Verbal Debates in Epistemology

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Abstract

The idea that certain philosophical debates are "merely verbal" has historically been raised as a challenge against (large parts of) metaphysics. In this paper, I explore an analogous challenge to large parts of epistemology, which is motivated by recent arguments in experimental philosophy. I argue that, while this challenge may have some limited success, it cannot serve as a wedge case for wide-ranging skepticism about the substantiveness of epistemological debates; most epistemological debates are immune to the worries it raises.

1 Introduction

If you're a professional philosopher, and you're honest with yourself, you've probably worried at some point or another that some debate in which you have a stake is ultimately merely verbal, or terminological, or somehow non-substantive. You've almost certainly thought that some debates in which *other* philosophers have stakes are merely verbal. There's an entire subfield of philosophy—metametaphysics—in which a good portion of the literature consists of debates about whether certain metaphysical debates might somehow be non-substantive or merely verbal.[1]

I won't try to resolve any questions about whether particular metaphysical debates are or are not substantive in this paper. Rather, I'll explore analogous issues concerning epistemological debates. I'll organize my discussion around a challenge to the substantiveness of a wide range of epistemological debates posed by recent work in experimental philosophy. I'll argue that, while the challenge may have some limited success, it cannot serve as a wedge case for a more wide-ranging skepticism about the substantiveness of epistemological debates; most epistemological debates are immune to the worries it raises.

Before getting into the details, however, it will help to have an example of a debate that is plausibly merely verbal, and to say a bit about what I'm assuming about the

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[1]See the essays collected in Chalmers et al. (2009). Of course, these contemporary metametaphysial debates are not historically anomalous. Skepticism about whether (some parts of) metaphysics are substantive can trace its intellectual origins at least as far back as Hume, and the contemporary debates are heavily influenced by the work of Carnap. In this paper I'll use 'non-substantive' and 'merely verbal' as synonyms. I'll call debates that are not merely verbal 'substantive.'

distinction between substantive debates and merely verbal ones. In his lecture "What Pragmatism Means," William James discusses a debate he once observed that all of us, I hope, can agree is in some sense merely verbal:[2]

> Some years ago, being with a camping party in the mountains, I returned from a solitary ramble to find every one engaged in a ferocious metaphysical dispute. The corpus of the dispute was a squirrel—a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree-trunk; while over against the tree's opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: *Does the man go round the squirrel or not?* He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go round the squirrel? In the unlimited leisure of the wilderness, discussion had been worn threadbare. (James, 1948, p. 141)

James goes on to give a particular account of *why* the debate concerning whether the man goes round the squirrel or not is a merely verbal debate; James' view is (roughly) that debates are substantive only when they have some practical import—only when resolving them one way rather than another would make a difference to how one would behave: "If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right." (1948, p.142) Because we could regiment our use of the word 'round' in various ways, none of which would lead to our behaving differently,[3] James regards the debate over whether the man goes round the squirrel as merely verbal.

However, we needn't accept this account of what it is for a debate to be merely verbal in order to think that there's *some* distinction in the neighborhood, and that the debate in James' anecdote falls on one side of that distinction. Imagine two parties who are having a debate over whether the number of stars in the universe is odd or even. The question of whether there is an odd or even number of stars in the universe (assuming there are finitely many), while probably of no practical importance, is plausibly a substantive matter—at the very least, unlike the debate James discusses, this sort of debate does not seem to call for linguistic regimentation.

I don't have an alternative account of the distinction merely verbal debates and substantive ones, and I don't assume that some reductive account can be had.[4] Moreover, for familiar reasons, we should be doubtful that the distinction between substantive debates and merely verbal ones is a precise one. It will admit of borderline cases,

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[2]Ernest Sosa (2010) and David Chalmers (2011) also use James' case as a paradigm example of a merely verbal dispute.

[3]Presumably James means to exclude merely linguistic behavior.

[4]For some attempts to give informative accounts of what the distinction amounts to, see the essays by Hirsch and Chalmers in Chalmers et al. (2009).

and it won't always be clear whether resolving some debate calls for a determination of fact or a regimentation of linguistic usage.[5] Vague distinctions are still distinctions, however; even after we admit that the distinction between substantive and merely verbal debates is a vague one, and even if we despair of finding a general reductive account of the distinction, we might still reasonably ask about the status of particular debates. The debate in James' anecdote, I'd suggest, is a paradigm case of a merely verbal debate, and we might wonder whether particular epistemological debates are relevantly (dis)similar to it without assuming that the sense of (dis)similarity at issue can be precisely or reductively characterized. In particular, I'll argue in §3.2 that a wide range of epistemological debates are *clear* cases of substantive debates; it's compatible with my arguments that some other cases may be harder to classify.

