like relative nor like absolute gradable adjectives. Their results suggest that aesthetic adjectives depend on more stable and general aesthetic standards, in particular, they allow for judgments of beauty or elegance that do not require a standard of application to be supplied by the immediate conversational context.<sup>8</sup>

Sundell's radical proposal is that aesthetic and personal taste adjectives are not semantically evaluative and that there is no need for an aesthetic standard parameter to be part of the semantics of aesthetic adjectives. All context-sensitivity would be that of regular relative gradable adjectives. But Liao *et al.* (2016)'s results indicate a) that aesthetic adjectives' context-sensitivity depends on aesthetic standards, and b) that the selection of an aesthetic standard is not determined by the immediate conversational context.

Since it is possible to apply an aesthetic adjective like 'beautiful' to a statue or a painting without requiring further specific information to be provided by the conversational context, the following is also possible. First, two people may agree on all the formal features of a painting, and second, they may still disagree about whether the painting is beautiful. Furthermore, they may disagree about whether the painting is beautiful even though they don't share a conversational context. And they may do so in spite of not engaging in any negotiation about how to use 'beautiful', and without sharing a common goal towards which they can coordinate their use of the word.

In other words, two people can disagree about whether a painting is beautiful while not disagreeing about what the linguistic facts concerning 'beautiful' should be. And their disagreement is not a mere *factual* disagreement either. Hence, metalinguistic negotiations are neither sufficient nor necessary for evaluative aesthetic disagreement. I conjecture that this conclusion generalizes to other evaluative domains.

There is no doubt that pragmatic mechanisms like metalinguistic negotiations exist, are important, and capture a way in which people may agree about some descriptive facts, while disagreeing about how language is to be used. But the idea that metalinguistic negotiations can account for all value disputes is, as I have argued, mistaken. Metalinguistic negotiations do not explain all cases of evaluative or normative disputes. Any account of value talk should accommodate the possibility of discourse that is literally evaluative or normative, and not only metalinguistically so.

Part of the reason that metalinguistic negotiations do not suffice, by themselves, to explain all persistent evaluative disagreements is that there are central claims that are semantically evaluative. A theory about the semantics of evaluative adjectives, for instance aesthetic or personal taste predicates, that leaves no room for value to be semantically encoded cannot explain what unifies a set of adjectives as *aesthetic* or of *taste*. Some of the core distinctive roles that evaluative discourse is presumed to play, besides its *cognitive* role, are that it normally *expresses speakers' conative attitudes*, that it is (normally) motivational, and that it serves a *connection building role*. These are roles that talk of height or distance, for instance, does not uniformly play. This manifests a disparity between the role of evaluative discourse and of

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<sup>8</sup> They also found that aesthetic adjectives do not behave exactly like absolute gradable adjectives.



uses of non-evaluative relative gradable adjectives. These distinctive features require, in my view, a comprehensive explanation of how value discourse serves to communicate values, and stronger metanormative commitments than Sundell seems willing to undertake.

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