

Topics, Disputes and “Going Meta”

– Preliminary Version –

On a naive view of conceptual engineering, conceptual engineers simply aim at *engineering concepts*. This picture has recently come under attack. Sarah Sawyer (2018, 2020) and Derek Ball (2020) present two rather different, yet equally unorthodox, accounts of conceptual engineering, which they take to be superior to the naive picture. This paper casts doubts on the superiority of their respective accounts. By elaborating on the explanatory potential of “going meta”, the paper defends the naive view against Sawyer’s and Ball’s rival proposals.

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I. Introduction

Names can be misleading. Just look at the species named “red panda”: not all red pandas have red(dish) fur and, surprisingly, not a single member of this species is a *panda*. (At least they live up to their name by mainly feeding on bamboo, though.) A lot of singular terms are like “red panda”, and even names for philosophical projects are not to be trusted. Take the term “conceptual engineering” as an example. Some philosophers consider this term a misnomer of the kind “red panda”. If they are correct, conceptual engineering has nothing (or only surprisingly little) to do with *concepts* or their *engineering*, but rather has more to do with e.g. linguistic meanings or the right analyses of concepts.

Before we consider two such positions in more detail, let us look at a *naive picture* of conceptual engineering first. On this picture, the term “conceptual engineering” is considered a connotative term, as Millians would put it; i.e. the term is taken as referring to an activity or process of *engineering concepts*. According to the naive view, conceptual engineers are concerned with assessing our conceptual repertoire. And they are considered as trying to improve the concepts we are currently employing by either revising or replacing them with concepts they see as a better choice.¹ Thus understood, conceptual engineering often leads to situations

¹ This paper sides with neither the revisionist nor the replacement camp; see e.g. Scharp (2020, 405-7) on the distinction between the two options. For ease of exposition, though, the paper sometimes talks as if it favours the replacement option.

of conceptual pluralism. The reason is simple: engineers aim at the replacement of a concept c^* by a (slightly) different and in their opinion somehow *better* concept c . But since changing a language takes some time, engineering concepts often engenders situations in which speakers within a single linguistic community express slightly different concepts with one and the same expression e . While some speakers simply continue using e to express c^* (i.e. the so far established concept), other speakers have already started to use e to express the ameliorated c .² As a result, the pre-engineering concept c^* as well as the post-engineering c are simultaneously part of the community's conceptual inventory during processes of amelioration.

Take the word “marriage” as an example. There not only seem to be convincing moral reasons for speakers of our linguistic community to express an inclusive concept m with “marriage”, i.e. a concept which also includes marriages between same-sex couples in its extension. But, of course, same-sex marriage is also legally recognised in various countries, including the US and the UK. Yet, apparently many speakers stubbornly refuse to accept this. Despite the legal situation in their countries, they use the English word “marriage” narrowly, referring to marriages between men and women only. In other words: they employ an exclusive concept of marriage m^* . We therefore (still) find two competing concepts of marriage within a single linguistic community, m and m^* , both expressed by one and the same term “marriage”.

In some contexts of dispute, such pluralism might make things particularly tricky. For instance, consider the following exchange between a proponent and an opponent of same-sex marriage:

Opponent Olivia: “Marriage is a relation between men and women only.”

Proponent Paul: “I disagree. Marriage isn't a relation between men and women only.”

In a situation of two competing concepts of marriage, disputes like this raise questions about disagreement and topic continuity.³ Assume Olivia and Paul are using

2 Speakers might also use e with a deliberately incorrect meaning to foster the intended conceptual change. As Sterken (2020) argues, intentionally misusing an expression might lead to serious communicative disruptions. As these disruptions could often be *transformative* for the audience, though, misusing e could provide a promising strategy for conceptual engineers to implement the conceptual change they are striving for, or so Sterken would argue.

3 The problem of topic continuity goes back to Peter Strawson's (1963) critique of Carnap (1950). It is tackled by e.g. Cappelen (2018, 2020), Prinzing (2018), Nado (2019) and Thomasson (2020) in the recent literature. See also Knoll's (2020) discussion of topic

“marriage” divergently and are thus employing m^* , i.e. the narrow, pre-engineering concept of marriage, and m , the more inclusive post-engineering concept respectively. Are Olivia and Paul still disputing about the *same topic*? Do they only present the *appearance* of disagreement while merely talking past each other?⁴ Or are Olivia and Paul genuinely disagreeing – and if they are, what exactly is it they are disagreeing about? “Marriage”, marriage or marriage*?

Only recently, questions like these have prompted philosophers to challenge the naive picture of conceptual engineering and pluralism outlined. It is two such challenges to this picture that the present paper will focus on. In particular, Sarah Sawyer’s (2018, 2020) and Derek Ball’s (2020) most recent contenders to the naive view will be critically discussed. Both Sawyer and Ball consider the term “conceptual engineering” at least partly along the lines of terms like “red panda”. According to Sawyer’s dual-aspect theory of representation, the *linguistic meaning* a non-indexical term such as “marriage” *has* is to be distinguished from the *concept* this term *expresses*. And while conceptual engineers may succeed in altering the meanings of such terms, the concept expressed by these terms remains the same throughout processes of amelioration. In Sawyer’s view, there is thus some engineering going on in conceptual engineering but no engineering of *concepts*. Ball, in contrast, sticks to current orthodoxy in equating meanings with concepts. On his account, however, conceptual engineers, if successful, only *determine* the meanings/concepts of contested terms by advocating revisionary analyses of these meanings/concepts. This way, conceptual engineers do not really *engineer* – change or replace – concepts. But their arguments, if successful, “only” determine which concepts we are (and have been) using all along.

Motivating their contenders to the naive picture, Sawyer and Ball are both drawing on analyses of disputes like Olivia’s and Paul’s. According to Sawyer and Ball, to properly explain what is going on in such disputes, we can’t just rely on the naive idea of pre- and post-ameliorators employing competing concepts. This

continuity and merely verbal disputes.

4 I follow e.g. Jenkins (2014), Balcerak Jackson (2014), Vermeulen (2018) and Belleri (2018) in assuming that merely verbal disputes are characterised by two general conditions: if speakers are merely talking past each other, (i) there is no relevant disagreement between them, but (ii) they are simply using a key expression of their dispute differently (i.e. with different speakers’ meaning). Here “disagree(ment)” is used to refer to states and not activities (see Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009, 60-1) or MacFarlane (2014, 119-20) regarding this distinction). The term is used along the lines of MacFarlane’s notion of noncotenability with regard to attitudes of full beliefs (also see fn. 10). *Disputes*, in contrast, are to be understood in purely behavioural terms (Jenkins 2014, 13; Vermeulen 2018, 333). On the distinction between *merely* verbal and *verbal* disputes (i.e. metalinguistic negotiations), see below.

paper critically assesses Sawyer’s and Ball’s arguments and compares their accounts’ alleged advantages to the naive account’s explanatory potential. Furthermore, the paper proposes an alternative take on interpreting disagreements in the presence of conceptual pluralism. It suggests to “go meta”, and thus interpret the relevant disagreements as metalinguistic negotiations (see Plunkett/Sundell 2013, Plunkett 2015).

