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Why metaphysical debates are not merely verbal (or how to have a non-verbal metaphysical debate)

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Abstract A number of philosophers have argued in recent years that certain kinds of metaphysical debates—e.g., debates over the existence of past and future objects, mereological sums, and coincident objects—are merely verbal. (Roughly speaking, a merely verbal dispute is one in which the two parties to the dispute don't disagree about any non-verbal facts and only seem to disagree because they mean different things by their words.) It is argued in this paper that metaphysical debates (of a certain very broad kind) are not merely verbal. The paper proceeds by uncovering and describing a pattern that can be found in a very wide range of philosophical problems and then explaining how, in connection with any problem of this general kind, there is always a non-verbal debate to be had. Indeed, the paper provides a recipe for locating the non-verbal debates that surround these philosophical problems. This undermines metametaphysical verbalist views of our metaphysical questions—i.e., views that say that there is no non-verbal debate to be had about some metaphysical question. Finally, the paper also provides a quick argument against actual-literature verbalist views of our metaphysical questions; in other words, the paper argues that in connection with all of our metaphysical questions, it is easy to find examples of non-verbal debates in the actual philosophical literature.

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1 Introduction

A number of philosophers have argued in recent years that certain kinds of metaphysical debates—e.g., debates over the existence of past and future objects, mereological sums, and coincident objects—are *merely verbal*. The list of people who can be interpreted as endorsing views along these lines includes Carnap (1950), Putnam (1987, 1994), Hirsch (2002, 2009), and with a little stretching, Sosa (1999), Sidelle (2002, 2007), Thomasson (2007, 2009), and Chalmers (2009). I will argue here that metaphysical debates (of a certain very broad kind) are *not* merely verbal. Others have argued against mere-verbalist views as well; see, e.g., Sider (2006, 2009), Hawthorne (2006), Eklund (2008, 2016), and Bennett (2009). The argument I provide here is different from these other arguments, although it's similar in certain respects to the ones in Hawthorne (2006) and Eklund (2016).

In Sect. 2, I'll characterize the notion of a merely verbal debate. In Sect. 3, I'll formulate two different ways to be a mere-verbalist about a metaphysical question. In Sect. 4, I'll argue against mere-verbalist views of our metaphysical questions. And in Sect. 5, I'll provide a recipe for how to have a non-verbal debate about a metaphysical question.

2 Merely verbal debates

The basic idea behind the concept of a merely verbal debate is pretty straightforward and can be brought out with an example. Here's one from Bennett (2009): A bartending purist and a young upstart get into a debate about a certain drink D, a vile concoction of vodka and green apple liqueur in a V-shaped glass (and note that D is a specific drink *token*, not a type; i.e., it's a specific pile of liquid, in a specific glass, in a specific spatiotemporal location). The upstart says that D is a martini, and the purist says it's not. But the debate is merely verbal, because (i) the purist and the upstart mean different things by 'martini' (in the purist's mouth it means *drink made of gin and a splash of vermouth*, and in the upstart's mouth it means *alcoholic drink in a V-shaped glass*); and (ii) both parties would agree that D is a martini in the upstart's sense but not the purist's sense, or that 'D is a martini' is true in the upstart's language and false in the purist's language. Or to put the point differently, they would agree on the relevant worldly facts—that D consists of vodka and green apple liqueur in a V-shaped glass—and they would only assign different truth values to 'D is a martini' because of differences in meaning.

Now, you might think that, in fact, the purist and the upstart mean the same thing by 'martini' because they're both speaking English and so, in both of their mouths, it means whatever it means in English.[1] But (a) 'martini' might have multiple meanings in English, and (b) even if it doesn't, we can sidestep this quibble by defining different languages for the two disputants. Following Hirsch (2009), we can say that if P is a person, then *P's language*, or *the language of P*, is the language that would be spoken by a community of people just like P. Given this, we can define 'merely verbal' in

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[1] For an argument for this sort of semantic externalism, see Burge (1979).

terms of the languages of the two disputants. But I won't always speak this way; I'll sometimes speak—perhaps sloppily—of "what the disputants *mean*," and "what languages the disputants *speak*," and so on. But I intend all of these phrases to be interpreted along the lines of the above definition of 'the language of P'.

It's a bit tricky to come up with a perfectly precise and fully satisfying definition of 'merely verbal dispute', but for our purposes, we don't need one. The following stipulation—about what *I'll* mean in this paper—will be good enough:

> Let Smith and Jones be people and S be a sentence, and suppose that Smith says that S is true and Jones says that it's false. Then the dispute between Smith and Jones is *merely verbal* iff (a) Smith and Jones mean different things by S–or S expresses different propositions in the languages of Smith and Jones, or some such thing; and (b) Smith and Jones would agree that S is true in Smith's language and false in Jones's language, or that the proposition that Smith takes S to express is true and the proposition that Jones takes S to express is false, or something along these lines.

Note that on this definition, if the purist and the upstart got into a debate about the meaning of the word 'martini' in English, it would not be a merely verbal debate. We can say that debates like this are *about meaning*. For our purposes, though, the difference between a merely verbal debate and a debate that's about meaning won't be very important. For I want to distinguish debates of both of these kinds from debates that are, so to speak, "about the world"—or, more precisely, the non-verbal part of the world. Thus, when I speak of *non-verbal debates*, I'll be talking about debates that are neither merely verbal nor about meaning.

One more point about merely verbal debates: Just because a debate is merely verbal doesn't mean that neither of the two parties "wins" the debate. For instance, if the best semantic theory for English says that 'martini' means *drink made of gin and a splash of vermouth*, then the purist is right and the upstart is wrong. But, of course, there can also be merely verbal disputes that don't have a "winner"; e.g., if the best overall theory of English says that 'martini' is ambiguous (and in particular that the usage of the purist and the upstart both count as correct), then it would seem that neither party "wins" the debate.[2]

3 Mere-verbalism about metaphysical debates

Let MQ be a specific metaphysical question, e.g., the question of temporal ontology, or composite objects, or whatever. Then one way to be a mere-verbalist about MQ is to endorse the following view:

> *Actual-Literature Verbalism about MQ*: Typical debates about MQ—i.e., typical debates between mainstream philosophers who are actually debating MQ in print—are merely verbal.

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[2] There could, however, be a "*pragmatic* winner"; for it could be that we *should* use the term in one of the two ways.

Consider, e.g., the debate between presentists and eternalists—i.e., the debate over the existence of past and future objects like dinosaurs and Martian outposts. Eternalists claim that such objects do exist, and presentists claim that they don't. Thus, we can think of the debate here as being about the truth values of sentences like

(Dinosaur) There exist dinosaurs.