While particular views about the distinction between substantive and merely verbal debates can be quite controversial, I hope that it is not controversial that there is *some* legitimate distinction in the area. Once we accept this distinction, why might we worry that certain epistemological debates are merely verbal?

2   The Experimental Critique

In recent years, a number of philosophers have provided empirical support for the claim that there is significant variation in epistemic intuitions along ethnic, socioeconomic, and gender lines.[6] To take just one example, Weinberg et al. (2001) presented the following prompt describing a standard Gettier case to their experimental subjects:

> Bob has a friend, Jill, who has driven a Buick for many years. Bob therefore thinks that Jill drives an American car. He is not aware, however, that her Buick has recently been stolen, and he is also not aware that Jill has replaced it with a Pontiac, which is a different kind of American car. Does Bob really know that Jill drives an American car, or does he only believe it?

Surprisingly, there were significant cross-cultural differences in the responses.[7] Western subjects were substantially more likely to answer that Bob only believes that Jill drives an American car, while in East Asian subjects the pattern was reversed. Weinberg et al. also found cross-cultural differences in responses to a variant of Keith Lehrer's (2000) "truetemp" case as well as differences along socioeconomic lines in responses to a variant of Fred Dretske's (1970) "cleverly disguised mule" case.

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[5]Of course, this issue is closely related to that of the analytic/synthetic distinction. While some philosophers take Quine (1953) to have shown that there is no such distinction, a more moderate (and I think more plausible) position holds that there is a distinction, while conceding that it is a vague one. Johnston (1992), for one, refers repeatedly to the "vagueness of the analytic/synthetic distinction."

[6]Here I'll focus on the work of Weinberg et al. (2001) as a representative sample of work on variation in intuitions across ethnic and socioeconomic lines, though see Buckwalter and Stich (2010) for discussion of variation in epistemic intuitions across gender lines.

[7]The question of whether these results reflect a robust difference is highly controversial. In recent experiments focusing on similar scenarios to the ones studied by Weinberg et. al., Nagel (2012) reports that she "did not find any statistically significant correlations between ethnicity or gender and knowledge ascription."

There are a number of ways one might use results like the ones above to provide a critique of standard epistemological practice. One—the one which Weinberg et al. focus on—involves raising a skeptical challenge; insofar as epistemologists (a group composed mainly of high socioeconomic status Westerners) rely on their intuitions in their practice, we can ask what grounds they have for taking their own intuitions to be more reliable than those of members of other ethnic or socioeconomic groups.[8]

However, I want to focus on a different way in which results like Weinberg et al.'s might seem to threaten epistemological practice. One response to such results— sometimes offered as a defense against skeptical challenges[9]—involves holding that they point to subtle conceptual differences in the different groups surveyed. Rather than speaking of knowledge full stop, in light of such results, perhaps we should speak of various different "knowledge concepts" used by different ethnic and socioeconomic groups. This isn't an obviously implausible suggestion; when linguists discover variance in grammaticality intuitions along ethnic or socioeconomic lines, a common response is to posit the existence of multiple dialects. Positing a multitude of knowledge concepts in response to studies like that of Weinberg et al. might seem like an equally reasonable response to a similar sort of data.

If the results point to conceptual differences, then we can regard the disagreements between different ethnic and socioeconomic groups as merely apparent. Philosophers (by and large Westerners of comparatively high socioeconomic status) can go on to assert that Bob doesn't "know" that Jill drives an American car, while granting that East Asians are equally correct when they assert that Bob does "know" this; what they assert is not the same as what we deny. Philosophers can go on constructing theories of knowledge, so long as they understand that such theories will only be adequate to one sense of "knowledge."

Once we do this, however, the threat of mere verbality looms; if there are many "knowledge concepts," many debates over whether subjects in various hypothetical circumstances have knowledge or mere true belief may fail to be substantive.[10] How we resolve such debates will depend on which knowledge concept we use, and it won't be clear whether there is anything of substance at stake in the decision to use one knowledge concept rather than another. If we ignore the (putative) fact that there is a multitude of knowledge concepts, the epistemological questions we ask will be of merely parochial interest, as they will be posed using concepts that are the cultural artifacts of rich Westerners. This isn't *quite* to say that they will be merely verbal; holding fixed which concepts we're using, there will be substantive debates to be had about whether they apply in particular cases. But this is cold comfort. After all, if we pick a precise set of rules of application for the notion of "going round the squirrel," there will be substantive debates to be had about whether the man in James' anecdote was going round

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[8]Whether this skeptical challenge can be met head on is, unsurprisingly, a matter of controversy. Alexander et al. (2010) argue that it cannot. Williamson (2011) argues that it can.