The structure of the paper is as follows: the next two sections introduce and discuss Sawyer’s dual-aspect theory, while sections 4 and 5 are concerned with Ball’s account and an exploration of our practice of voicing arguments when we are involved in disputes of amelioration. Section 6 briefly concludes. As we will see, “going meta” in our interpretation of controversies is not only compatible with a naive picture of conceptual engineering; it is also explanatorily fruitful. *Pace* Sawyer and Ball, it can explain the point of our arguments when involved in disputes like Olivia’s and Paul’s. Neither Sawyer’s dual-aspect theory nor Ball’s idea of revisionary analyses is required to accommodate our feeling of genuine disagreement and topic continuity in such cases. As a result, the naive view is on equal footing with (if not superior to) theoretically more demanding accounts such as Sawyer’s and Ball’s.

II. Sawyer’s dual-aspect theory

According to Sawyer’s externalist *dual-aspect theory of representation* (2018, 2020), non-indexical terms such as “marriage” have two aspects which are to be carefully distinguished from each other. On the one hand they *have linguistic meanings*, which supervene on patterns of usage across linguistic communities. Such patterns of usage often change over time. “Language is organic”, as Sawyer (2020, 384) puts it, and the history of the term “meat” is one of many examples for this.⁵ The meaning of “meat” has shifted over centuries from [food] to [animal flesh eaten for food] while only the latter is what “meat” means today, of course. In addition to meanings which non-indexical terms like “marriage” or “meat” *have*, such terms also *express concepts*. In contrast to meanings, concepts are mental representations, constituents of thought, rather than linguistically encoded

5 For a conception of meanings as species-like entities see Richard (2019, 2020), who suggests understanding conceptual engineering “as an attempt to foster a kind of evolution within a population” (2020, 377). On his account, conceptual engineers try bringing about so-called *c-changes*, i.e. changes in certain presuppositions accompanied by speakers’ usages of particular terms.

semantic contents of language. On Sawyer’s account, concepts are not individuated by speakers’ individual or communally shared conceptions of the world but by how the world is objectively. As we possibly misconceive various aspects of reality, we can possess and employ a concept *c* while still being fundamentally wrong about the nature of objects represented by *c*.

This separation of meanings, which terms have, and concepts, which terms express – or, as Sawyer puts it: talk and thought – also shapes her understanding of conceptual engineering. According to Sawyer, processes of amelioration do not include any elimination, revision or replacement of *concepts*. Instead, on her picture, conceptual engineering is all about changing the *meanings* of certain terms, it is about aiming to bring “the extension of a linguistic meaning of a term in line with the extension of the concept it expresses” (2020, 391). On her account, for instance, the *meaning* of “rape” did change over time, from a meaning *excluding* intra-marital transgressions to one *including* them. Yet, the *concept* which “rape” expressed over the centuries and still expresses has remained untouched by feminist struggles. Although its meaning has changed along with the term’s usage, “rape” still expresses the same concept as it did 200 years ago, according to Sawyer. Back then, speakers were simply wrong about the nature of objects represented by the concept of rape. They did grasp the linguistic meaning of “rape”, however, and thus generally used this term in line with its correct meaning at that time.

Certainly, this rather unorthodox separation of meanings and concepts is in special need of justification, and likewise is Sawyer’s resulting take on conceptual engineering. As already indicated in section 1, disputes between pre- and post-ameliorators are supposed to play a key role in this. To sufficiently accommodate facts of meaning change as well as intuitions of genuine disagreement over a single subject matter/topic⁶, Sawyer thinks it is required to draw a distinction between meanings and concepts. So, let’s briefly examine her understanding of such disputes in a bit more detail and see which phenomena are supposed to motivate her account.

Take the example of “rape” again and assume (with Sawyer) that speakers of the 18th and early 19th century were using this term – semantically correctly – for

⁶ The terms ‘topic(s)’ and ‘subject matter(s)’ are used interchangeably in this paper.

sexual assaults outside marriages only.⁷ Fortunately, patterns of usage changed. On the assumption that meaning supervenes on usage, the meaning of “rape” plausibly changed as well. I am happy to grant these assumptions. Yet, taking these circumstances into account, Sawyer now considers disputes like the following:

Anciento (around 1800): “There cannot be rape between husband and wife.”

Nowy (in 2020): “Rape between married partners is possible. A husband can rape his husband or wife, and a wife can rape her wife or husband.”

Anciento and Nowy are using “rape” differently, each semantically correctly. However, it seems as if their dispute would not simply dissolve if they learned about this difference in usage and the change of meaning. There seems to be genuine disagreement between them, which can survive such disambiguation.⁸ But how should we accommodate this impression of genuine disagreement between our speakers? Genuine disagreement is disagreement over a single subject matter and sameness of subject matter appears to require a single propositional content over the truth of which the parties disagree. A single propositional content in turn appears to require sameness of linguistic meaning, according to Sawyer (2020, 386). “Rape”, however, does not *have* the same meaning in Anciento’s and Nowy’s utterances. Due to a change in usage, the meaning of “rape” has changed over time. Therefore, according to Sawyer, if we do not separate meanings from concepts, we cannot construe a single topic Anciento and Nowy are disputing about. We fail to accommodate the intuition of genuine disagreement between them. “Linguistic meaning cannot both supervene on use *and* determine a stable subject matter”, as Sawyer (2020, 386) puts the problem. Hence, she concludes that “two representational elements are required; one to supervene on use, and the other to determine a stable subject matter” (2020, 387).⁹

7 In support of this assumption see Hasday’s (2000) detailed study of the legal history of marital rape.

8 According to Sawyer (2018, 2020) things are different regarding meaning shifts of terms such as “meat”. In such cases, disambiguation would dissolve a dispute, since it would make clear that “the subject matter of the term ‘meat’ in Shakespeare’s time is not the same as the subject matter of the term ‘meat’ now” (2020, 386). See more on this later.

9 Drawing on a puzzle introduced by Sainsbury (2014), Sawyer (2018, 2020) discusses an analogous sample case: a dispute between two speakers *A* and *B* uttering “Whales are fish” at t_1 and “Whales are not fish” at t_2 respectively. While *B* uses “whale” as competent speakers are using it today, *A* uses “whale” at t_1 to mean “a very large *fish* with a streamlined hairless body, a horizontal tail fin, and a blowhole on top of the head for breathing” (Sawyer (2018, 133-4); my emphasis). On Sawyer’s account, *A* and *B* are using “whale” divergently, each

To solve the alleged tension between meaning change and genuine disagreement, Sawyer’s dual-aspect theory introduces *concepts* as the supposedly required second representational element. According to Sawyer, it is only by distinguishing between concepts and meanings that we can plausibly explain what is going on in controversies like Anciento’s and Nowy’s. Although the *meaning* of “rape” has changed, the *concept* this term expresses has remained the same. It is this stability of concept which then secures the required continuity of topic across centuries. “Where there is stability of subject matter through linguistic change, it is concepts that explain the stability”. It is thus “also concepts that explain the possibility of genuine disagreement over a single subject matter” (2018, 145).

III. Against Sawyer’s account

As intriguing as the dual-aspect idea of representation is, it faces two problems. On the one hand, separating meanings from concepts is, *pace* Sawyer, not *required* to account for topic continuity and genuine disagreement in cases of meaning shift (problem 1). Instead, we can stick to the default of equating meanings with concepts and still explain how there is a single, continuous topic speakers like Nowy and Anciento can disagree about. On the other hand, even if we do subscribe to Sawyer’s separation of meanings and concepts, it can be shown that it is not sameness of concepts which eventually secures topic continuity over time (problem 2). The reason is simple: there are cases of dispute across centuries in which a relevant term *e* uttered by the speakers expresses the *same* concept on Sawyer’s account, but the speakers are still talking about *different* topics. And additionally, we can find cases of disputes across centuries in which *e* expresses *different* concepts according to Sawyer, yet the speakers are talking about the *same* topic nonetheless. Even within Sawyer’s account, concept continuity and topic continuity therefore turn out to be two independent phenomena.

