Does Metalinguistic Negotiation help with Conceptual Ethics?

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Abstract   Suppose a speaker states, "a fetus is a person," to which her conversational partner replies, "a fetus is not a person," and that their claims go beyond merely disagreeing (descriptively) about what the concept PERSON means. That is, the speakers are actually disagreeing (normatively) about what PERSON should mean, highlighting the dispute's normative, metalinguistic dimension. David Plunkett refers to this dispute as a 'metalinguistic negotiation'. There seems to be a gap between metalinguistic negotiation and the field of Conceptual Ethics, regarding the extent to which metalinguistic negotiation is connected to Conceptual Ethics. This missing link motivated me to explore if metalinguistic negotiation can help with Conceptual Ethics. I argue that the extent to which metalinguistic negotiation can help Conceptual Ethics, in terms of unifying Conceptual Ethics' projects to achieve shared goals, depends on which model of metalinguistic negotiation we utilise.

To explore my argument, I do six main things. First, I define Conceptual Ethics and offer an example of a defect concept. Second, I outline and discuss Plunkett's view, his model of metalinguistic negotiation, its strengths, and how it helps Conceptual Ethics. Third, I explore Plunkett's model's main weaknesses, identifying a dilemma. Fourth, I briefly consider and object to a suggestion attempting to salvage Plunkett's model. Fifth, I propose a reinterpreted model of metalinguistic negotiation, the Elasticity Model, utilising Speech Act Pluralism. In the proposal section, I introduce Speech Act Pluralism, bridge Speech Act Pluralism and metalinguistic negotiation, and outline the Elasticity Model. Thereupon, I investigate the Elasticity

Model's strengths and the ways in which it could help Conceptual Ethics. In particular, I attempt to demonstrate how the Elasticity Model can help Conceptual Ethics more than Plunkett's model can, particularly as the Elasticity Model avoids Plunkett's dilemma. Lastly, I raise and respond to numerous objections against my position.

1 Introduction

Suppose a speaker, S1[1], states, "Fs are G," to which her conversational partner, S2, replies, "Fs are not G," and that their claims go beyond merely disagreeing (descriptively) about what the concept G means. That is, the interlocutors are actually disagreeing (normatively) about what G should mean, highlighting the dispute's normative, metalinguistic dimension. To David Plunkett, this dispute is a metalinguistic negotiation (MLN)[2]. There seems to be a gap between MLN and the field of Conceptual Ethics[3], regarding the extent to which MLN is connected to Conceptual Ethics. This missing link motivated me to explore if MLN can help with Conceptual Ethics. Taking Conceptual Ethics to be a "sparse and scattered field,"[4] I believe it requires more unity to strengthen its "potential [. . . and help] conceptual development"[5]. I argue that the extent to which MLN[6] can help Conceptual Ethics, in terms of unifying Conceptual Ethics' projects to achieve shared goals, depends on which MLN model we utilise.

To explore my argument, I do six main things. First, I define Conceptual Ethics and offer an example of a defect concept. Second, I outline and discuss Plunkett's view, his MLN model, its strengths, and how it helps Conceptual Ethics. Then, I explore his model's main weaknesses, identifying a dilemma. Fourth, I briefly consider and object to a suggestion attempting to salvage Plunkett's model. Thereupon, I propose a different model of MLN, the Elasticity Model, utilising Speech Act Pluralism. Lastly, I raise and respond to several objections.

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1. I refer to speakers as S1, S2, and so forth.
2. I explore Plunkett's model, as it is currently the most influential one.
3. I treat Conceptual Ethics and Conceptual Engineering as synonymous, as their definitions remain open questions. See Alexis Burgess et al., *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2 for further discussion.
4. Alexis Burgess and David Plunkett, "Conceptual Ethics I," *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 12 (2013), 1096.
5. *Ibid.*, 1096-7.
6. I presuppose that MLNs exist and occur often.

2   Conceptual Ethics and Concepts

Conceptual Ethics asks, "which concepts should we use?"[7] In response, philosophers of Conceptual Ethics pursue diverse projects, which aim to improve our representational devices (such as concepts[8] and words, which arguably possess defects). Given the diversity of Conceptual Ethics, I define it broadly as "(i) [t]he assessment of representational devices [not only concepts], (ii) reflections on and proposal for how to improve representational devices, and (iii) efforts to implement the proposed improvements"[9]. In particular, concepts can have multidimensional defects, including semantic defects, socio-political defects, and inconsistency (enabling logical paradoxes), and one concept can entail numerous defects. Attempting to fix concepts is thus complex.