[9]See Sosa (2007), though I don't know if Sosa would endorse the particular version of the position I consider here.

[10]These worries are very similar to worries raised by Alston (1993, 2005) concerning debates about justification.

the squirrel, or not. But we may still worry that there's nothing much of interest in the decision of which set of rules to use, and the associated decision of how to classify cases like James'. Along similar lines, if there are many "knowledge concepts," none of which enjoys any special theoretical advantage, the task of articulating the contours of *one* of them (e.g., that of rich, educated Westerners) seems to be at best of anthropological interest.[11]

One way of bringing this point out involves showing how demographic variation in intuitions about knowledge undermines an otherwise plausible defense of a certain sort of philosophical methodology—one originally associated with ordinary language philosophy, but versions of which are still quite common today. The defense I have in mind was offered by J.L. Austin:

> [O]ur common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since they have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters, than any that you or I are likely to think up in our arm-chairs of an afternoon—the most favoured alternative method." (Austin, 1956)

When we find out, however, that different demographic groups have found slightly different distinctions worth drawing, it's quite natural to worry that there's nothing especially "sound" or "subtle" about the distinctions that *we* are inclined to draw, at least as compared to those drawn by other demographic groups. In light of this worry, pressing on and trying to systematize *our* intuitions would be hasty; we would run the risk of engaging in a largely worthless task.

In the next section, I'll offer a strategy for showing that epistemological debates are substantive. I hope to establish that a great many epistemological debates are immune from the challenge just discussed. However, the strategy will not work in all cases. In particular, it will not apply to the debates targeted by Weinberg et al.; for all I say in the next section, debates over the proper epistemological classification of cases like those discussed by Weinberg et al. may be merely verbal. But the lesson to draw from this—I'll argue—is that these debates are in fact much less typical and much less central to the epistemological enterprise than they might at first seem.

3 Vindicating Epistemological Debates

In this section I'll pursue a two-part strategy for defending epistemological debates from the charge of mere verbality. The first part will involve offering a coherence constraint

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[11]Though I don't take this to be obvious. It might be, e.g., that articulating the contours of *each* knowledge-concept would be a worthwhile philosophical project, since each of them might be philosophical interesting in different ways. See, e.g., Sosa (2009, p.109) for a suggestion along these lines, and Stich (2009) for a reply.

that applies to our views about which debates are merely verbal, and which are substantive. The constraint is quite modest—in particular, it is powerless to resolve disputes in metametaphysics. Nevertheless, the second part of my strategy will involving arguing that if the constraint is appropriate, then we are committed to regarding a great many epistemological questions—including questions about justification and knowledge—as substantive. I'll go on to explain why the debates discussed so far are atypical, and can't be vindicated using the strategy I defend.

3.1 Transmission of Substantiveness

Suppose we come upon two people engaged in a debate about whether a particular country's government is "legitimate." If we don't take it to be immediately obvious whether their debate is substantive or merely verbal, how might we try to determine its status? A natural strategy is to ask the participants to the debate what *further* questions they think turn on the debate over whether or not the government is legitimate. They might say that the debate over whether the government is legitimate is relevant (at least *ceteris paribus*) to questions such as whether the government in question should receive foreign aid, whether the citizens of the country have an obligation to follow its laws, whether a humanitarian military intervention in that country might be justifiable, and other ground-level moral questions. Potential debates about these latter questions, we might think, would clearly be substantive—taking a stand on them amounts to taking a stand on matters of practical significance.[12] If we take these latter questions to be substantive—in the sense that debates concerning them would be substantive—and we take the debate over whether the government is legitimate to bear on them, then it seems that we must, on pain of incoherence, take the debate over whether the government is legitimate to be itself substantive.

More generally, it doesn't seem coherent to think that some particular debate is not a substantive one, while also thinking that resolving that debate would have important consequences for other debates that *are* substantive. If merely verbal debates are distinctive in that nothing of substance turns on such debates, then we must think that a debate is not merely verbal if we think that it is relevant to some *other* debate that *is* substantive.