The following two subsections lay out these two problems in reverse order. §3 briefly concludes this part of the paper.

being semantically correct at their time. Nonetheless, we have the intuition that their exchange reflects genuine disagreement. Yet, “[s]ubstantive disagreement requires agreement in meaning”, as Sainsbury (2014, 4) puts it. Sawyer – agreeing with Sainsbury’s general idea that disagreement requires conflicting content expressed by the disputants’ utterances – therefore sees the need for a second kind of representational element (in addition to meanings). (Note that Sainsbury’s puzzle is originally about the disputants’ divergent usage of “*fish*”, not “*whale*”).

1 Concept continuity and topic continuity

Let's start the discussion by pointing at an assumption which Sawyer and I agree on. Take a dispute in which one party *A* is uttering a statement of the form "*p*" while the opposing party *B* utters a statement of the form " $\sim p$ ". Sawyer's account is based on the assumption that their dispute should not be construed as reflecting genuine disagreement if the two speakers are not talking about the same subject matter/topic. I agree. In fact, following B. Balcerak Jackson (2014), I take it to be an essential attribute of *merely verbal disputes* that the parties in such disputes are talking about different topics and therefore merely past each other. (For more on this see below.) I disagree with Sawyer, however, on taking *concept continuity* as essential for securing topic continuity in cases of meaning change.

Consider disputes over centuries of the form "*p*" and " $\sim p$ " (like Anciento's and Nowy's). Sawyer argues that there is a relevant term *e* contained in "*p*" (such as "rape") which is used with different meanings by the speakers while it expresses the same concept in both of their utterances. Or, as Sawyer puts it: due to the difference in meaning, the propositional *linguistic* content of both of the disputants' utterances differs; but "*p*" expresses the same propositional *thought* content, for the concept expressed by *e* remains constant across centuries. It is this stability of concept/thought content which is supposed to be required to secure topic continuity and hence genuine disagreement over time.¹⁰ As this subsection argues, though, even in cases of meaning change and even within Sawyer's account, the connection between concept continuity and topic continuity is much looser than Sawyer makes it seem.

Just for the sake of the argument, let's subscribe to Sawyer's idea of separating meanings from concepts, i.e. linguistic content from thought content. If it really were concept continuity (in Sawyer's sense) which secured topic continuity over time, then it would certainly be surprising to find cases of (i) same concept but different topics, and (ii) different concepts but same topic. As the following two sample cases demonstrate, however, such cases do exist.

Case 1: Merely Verbal Dispute

Let's come back to our sample case of Anciento and Nowy again.

¹⁰ Note that disagreement may not only be construed as a matter of conflicting *beliefs* (even if this paper, just for ease of exposition, mostly talks as if it were). But two persons can also be in disagreement if they have different nondoxastic attitudes towards the same thing, for instance. See esp. MacFarlane (2014, ch. 6) for different notions of disagreement and Ridge (2014, ch. 6) for a discussion of disagreement in attitude.

Anciento (around 1800): “There cannot be rape between husband and wife.”

Nowy (in 2020): “Rape between married partners is possible. A husband can rape his husband or wife, and a wife can rape her wife or husband.”

Following Sawyer, I assume that the meaning of “rape” has changed over centuries from a meaning *excluding* intra-marital transgressions to a meaning *including* them. The speakers are using “rape” with divergent meanings.

Nevertheless, “rape” expresses the same concept in Anciento’s and Nowy’s statement, according to Sawyer. It is important to note, however, that even if this were the case, subscribing to an interpretation of Anciento’s and Nowy’s dispute as reflecting genuine *disagreement* would not be the only option. Sure, on the face of it, the speakers seem to hold competing beliefs on a single subject matter. But depending on the speakers’ specific communicative intentions in the context of utterance, an interpretation of them as merely talking past each other might also be a viable option. In this case, the speakers would merely use “rape” differently, with different speakers’ meaning, while not disagreeing on what the other party is intending to convey by their utterance. The two speakers might be willing to interpret the other party as speaking the truth in their own language, as Hirsch (2005) would put it. Using “rape” in its pre-ameliorated meaning of his time, Anciento would simply intend to convey that there cannot be rape_{pre} between husband and wife. Nowy, in contrast, could correctly use “rape” to mean that rape_{post} is possible between married partners.

It is thus *possible* that our two speakers are having a merely verbal dispute although, on Sawyer’s account, “rape” expresses the same concept in both of their assertions. Their dispute *could* resolve after a disambiguation. If Anciento and Nowy are merely talking past each other, however, they are not disagreeing on what the other party is intending to convey with their utterance. They are then not offering conflicting views on a single subject matter. Instead, in line with B. Balcerak Jackson’s (2014) prominent account of merely verbal disputes, it seems natural to construe them as offering compatible views on different subject matters.¹¹ After all, the reason *why* speakers are merely talking past each other is that they

11 According to B. Balcerak Jackson (2014), merely verbal disputes are defined as disputes in which speakers address questions about different subject matters while offering non-conflicting answers to these questions. So, following Balcerak Jackson’s account, in a context in which the dispute between Anciento and Nowy is merely verbal, there is no specific topic under discussion about which the speakers offer conflicting opinions.

are not talking (and disagreeing) about *the same*. Unbeknownst to them, speakers in a merely verbal dispute are conveying thoughts about slightly different topics instead, about which they do not disagree (see also Knoll (2020) and Pinder (2019: 21) on this). Disambiguation therefore works in such cases, “because it separates what are clearly two distinct subject matters”, as Sawyer (2020, 386) puts it. So, also according to Sawyer, speakers in a merely verbal dispute are concerned with different topics.

To be sure, it is not obligatory to interpret the above dispute as a merely verbal dispute about two distinct topics – rape_{pre} and rape_{post}. But it certainly is possible. Also note that interpreting the speakers as merely talking past each other does not exclude the possibility of them having *further* disputes which *do* involve genuine disagreement. After realising that Anciento is merely using “rape” differently – i.e. after dissolving the merely verbal dispute at hand –, Nowy could, for instance, still object to Anciento’s usage of this term in a *second* step and start arguing with him again. In this case, Nowy would still agree that his adversary’s assertion was true in the language of Anciento’s time. Yet, Nowy could still find the language of this time objectionable. And as a result Nowy could begin a *new* dispute about the right usage of “rape” with Anciento. Hence, even if the dispute between Nowy and Anciento were a merely verbal dispute, this would not mean that the two speakers could not *also* have a dispute concerning the usage of “rape”. After all, dissolving merely verbal disputes between speakers does not always lead to agreement about related topics.

To briefly sum up this first case: the interpretation of Anciento’s and Nowy’s dispute as a merely verbal one is certainly not the only option available. But the fact that it is *possible* to construe them as merely talking past each other seems enough to show that it is not concept continuity which secures topic continuity in all cases. Even within Sawyer’s account, there plausibly are cases in which the speakers express the *same* concept but are still talking about *different* topics.