Eternalists think this sentence is true, and presentists think it's false. Given this, we can endorse an actual-literature verbalist view of this debate by claiming that (a) sentences like (Dinosaur) mean different things in the mouths of presentists and eternalists, and (b) these sentences are true in the language of eternalists and false in the language of presentists. To see how we could develop a view of this kind, consider two languages, *Presentese* and *Eternalese*. In Presentese, (Dinosaur) expresses the obviously false proposition that dinosaurs exist at the present time, i.e., in the 21st Century. And in Eternalese, (Dinosaur) expresses the obviously true proposition that either there were dinosaurs, or will be dinosaurs, or are dinosaurs at the present time. Given this, one way to be an actual-literature verbalist about the temporal ontology debate is to claim that Eternalese is the language of actual eternalists (or typical actual eternalists, or some such thing) and Presentese is the language of actual presentists, so that (Dinosaur) is obviously true in the language of eternalists and obviously false in the language of presentists.

But actual-literature verbalist views are only interesting in an exegetical, history-of-philosophy sort of way. They're not *metametaphysically* interesting because they don't imply that there's something wrong with the relevant metaphysical questions *themselves*; they imply only that there's something wrong with the way that certain people have debated those questions. But there's another kind of mere-verbalism that *is* metametaphysically interesting, namely, the following:

Metametaphysical Verbalism about MQ: There is no non-verbal (metaphysical[3]) debate to be had about MQ. (In other words, any (metaphysical) debate about MQ would have to be either merely verbal or about meaning.)[4]

This is a very strong kind of mere-verbalism. But notice that if mere-verbalists stop short of this view—if they admit that there's a non-verbal debate to be had about MQ—then their mere-verbalism won't be very interesting from a metametaphysical point of view. In particular, they won't have a criticism of MQ; they'll be able to say that certain debates about MQ have been merely verbal, but they won't be able to say

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[3] To see why I've included this parenthetical qualifier, consider the debate over the truth value of (Dinosaur) and notice that even if we limit our attention to languages like Presentese and Eternalese, there are still non-verbal debates to be had about this sentence. Suppose, e.g., that Jane thinks that there were never any such things as dinosaurs and, hence, that (Dinosaur) is false in Eternalese; then the rest of us (who think that (Dinosaur) is true in Eternalese) could obviously have a non-verbal debate with Jane about this–in Eternalese. But this wouldn't be a *metaphysical* debate in any interesting sense; it would be a debate about zoological history. This is why I include '(metaphysical)' in the definition of metametaphysical verbalism. The idea is that there's no non-verbal *metaphysical* debate to be had about the given metaphysical question.

[4] Eklund (2016) draws a distinction between kinds of mere-verbalism that's similar to the distinction I'm drawing here between actual-literature views and metametaphysical views.

that there's a mere-verbal-type problem with MQ *itself*.[5] For this reason, I will focus more on metametaphysical verbalism than on actual-literature verbalism. But I won't entirely ignore the latter. After arguing in detail against metametaphysical verbalist views, I will say a few words against actual-literature verbalist views as well.

I should say here that my arguments will not be directed against any specific philosophers. There are numerous people (e.g., Carnap, Putnam, and Hirsch) who endorse views that can be reasonably thought of as kinds of mere-verbalism, and I think these people intend to be endorsing more than just exegetical views about actual metaphysical works that have appeared in the literature. They intend to be endorsing *anti-metaphysical* views—i.e., attacks on the relevant metaphysical questions. But it's not entirely clear what the anti-metaphysicalism of these philosophers' views consists in; I suspect that at least some of them would endorse metametaphysical verbalist views, or something similar, but I don't know of anyone who has explicitly said this. In any event, the question of what these philosophers think is not relevant here. My reason for arguing against metametaphysical verbalist views is not that I think that actual mere-verbalists have endorsed such views (although, again, I think that some of them probably would assent to views of this general kind); my reason is that I think that metametaphysical verbalism about MQ is the view you need to hold if you want to endorse the anti-metaphysical view that there's a mere-verbal-type problem with MQ *itself*.

In short, my aim here is not to refute the views of other philosophers; my aim is (a) to show that there are non-verbal debates to be had about our metaphysical questions (or at any rate, a very broad class of metaphysical questions) and (b) to provide a general account of what these non-verbal debates are like and how we can find them.

4 Against mere-verbalism about metaphysical debates

I'll argue against metametaphysical verbalist views in Sect. 4.2 and against actual-literature verbalist views in Sect. 4.3. But I want to start with some background.

4.1 Some general remarks about metaphysical arguments

To bring out my argument, I need to say a few words about a certain argument strategy that philosophers often use to argue for controversial metaphysical claims. The strategy can be summed up as follows: (i) locate a category of ordinary sentences that seem obviously true, and (ii) argue that the sentences in question can be true only if some controversial metaphysical thesis is true. For instance, platonists argue that mathematical sentences like '3 is prime' can be true only if there actually exist abstract objects; and Lewisian modal realists argue that ordinary modal sentences like 'There

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[5] I should note that even if you endorse metametaphysical verbalism about MQ, you could still claim that there's something worth debating in connection with MQ because you could claim that there's an interesting/important metalinguistic debate to be had about what sort of language (or which words or concepts) we should employ. For views along these lines, see, e.g., Plunkett and Sundell (2013), Thomasson (2016), and Belleri (2016).

could have been talking donkeys' can be true only if there exist non-actual possible worlds; and metaethical non-naturalists argue that moral sentences like 'Killing babies just for money is wrong' can be true only if there exist non-natural moral facts; and libertarians about free will argue that ordinary sentences about human freedom and responsibility can be true only if we possess an indeterministic, libertarian sort of free will; and eternalists argue that ordinary sentences like 'Queen Elizabeth is a direct descendent of William the Conqueror' could be true only if there exist past objects like William the Conqueror—and, of course, they would run a similar argument about future objects.

There are three ways to respond to arguments of this kind. One way is, of course, to accept the relevant controversial metaphysical thesis—i.e., to endorse the existence of the relevant controversial objects (or facts or properties or events or whatever). (The controversial metaphysical theses that I'm talking about here aren't all *ontological* theses in the traditional sense of the term, but we can think of them as existence claims of one kind or another; e.g., libertarianism can be thought of as the claim that there actually exist indeterministic, libertarian-free human choices; and moral non-naturalism can be thought of as the view that there actually exist non-natural moral facts or properties.)