For example, consider MARRIAGE. Assuming[10] concepts have intensions (sets of principles picking out extensions) and extensions (references in the external world), the meaning of 'marriage' as commonly understood is often restricted to occurring only between heterosexual couples (indicating that MARRIAGE's intension includes only heterosexual couples). Therefore, MARRIAGE's intension picks out heterosexual couples, whilst excluding homosexual couples and polygamists. So, if used in policy, 'marriage' creates legal constraints on whom and how many people one can wed. For example, polygamy is illegal in the United States. Such socio-political defects require fixing, which is where a conceptual ethicist's task begins. She can attempt to engineer MARRIAGE by revising its meaning (revisionary conceptual engineering), replacing it with surrogates (replacement conceptual engineering), or eliminating it from our language (eliminativist conceptual engineering).

3   Plunkett's Approach to Metalinguistic Negotiation

Within Conceptual Ethics' realm, philosophers often seem to dispute what a concept means, creating a sense of disunity in the field and, if they are attempting to engineer the same concept, lacking cohesion between their projects. On Plunkett's view, such first-order, descriptive disputes concerning an expression's literal content (canonical disputes) are oftentimes not about literally expressed content (non-canonical disputes) and are metalinguistic. Plunkett argues that speakers can use "a word to communicate [their] views about the meaning of that word. These views can either be [about

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7. David Plunkett, "Which Concepts Should We Use?: Metalinguistic Negotiations and The Methodology of Philosophy," *Inquiry* 58, no. 7-8 (2015).

8. I focus on concept-based Conceptual Ethics, as Plunkett does.

9. Herman Cappelen and David Plunkett, "A Guided Tour of Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics," in *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*, Alexis Burgess, Herman Cappelen, and David Plunkett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 3.

10. I recognise the ongoing wider debates about concepts.

descriptive issues regarding] what a word does mean or about the normative issue of what it should mean"[11]. I return to Plunkett's focus on usage, first explaining the general descriptive/normative divide within the domain of non-canonical disputes. Plunkett distinguishes between metalinguistic disputes and MLNs, claiming that not all metalinguistic disputes are MLNs as some are purely descriptive (for example, those involving context-sensitive terms such as 'tall'[12]). Therefore, MLNs are a sub-set of metalinguistic disputes.

In order to therefore determine whether a dispute is a MLN, Plunkett proposes four main criteria. First, is it a dispute, namely, "a linguistic exchange that appears to express a disagreement"[13]? Second, does it truly express a disagreement? Third, do the speakers mean different things with (at least) one term? Fourth, is it normative? Plunkett qualifies his criteria with examples of evidence which can help pinpoint MLN. For example, Plunkett's third condition (C3) requires "good evidence that speakers in the dispute mean different things by (at least) one of the terms in that dispute"[14]. The 'good evidence' is that speakers consistently use the same term differently "in the same (non-defective) conditions"[15]. Regarding condition four (C4), Plunkett notes that the dispute is normative if it

> isn't just about descriptive information about what a word does mean, or how it is used. [. . .] [Evidence] here would be that speakers persist in their dispute even when they agree on the facts about a term's current meaning or current use.[16]

4 The General Strengths of Plunkett's Model

Initially, Plunkett's argument seems convincing. An immediate strength of Plunkett's view is his strong prima facie case for MLN's existence and frequent occurrence. In particular, Plunkett foregrounds disputes' possible normative dimension, which is an important feature of MLN. For example, S1's claim, "a fetus is a person," to which S2 counters, "you are mistaken, a fetus is not a person," may initially seem to concern the current meaning or use of 'person'. However, by applying Plunkett's criteria, one can deem the dispute normative as, arguably, the speakers are disputing what PERSON should mean, in virtue of observing their differing meanings of 'person' through their differing usages of 'person'. Due to normativity's defining importance for MLN, C4 is thus vital for MLN's existence.

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11. Plunkett, "Which Concepts Should We Use?," 833.

12. *Ibid.*, 834-8.