Case 2: Metalinguistic Negotiation

Are there also cases of dispute across centuries in which a term expresses *different* concepts according to Sawyer, yet the speakers are still disagreeing about the *same* topic? There are indeed. Take the example of the term “meat”. According to Sawyer (2018, 141), not only the linguistic meaning of this term shifted over time but also the *concept* expressed by “meat” around 1600 is different from the concept that “meat” expresses today. However, it seems still possible to construe

speakers who are using “meat” in different centuries as genuinely disagreeing over one and the same topic. Take two speakers, Oberon and Pamela, saying

Oberon (in 1600): “Meat is meat.”

Pamela (today): “Meat is not meat.”

On Sawyer’s picture, “meat” expresses different concepts in each of their two assertions. Thus, according to her, there is no single propositional *thought* content (p) which is expressed by Oberon’s and negated by Pamela’s assertion.¹²

Still, the two can be discussing a single topic on which they genuinely disagree. So, *pace* Sawyer, it is actually not the case that “any appearance of disagreement is merely superficial” (2018, 141) in such a case. To see this, assume, for instance, that Oberon and Pamela are both talking to their little sons, telling them for which objects speakers should use the term “meat”. Vegetarian Pamela thinks that speakers should not use the term “meat” for meat, but try establishing the more explicit term “animal flesh” instead (her idea being that it would be preferable to use an expression that reminds people of the fact that it is actually *animals* they are eating when eating meat). Thus, Pamela is uttering “Meat is not (to be called) *meat*” to make a metalinguistic point about the (in her opinion) morally wrong usage of “meat”: do not use “meat” for meat! Taciturn Oberon in contrast intends to tell his son (unhelpfully) that “meat” is to be used for food in general (i.e. what “meat” means in Oberon’s statement, uttered around Shakespeare’s time). Oberon thinks speakers should simply use a term in line with its linguistic meaning. As a consequence, there *is* in fact genuine disagreement over centuries between Oberon in 1600 and Pamela in 2021 although, according to Sawyer, the term “meat” in their utterances not only has a different meaning but also expresses a different concept. Oberon believes that “meat” should be used for all food including animals, Pamela, however, disagrees. She is convinced that, when referring to meat, we should only use expressions that remind people of what it is they are eating.¹³

12 On Sawyer’s picture, there also is no propositional *linguistic* content, expressed by Oberon’s and negated by Pamela’s assertion, of course. For “meat” also changed its *meaning* over time.

13 Just for the sake of the argument, assume for a moment that there is a linguistic community in which “meat” has such lexical effects. Say, for instance, vegans in A ’s linguistic community introduced the term “meat” as an expression for meat because in A ’s language this term reminds people that meat is in fact animal flesh. In this case, I take it, there would be no relevant disagreement between A and Pamela on how best to use “meat”. For, given what this term means and which lexical effects it has in A ’s language, Pamela would agree to use “meat” for animal flesh in A ’s linguistic community. And given what “meat” means and which lexical effects this expression has in Pamela’s language, A would agree that speakers of Pamela’s linguistic community should *not* use this term for meat.

So, as Sawyer correctly assumes, “[l]inguistic meaning cannot both supervene on use *and* determine a stable subject matter”. And as outlined in the last section, this is why she introduces a second representational element – concepts – to do the job. However, as Pamela’s and Oberon’s case shows, it isn’t concept continuity either which generally explains the stability of topic across centuries. For, apparently, there can be topic continuity without concept continuity. In the above dispute, “meat” expresses different concepts in Oberon’s and Pamela’s utterances, according to Sawyer. Still, Oberon and Pamela *do* talk and disagree about the same metalinguistic topic – the question of how to best use “meat”. The propositions they intend to convey with their utterances are incompatible. And this is enough to accommodate disagreement between them. (For more on this also see below.)

Let’s quickly recapitulate. As we have seen, even if we subscribe to Sawyer’s account, it is not concept continuity which generally establishes a continuity of topic in cases of meaning change. On the one hand, there are cases in which a relevant term (such as “rape”) expresses the same concept but the speakers using this term are merely talking past each other and are thus speaking about divergent subject matters. And, on the other hand, there are cases in which speakers are genuinely disagreeing about the same topic although Sawyer would construe their utterances as expressing different thought contents. In other words: we also find cases of topic continuity without concept continuity. Even within Sawyer’s account, there is thus no close or stable explanatory connection between topics and concepts.

2 An alternative explanation

Let’s now move on to the second, more general goal of this section: *pace* Sawyer, separating meanings from concepts is not *required* to account for topic continuity. Instead, if we “go meta” in our interpretation of disputes between pre- and post-ameliorators, we can accommodate our impression of genuine disagreement without subscribing to Sawyer’s picture. To see this, let’s come back to our example of Anciento and Nowy.

Anciento (around 1800): “There cannot be rape between husband and wife.”

Nowy (in 2020): “Rape between married partners is possible. A husband can rape his wife or husband, and a wife can rape her husband or wife.”

As stressed in the last subsection, the right interpretation of a dispute hinges on the particular context of the dispute. For instance, there certainly is a possible context in which Anciento and Nowy are merely talking past each other due to their divergent usages of “rape”. However, in another context, things might be very different. In particular, it seems a viable option to interpret Anciento’s and Nowy’s dispute in analogy to Oberon’s and Pamela’s argument above. If we “go meta” in our interpretation of such disputes, we can easily accommodate our impression of genuine disagreement in light of meaning change. And we can do so even if we refute Sawyer’s separation of meanings and concepts.

According to a metalinguistic interpretation of the above dispute, there is a proposition over whose truth Anciento and Nowy are genuinely disagreeing: the proposition that “rape” should be used for intra-marital sexual assaults, too.¹⁴ This proposition concerns the (morally appropriate) usage of a term – and I agree that it is not literally expressed by what Nowy is saying. After all, Nowy (as well as Anciento) is *using* “rape” and not mentioning it. But this is exactly how metalinguistic negotiations are supposed to work. In metalinguistic negotiations, the relevant “linguistic expression is used (*not* mentioned) to communicate information about the appropriate usage of that very expression in context”, as Plunkett and Sundell (2013, 3) put it. I also agree with Sawyer that the propositions expressed by Anciento’s and Nowy’s assertions – the *linguistic* propositions in Sawyer’s jargon – are *compatible*. After all, “rape” has changed its meaning from 1800 to today. Plunkett and Sundell, too, point to this possibility of compatible propositional linguistic contents when setting up their account of metalinguistic negotiations: “genuine disagreements can be expressed in disputes in which the speakers literally express *compatible* contents” (2013, 12). However, Sawyer seems to misunderstand what Plunkett and Sundell’s thesis amounts to. For her, their account refutes the “mainstream position on disagreement” by implying that “disagreement can be accommodated without appeal to a shared propositional content” (2020, 387). She then construes her theory as offering an allegedly superior “middle way”. That is, she a) agrees “with Plunkett and Sundell that substantive disagreement does not require sameness of linguistic meaning”; but she b) also sticks to the supposed mainstream in assuming that there has to be *some* “single propositional content over the truth of which the parties to the dispute disagree”

14 There are in fact several propositions over whose truth-value the speakers are genuinely disagreeing in their dispute. E.g., there is the further proposition that “rape” should not be used for extra-marital transgressions. For ease of exposition, this section will only focus on Nowy’s utterance and the proposition mentioned.