A second way to respond to arguments of the above kind is to admit that the truth of the relevant ordinary sentences does depend on the truth of the relevant controversial metaphysical thesis—i.e., on the existence of the relevant controversial objects (or facts or properties or whatever)—and then to argue that since the relevant objects (or facts or whatever) don't really exist, the relevant ordinary sentences aren't true. This strategy of response is inherent in, e.g., mathematical fictionalism, metaethical error theory, and hard determinism about free will. In general, we can call views of this kind *error* theories, or *fictionalist* views.[6] (Error theorists will usually want to explain why the sentences in question *seem* true to us, and why they're *useful* to us despite the fact that they're not true; one way to do this is to explain why they're "for-all-practical-purposes true," or some such thing; for more on this, see my (forthcoming-a).)

The third way to respond to arguments of the above kind is to reject the claim that the truth of the relevant ordinary sentences depends on the truth of the relevant controversial metaphysical thesis; in other words, the idea is to deny that the ordinary sentences have "metaphysically weighty" truth conditions. This strategy of response is inherent in, e.g., compatibilism about free will, naturalism and non-cognitivism about morality, and a few different views of mathematics, e.g., psychologism and if-thenism (i.e., the view that '3 is prime' really says that if there were numbers then 3 would be prime). We can call such views *thin-semantics views*, for they involve the adoption of a semantic theory for the relevant ordinary sentences that either (a) denies that these sentences have truth conditions (this is the non-cognitivist option) or (b) entails that the sentences have *non-weighty* truth conditions, i.e., truth conditions that don't require

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[6] 'Fictionalism' is a dangerous term because it gets used in different ways; but at least some versions of mathematical fictionalism—e.g., those developed in Field (1989), my (1998), and Leng (2010)—are error theories.

the existence of the relevant controversial objects (or facts or properties or events or whatever).[7]

The next point to note is that we can think of the various views here (i.e., the views that are generated by the three ways of responding to arguments of the above kind) as involving both semantic and metaphysical theories. And to take a somewhat crude view of things, we can categorize all of the different theories (metaphysical and semantic) as either *thick* theories or *thin* theories. A *thick metaphysics* (in a given domain) is one that entails the existence of objects (or facts or properties or events or whatever) of the relevant controversial kind—e.g., abstract objects, or non-actual possible worlds, or non-natural moral facts, or libertarian-free choices, or past and future objects, or whatever. A *thin metaphysics* (in a given domain) is one that denies the existence of objects (or facts or whatever) of the relevant controversial kind. A *thick semantics* (in a given domain) is one that says that objects (or facts or whatever) of the relevant controversial kind need to exist in order for the relevant ordinary sentences to be true. And a *thin semantics* (in a given domain) is one that either (a) denies that the relevant ordinary sentences have truth conditions or (b) entails that these sentences have *non-weighty* truth conditions, i.e., truth conditions that don't require the existence of objects (or facts or whatever) of the relevant controversial kind.

Overall, then, there are four different kinds of views we can endorse: thick-semantics/thick-metaphysics, thick-semantics/thin-metaphysics, thin-semantics/thick-metaphysics, and thin-semantics/thin-metaphysics. Putting this into a matrix, the four possibilities can be represented as follows:

		METAPHYSICS	
		Thick	Thin
SEMANTICS	Thick	R	E
	Thin	X	T

This matrix can be used to make sense of lots of different debates in philosophy. Cell R is occupied by what we can call *robust realist* views—e.g., libertarianism about free will, non-naturalism about morality, and platonism about mathematics. Cell E is occupied by *error* theories (or fictionalist views)—e.g., hard determinism about free will, error theory about morality, and fictionalism about mathematics. Cell T is occupied by *thin-semantics views*—e.g., compatibilism about free will, naturalism and non-cognitivism about morality, and various views about mathematics, e.g., psychologism and if-thenism. Finally, cell X usually goes unoccupied. It's worth noting, however, that while cell-X views are extremely unpopular among philosophers, they usually make perfect sense. For instance, in connection with free will, you could occupy cell X by endorsing a compatibilistic libertarian view according to which (a) human beings

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[7] There are two different ways to develop a non-weighty-truth-condition view: you can offer a non-face-value view of the logical form of the sentences, or you can accept the face-value form and endorse an alternative view of the kinds of objects involved. So, e.g., in the philosophy of mathematics, if-thenists follow the first strategy, claiming that '3 is prime' really says that *if there were numbers, then 3 would be prime*; and advocates of psychologism follow the second strategy, claiming that sentences like '3 is prime' make claims about mental objects, not abstract objects.

possess libertarian freedom, but (b) the ordinary term 'free will' denotes Humean freedom. I think there are lots of interesting things to say about the fact that philosophers don't generally like cell-X views, but I won't pursue this here.

It's worth noting that while *some* cell-T views (namely, non-cognitivist views) aren't realist views, other cell-T views *are* realist views—namely, those that entail that the relevant ordinary sentences are true. For instance, just about all compatibilist views can be thought of as realist views of free will because they entail that humans do have free will. It is for this reason that I say that the views in cell R are *robust* realist views. A robust realist view is a view that says that the relevant ordinary sentences are true *because objects (or events or whatever) of the relevant controversial kind exist*. Thus, while most compatibilist views are realist views (because they entail that there are free human choices), they usually aren't robust realist views in the way that libertarianism is because they usually reject the existence of events of the relevant controversial kind—namely, indeterministic, libertarian-free human choices.

It's important to note, however, that my terminology here is not meant to suggest that thin-semanticists think that their versions of realism are somehow watered down. They don't. On the contrary, we might characterize their views as involving the idea that what I'm calling "robust realism" would more accurately be called "overblown realism". For instance, compatibilists are likely to think that some compatibilistic kind of freedom is *real* freedom and that libertarian-freedom is overblown fake freedom (or better, that it would be overblown and fake if it existed); and metaethical naturalists are likely to think that naturalistic wrongness is *real* wrongness and that non-naturalistic wrongness is overblown fake wrongness (or would be overblown and fake if it existed); and so on. So when I say that these kinds of realism are non-robust, all I mean is that these views are metaphysically innocent in the sense that they don't commit to objects (or events or whatever) of the relevant controversial kind—e.g., non-natural moral facts, or libertarian-free choices, or abstract objects, or whatever.[8]

4.2 Against metametaphysical verbalism

I now want to explain how the above matrix can be used to see what's wrong with metametaphysical verbalist views of our metaphysical questions. The key point is that the matrix gives us a way of seeing which kinds metaphysical debates are merely verbal and which kinds are non-verbal, and moreover, it gives us a way of locating the non-verbal debates associated with our metaphysical questions. In general, it's easy to