13. *Ibid.*, 847.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

Expanding upon my above claim, C4's emphasis on normativity highlights MLN's relation to Conceptual Ethics, entailing the potential for conceptual ethicists to explicitly engage in MLNs, thereby furthering their goals (for example, replacing MARRIAGE to improve social justice). C4 thus seemingly answers the title question, simultaneously offering to explain how: philosophers often engage in MLNs and, if aware of this (perhaps after looking for the specified evidence), they can realise what they are truly disputing and find a solution. As Plunkett and Sundell note,

> many disagreements about conceptual ethics are not expressed explicitly. Metalinguistic negotiations are the most important instances of this implicit [. . .] kind. [They] may not at first glance appear — either to the speakers themselves or to the theorist — to reflect disagreements about concept choice.[17]

Therefore, if disputing philosophers utilise Plunkett's criteria to reflect upon their disputes, they may find that their disputes express normative disagreements about concepts. So, is the missing link problem solved?

5   The Weaknesses of Plunkett's Model

Despite C4's strength, Plunkett's model faces two main problems: scope and an incompatibility. Regarding scope, all intractable disputes seem to be MLNs. Suppose S1 and S2 dispute whether or not a hedge is a tree, and that their dispute expresses a disagreement. Assuming their dispute persists beyond the facts about the current meaning or usage of 'hedge', their dispute could be classified as a MLN. Evidence for this claim is that, in this scenario, S1 uses 'hedge' to refer exclusively to shrubs, whilst S2 uses 'hedge' to refer exclusively to small trees. So, if such everyday disputes can be MLNs on Plunkett's view, how many other disputes are MLNs? Plunkett simply states that discerning this is "no easy task"[18].

I return to the scope worry later, focusing my analysis on an incompatibility between C3 and C4, which I argue undermines Plunkett's model's coherence and, subsequently, its ability to help Conceptual Ethics. Whilst C3 specifies that speakers can mean different things with a term, evidenced by their differing usages of it[19], C4's evidence (for normativity) is that "speakers persist in their dispute even when they agree

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17. David Plunkett and Tim Sundell, "Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms," *Philosophers' Imprint* 13, no. 23 (2013), 3.

18. Plunkett, "Which Concepts Should We Use?," 850.

19. Plunkett seemingly adheres to semantic holism (every change in use changes meaning), characterising language as hyper-sensitive to usage change. Thanks to Dr Patrick Greenough for highlighting this point in a discussion.

on the facts about a term's current meaning or current use"[20]. To Plunkett, the facts are either about their usage(s) or their speech community's, and the speakers negotiate "how they should use the term going forward,"[21] simpliciter. However, I wonder how the speakers can agree on the facts about a given term's current meaning or use (hereupon, current meaning and use facts are referred to as 'the facts'), given that they can mean different things with the term. I believe this incompatibility arises from Plunkett's overly strong Use Theory of Meaning. Whereas the Use Theory of Meaning generally claims that use determines meaning, Plunkett's aforementioned conditions imply a bi-entailment: use determines meaning and any difference in meaning is a difference in use. This bi-entailment seems problematic for two main reasons.

First, as C4 allows speakers to agree on their usages' divergence, Plunkett implicitly suggests use facts[22] are intrinsically normative rather than descriptive, as deciding upon a term's meaning would involve selecting one speaker's use over another's. Given bi-entailment, this also suggests meaning facts are intrinsically normative. For example, utilising Plunkett's linguist example, a linguist can state F "just means"[23] G, given what G is (descriptively). This implies that in a MLN, an expert on terms, such as a linguist, will have their usage of a term accepted and a non-expert's usage will be rejected, so the facts ultimately depend on who states them. By extension, considering Plunkett's model's implications for Conceptual Ethics, as C3 permits meaning difference and Plunkett neither specifies exit rules nor how to arrive at a solution (deciding which concept to use), his model seems impractical if we consider unifying projects more towards common goals, as disputes and disunity can indefinitely continue.

Second, considering a dispute about PERSON, C3 and C4 allow S1 and S2 to agree that S1 uses 'person' to apply to fetuses and S2 does not. If their dispute persists beyond such agreement, it is a MLN, supporting Plunkett's position. Given C4's stipulation, Plunkett would conclude from this that the speakers are negotiating what PERSON should mean simpliciter, rather than what PERSON should mean to each individual. However, in order to claim the former, Plunkett would need to allow for 'person' to possess a shared social (public) meaning (which is then disputed in the MLN), yet C3 does not allow for this and C4 stipulates that the facts (such as speakers' diverging usages) about 'person' must be agreed upon to make their dispute normative.