(2020, 388). For Sawyer, of course, this propositional content is *thought*, i.e. concept content. *Pace* Sawyer, however, Plunkett and Sundell’s account does *not* imply that *there is no* single propositional content in cases of metalinguistic disagreement over the truth of which the disputants disagree.¹⁵ On the contrary, there *is* a proposition over whose truth Anciento and Nowy disagree, namely the *metalinguistic proposition* that “rape” should be used for intra-marital transgressions, too. Of course, this metalinguistic content Anciento and Nowy disagree about is not *literally expressed* by one of their utterances; it is merely *pragmatically conveyed* by what Nowy is saying. But this does not mean that there *is no* single propositional content the parties are disagreeing about. Quite the contrary.¹⁶

So, to again briefly summarise my point: if we are “going meta” in our interpretation of the above controversy, we easily find a topic Anciento and Nowy are likely to be disagreeing about: the right usage of “rape”. Anciento is pleading for a usage of “rape” according to which this term is to be used for extra-marital transgressions only. Nowy, in contrast, pragmatically communicates his conflicting opinion on this: according to him, “rape” is to be used for sexual violence inside marriages, too. This interpretation of their dispute does not hinge on any separation of meanings and concepts. “Going meta” simply leaves Sawyer’s distinction un-called-for.

3 Conclusion

§1 of this section demonstrated that even if we take Sawyer’s unorthodox separation of meanings and concepts for granted, topic and concept continuity come out as two independent phenomena. According to the counterexamples I have presented, two disputants accidentally talking about *different* topics – and thus merely past each other – can still discuss what (in Sawyer’s terms) is the *same* thought content. Furthermore, two speakers can express (their negation of) *divergent* thought contents while nonetheless disagreeing on *one and the same* topic. *Pace* Sawyer, it thus need not be “concepts that explain the possibility of genuine disagreement over a single subject matter” (2018, 145).

As was laid out in §2, acknowledging the option of “going meta” also undermines the urgent need for Sawyer’s distinction. *Pace* Sawyer, separating meanings from

15 Also see Plunkett and Sundell’s (2013, 11) proposal for an analysis of a workable notion of disagreement actually named “Disagreement Requires Conflict in Content”.

16 That is not some special feature of metalinguistic negotiations. In disputes in which speakers are *not* negotiating the usage or meaning of a term, the propositional content they are disagreeing about need not be literally expressed by what the speakers are saying either. (Also see e.g. Plunkett and Sundell (2013, 12-13) on this.)

concepts is *not required* to account for genuine disagreement in light of meaning change. If we construe cases like Anciento's and Nowy's as metalinguistic negotiations, we can interpret disputants as genuinely disagreeing over a single continuous topic: the right usage of a term. This interpretation only depends on a distinction between contents *literally expressed* by speakers' assertions and contents *pragmatically conveyed* by the speakers. But it can do without distinguishing concepts from meanings. Conceptual pluralism and disagreement are fully compatible.

To be sure, the considerations of this section do not *vindicate* a metalinguistic interpretation of *all* possible disputes between pre- and post-ameliorators. However, they at least show that the metalinguistic picture is an equivalent contender to Sawyer's account, that is worthy of a more detailed discussion. Also note that the burden of proof might now be on Sawyer. Her separation of meanings and concepts not only goes against current orthodoxy in the philosophy of language. By stipulating a second representational element, her account is also less simple and parsimonious than the naive picture. If there is no good reason to abandon the naive picture, then sticking to it seems *prima facie* preferable. As this section has argued, Sawyer has not provided us with a strong reason to subscribe to her view.

It is not as if there *were* no potential reasons which could cast some doubt on the adequacy of "going meta". There are. And as the following discussion of Ball's (2020) account shows, the supposed downsides of "going meta" might be in need of further justification. It is just that a detailed discussion is yet to come. Until the matter is settled, the metalinguistic picture should not be ruled out prematurely.¹⁷

IV. Ball's account and his *argument argument*

Sawyer's view is not the only account which is incompatible with the naive view of conceptual pluralism presented in the introduction. Ball (2020) lines up against the naive picture as well. In contrast to Sawyer, though, he is not arguing for setting apart meanings and concepts. Instead, his account builds on the controversial idea of revisionary analyses.

¹⁷ In particular, the metalinguistic account has to deal with the problem of speakers explicitly refusing an interpretation of their dispute as a metalinguistic negotiation (see section 5). Yet, Sawyer's view is also not without its problems. After all, Sawyer suggests abandoning the common sense picture of concepts as meanings without having provided a really strong reason for doing so. Overall, it therefore seems fair to see the two accounts as equivalent contenders, at least for the time being.

According to Ball, projects of conceptual engineering such as Sally Haslanger's (2000) ameliorative approach to the concept of women, for instance, neither aim at meaning/concept change nor the introduction of a new meaning/concept. As red pandas are no pandas, conceptual engineers are no engineers, according to Ball. Rather, instead of altering/replacing the meanings of contested terms, conceptual engineers aim at *revisionary analyses* of terms such as "women". These analyses are "revisionary, in that they depart from present usage and beliefs", Ball (2020, 37) tells us, "but are still descriptive in that they are making a claim about what we mean now and have meant all along." They are supposed to be successful if at the end of a discourse speakers are willing to subscribe to them. So if in the case of "women", for instance, speakers really came to use this term such that it comes out true that *women* are systematically subordinated on the basis of certain observed or imagined bodily features, then Haslanger's proposed revisionary analysis of "women" would turn out to be a success. It would then really determine the meaning of "women".¹⁸ A general acceptance of the proposed analysis, however, would not only fix what this term means *from then on*; it would also settle what "women" has meant already the whole time. So, on Ball's metasemantic picture, the meaning "women" has *now* is determined at least in part by future facts.

As Sawyer takes her separation of meanings and concepts to be *required*, Ball, too, takes his view on conceptual engineering to be *inevitable*. According to Ball, his

view is superior to the alternatives defended by most proponents of "conceptual ethics" and "conceptual engineering" (according to which revisionary theorizing involves replacing words or concepts) because it better explains the arguments we advance when we engage with proposed revisionary analyses. (2020, abstract)

As Ball maintains, we should favour his account since only his account is able to sufficiently explain what is going on in argumentative disputes such as the following:

Olivia: "The purpose of marriage is to produce children. Therefore, same-sex couples cannot be married."

Paul: "I disagree. Marriage isn't a relation between men and women only. Same-sex couples *can* be married. (And I also reject your premise: the purpose of marriage is *not* to produce children.)"

¹⁸ For a critique of Haslanger's suggestion see e.g. Jenkins (2016).

Let's consider this dispute in a bit more detail. According to Ball, Olivia and Paul argue for different views on marriage (not: "marriage") here. And depending on which of their views eventually succeeds, the meaning of "marriage" will get fixed accordingly. So, "marriage" does not get a *new* meaning if one proposal comes out ahead, but "a successful stipulation fixes the meaning of the word as it was used all along" (2020, 51). Allegedly then, the meaning of "marriage" is the same in both of the speakers' statements, which is why, on Ball's account, we can construe Olivia and Paul as talking about the *same topic* without difficulty.