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[8] You might wonder whether *pleonastic view* (or *easy-ontology views*) should be classified as cell-R views or cell-T views. (I'm thinking here of views like Rayo's (2013) *trivialist platonism*; on his view, the sentence 'Numbers exist' is true but this is just because it follows trivially from sentences like 'There are no witches' (and the idea is that since the latter is just a negative existential, it doesn't involve any reference to, or quantification over, numbers). Others to endorse views of this general kind include Thomasson (2015).) As I'm conceiving of things, views like this are cell-T views, not cell-R views. This is because these views don't entail the existence of objects of the relevant controversial kind; e.g., Rayo's view doesn't entail the existence of abstract objects. (His view does entail the existence of *numbers* (or at any rate, it entails that the sentence 'There are numbers' comes out true according to the rules of ordinary English), but it doesn't entail the existence of full-blown abstract objects—i.e., non-physical, non-mental objects that fully exist but not in space and time. This is why Rayo calls his view "*trivialist* platonism".).

see how a cell-E-vs-cell-T debate (that is, a debate between an error theorist and a thin semanticist) can be merely verbal; but it's equally easy to see how a cell-R-vs-cell-E debate (that is, a debate between a robust realist and an error theorist) can be *non*-verbal. I'll start (in Sect. 4.2.1) by giving a quick intuitive account of how we can use the matrix to locate a non-verbal debate about temporal ontology; then (in Sect. 4.2.2) I'll further develop my argument by responding to a series of objections; finally (in Sect. 4.2.3), I'll point out that the same argument can be run in connection with other metaphysical questions.

4.2.1 A quick version of the argument against metametaphysical verbalism about the temporal ontology debate

As I pointed out above, we can think of the temporal ontology debate as a debate over the truth values of sentences like

(Dinosaur) There exist dinosaurs.

Let me start by explaining how a cell-E-vs-cell-T debate over the truth value of (Dinosaur) could be merely verbal.[9] I'll do this by simply describing two people who are engaged in such a debate. One of them is a cell-E presentist who I'll call "McError". The first point to note about McError is that her language is *Thickese*. Thickese is a language in which (Dinosaur) says that dinosaurs are among the things that *exist*—or, better, the things that exist *tenselessly*—where (a) this is not analytically entailed by the claim that there used to be dinosaurs,[10] and (b) it doesn't analytically entail the claim that dinosaurs exist at the present time, i.e., the time at which I'm writing. Thus, given certain obvious empirical facts (e.g., that there used to be dinosaurs and that they're now extinct), we can say that in order for (Dinosaur) to be true in Thickese, it needs to be the case that dinosaurs exist in a metaphysically substantive eternalistic way; in short, it needs to be the case that reality is a 4-dimensional block, so that the past times at which dinosaurs existed are just as real as the present time.

Given this, McError has three important traits: (a) she speaks Thickese (i.e., Thickese is the language that would be spoken by a community of people just like her); (b) she endorses a Thickese-semantics for English (i.e., she believes that English is Thickese); and (c) she believes that (Dinosaur) is false because presentism is true—i.e., because past and future objects don't really exist. So McError is an error theorist about

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[9] You might worry that when I introduced the matrix in Sect. 4.1, I was talking about sentences that seem obviously true to us, whereas (Dinosaur) *doesn't* seem obviously true to us. But the fact that (Dinosaur) doesn't strikes us as obviously true won't matter at all in what follows. Nothing I'm going to say will depend on the claim that (Dinosaur) seems true to us, and what's more, if I wanted to, I could run essentially the same argument in terms of a sentence that *does* seem true to us—e.g., 'Queen Elizabeth is a direct descendent of William the Conqueror.' The reason I've decided to run the argument in terms of (Dinosaur), instead of some true-seeming sentence like the one about William the Conqueror, is just that it's simpler in this context to work with an existence claim.

[10] I'm assuming here that the sentence 'There used to be dinosaurs' is to be interpreted in an ontologically innocent way; if it's interpreted as being ontologically committing—e.g., as saying that there exists a time, prior to the present time, at which dinosaurs exist—then it might be natural to say that, in Thickese, this sentence *does* analytically entail (Dinosaur).

talk of past and future objects; she thinks that sentences like (Dinosaur) and 'Queen Elizabeth is a direct descendent of William the Conqueror' are strictly speaking false.

The other party to the merely verbal dispute that I've got in mind is a cell-T-ist called "McThin". McThin has the following four traits: (a) his language is Thinese— i.e., in his language, (Dinosaur) is synonymous with the sentence 'Dinosaurs did exist, or will exist, or do exist at the present time' (so 'Thinese' is just another name for Eternalese); (b) he believes that English is Thinese; (c) he agrees with McError about the metaphysics—i.e., he doesn't think that dinosaurs exist in any metaphysically robust eternalistic way; and (d) he thinks that (Dinosaur) is true because he thinks that there used to be dinosaurs and that this is sufficient for the truth of (Dinosaur).

Given all this, it should be obvious that the dispute between McError and McThin over the truth value of (Dinosaur) is either merely verbal or about meaning (if McError and McThin are sufficiently tuned in to the fact that their debate turns on the meaning of (Dinosaur), then it will probably be more charitable to interpret the debate as being about meaning, but either way, the debate is not non-verbal).

But while the debate between McError and McThin is merely verbal, there are *other* presentist-vs-eternalist debates to be had, and some of these other possible debates are *non*-verbal. In particular, it's easy to imagine a cell-R-vs-cell-E debate over the truth value of (Dinosaur) that's non-verbal. All we have to do is imagine a debate between the cell-E presentist defined above (i.e., McError) and a cell-R eternalist (let's call him "McReal") who has the following three traits: (a) McReal's language is the same as McError's language (i.e., McReal speaks Thickese); (b) McReal endorses the same semantic theory of (Dinosaur) that McError endorses (i.e., like McError, McReal believes that English is Thickese); and (c) McReal thinks that (Dinosaur) is true because past and future objects exist in a metaphysically substantive eternalistic way (in other words, McReal thinks that reality is a 4-dimensional block in which past and future objects are just as real as present objects).