The following coherence constraint is meant to capture the above line of thought. I'll call it '(TS)', for *transmission* of *substantiveness*:

(TS)   If you think the question of whether Q is a substantive one, and you take the question of whether P to be relevant to the question of whether Q, then you are rationally required to think the question of whether P is substantive as well.[13]

It's not immediately clear how to understand (TS)—in particular, we might ask how

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[12]I assume that James' pragmatic criterion for what it takes for a question to be substantive is at least a sufficient one, if not a necessary one.

[13]This principle is a close cousin to the "method of elimination" proposed by Chalmers et al. (2009), as a strategy for diagnosing verbal debates.

to understand the phrases 'relevant' and 'rationally required.' I'll address these questions in turn. First, however, I want to say a bit about why I've framed (TS) as a coherence constraint concerning which questions we must *think* are substantive (given facts about which other questions we *take them* to be relevant to), rather than as a constraint on which questions must *be* substantive (given facts about which other questions they *are* relevant to). The short answer is that I view the notion of someone's *taking* a question to be relevant to another one as a more proper starting point for analysis than the notion of a question's *being* relevant to another one. While the following biconditional is extremely plausible, I'm inclined to view the right-to-left direction as the more explanatory one:

- Question Q is relevant to question P $\leftrightarrow$ Question Q is rightly taken to be relevant to whether P

Also, my focus on questions rather than, say, propositions, is not accidental. I intend questions to be individuated by their contextually determined sets of possible complete answers.[14] One consequence of this is that, in two different contexts, one and the same sentence may express a different question. Suppose we disagree about how to answer the (syntactically individuated) question "Is Sally drinking a martini?". We might be having a merely verbal debate, or a substantive one. If you think she's drinking gin and vermouth, while I think she's drinking iced tea, then our disagreement will be substantive. But suppose we both agree that she is drinking an "appletini"—vodka, vermouth, and apple juice. Our disagreement stems from the fact that you are a purist when it comes to martinis, while I'm very relaxed—you'll only call a cocktail a martini if it contains gin, vermouth, and nothing else, while I'll call pretty much any alcoholic drink served in a long-stemmed v-shaped glass as a martini.[15] Plausibly, our debate will be merely verbal. It's not so hard to see how more philosophically interesting cases might generate similar contrasts; e.g., a sentence of the form "Does S know that P?" might denote a substantive question in some contexts, but a merely verbal one in others. Now that I've said a bit about why I've framed (TS) as a coherence constraint concerning questions, I'll clarify my use of "relevant" and "rationally required," as they appear in (TS).

Here's a first pass characterization of what I have in mind by 'relevant'—one takes the question of whether P to be relevant to the question of whether Q just in case one's beliefs concerning P conditional on an answer to the question of whether Q are different from one's unconditional beliefs concerning whether P. In a Bayesian framework for representing doxastic attitudes, we might understand this in terms of conditional probabilities; if an agent's unconditional credence in Q differs from her conditional credence in Q given P, she takes the question of whether P to be relevant to the question of whether Q. Other formal frameworks might suggest different explications of what's involved in taking one question to be relevant to another. E.g., in a belief-revision framework,[16]

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[14]I am influenced here by work in linguistics on the semantics of questions, which standardly takes questions to denote sets of possible complete answers. See Karttunen (1977).

[15]The example is from Bennett (2009).

[16]Alchourrón et al. (1985).

taking the question of whether P to be relevant to the question of whether Q might involve accepting a revision rule that dictates changing one's belief concerning Q, upon revising by P. However we formalize what's involved in taking one question to be relevant to another, we should expect that such an attitude will *normally* manifest itself in dispositions to change one's mind; if I think that the performance of the economy is relevant to the president's reelection chances, then normally I'll become more confident that the president will win reelection if I learn that the economy is performing very strongly.[17]

Now that we've said a bit more about 'relevant,' we can turn to 'rationally required.' The intuitive idea is that having attitudes that fail to conform to (TS) amounts to a kind of inconsistency or incoherence in an agent's attitudes, in much the same sense that it's typically thought that an agent is incoherent if she has contradictory beliefs, or if she holds a belief while also believing that her total evidence tells against the truth of belief. In holding that (TS) is a coherence norm on all fours with non-contradiction and anti-akrasia norms, however, I am leaving undecided many questions about the nature of coherence norms in general. In particular, I am not taking a stand on whether such norms are fundamental, or whether they can be reduced to more basic norms that do not concern coherence relations among an agent's attitudes.[18] I am also not taking a stand on whether all maximally rational agents would satisfy coherence norms like (TS). For all I say, (TS) might, at least in some circumstances, conflict with other norms of rationality, and the best tradeoff might involve violating (TS).[19]