To clarify my aforementioned point, as the speakers can agree they mean different things with 'person' (individually), how can Plunkett claim they are disputing what 'person' means (simpliciter)? Plunkett overlooks the possibility that if speakers agree that their usages diverge, their agreement does not equate to one on a term's (general) current meaning and use facts. My objection creates a dilemma for Plunkett: if he adheres to C3, he loses C4 (and cannot bridge the gap to Conceptual Ethics) as there

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20. Plunkett, "Which Concepts Should We Use?," 847.

21. *Ibid.*, 840.

22. I wonder if this applies to all use facts or only to some.

23. Plunkett, "Which Concepts Should We Use?," 842.

arguably cannot be agreement on the facts. If he keeps C4, he cannot advocate meaning difference (key to his model). Thus, although C4 is crucial for MLN, Plunkett cannot address the missing link fully. Therefore, we can either fix Plunkett's model or propose a meaning sameness model.

6   Salvaging Plunkett's Model?

If we attempt to salvage Plunkett's view, one possible approach is Simple Contextualism as, on one reading, meaning difference could imply terms' context-sensitivity. MLNs concern "how to best use a word relative to a context,"[24] which supports this connection. Simple Contextualism claims that speakers share a term's conventional linguistic meaning. A conventional linguistic meaning is incomplete[25], so a given context's features complete a term's semantic value. Therefore, one could argue that requiring context to fix content accounts for a context-sensitive meaning difference notion, implying a reliance on contexts to derive complete meanings. Therefore, a conventional linguistic meaning without a specified context can create the impression of speakers meaning different things with a term, accommodating for C3.

Whilst an intriguing suggestion, I object to it on two fronts: first, if someone made the above argument, they would overlook Simple Contextualism's single-content view. Simple Contextualism is therefore actually an attractive option for meaning sameness rather than meaning difference, suggesting a possible single-content contextualist MLN. That is, contrasting Plunkett, propounding meaning sameness arguably accounts for C4 (and, thus, normativity), bridging the missing link and solving Plunkett's dilemma as speakers can agree or disagree about what a word means[26], since one meaning exists. Notwithstanding, this approach may produce a dilemma for Plunkett insofar as that he could not propound meaning difference. In conjunction, as Plunkett claims context-sensitive terms are insufficiently normative (for example, 'tall'), he may reject Simple Contextualism as a viable alternative. Second, even if I utilised Simple Contextualism to construct a meaning sameness model, I would be committed to claiming that all words are context-sensitive. Considering the evidence suggesting the contrary, I find this too ambitious a claim to defend here, particularly as I seek to find a model entailing minimal baggage.

Plunkett's dilemma and Simple Contextualism's limitations lead me to explore my second option: proposing a meaning sameness model, the Elasticity Model, aiming to avoid Plunkett's problems. An important preliminary is that I do not intend the Elasti-

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24. Plunkett and Sundell, "Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms," 3.

25. Joseph Almog et al., *Themes from Kaplan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) discusses Kaplan's character and content distinction.

26. Plunkett could argue that this captures canonical disputes. However, I think that a 'simple contextualist MLN' could demonstrate how terms' incomplete meanings elongate disputes.

city Model to be a flawless model. Adhering to my paper's purpose, I simply explore how the Elasticity Model could help Conceptual Ethics more than Plunkett's model. Therefore, I consider some objections after presenting the Elasticity Model, which indicates that the Elasticity Model requires more conceptual development than I can offer in the space of my paper. To briefly outline the Elasticity Model's main claim, it holds that interlocutors in a MLN are not directly negotiating about what our concepts should mean, rather, they are negotiating what their uttered sentences (embedding concepts) about concepts should be saying. More specifically, speakers are negotiating which expressed proposition they should associate with an uttered sentence[27]. I elaborate on the Elasticity Model after introducing its theoretical background (Speech Act Pluralism).