It should be obvious that the debate between McError and McReal over the truth value of (Dinosaur) is *non*-verbal—i.e., that it isn't merely verbal or about meaning. McError and McReal mean the same things by their words, and they disagree about ontology—in particular, about whether past and future objects exist in a metaphysically substantive eternalistic way. And this is their *only* disagreement. They agree about the semantics of their language, and what's more, they speak the same language. So the debate between McError and McReal isn't merely verbal, or about meaning, or anything of the sort. Therefore, metametaphysical verbalism about the temporal ontology debate is false. There is a non-verbal debate to be had about the existence of past and future objects. The debate between McError and McReal is such a debate.

The argument of this section is obviously very quick, and one might have various worries about it. I will now respond to some of these worries, and in the process, I will make my argument stronger and tighter.

4.2.2 Responses to objections

In giving the above argument, I just stipulated that McReal speaks Thickese, and one might think that in doing this, I essentially begged the question against metametaphysical verbalists. There are multiple ways to articulate this objection. I'll start with

a version of the objection that might seem somewhat shallow and work my way to other versions that might seem deeper. The first version can be put like this:

> *The first (shallow?) version of the objection; aka, the charity objection:* McReal might *believe* that he speaks Thickese, but it's better to interpret him as speaking Thinese, i.e., the language in which (Dinosaur) is synonymous with 'Dinosaurs either did exist or will exist or do exist at the present time.' For (a) the principle of charity dictates that we should interpret people (as far as we can) in a way that makes their assertions come out true, and (b) if we interpret McReal's assertions of sentences like (Dinosaur) with a thick semantics–i.e., in a way that makes their truth depend on the thesis that dinosaurs exist in a metaphysically substantive eternalistic way–then they *won't* be true. (You might wonder why clause (b) is needed here; the reason is that without this clause, we won't be able to use the principle of charity to argue that we should interpret McReal as speaking Thinese.)

Let me begin my response to this objection by making a point about the dialectical situation we're in. In order to show that metametaphysical verbalism about the temporal ontology debate is false, all I need to show is that there's a non-verbal debate to be had about temporal ontology. In other words, I just need to locate a *possible* presentist-vs-eternalist debate that's neither merely verbal nor about meaning. But this means that I get to construct the details of the hypothetical debate I'm describing in whatever way I want to, and so it seems to me that as long as it's *possible* that McReal's language is the same as McError's language—i.e., as long as it's possible that McReal's language is Thickese—I can just *stipulate* that this is indeed the case.

Thus, the charity objection can succeed only if it's supplemented with an argument for the claim that McReal, as I've described him here, is *impossible*. In other words, if you want to endorse the charity objection, you need to argue that it's impossible for a person P to be such that (i) P's language is Thickese, and (ii) P believes that (Dinosaur) is true. Or to put the point in a slightly different way, you need to argue that it's impossible to believe that dinosaurs exist in a metaphysically substantive eternalistic way, in a past region of a 4-dimensional spatiotemporal block. But this just seems obviously false. It seems obvious that it's *not* impossible for someone to speak Thickese and still believe that (Dinosaur) is true. And so it seems to me that the charity objection doesn't succeed.

I'm not suggesting here that there's something wrong with the principle of charity. But the principle of charity doesn't say that we should interpret people so that *everything* they say is true, and it certainly doesn't say that it's *impossible* for someone to say something that's false. That's the principle of charity run amok. It's obviously possible for people to assert falsehoods, and there is nothing wrong with interpreting people so that some of what they say is false. Moreover, in our particular case, there doesn't seem to be any reason to think that it's impossible for McError and McReal to disagree about the truth value of (Dinosaur) while meaning the exact same thing by that sentence—i.e., while both are speaking Thickese.

Also, even if McReal's utterance of (Dinosaur) would be false if we interpreted it with a thick semantics, it seems to me distinctly *uncharitable* to interpret him as not speaking Thickese, i.e., as speaking some language like Thinese in which (Dinosaur)

expresses a trivial truth. This is because McReal is (I hereby stipulate) *trying* to make a controversial ontological claim when he utters (Dinosaur), not a trivial claim of zoological history. Given this, it seems to me much more charitable to interpret him as saying what he's *trying* to say and uttering a falsehood than to interpret him as asserting some trivially true proposition that he isn't trying to assert. (Here's an analogy: suppose that there is no God, and consider an ordinary theist who utters the sentence 'God exists'; it seems to me more charitable to interpret this person as asserting the falsehood that God exists than as asserting some trivial truth, e.g., that love exists.)

I actually think that most mere-verbalists would reject the charity objection, as I articulated it above. This is because the charity objection relies on the claim that (Dinosaur) is false in Thickese, and I don't think that very many mere-verbalists would want to make that claim. Now, of course, some mere-verbalists do rely on the principle of charity in their arguments (see, e.g., Hirsch 2009), but I don't think they would want to rely on it in the way that the charity objection does.

If metametaphysical verbalists wouldn't want to rely on the charity objection, then how would they respond to my argument? Well, they might object in something like the following way:

> *The second (deeper?) version of the objection; aka, the legitimate-language objection*: Your discussion up until now still begs the question. In couching the issue as a question about whether McReal speaks Thickese (or whether it's possible for McReal to speak Thickese), you're assuming that Thickese is a legitimate language–i.e., that there is a clear, coherent language here for someone to speak. But this is precisely what's at issue. You need to *argue* that Thickese is a legitimate language.

It's not entirely clear what it means for a language to be "legitimate". But, remember, all I need to argue is that there's a non-verbal debate to be had between presentists and eternalists, and so it seems that all I need here is that Thickese is *possible*. If Thickese is a possible language, and if it's possible for McReal and McError to speak this language, then metametaphysical verbalism (about the temporal ontology debate) is false. But given this, it's hard to see what the legitimate-language objection could amount to. I characterized Thickese (back in Sect. 4.2.1) as follows:

> Thickese is a language in which (Dinosaur) says that dinosaurs are among the things that *exist*–or, better, the things that exist *tenselessly*–where (a) this is not analytically entailed by the claim that there used to be dinosaurs,[11] and (b) it doesn't analytically entail the claim that dinosaurs exist at the present time, i.e., the time at which I'm writing. Thus, given certain obvious empirical facts (e.g., that there used to be dinosaurs and that they're now extinct), we can say that in order for (Dinosaur) to be true in Thickese, it needs to be the case that dinosaurs exist in a metaphysically substantive eternalistic way; in short, it needs to be the case that reality is a 4-dimensional block, so that the past times at which dinosaurs existed are just as real as the present time.

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[11] See footnote 10.

What could it mean to say that this language isn't possible? Clearly, it *is* possible. McReal and McError could define Thickese as I just did and then agree to speak that language. And I can stipulate, as part of my thought experiment, that they *do* speak this language—i.e., that this is the language that would be spoken by a community of people just like them. So it's possible.