For my purposes, all that's important is that we can appeal to (TS) to generate commitments concerning which debates we must regard as substantive, on pain of incoherence, given which *other* debates we regard as substantive. Of course, if the cases I discuss were ones in which it were impossible to avoid incoherence, or the most rational combination of attitudes would nevertheless be one that violated coherence norms like

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[17]This doesn't necessarily mean that we should hold out hope for an *analysis* of the attitude of taking one question to be relevant to another in terms of dispositions to change one's mind. We *certainly* shouldn't expect an analysis in terms of conditionals of the form "if an agent changed her mind about whether P, she'd change her mind about whether Q." Such an analysis would commit the conditional fallacy. (Shope, 1979). Or at least, if there is no such *general* fallacy (Bonevac et al., 2006), it will still fall prey to familiar sorts of counterexamples. However, it's not clear that such concerns must threaten all attempts to analyze the attitude of relevance in terms of dispositions to change one's mind. If we allow that a subject S can be disposed to change her mind concerning whether Q upon changing her mind concerning whether P, even though the conditional "if S changed her mind concerning whether P, she would change her mind concerning whether Q" is false (perhaps because S's mind-changing dispositions would be finked or masked were the antecedent to come to pass), then conditional fallacy concerns don't straightforwardly threaten an analysis of the attitude of relevance in terms of mind-changing dispositions. Thanks to an anonymous referee for discussion on this point.

[18]I have in mind the debate between Broome (1999) and Kolodny (2005).

[19]Christensen (2007) argues that it is impossible to fully satisfy all rational ideals. He holds that while being coherent—in particular, having probabilistically coherent degrees of belief—is a genuine ideal of rationality, it conflicts with other ideals, and the best tradeoffs among ideals will sometimes violate coherence norms. Nevertheless, such norms generate a sort of rational pressure—somebody who violates them is not rationally *ideal*, even if her attitudes may be as rational as possible in light of the tradeoffs she faces. Thanks to an anonymous referee for discussion on this point.

(TS), that would rob my discussion of much of its interest. But in the absence of some special reason to think that, in the cases I discuss, conforming to (TS) would necessarily involve violating some *other* norm of rationality, I take it to be reasonable to move from the premise that some combination of attitudes violates (TS) to the conclusion that it is not a rational combination of attitudes.

To be clear, (TS) does not provide anything like a general recipe for resolving debates about which questions are merely verbal, and which are substantive. To see why not, consider the following example. Suppose Rudolf and Ted disagree about whether the debate over P is substantive, or merely verbal; Rudolf thinks it is merely verbal, while Ted thinks it is substantive. Suppose that both parties accept (TS), and both parties regard the debate over whether P as relevant to the question of whether Q. Ted takes this fact about relevance to support the position that the question of whether P is substantive, since Ted thinks that the question of whether Q is substantive. But one person's modus ponens is another's modus tollens—Rudolf thinks that the question of whether Q is merely verbal, and therefore doesn't take the connection between whether P and whether Q to indicate that either question is a substantive one.

As long as disagreements about which debates are substantive run deep enough, we cannot resolve these disagreements by appeal to (TS). It's only when two parties both agree that some particular debate is substantive, and agree that certain other debates are relevant to it, that they can appeal to (TS) to generate further shared commitments. In the cases about which metametaphysicians tend to disagree, this sort of common ground is typically absent. For instance, those who regard the debate between mereological nihilists and mereological universalists as a substantive one might point out that it has consequences for questions such as the question of how many objects the world could have contained, which might seem like a substantive question. But those initially inclined to regard the debate between nihilists and universalists as merely verbal will probably, upon appreciating its connection to questions about how many objects the world could have contained, come to see these latter questions as merely verbal as well.[20]

The fact that (TS) is impotent to resolve vexed metametaphysical questions is, I think, a point in its favor—in endorsing it, I don't thereby commit myself one way or the other on any standing controversies in metametaphysics. Nevertheless, despite the innocuousness of (TS), I'll argue that it can do some significant metaepistemological work. The basic strategy is straightforward—I'll argue that we treat many epistemological debates as relevant to uncontroversially substantive non-epistemological questions. By (TS), then, we're committed to regarding the epistemological debates themselves as substantive, on pain of incoherence.