7 Speech Act Pluralism

I utilise Speech Act Pluralism for MLN as I find Plunkett's focus on usage important because speakers use the terms they utter in their disputes. Speech Act Pluralism helps me foreground and maintain a focus on usage, albeit differently to Plunkett, as Speech Act Pluralism claims "no one thing is said [...] by an utterance; rather, indefinitely many propositions[28] are said, asserted[29], claimed, stated"[30]. Therefore, what is said when a speaker utters a sentence (for example, of the form 'X is F') in a context of utterance expresses multiple propositions (P1, P2, P3, and so forth). Speech Act Pluralism thus distinguishes between a sentence's literal meaning and speaker meaning (namely, "what a person means in using [a sentence]"[31]).

For example, Speech Act Pluralism[32] would claim that a speaker asserting "Trump is the US President" in a context of utterance expresses multiple propositions, such as *Donald is the US President*, *Melania's husband is our President*, *The Trump Organisation's owner is the President*, and so forth, due to a one-many saying relation. Specifically, the saying relation, relativised to a single context, is one-many. Moreover, "pluralism about speech act content applies [both] to sentences that report something about what speakers' utterances say [and] to the reported speakers' utterances,"[33] which I expand upon below.

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27. For my paper's purposes, I only refer to the utterances of sentences.

28. Every expressed proposition has truth conditions (necessary and sufficient conditions), illustrated below.

29. Speakers produce speech acts by, for example, asserting, "Fs are G."

30. Herman Cappelen and Ernest Lepore, *Insensitive Semantics: a Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 4.

31. Gillian Russell and Delia Graff Fara, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Language* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 79.

32. Although this view's accuracy is contested, I believe that the way we utter sentences and use reports in natural language supports Speech Act Pluralism. I aim to demonstrate this through my examples.

33. Cappelen and Lepore, *Insensitive Semantics*, 199.

Aside from an interlocutor's utterance in a context of utterance, also referred to as the reported context (what is said), Speech Act Pluralism considers "the context of those who say or think about what the speaker said, [so] the context of those who report what's said by the utterance can [partly] determine what was said by that utterance"[34]. Therefore, if S1 asserts, "X is F," this "does not stand in a single one:one relationship with some indirect speech report [(hereupon, 'report')], but rather explodes into a plethora of possible indirect speech acts"[35]. So, if S2 reports on S1's utterance, S2's report selects one of its expressed propositions. Therefore, the expressed propositions (multiple sayings), which expressed proposition a speaker reports on, and what is saliently said depend partly "on features quite external to that [uttered] sentence, like the [given] conversational context [. . .] and the (shared) background assumptions of speakers and [hearers]"[36]. Some reports may therefore communicate (in the reporting context) "things only tangentially connected with the meaning of the sentence produced,"[37] and which expressed proposition is most felicitous to report on ultimately depends on the speakers' freedom to select one. Thus, both utterances' and reports' flexibility stem from the one-many saying relation's flexibility[38].

8   Initial Worry

Initially, one may perceive a fundamental problem with Speech Act Pluralism, namely, why are some reports successful and others not? Is this context-sensitivity? Does Speech Act Pluralism share Simple Contextualism's limitations? I contend that one can distinguish between the two views. Whilst Speech Act Pluralism proposes that an utterance produced in a context of utterance expresses multiple propositions, Simple Contextualism focuses on terms' context-sensitivity and how contexts complete terms' meanings. Figure 1, which I have produced, underscores this difference:

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34. *Ibid.*, 4-5.

35. Emma Borg, *Minimal Semantics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 114-5.

36. *Ibid.*, 115.

37. *Ibid*.

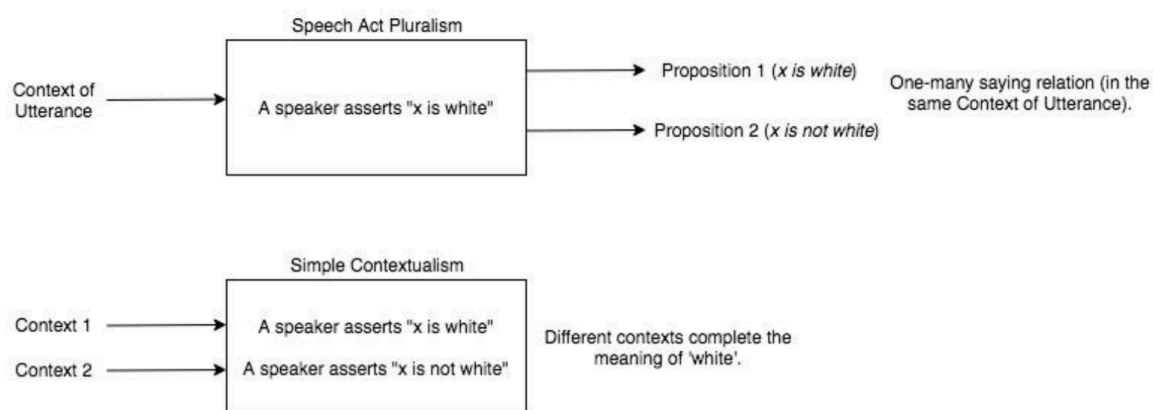38. The 'elasticity' of 'Elasticity Model' denotes this flexibility.