Metametaphysical verbalists might respond to this by saying the following:

> *The third (even deeper?) version of the objection; aka, the imprecision objection*: The problem with Thickese isn't that it's impossible. It's that it's imprecise. Notice that when McReal and McError characterize Thickese in the above way, they use *words* to do this. They say that in order for (Dinosaur) to be true in Thickese, it needs to be the case that sentences like the following are true:
>
> (i) Dinosaurs exist in a metaphysically substantive eternalistic way.
> (ii) Reality is a 4-dimensional block.
>
> But the problem is that it's totally unclear what's needed for the truth of (i) and (ii). We start out wondering what the truth conditions of (Dinosaur) are. McReal and McError replace (Dinosaur) with sentences like (i) and (ii). But (i) and (ii) are imprecise. We don't know what their truth conditions are; i.e., we don't know what the world needs to be like to make them true. And we don't know whether McReal and McError are understanding them, or precisifying them, in the same way.

Let me grant for the sake of argument that if McReal and McError were real people, it might be hard to tell whether they meant the same things by sentences like (i) and (ii). But they're not real people. They're fictional characters. And they're *my* fictional characters. So I get to stipulate that they *do* understand (i) and (ii) in the same way. I get to do this because I'm trying to show only that it's *possible* to have a non-verbal dispute about temporal ontology. All I need is that it's possible for two people to stipulate that they're speaking Thickese, and to mean the same things by sentences like (i) and (ii), and to still disagree about the truth values of these sentences—and sentences like (Dinosaur). And it's really hard to see why this isn't possible.

To this, metametaphysical verbalists might respond as follows:

> *The fourth (deepest?) version of the objection; aka, the catastrophic-indeterminacy objection*: You're not understanding our view. We can grant that it's possible for McReal and McError to mean the same things by sentences like (Dinosaur). But if they do, then on our view, either (a) one of them is making a trivial mistake about zoology, or (b) they're both wildly imprecise in their thinking about sentences like (Dinosaur). This is because, on our view, there are only two ways to precisify (Dinosaur)–or at any rate, there are only two ways that are relevant to the present discussion. One way to precisify (Dinosaur) is to take it to mean what it means in Eternalese (i.e., that there were dinosaurs, or will be dinosaurs, or are dinosaurs at the present time); and the other way to precisify (Dinosaur) is to take it to mean what it means in Presentese (i.e., that dinosaurs exist at the present time, i.e., in the 21st Century). On the former way of precisifying (Dinosaur), it's trivially true (it's made true by the fact that there used to be dinosaurs); and on the latter way of precisifying (Dinosaur), it's trivially false

(it's made false by the fact that dinosaurs don't exist in the 21st Century). Now, if McReal and McError both understand (Dinosaur) in either of these two ways, then one of them is just making a silly mistake about zoology, and so the case is uninteresting. So let's assume that this *isn't* what's going on. Given this, on our view, it follows that if McReal and McError understand (Dinosaur) in the same way—and we're willing to assume with you that this is the case—then they're both wildly imprecise in their thinking about (Dinosaur). This is because, on our view, there's no other way to precisify (Dinosaur). So, in a nutshell, the problem with your argument—the reason it begs the question—is that you just assume that there *is* a third way to precisify (Dinosaur). You're assuming that Thickese can be made precise. But that's exactly what's at issue. On our view, Thickese— as you and McReal and McError want to understand it—is wildly imprecise. In particular, it doesn't give any precise truth conditions to (Dinosaur). Indeed, on our view, in the language that you're imagining, (Dinosaur) is so imprecise that there's just no fact of the matter whether it's true. We might express this by saying that it's *catastrophically indeterminate*. So if you don't want to beg the question, you need to *argue* that there's a way of understanding (Dinosaur) here that isn't indeterminate in this way.

Before giving my main response to this objection, I want to make a preliminary point. The preliminary point is that the above characterization of Thickese gives us at least *some* information about the truth conditions of (Dinosaur). In particular, it tells us that (a) the truth of (Dinosaur) requires *more* than the past existence of dinosaurs, and (b) it *doesn't* require the present-time existence of dinosaurs. And note that when I say in (a) that the truth of (Dinosaur) requires "more than the past existence of dinosaurs," what I mean is that it requires more of the *world*. The world needs to be a certain way, in addition to it being the case that there used to be dinosaurs, in order for (Dinosaur) to be true. Now, McReal and McError have *tried* to say something about what the extra requirement is—e.g., they say things like "reality has to be a 4-dimensional block, and dinosaurs need to exist in a past region of that block in a metaphysically substantive eternalistic way"—but even if McReal and McError fail in their attempt to clarify what the extra requirement is, they've still made clear that there *is* an extra requirement. They've made clear that (a) it's not enough that there used to be dinosaurs, and (b) it's not needed that dinosaurs exist at the present time.

Let me move on now to the main point I want to make in response to the catastrophic-indeterminacy objection, and let me start by granting for the sake of argument that McReal and McError have failed in their attempt to clarify what the extra requirement is. Indeed, let me grant (again, for the sake of argument) that (Dinosaur) is catas-trophically imprecise and indeterminate in Thickese, so that there's no fact of the matter whether it's true in that language. So what? How is this supposed to vindicate metametaphysical verbalism? Metametaphysical verbalism is, after all, a version of mere-verbalism. The idea is supposed to be that there's no non-verbal debate to be had about temporal ontology. That view is false. The debate between McReal and McError—or the possibility of that debate—proves that it's false. This is because there is no linguistic/semantic difference between McReal and McError—they speak the same language and endorse the same theory of the semantics of English. So the

debate is not merely verbal or about meaning. So it's non-verbal. So there's a non-verbal debate to be had here, and so metametaphysical verbalism (about the temporal ontology debate) is just false.

Now, you might go on to claim that the debate between McReal and McError is factually empty in the sense that there's no fact of the matter which of them is right because there's no fact of the matter whether (Dinosaur) is true in Thickese. But this is *not* a version of metametaphysical verbalism—or any other kind of mere-verbalism for that matter. So metametaphysical verbalists can't use the catastrophic-indeterminacy objection to defend their view because that objection *admits* that the McReal-McError debate that I've described here is non-verbal because McReal and McError both speak Thickese. Moreover, since McReal and McError *do* both speak Thickese, their debate just *is* non-verbal. So there's a non-verbal debate to be had about temporal ontology, and so, again, metametaphysical verbalism is just false.