3.2 Applying (TS) to Epistemological Debates

A great many epistemological debates are (or can be naturally recast as) debates about whether the belief that P has some positive epistemic status (rationality, justification,

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[20]Here we might recall the words of David Lewis: "any competent philosopher who does not understand something will take care not to understand anything else whereby it might be explained." (1986, p. 203, fn. 5)

evidential support), for some claim P that itself is uncontroversially substantive.[21]

For instance, classic epistemological questions include questions about whether we have any good reason to believe that there exists an external world, (Descartes, 2004) or that bread will continue to nourish us (Hume, 2000). The questions of whether there is in fact an external world, or whether bread will in fact continue to nourish us, are (almost) uncontroversially substantive. Perhaps their answers are obvious, but they don't strike us as questions that are empty, or somehow terminological.[22]

In recent years debates about how we ought to respond to disagreement have been receiving a great deal of attention in the epistemological literature. These debates are naturally cast in the form mentioned above; we can see them as debates over whether is it rational for one to suspend judgment concerning whether P when one is faced with disagreement from one's epistemic peers concerning whether P, and where the proposition that P concerns some straightforwardly substantive matter.

Many epistemological debates in the philosophy of science also have this feature; they are often debates about whether our evidence warrants belief in some claim P, where the question of whether P is itself (almost) uncontroversially substantive. Unless we're verificationists, we'll think that the question of whether electrons exist or the world is merely observably *as if* electrons exist, is a substantive question. So debates between constructive empiricists and scientific realists about whether we ought to believe that electrons exist will be debates about whether we ought to believe that P, for some substantive claim P.[23] Along similar lines, we might consider epistemological debates between Bayesians and Frequentists about the appropriate methodology in hypothesis testing. If we take their debate at face value, the Bayesian and the Frequentist seem to disagree over which beliefs it would be rational to adopt in response to certain bodies of evidence. In extreme cases, the Frequentist might recommend that we become more confident that some coin has a certain bias—clearly a substantive matter—while the Bayesian would give the opposite recommendation.[24]

Even many epistemological debates that might seem recherché can be cast in this form. For instance, the Sleeping Beauty problem concerns which beliefs about whether a coin landed heads—clearly a substantive question—it would be rational to have in some odd (but not impossible) circumstances (Elga, 2000).

Why does it matter, for my purposes, that so many epistemological debates have this form? In each of these cases, we can appeal to (TS) to argue that we're committed

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[21] *Terminological note*: I'll alternate freely between the locutions 'it is rational for one to believe that P,' 'one ought to believe that P,' 'it is reasonable for one to believe that P,' 'one has justification to believe that P,' and 'the rational attitude given one's evidence is to believe that P.' I don't deny that these locutions can fruitfully be given distinct senses, but I do think that this is largely a matter of stipulation. I don't think ordinary language already cleanly distinguishes them.

[22] Of course, there are philosophers, especially in the positivist tradition, who have denied that the question of whether there is an external world is substantive. See, e.g., Schlick (1948). I do not know of philosophers who have denied that the question of whether the future will resemble the past (in the way that inductive arguments presuppose) is substantive.

[23] I have in mind the debate between van Fraassen (1980) and his critics.

[24] See Howson and Urbach (1996). The example I have in mind is discussed in the section entitled 'A Well-Supported Hypothesis Rejected in a Significance Test.'

to regarding the epistemological debate in question as substantive. This is because most of us take the question of whether we ought to believe that P as relevant to the question of whether P. At least from the first-person perspective, the question of whether the evidence supports P is transparent to the question of whether P—once we come to think that the evidence favors/disfavors some hypothesis, we'll thereby believe that hypothesis, at least if we are not akratic.[25] I suspect part of the reason that the disagreement debate has attracted so much attention is that the questions it poses are immediately relevant to straightforwardly substantive non-epistemological questions. If we come to think that beliefs are unjustified when they are held in the face of certain sorts of disagreement, we will likely go on to suspend judgment concerning a wide range of controversial political, economic, and scientific matters.[26]

Along the same lines, at least normally, we'll treat questions of whether we *ought* to believe various claims about unobservables as relevant to questions about whether those claims are *true*. Even in the case of Sleeping Beauty, if we've settled on an answer to the problem and we later find ourselves in Beauty's predicament, our views about how likely the coin is to have landed heads will likely be informed by our epistemological views about what it would be rational to believe in such circumstances.

In each of these cases of epistemological debates about whether it is rational to believe some claim P, if we hold fixed that (1) we believe that the question of whether P is a substantive one, and (2) we take the epistemological debate to be relevant (in the sense spelled out in the previous section) to question of whether P, then the only way for us to satisfy (TS) is to regard the epistemological debate as substantive as well. Moreover, in each of the examples I mentioned, it's quite plausible that we *should* hold (1) and (2) fixed—that is, we're right to regard the first-order, non-epistemological questions as substantive, and we're also right to take the epistemological debates to be relevant to those first-order, non-epistemological questions.