Some views, in contrast, are unable to do so, according to Ball. According to these *subject-change views*, opponents and proponents of same-sex marriage simply employ different concepts of marriage. With his assertion, Paul thus changes the subject: as he is using "marriage" differently, Paul is no longer talking about the same phenomenon Olivia was talking about. As a consequence, subject-change views fail to interpret disputants (such as Olivia and Paul) as making claims and raising objections they take to be *true* and *relevant* to the debate at hand. According to Ball, such views fail to come up with an explanation of why disputants are saying what they are saying and how their arguments bear on the issue discussed. They "cannot make sense of many of the argumentative moves" pre- and post-ameliorators make in their debates – in short: they "cannot explain the way we argue". According to Ball, this "constitutes a powerful argument" against these views. It is this argument on which Ball bases his unorthodox contender to the naive picture. He names it the *argument argument* (2020, 41).

Admittedly, construing arguments such as the above as metalinguistic negotiations also means subscribing to a subject-change view. When involved in a metalinguistic negotiation, speakers are expressing different concepts with a commonly used term *e*. And usually, they aim at a revision or replacement of concepts when negotiating this term's proper usage – in other words: they aim at changing the meaning of *e*. Consequently, resolved metalinguistic negotiations (at least often) result in a change of topic, for better or worse. If, for instance, the meaning of "marriage" changes due to, say, a widespread public debate, then people pre- and post-amelioration will talk about *different* topics when uttering "marriage": marriage and marriage*. Despite this long-term effect of topic change, however, there remains a plausible explanation of what is going on in relevant debates between pre- and post-ameliorators. If we "go meta" in our interpretation of these debates, then not only can we construe such disputes as being about the *same metalinguistic topic*. One can also make sense of the way disputants like Olivia and Paul

are arguing. Presupposing that they *are* covertly discussing metalinguistic topics (despite using and not mentioning “marriage”), Ball’s argument does not constitute a challenge to the naive picture of conceptual engineering. (As pointed out in the next section, though, Ball’s argument might in fact challenge his own view.)

Let me be clear about what Ball and I agree on. As we have seen, Olivia comes up with the following premise in her reasoning:

(1) “The purpose of marriage is to produce children.”

Now suppose, we read Olivia’s conclusion (C) as a metalinguistic statement about “marry”/“marriage”. That is, assume that by uttering

(C) “Same-sex couples cannot be married”

Olivia intends to convey that “marry”/“marriage” should not be used for relations between same-sex couples. Admittedly then, it is hard to see any way that Olivia’s premise (1) would (or should) directly convince Paul of her metalinguistic conclusion (C) if we do not “go meta” in interpreting premise (1) as well. To vary this thought: I agree that it is in fact hard to understand how Olivia’s premise (1) might directly persuade Paul of a metalinguistic conclusion if we do not “go meta” in our interpretation of (1), too.

But, as I see it, it is *prima facie* plausible not only to “go meta” in our interpretation of (C) but also to read (1) as intended to communicate a metalinguistic thought: the thought that the terms “marriage” and “marry” should only be used for relations whose alleged purpose it is to produce children. Interpreting Olivia as communicating this metalinguistic thought with (1) does provide a straightforward explanation of the way she argues. Olivia simply tries to convince Paul of a metalinguistic conclusion by assuming a metalinguistic premise. So, *pace* Ball (2020, 42), the metalinguistic picture *can* in fact account for the way pre- and post-ameliorators argue. If we truly read Olivia’s and Paul’s (whole!) dispute as a metalinguistic dispute about “marriage”/“marry”, then we can construe the parties as intending to convey conflicting metalinguistic thoughts, which they both take to be true and relevant to the debate at hand. Given a metalinguistic interpretation of what is going on, Ball’s argument against the naive view therefore fails.

To be sure, Ball wants to read the arguments advanced in such debates as *first-order* arguments:

[O]pponents of same-sex marriage [...] sometimes claim that the purpose of marriage is to produce children. This is (or at least seems to be) an argument about marriage (rather than an argument about “marriage”.) (2020, 39)

So, Ball explicitly rejects a metalinguistic reading of sentences like (1). But as far as I can see, he does not provide any substantial reasons for why we should really follow him in this regard. That such statements *are not* about the proper usage of terms is a crucial step in his line of argument, however. After all, if we understand speakers like Olivia and Paul as communicating metalinguistic thoughts, then subscribing to Ball’s unorthodox account is no longer inevitable.¹⁹

That Ball does not *cite* any reasons to avoid “going meta” does not mean that there *are* no such reasons. Yet the mere fact that speakers do not mention but *use* terms like “marriage” differently is not a particularly strong reason. This is because metalinguistic negotiations are precisely characterised by speakers using terms differently (see section 3). There might nevertheless be a reason to remain sceptical about “going meta” and this certainly deserves a more thorough discussion. The next section can only hint at this discussion. However, the section will already show that Ball’s account remains far from being vindicated. The naive picture is strong enough to stay in the game.

V. Speakers’ errors and the *argument argument* revisited

Let’s start the discussion by going back to Ball’s example of Olivia and Paul:

Olivia: “The purpose of marriage is to produce children. Therefore, same-sex couples cannot be married.”

Paul: “I disagree. Marriage isn’t a relation between men and women only. Same-sex couples *can* be married.”

As we have seen in the last section, if we read the speakers as communicating metalinguistic thoughts about “marriage”/“marry” with their utterances, we can easily explain the way they argue. But what if, on further inspection, the two

¹⁹ Towards the end of his paper (2020, 52-3), Ball discusses cases of belief revision reflected in sentences like “I used to think that two women could not marry each other, but now I see that I was wrong”. And he takes such sentences as expressing belief revisions about *marriage*, not “marriage”. But why shouldn’t we interpret speakers as reporting belief revisions about the proper usage of terms with such statements? As before, Ball does not provide any reason for this beyond an appeal to intuition. (For why we shouldn’t rely too heavily on intuitions in the present context, see the following section.)

parties reject a metalinguistic understanding of their assertions? What if they explicitly refuse to be interpreted as pragmatically conveying any metalinguistic propositions? What if they want to be understood as only communicating incompatible first-order views on *marriage* instead? This certainly seems possible. And, as Thomasson (2017) and Plunkett and Sundell (2014, 2019) have noticed, it *prima facie* spells trouble for the metalinguistic account. For especially on a classic Gricean (1975) understanding of conversational implicature – and let’s suppose this really *is* the pragmatic mechanism underlying metalinguistic negotiations²⁰ – the speakers would have to *intend* to pragmatically convey metalinguistic content with their first-order utterances. But if Olivia and Paul deny having such intentions, then this seems like a good reason to refrain from “going meta” in our interpretation of what they most plausibly mean.

If friends of the metalinguistic picture want to “go meta” even in such cases of explicit denial, then they have to come up with an explanation of why we should distrust the disputants’ avowals. They have to explain why speakers *err* about their own communicative intents (also see Belleri (2020, 4) on this). As Plunkett and Sundell as well as Thomasson have pointed out, providing such an explanation is possible. After all, the semantics-pragmatics distinction is technically heavy-weight and often rather subtle. It might therefore not be too surprising to see speakers not having a firm grasp of what exactly it is they intend to pragmatically communicate with their assertions. That speakers are often wrong about what their dispute *really* is about also looks overly familiar. So, even if speakers explicitly refuse a metalinguistic interpretation, we might still have reasons to take this to be the best interpretation possible. Yet, even so, explaining why some pre- and post-ameliorators are wrong about how to correctly interpret their own utterances is certainly still a price proponents of a metalinguistic interpretation have to pay. (Even if this price might not be that high.)²¹ But should we therefore give up on “going meta” and subscribe to Ball’s unorthodox account instead? I don’t think so.