Here's an analogy: Suppose that you and I get into a debate about whether some person (say, Ralph) is bald, and suppose that (a) you and I use 'bald' in the exact same (imprecise) way—i.e., with the exact same (imprecise) meaning—and (b) we both use/understand 'bald' in an *acceptable* way, according to the rules of ordinary English, and (c) on our usage (and on the meaning of 'bald' in ordinary English), Ralph is a borderline case of baldness, so that there's no fact of the matter whether he's bald. In this scenario, the sentence we're debating—'Ralph is bald'—is catastrophically indeterminate; there's no fact of the matter whether it's true, and so neither of us is right. But our debate is not merely verbal in any interesting sense because we mean the exact same thing by the sentence 'Ralph is bald.' This is precisely the situation with the McReal-McError debate if the catastrophic-indeterminacy objection is right—i.e., if (Dinosaur) is catastrophically indeterminate in Thickese. In this scenario, the debate is factually empty in an obvious sense—neither McReal nor McError is right–but the debate is not merely verbal in any interesting sense.

There's a second problem with the catastrophic-indeterminacy objection that's worth mentioning here. The central claim in that objection—the claim that (Dinosaur) is catastrophically indeterminate in Thickese, i.e., that there's no fact of the matter whether (Dinosaur) is true in Thickese—is wildly controversial. It requires *argument*. So even if metametaphysical verbalists *could* defend their view by appealing to this claim—which, again, they can't—they couldn't just *assert* that temporal-ontology debates that aren't merely verbal (e.g., the McReal-McError debate) are catastrophically indeterminate in the above way. They would need to *argue* this point. And to the best of my knowledge, no mere-verbalist has ever even tried to argue for it.

(I actually think that the sort of non-factualism that's alluded to in the catastrophic-indeterminacy objection—i.e., the view that there's no fact of the matter whether (Dinosaur) is true in Thickese—is fairly plausible, and in my (2016a), I say a few words about how one might go about arguing for this view. But as I make clear

there, it would take some doing to produce a full-blown argument for this sort of non-factualism.)[12]

4.2.3 Generalizing

I just argued that metametaphysical verbalism (about the temporal ontology debate) is false. I now want to point out that the same argument can be run in connection with other metaphysical questions. In particular, it can be run in connection with any metaphysical question (indeed, any philosophical question) that can be reasonably fit into the above matrix—e.g., the question of whether human beings have free will, the question of moral realism, the abstract-object question, the composite-object question, and so on. I admit that in all of these cases, it's possible to set up cell-E-vs-cell-T debates (that is, debates between error theorists and thin semanticists) that are merely verbal. But the important point here is that it's *also* possible to set up cell-R-vs-cell-E debates (that is, debates between robust realists and error theorists) that are *non*-verbal. We can do this by imagining a scenario in which the two disputants (i.e., the cell-E error theorist and the cell-R robust realist) satisfy the following two conditions:

> (a) they both speak the same thick-semantics language (and they both endorse the same thick semantic theory for the relevant folk sentences), and (b) they still disagree about the truth values of the relevant sentences because they disagree about the existence of the relevant controversial objects (or facts whatever)–i.e., they disagree about the existence of abstract objects or non-natural moral facts or whatever.

Debates like this are not merely verbal or about meaning; they're non-verbal in the relevant sense of the term. Now, again, it might turn out that the crucial sentences in these debates are catastrophically indeterminate, but that doesn't change the fact that we can have non-verbal debates about them (and moreover, as far as I know, no mere-verbalists have ever *argued* that these sentences would be indeterminate[13]). Thus, since in all of these cases we can set up non-verbal debates of this kind—i.e., since E-vs-R

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[12] Given my arguments against metametaphysical verbalism, you might think that mere-verbalists could respond by defining a third kind of verbalism, distinct from metametaphysical verbalism and actual-literature verbalism. You might try to define such a view as follows:

> There are non-verbal debates to be had about temporal ontology (and, indeed, it may be that some debates in the actual literature are non-verbal), but the ones that are non-verbal are factually empty in the sense that there's no fact of the matter what the answers to the given questions are.

I wouldn't want to argue against this view—indeed, as I just pointed out, I find it at least initially plausible—but I don't think there's any interesting sense in which this view is a *mere-verbalist* view; what it is is a *non-factualist* view. (Likewise, if you said that there are non-verbal debates to be had about temporal ontology but that we humans could never make any progress on settling these debates, that wouldn't be a mere-verbalist view either; it might be called an *epistemicist* view.).

[13] However, I *have* argued that some of these sentences are indeterminate. In my (1998), I argue that sentences asserting the existence of abstract objects are indeterminate; in my (forthcoming-b), I argue that sentences asserting the existence of composite objects are indeterminate; and in my (2016a), I say a few words about how we might argue that sentences asserting the existence of past and future objects are indeterminate.

debates are at least *possible* in all of these cases—it follows that metametaphysical verbalism isn't true of any of these philosophical questions.

You might wonder how far I think my argument can be generalized. I think it can be used in connection with any philosophical question that can be reasonably fit into the above matrix. This, I think, is a *lot* of philosophical questions, but it's not *all* of them. Consider, e.g., conceptual-analysis questions—i.e., questions like 'What is knowledge?' and 'What is free will?' I don't think questions like this can be reasonably fit into the above matrix, and so I don't think my argument applies to these questions.

I should say, however, that I think that conceptual-analysis questions often form "the semantic halves" of philosophical questions that *do* fit into the above matrix. For instance, I think that the question 'Do human beings have free will?' fits nicely into the above matrix; and I think the question 'What is free will?' is essentially the semantic half of that question—those who think that free will is libertarian-freedom endorse a thick semantics, and those who think that free will is some compatibilistic kind of freedom endorse a thin semantics. So, on my view, conceptual-analysis questions like 'What is free will?' are *semantic* questions, and so there's a good reason why my argument doesn't apply to them—because it's just not true that debates about these questions are non-verbal. More specifically, I think it can be argued that conceptual-analysis questions are best thought of as being *about meaning*. I can't argue for this stance here, but see my (2016b).

4.3 Against actual-literature verbalism

One might complain here by saying something like this:

> Even if what you just argued in Sect. 4.2 is right, your conclusion is so weak that it's not very important. All you've really argued is that for each of the metaphysical questions that you're talking about, it's *possible* to have a non-verbal debate about that question. Fine. But isn't the more interesting and important question whether certain *actual* debates in the philosophical literature are merely verbal?