Figure 1: Speech Act Pluralism's and Simple Contextualism's differences regarding context

9 Using Speech Act Pluralism for Metalinguistic Negotiation: the Elasticity Model

With the Elasticity Model's background established and the contextualism worry dispelled, I now explore how MLN could work on a Speech Act Pluralism view. First, I propose its MLN criteria: are the interlocutors engaged in a dispute? Does it express a disagreement? Is there evidence that the interlocutors mean the same thing with a term used in a sentence and are disputing the uttered sentence's expressed propositions (EC3)? Is it normative (EC4)? My criteria suggest MLNs may not always overtly involve disputes (in Plunkett's sense) as the expressed propositions, rather than a term's meaning, are multiple, and speakers must select what is saliently said among the many sayings[39]. Considering Plunkett's Secretariat example, wherein S1 says, "Secretariat is an athlete," and S2 disagrees, Plunkett argues that the speakers are negotiating what ATHLETE should mean. For S1, non-human animals can be athletes, whereas, for S2, they cannot, and this meaning difference is evidenced by S1 using 'athlete' to refer to Secretariat, a horse, whereas S2 does not. In contrast, the Elasticity Model views the speakers as negotiating what "Secretariat is an athlete" should be saying (what the most relevant expressed proposition is for their MLN). Thus, 'athlete' possesses a single (shared) meaning and S1's utterance of "Secretariat is an athlete," with respect to a context of utterance, expresses multiple, differing propositions. Moreover, an utterance's multiple expressed propositions can account for how interlocutors seem to mean different things when they utter a sentence using the same (disputed) term, accounting for an initial impression of meaning difference.

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39. What is said does not imply that speakers simply talk past each other as, despite shared semantic-content, disputes persist.

Nonetheless, one may question whether the interlocutors are aware a MLN is occurring. Moreover, how can speakers decide upon what is said given this complicated view and that there is "no one correct answer to what was said by an utterance, [nor. . .] to what was said by a report of [the utterance]"[40]? I suggest that a filtering mechanism is needed, such as MLN referees. Arguably, if interlocutors are aware of engaging in MLNs, they could referee themselves, provided they know an uttered sentence has multiple expressed propositions. Referees could choose the most felicitous saying as "intuitively we don't want to countenance all of them as semantically informative,"[41] giving the referees a demanding decision-making role. I address some practical questions about such decision-making below.

10   The Elasticity Model and Conceptual Ethics

To test the Elasticity Model, I consider an example[42] pertaining to Conceptual Ethics and connect it to Conceptual Ethics projects. Suppose S1 utters, "x is white" in a context of utterance, expressing propositions P1, P2, and so on. We could think of the truth conditions for 'x is white' as ''x is white' is true if and only if (iff) x has a reflectance property greater than or equal to ($\geq$) n'. So, P1's truth condition is 'x is white iff x has a reflectance property ≥ 0', whereas P2's is 'x is white iff x has a reflectance property ≥ 1', and different speakers can report on different expressed propositions, "all of which may be licensed by [S1's] production of ["x is white"]"[43]. The speakers are thus negotiating the boundary for whiteness and, considering EC3, there is shared meaning insofar as what S1 and S2 mean by WHITE is the same, however, their choice of what is saliently said differs.