20 Also see Plunkett and Sundell (2019, 12-13) for other, less problematic options as well as Thomasson (2017, 23-5) for a brief illustration of how disputants involved in a metalinguistic negotiation might be understood as performing metaconventional speech acts instead of pragmatically conveying informational content.

21 Of course, this is only a price they have to pay if they stick to the idea that the speakers, unbeknownst to them, *are* in fact discussing a metalinguistic topic. An alternative option for proponents of the naive view might be to construe disputants like Olivia and Paul as merely talking past each other in such cases. To be sure, the speakers would then erroneously take their dispute as reflecting genuine disagreement. Yet this error might be explainable. Because even if the speakers are having a merely verbal dispute, there can still exist a metalinguistic disagreement between them expressible in a further dispute. Hence, there is a dispute in the vicinity which is still to be had and *not* merely verbal but about the proper usage of a term.

On the one hand, his account, too, accuses speakers of making significant errors. And on the other hand, Ball's theory seems exposed to his very own *argument argument* presented in the last section. In what follows I will detail these two replies in turn.

For a discussion of the first worry, let's assume that some day in the future the liberals' stipulation is successful and sentences such as "Two men can marry each other" turn out to be true. (Let's also stipulate that this is not yet the case.) On Ball's view, this success would retrospectively determine the meaning of "marriage" in Paul's and Olivia's dispute. That is, if (and when) conservatives come to accept the liberals' revisionary analysis of "marriage", this would not only determine the meaning of this term from then on. It would also determine what speakers meant by uttering "marriage" all along. Conservatives like Olivia would have always been using "marriage" liberally. But, of course, this would come as a surprise to them. And asked now whether by uttering sentences like (1) Olivia intended to convey a thought about a) a relation between men and women only or b) a relation which can hold between same-sex couples, too, Olivia would certainly insist on a). According to Ball's account, however, conservatives would *err* about having conveyed a thought about relation a). Instead, contrary to what they believe, what they would have "meant all along is the relation that same-sex couples can stand in" (2020, 53).

To be sure, speakers *are* sometimes wrong about the objects they pick out by using a linguistic term. Flat earthers, for instance, are wrong when thinking that they are using the term "earth" to refer to something flat. So why worry about conservatives being wrong in thinking that they have always used "marriage" to refer to a relation between men and women only? One notable difference between these two cases is that Ball, I take it, would not consider the sentence "The earth is spherical" as being metasemantically analytic of "earth". That is, he would not take the meaning of "earth" to be determined by the stipulation that this sentence is to be true. In contrast, however, he *would* see a sentence like "Two women can marry each other" as metasemantically analytic of "marry" (provided that the liberals' analysis succeeds) (cf. 2020, 53).²² On Ball's picture, conservatives therefore utter a number of *analytic* falsehoods when being engaged in disputes with

22 A sentence is metasemantically analytic with respect to a word, according to Ball, "iff the meaning of that [...] word is partially fixed by the stipulation that the sentence is to be true" (2020, 50). So, on Ball's picture, the stipulation of a sentence such as "Two men can marry each other" as true partially determines the meaning of the word "marry". The sentence is thus metasemantically analytic with respect to this term.

liberals like Paul. (Flat earthers, in contrast, do not make analytic mistakes about the meaning of “earth” but simply err about the earth’s sphericity.)

To be sure, I am also happy to concede that speakers *are* sometimes making analytic mistakes. But interpreting speakers like Olivia as unknowingly expressing the more liberal concept with “marriage” is certainly not the most charitable interpretation of what these speakers are saying.²³ (Note that, on the metalinguistic picture, Olivia is expressing the more narrow concept when speaking of “marriage”.) What is more, it seems questionable whether construing speakers as broadly making all kinds of analytic mistakes is really to be preferred over sometimes taking them to be mistaken about the pragmatic import of their utterances. It is thus not clear to me that, compared to the metalinguistic account, Ball’s view really is better off in avoiding ascribing relevant *errors* to the speakers involved.

Most notably, though, Ball’s account is called into question by his own *argument argument*. According to Ball, subscribing to his idea of retrospective meaning stipulation is required. The metalinguistic view fails to spell out how “disputes about revisionary analyses involve genuine disagreement”. According to Ball, it “cannot explain how these disputes are conducted: it cannot explain the way we argue” (2020, 41). As section 4 has argued, though, these allegations are unfounded. If we take the idea of metalinguistic interpretations seriously, Ball’s view is not inevitable.

What we have not spelled out in detail so far is how Ball’s *own* account answers the argument argument, i.e. how Ball’s account explains the way disputants like Olivia and Paul respond to reasons throughout their discourse. Let’s do this now.

Recall that the argument/premise Olivia provides for her conclusion

(C) “Same-sex couples cannot be married.”

is

(1) “The purpose of marriage is to produce children.”

Now, Ball discusses two possible ways in which debates between proponents and opponents of same-sex marriage might end up: (i) opponents like Olivia (O) con-

²³ Also see Hirsch’s *charity to understanding* on this. According to this principle of interpretive charity, “typical speakers of a language have a sufficiently adequate grasp of their linguistic and conceptual resources so that they don’t generally make a priori (conceptually) false assertions” (Hirsch 2005, 71). Note, though, that making a conceptual mistake does not amount to making an *a priori* mistake on Ball’s picture. For, according to his view, a term can have a certain meaning in virtue of a (e.g. future) stipulation which the speaker is in no position to know of (cf. 2020, 48-9).

vince proponents like Paul (P) of their view, and (ii) proponents convince opponents.

1. If O convinces P – so that O and P end up agreeing that same-sex marriage is by definition impossible – then the assertion of (1) will seem to have been a good argument: an argument that bears on the issue, and expresses a reasonable belief. [...]
2. If P convinces O – so that O and P end up agreeing that same-sex marriage is possible – then the argument will seem flawed. (2020, 55)

On Ball's account, if some day e.g. the *opponents* of same-sex marriage succeed, then this retrospectively establishes that Olivia and Paul express the more narrow, conservative concept of marriage when uttering "marriage" during their dispute. Sentence (C) will thus come out as true and inconsistent with Paul's assertion. (In this first case, (1) "may end up as [...] true", too, as Ball (2020, 55) remarks.) In the case of *proponents* succeeding, in contrast, Olivia and Paul are employing the more liberal concept of marriage when speaking of "marriage" in their dispute. (1) as well as (C) then end up being false. But both of Olivia's assertions would still be inconsistent with Paul's, even in this second case. So, in this sense, Olivia would still make a *relevant* contribution to the debate even if liberals like Paul succeeded. Ball's picture can therefore easily vindicate the appearance of *disagreement* between the speakers. Whoever succeeds, the two parties intend to convey conflicting beliefs about one and the same topic.

This certainly is a virtue of Ball's account. Yet even so, Ball's picture is challenged by his own argument. On a closer look, his theory of retrospective meaning stipulation fails to explain how disputants respond to reasons in debates like Olivia's and Paul's. Let us spell out this worry in more detail.