I have two responses to this. First, it seems to me that the answer to my interlocutor's question here is simply "*No.*" Questions about actual metaphysical debates (i.e., about real debates between real people) strike me as distinctly *less* interesting and important than the question that I've been addressing so far, at least from a metametaphysical point of view. Perhaps this is just a function of intellectual taste, but here's how it seems to me: What I've argued so far is that mere-verbalists have failed in their attempt to establish that there's something *wrong* with our metaphysical questions. In other words, what we've found is that the questions themselves aren't flawed in a merely-verbal sort of way; on the contrary, there are non-verbal debates to be had in connection with all of these questions. *That's* the really important point—or so it seems to me. Whether some actual debate (e.g., the debate among post-Lewisian metaphysicians about the truth of eternalism) is merely verbal seems to me to be of only historical interest. It's hard to see why it would matter in any long-lasting metaphysically interesting way if some bunch of philosophers were confused enough to be engaged in a merely verbal debate.

My second response to the above worry is probably more important. It's that the apparatus that I've set up in this paper can be used to undermine not just metametaphysical verbalist views, but *actual-literature* verbalist views as well. I can't argue this point in depth, but I'd like to say a few words about it. Let me begin with actual-literature verbalism about the temporal ontology debate. Given the arguments of Sect. 4.2, we know that it's at least possible to set up a non-verbal debate between presentists and eternalists. Thus, actual-literature verbalists have to maintain that *actual* debates between mainstream presentists and eternalists aren't like this. They have to say that actual presentists and eternalists mean different things by their words. Now, there are obviously numerous ways to argue this point (because there are numerous languages you could claim are the languages of actual presentists and eternalists), but the most obvious ways of doing this all involve the claim that actual eternalists speak Thinese— or, more precisely, that in the language of actual eternalists, (Dinosaur) says that either there were dinosaurs, or will be dinosaurs, or are dinosaurs at the present time.

But the idea that actual mainstream eternalists—people like Lewis (1986) and Sider (2001)—speak Thinese is pretty implausible. It seems much more plausible to suppose that mainstream eternalists speak some language along the lines of Thickese. At any rate, this much is clear: mainstream eternalists *believe* that they speak such a language. In other words, they endorse a thick semantics for their own sentences. They would strenuously deny that when they say that (Dinosaur) is true—*while they're engaged in the debate about eternalism*—they're merely saying that there were dinosaurs or will be dinosaurs or are dinosaurs at the present time. They would wholeheartedly claim that what they're saying is that dinosaurs exist in a metaphysically substantive eternalistic way. Now, of course, it *could* be that eternalists confused about what they mean by their own words; it could be that despite their conscious commitments to a thick semantics, when they utter (Dinosaur), they're really just making a trivial zoological claim, not a controversial metaphysical claim. But this just seems extremely implausible. And what's more, it's extremely *uncharitable*. It's much more charitable to interpret these people as making false (or potentially false, or imprecise) metaphysical claims than trivially true zoological claims.

(You might respond here by saying that even if people like Lewis and Sider think they're speaking Thickese, if *English* is Thinese, then since they're speaking English, they're speaking Thinese. But English is irrelevant in the present context. The question here is what the *language of (actual mainstream) eternalists* is, and as I pointed out above, the language of eternalists isn't (or needn't be) their public language; it's the language that would be spoken by a community of people just like them.)

Similar points can be made about actual-literature verbalist views of other metaphysical debates. Even if there are lots of merely verbal E-vs-T debates surrounding our metaphysical questions, in just about all of these cases, there seem to be lots of instances of non-verbal R-vs-E debates as well. E.g., there seem to be actual cases of non-verbal R-vs-E debates between mathematical platonists and fictionalists over the existence of abstract objects; and between libertarians and hard determinists over the existence of libertarian-free human choices; and between moral non-naturalists and error theorists over the existence of non-natural moral facts; and between mereological universalists and fictionalistic (or error-theoretic) nihilists over the existence of composite objects; and so on. I obviously can't argue here for this sweeping historical

claim, but in each case, the point seems pretty obvious. All it takes is a cursory reading of most mainstream platonists (and metaethical non-naturalists, and libertarians, and so on) to realize that they're speaking a thick-semantics language—i.e., that they're committed to the real existence of full-blown abstract objects (and non-natural moral facts, and libertarian-free choices, and so on). There is just no plausible way to deny that this is the right way to interpret these people.

In sum, then, it seems to me that actual-literature verbalist views of our metaphysical debates are no more plausible than metametaphysical verbalist views are.

5 A recipe

Before ending, I want to point out that if the arguments in this paper are correct, then they give us a sort of *recipe* for locating the controversial non-verbal debates associated with our metaphysical questions. Roughly speaking, we can locate these debates by simply stipulating that we're using a thick semantics for the relevant sentences. Even if a thin semantics is the *right* theory of the ordinary-language meanings of the relevant expressions (I actually think this is pretty rare, but I won't argue for this here), we can just stop using the relevant folk expressions, replace them with terms of art, and stipulate that these terms are to be understood in the relevant thick-semantics way. If we debate our metaphysical questions in languages like this—so that both parties to the debate are assuming a thick semantics, or speaking a language with a thick semantics—then we can avoid the kinds of E-vs-T debates that are merely verbal or about meaning.

Now, of course, this strategy doesn't give us a *guarantee* that the resulting debate will be non-verbal, because the two parties could be speaking *different* thick-semantics languages; but I think this is a pretty nit-picky worry; I think that in connection with all of the questions that I've been discussing, if we stipulate that we're working with a thick semantics, it will be pretty clear what we've got in mind, and there will be enough semantic agreement for the debate to be non-verbal. For instance, in the philosophy of mathematics, we'll be talking about abstract objects; in metaethics, we'll be talking about non-natural moral facts; in free will, we'll be talking about libertarian-free choices; and so on. Now, the disputes that we get by proceeding in this way might end up being catastrophically imprecise (and, hence, factually empty), but again, that's another matter—that wouldn't make the debates merely verbal or about meaning.

You might ask: "If the *right* semantics for the relevant ordinary-language sentences is a thin semantics, why on Earth would we stipulate a thick semantics?" The short answer is: To have a non-verbal debate about the relevant metaphysical question. The long answer involves an argument for the claim that we can't establish anything metaphysically interesting by arguing for a thin semantics—that even if a thin semantics is the right semantics for ordinary English, the given metaphysical question remains open. I can't argue for this here, but see my (2010), Chapter 2.

The point I'm making here is similar in certain ways to the claim made by Dorr (2005) and Sider (2009) that ontological questions should be disputed in a special language—*the language of ontology*. But the thick languages I'm talking about here are different from the languages that Dorr and Sider have in mind.

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