I've argued that we must think that a great many epistemological questions about what it is rational to believe are substantive, if we accept (TS) and some other plausible assumptions. We might wonder, then, whether (TS) might be used to vindicate the epistemological debates discussed earlier—debates over whether subjects in Gettier, truetemp, and cleverly disguised mule cases have knowledge or mere belief. I'll explain in the next two subsections why (TS) does *not* straightforwardly commit us to regarding these debates as substantive.

3.3 Knowledge

In §3.2 I argued that a wide range of debates about what it is rational/justified/warranted to believe can be defended from the charge of mere verbality, because such debates are relevant to straightforwardly substantive, non-epistemological questions. Can a similar

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[25]McHugh (2010) makes a similar point, drawing on work on work by Evans (1982) and Moran (2001).

[26]In fact, this is not completely straightforward. See Elga (2007) on the charge of "spinelessness." The general point still stands, however—debates about the epistemic significance of disagreement are typically relevant to questions about non-epistemological matters.

strategy be used to defend the status of debates about which beliefs constitute knowledge?

There's a tradition in epistemology that sees the utility of the concept of knowledge as issuing primarily from its role in enabling us to identify reliable informants. While this tradition perhaps reached its apotheosis in Edward Craig's *Knowledge and the State of Nature* (1990), it has also been defended by Bernard Williams (1970), Robert Brandom (2000, chap. 3), and Allan Gibbard (2003, chap. 11).

According to the line of thought pursued by Williams, Craig, Brandom, and Gibbard, a (perhaps *the*) central role of the concept of knowledge is in helping us form beliefs about non-epistemological matters. In trying to determine whether P, we often seek the guidance of people who know whether P. Determining who knows whether P is not an idle classificatory exercise, irrelevant to non-epistemological matters. Rather, it is a crucial step in our worldly inquiries; if we determine that someone knows whether P, then we'll generally come to believe that P if she asserts that P, and to believe that $\sim P$ if she asserts that $\sim P$. If we find this way of thinking about knowledge attractive, then we'll generally take questions about who knows what to be substantive; much the same strategy that I used in §3.2 to argue that debates about rationality/justification/warrant are substantive will apply to debates about knowledge as well. However, this strategy will not extend to a certain class of debates, of which the debates studied by Weinberg et al. are members. These are the debates concerning how to sort people into knowers and mere believers when we occupy what Williams calls the "examiner situation":

> Academic writings about knowledge are notably fond of that which might be called the *examiner* situation: the situation in which I know that P is true, this other man has asserted that P is true, and I ask the question whether this other man really knows it, or merely believes it. I am represented as checking on someone else's credentials for something about which I know already...But this is far from our standard situation with regard to knowledge; our standard situation with regard to knowledge (in relation to other persons) is rather than of trying to find somebody who knows what we don't know; that is, trying to find somebody who is a source of reliable information about something...Our standard question is not "Does Jones know that P?" Our standard question is rather "Who knows whether P?" (Williams, 1970, p. 146)

Williams doesn't tie his discussion of the oddity of the examiner situation to worries about mere verbality—the passage above appears in a paper primarily concerned with doxastic voluntarism. However, the strategy I've been pursuing so far suggests a reason for skepticism about the substantiveness of certain debates about knowledge conducted from the examiner situation. When we occupy the examiner situation, a central reason for asking whether somebody knows that P is absent, since we have no need to rely on testimony concerning whether P. Correlatively, a central reason for regarding many debates about knowledge as substantive—the fact that they are relevant to straightforwardly substantive non-epistemological questions—doesn't apply to debates conducted

from the examiner situation.

Of course, determining whether to rely on someone's testimony isn't the *only* reason to ask who knows what. If I am engaging in illicit activities, I might be interested in who knows what I've been up to. This isn't because I want to rely on their testimony (*I* know what I've been doing), but because I want to make sure that my secret doesn't get out—if people know what I've been doing, they make speak up, and they're more likely to convince other people of my wrongdoing if they have knowledge rather than mere suspicion.[27] Or, even if I know whether P and so don't need to rely on testimony concerning whether P, I might be interested in who else knows whether P because I *do* need to rely on testimony concerning *other* questions in the same subject matter as P. For instance, I might be interested in who knows who plays first base for the Yankees, not because I need to rely on testimony concerning *this* fact, but because I want to find somebody who's knowledgeable about baseball more generally, so I can rely on his or her testimony about *other* baseball-related matters. But many of the "examiner situation" cases that epistemologists focus on lack these features. Recall the Gettier case described by Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich. When we ask whether Bob knows or merely believes that Jill drives an American car, it doesn't seem as if different answers to our question are supposed to correspond to different predictions about Bob's future behavior, or his ability to influence the opinions of others, or his reliability concerning other automotive matters.