For example, S1 argues, "x is white," satisfying P1's truth conditions (a lower standard), whereas S2 does not think x is white because it must satisfy P2's truth conditions (a higher standard). Regarding EC4, one may argue that MLNs express merely verbal disputes as 'white' has one meaning, so the speakers could be talking past each other. However, I argue that normativity is present, as what should be saliently said is normatively disputed. That is, the Elasticity Model proposes a MLN that concerns which of the many truth conditions we should associate with a sentence, in a context of utterance. Thus, in certain contexts, S1 and S2 can agree because of their shared meaning of WHITE and by deciding what an utterance about WHITE should say for their MLN's purposes. It is a further, practical question as to what the most felicitous saying is, which suggests setting standards and artificial constraints on these, depending on the MLN. Arguably, speakers must agree upon which standards are appropriate in which condition(s), which I explore below.

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40. Cappelen and Lepore, *Insensitive Semantics*, 199.
41. Borg, *Minimal Semantics*, 115.
42. As I aim to challenge Plunkett's account, I too do not consider concepts such as TRUTH.
43. Borg, *Minimal Semantics*, 114-5.

Applying my example to a wider discussion wherein theorists consider normative issues about our conceptual choices of racial terms, "x is white" may hold if the theorists adopt a low standard (perhaps for everyday discussions involving WHITE). However, if engaging in an eliminativist project on WHITE, demanding standards may be adopted for the MLN, whereby "x is white" does not hold. For example, Appiah, an eliminativist about RACE, advocates that "there are no races"[44] as no referents exist for it. Appiah claims "the evil [...] is done by the concept,"[45] deeming RACE defective, especially when racial terms are used in policies to oppress certain groups of people. An Appiah-like eliminativist would thus argue that racial terms should not be used, as they do not refer to anything. In contrast, racial constructivists perceive races as socially constructed, leading many to argue that we should keep RACE (and racial terms), as removing it leaves out "something [...] causally or socially important"[46]. For example, Root argues that labelling races through terms such as 'white' and 'black' is "conceptually or logically required"[47] to understand the (oftentimes harmful) role these terms have played and continue to play in societies. Therefore, theorists such as Root hold that 'race' and "racial terms pick out groups of persons in virtue of either superficial or culturally local features (or both),"[48] contrasting Appiah's claims.

Utilising the aforementioned theorists' diverging perspectives, suppose S1 from my WHITE example is a Root-like theorist and S2 is a Appiah-like theorist, and both desire to further social justice in different ways. Whereas S1 aims to revise WHITE's intension, S2 holds that WHITE is so defective that it must be removed. Given Speech Act Pluralism, if S1 argues, "Jim is white," her utterance expresses multiple propositions (depending on what is present in the context of utterance and reporting context) including *Jim is not white*[49], which S2 may decide is saliently said (given S2's views). Thus, which expressed proposition either speaker reports about the other's utterance whilst refereeing depends on what they deem most felicitous to report. Furthermore, the interlocutors could decide what is saliently said in their MLN by setting standards. That is, they decide which expressed proposition (and its truth conditions) are correct for an utterance about WHITE for their MLN's purposes[50]. Consequently, their dispute may be long and confusing[51]. By extension, regarding my example, the Elasticity Model highlights that if a revisionist and an eliminativist agree on a standard, this may impact one of their projects more than the other's. For example, if they agree "Jim is

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44. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985), 35.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Ron Mallon, "'Race': Normative, Not Metaphysical or Semantic," *Ethics* 116, no. 3 (2006), 534.

47. *Ibid.*, 536.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Some Speech Act Pluralism theorists find arguing that one uttered sentence, as used in a single context, can express incompatible propositions controversial, whilst others remain neutral on this matter.

50. Essentially, they decide how to categorise our world correctly, implying a deflated sense of normativity.

51. This is quite representative of our drawn-out disputes.

white" expresses *Jim is white*, the eliminativist may need to rethink his project[52].

   Arguably, my above example demonstrates the Elasticity Model's applicability, as the interlocutors mean same thing with WHITE and are disputing what the utterance "Jim is white" should be saying, rather than what WHITE's meaning should be (fulfilling EC3). Considering EC4, I view this dispute as normative because the interlocutors are disputing what the uttered sentence should be saying, not what it means or says. Therefore, I believe the example highlights that the Elasticity Model can be applied to Conceptual Ethics-style disputes, ridding MLN of Plunkett's dilemma (as there is a shared meaning of 'white') and Simple Contextualism's limitations (meanings are not incomplete). Moreover, the Elasticity Model can bridge MLN and Conceptual Ethics as, contrasting Plunkett's lack of exit rules, standard-setting enables a greater chance for speakers to arrive at a solution. That is, as Conceptual Ethics asks, "which concepts should we use?" the Elasticity Model indicates multiple ways to decide upon which concepts to use, depending on the operative standards in a MLN's context. Therefore, the Elasticity Model arguably helps Conceptual Ethics more than Plunkett's model, as it possesses three advantages: coherence, unity, and practicality. As I demonstrated, the Elasticity Model can unify projects towards common goals, such as furthering social justice, because interlocutors can find solutions. Thus, for the "sparse and scattered field"[53] of Conceptual Ethics, the unity the Elasticity Model could provide, especially if further developed, is a virtue.