In typical cases of dispute, a speaker (or group of speakers) *A* wants to convince another speaker (or group of speakers) *B* of a certain thesis (or group of theses) *t*, which *B* assumes to be false. In the course of the debate, *A* comes up with reasons for why *B* should take *t* to be true. (In the above case, for instance, Olivia's assertion of (1) is supposed to be a reason for Paul to start believing conclusion (C).) If *B* finds *A*'s reasons convincing, then at least in an ideal world *B* changes his mind. Moreover, *B* takes *t* to be true (and changes his mind) *because* he judges *A*'s reasons to be convincing. That is, *B* starts accepting thesis *t* because *B* judges the reasons provided by *A* during their dispute as being good reasons for believing in *t*.

Now assume that, sadly, possibility 1 above is actualised. That is, opponents of same-sex marriage like Olivia really convince proponents like Paul. The opponents' analysis of "marriage" thus comes out ahead and the meaning of "marriage" is retrospectively determined such that Olivia's conclusion (C) is true. Hence, on Ball's view, it is already settled during Olivia's and Paul's dispute that Olivia's assertion of (1) really is a "good argument" (2020, 55) – a good reason for Paul and others to be convinced of conclusion (C) – and that is a good thing.²⁴ According to Ball, however, it is a future fact that retrospectively determines whether (1) *is* a good argument: the fact that Paul and other proponents of same-sex marriage will eventually be *convinced* by (1) and hence follow Olivia and the rest of the opponents to accept (C). So, on Ball's account, (1) is a good reason to believe in (C) *because* Paul and others will eventually be convinced by it. Sentence (1) is a good argument that "expresses a reasonable belief" (2020, 55) in virtue of the fact that Olivia's analysis of "marriage" is going to be accepted by proponents like Paul. This, however, seems to turn things on its head. And it seems to misconstrue how we take ourselves and others to be responding to reasons in such debates. Why?

As I see it, we would certainly insist that the reason why we change our minds about something is that the person we are arguing with provided good reasons to do so – reasons we rationally responded to. Proponents like Paul, for instance, would certainly insist that the reason why they became convinced of (C) is that the opponents' assertions of (1) and other arguments they gave provided good reasons to believe in (C). They would take themselves as eventually accepting the opponents' analysis of "marriage" *because* they came to find the opponents' arguments convincingly good arguments – better arguments than their own. But they would certainly *resist* the idea that (1) and other arguments provided good reasons to believe in (C) *in virtue* of the fact that proponents like themselves will be eventually convinced by them.

Intuitively, what makes arguments like (1) good and convincing should not hinge on whether they will eventually be *accepted as good* or not. What makes Olivia's statement a good argument and a true sentence in the setting detailed should not be the fact that Paul will eventually subscribe to it. The latter, however, seems exactly how Ball construes the situation. According to his account, Olivia's assertion of (1) provides a reasonable argument for Paul because her analysis of "marriage" is going to be accepted by proponents like Paul at some point in the future. (For

²⁴ In contrast, if the proponents' analysis succeeds, then Olivia's assertions would simply be false; her argument would thus be "flawed" (2020, 55).

only in this case is what Olivia says retrospectively settled as true.) On Ball's picture, Olivia provided a good argument because proponents like Paul will be convinced by it. Yet this, of course, is not how we usually see ourselves responding to reasons in such debates. When involved in ameliorative disputes, we see ourselves responding to reasons that are good and convincing independently of whether somebody (ourselves included) will eventually acknowledge them as such.

A closer look at how Ball explains the way pre- and post-ameliorators argue therefore reveals that his argument argument seems to challenge his very own account. At least at first glance, his account cannot accommodate the way disputants respond to reasons. The metalinguistic account, in contrast, can do so.²⁵

As a result, Ball's view is far from being established as "superior" to the naive picture of conceptual engineering. As we have seen in the last section, "going meta" in our interpretation of debates between pre- and post-ameliorators can counter Ball's argument argument. The naive view can easily explain the way we argue. *Pace* Ball, his account is therefore not inevitable. Ball simply dismisses "going meta" without argument. As conceded in this section, this does not mean that the metalinguistic picture is without problems. In fact, on a classic Gricean picture, the account needs to construe some speakers as erring about their own communicative intentions. Compared to the alternative Ball (2020) provides, however, this price seems well worth paying. For not only does his account subscribe considerable errors to speakers, too. In contrast to the metalinguistic subject-change view, Ball's idea of revisionary analysis is also questioned by his own argument argument.

VI. Conclusion

This paper has critically discussed two recent contenders to the naive view of conceptual engineering: Sawyer's dual-aspect theory of representation and Ball's idea of revisionary analyses. According to both theorists, "conceptual engineering" is a bit like the term "red panda". According to Sawyer, there is some engineering go-

25 This is not meant to suggest that Ball could not come up with a reply to the challenge outlined. For example, Ball could insist that what might make (1) a good reason to believe in (C) in the situation outlined is eventually not just the fact that proponents will be convinced by (1). Instead, Ball might e.g. argue that proponents will eventually accept (C) as true (and take (1) to be convincing) because a) there is only one maximally joint-carving concept of marriage, b) this concept is such that it excludes same-sex marriage and c) in the long run, speakers' beliefs come to mirror the fundamental structure of the world. (Thanks to Delia Belleri for pointing this out.) Note, however, that such a solution would bring in heavy theoretical machinery and controversial commitments into Ball's account – commitments that could easily be avoided by "going meta".

ing on in conceptual engineering yet no engineering of *concepts*. According to Ball, on the other hand, there are concepts involved but no real *engineering* of them. As a result, both accounts reject the tight connection between conceptual engineering and conceptual pluralism outlined in section 1: according to Sawyer as well as Ball, projects of conceptual engineering do not lead to situations of several competing concepts within a single linguistic community.

As this paper has shown, however, their two accounts are in fact built on a rejection of the metalinguistic picture and an assessment of disputes and topics which could not hold up against scrutiny. Sawyer and Ball take their own views to be required to sufficiently accommodate our impression of disagreement between pre- and post-ameliorators. It is alleged that we must subscribe to these accounts to explain the way we argue. As demonstrated, however, both of their unorthodox views can in fact be avoided when sticking to the naive picture.

As we have seen in section 2, Sawyer's dual-aspect theory postulates a further representational element in addition to meanings: concepts. Sawyer takes this move to be necessary for explaining doxastic disagreement and topic continuity in cases of meaning change. Yet, as section 3 laid out, the naive picture can incorporate such cases. Furthermore, even within Sawyer's theory – i.e. even if there were a distinction between concepts and meanings – concept continuity would be neither necessary nor sufficient for securing topic continuity over time. This certainly does not vindicate the metalinguistic picture either. But it might still be enough to shift the burden of proof back on Sawyer's unorthodox and less parsimonious account.

Ball's idea of revisionary analysis faces similar problems. As demonstrated in section 4, his account, too, is not inevitable. Cases of argumentative dispute between pre- and post-ameliorators *can* be explained by the so-called subject-change view. Yes, sometimes this view might have to attribute considerable errors to speakers. But, as section 5 laid out, the same holds for Ball's view. Additionally – and in contrast to the metalinguistic view – Ball's picture seems to run into trouble when explaining the disputants' way of responding to arguments.

Summing up, this paper has come up with reasons to consider the naive picture of conceptual engineering a serious contender to two of its most recent rivals. As long as there is no good reason to stop being naive, we might thus stick to the idea of conceptual engineers as engineering concepts for a little while longer.

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