11 Objections and Replies

The Elasticity Model faces numerous challenges, which the below objections highlight. Moreover, these objections are not exhaustive, so I welcome additional comments for refinement.

   What if different MLN groups decide upon a different expressed proposition for an utterance?

   The groups need to engage in MLN with each other, in order to re-negotiate an utterance's expressed proposition (and, thus, what is saliently said in their new MLN). Hopefully, their MLN can enable them to eventually converge on one expressed proposition.

   What if an interlocutor sticks to another expressed proposition?

   Perhaps she should not participate in MLNs. As Plunkett notes, being aware of engaging in MLNs is rare, so a willingness to explicitly participate in, and accept, MLN

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52. Making such choices may reduce projects' diversity, a potentially negative implication.
53. Burgess and Plunkett, "Conceptual Ethics I," 1096.

is arguably required. The reluctance to agree with a solution underscores the need for negotiation rules, especially if MLN becomes more popular (as a research interest) and accepted as a phenomenon (philosophically and socially).

> *The Elasticity Model faces Plunkett's scope issues.*

I agree and bite the bullet: perhaps most disputes are MLNs. I agree with Plunkett that determining MLN's scope is difficult, especially if we are still developing more coherent criteria. Nonetheless, I hope to have shown how the Elasticity Model avoids Plunkett's dilemma, which I identified as the major weakness of Plunkett's model.

> *Does the Elasticity Model's speech act pluralist-nature still align it with Conceptual Ethics' question of "which concepts should we use?"*

Yes. For the Elasticity Model, the above question is asked in virtue of an utterance's expressed propositions (embedding concepts) and which of these holds depends on a given MLN's purpose(s).

> *What about scenarios exploring an utterance's indefinite expressed propositions? Is this an endless dispute?*

The Elasticity Model needs more conceptual work to answer this question properly. However, if one adheres to a speech act pluralist approach, perhaps MLNs are just incredibly intractable (therefore, also wide in scope) because of the one-many saying relation. Thence, we may need to simplify and choose for the purposes of our negotiations.

> *Speech Act Pluralism just gives us what a sentence is saying, not what a sentence should be saying. So, the Elasticity Model is insufficiently normative.*

This objection initially makes a good point; however, it overlooks that what is saliently said is partly determined by normative matters concerning which expressed propositions we should be using. Thus, I believe the Elasticity Model is sufficiently normative.

12 Conclusion

I have argued that the extent to which MLN can help Conceptual Ethics, in terms of unifying Conceptual Ethics' projects to achieve shared goals, depends on which MLN model we utilise. I introduced Conceptual Ethics and discussed Plunkett's MLN criteria. Although I identified C4 as crucial for MLN, as MLN's normativity connects MLN to Conceptual Ethics and highlights our disputes' (potentially) normative dimen-

sion, I raised two objections and analysed their implications through examples, focusing on Plunkett's dilemma. Prior to discarding Plunkett's model, I considered tackling the dilemma through Simple Contextualism. However, I found Simple Contextualism more helpful for a meaning sameness rather than a meaning difference model. As using Simple Contextualism for MLN would force me to deem all words context-sensitive, I rejected this idea and proposed the Elasticity Model.

First, I qualified my proposal and introduced the Elasticity Model's Speech Act Pluralism background. Thereafter, I demonstrated how the Elasticity Model could help Conceptual Ethics more than Plunkett's model, including avoiding its limitations and solving the missing link. Through a key example, I found the Elasticity Model to entail the potential to help Conceptual Ethics projects, especially those on the same concept, unify more towards goals philosophers may share, albeit with numerous limitations. I then considered some of these limitations as objections. Overall, I hope to have presented the Elasticity Model as a viable starting-point for developing a more coherent MLN model.

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