The relevance of the present discussion to the experimental critique should now be starting to come into focus. Research into variance in epistemological intuitions across demographic lines has—at least as far as I know—exclusively involved the examiner situation; experimenters describe a situation in which it is stipulated that P, and subjects are asked whether some character in the situation knows that P or merely believes it. In these sort of situations, questions about who knows what lack their typical, clear connections to non-epistemological questions. As a result, it's far from obvious whether differences between—for example—Westerners and East Asians on these epistemological questions will manifest themselves in different dispositions to rely on testimony in forming non-epistemological beliefs, or different predictions about how people will behave. There is, then, some pressure to suspect that the disagreement between a typical Westerner and a typical East Asian in one of Weinberg et al.'s studies is merely verbal.

Moreover, even if there *weren't* any such disagreement—even if, for example, Nagel (2012) is right that there are no stable demographic differences in epistemological intuitions in cases of the sort studied by Weinberg et al.—there would *still* be reason to worry about the substantiveness of questions about knowledge asked from the examiner situation. Ultimately, while actual demographic differences may make salient the possibility that questions asked from the examiner situation are merely verbal, the reasons to worry that they *are* merely verbal—namely, that they lack inferential connections to non-epistemological questions—apply whether or not people actually disagree about such questions.

Once the distinction is made between debates conducted from the examiner situation

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[27]See Williamson (2000, p. 62) for a related discussion.

and other debates about knowledge, we may see the position according to which there is a multitude of "knowledge concepts" in a new light. In §2.2, we encountered the threat that admitting that there are various different concepts of knowledge—akin to various different dialects of English—would lead to the result that epistemological questions about who knows what are often merely verbal. But we now have a principled way of containing the threat. Many debates conducted from the examiner situation may well turn out to be merely verbal—as already mentioned, these questions lack straightforward connections to non-epistemological questions. But they are unusual in this respect. Most questions about knowledge must be substantive, since they are relevant to our decisions about whom to trust, and the (obviously substantive) testimony-based beliefs we go on to form as a result of these decisions. If it turns out that there is significant disagreement across demographic lines even on *these* epistemological questions—a claim for which there is as yet no empirical evidence—then there will be difficult questions about how best to respond to that disagreement. But that would be a very different situation from the one we find ourselves in now; as matters stand, the only epistemological disagreements that seem to track demographic lines are ones that we can regard as merely verbal without thereby committing ourselves to regarding *most* epistemological disagreements as merely verbal.[28]

4 Conclusions

My strategy in this paper has been one of damage containment. Even if we concede that debates about knowledge targeted by experimental philosophers are merely verbal, there are principled reasons for denying that the threat of mere verbality in epistemology generalizes. Epistemological debates are uncontroversially substantive when they are relevant to other questions that are uncontroversially substantive, and I've argued that a wide range of epistemological debates *are* relevant to uncontroversially substantive questions of fact.[29]

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[28]In some respects, my strategy in this section has been similar to that of Mark Kaplan in "It's Not What You Know that Counts" (1985). In that paper, Kaplan argues that questions about knowledge (as opposed to questions about justification) are unimportant and uninteresting, largely because they are irrelevant to questions about how to go about conducting our wordly inquiries. While I am sympathetic to the idea that epistemological debates *should* be relevant to questions about how to inquire, *and* to the idea that a large class of debates about knowledge that epistemologists have focused on fail to meet that standard of relevance (namely, the class of debates conducted from the examiner situation), I cannot endorse all of Kaplan's conclusions, in large part because it seems to me that he fails to appreciate that we do not *always* (or even normally) occupy the examiner situation when we ask who knows what.

[29]It may seem as if I've appealed to unnecessarily limited materials in defending various epistemological debates as substantive. Even if we grant that my defense succeeds, it may seem as if I've been fighting with one hand behind my back; after all, it's not as if epistemological questions are *only* substantive when they bear on non-epistemological questions, is it? I'm inclined to say that this in fact *is* the case, though I cannot defend that view here. If we generalize the Williams/Craig/Gibbard/Brandom view concerning knowledge to epistemology more generally—as Gibbard and Brandom do—and hold that the role of all epistemological concepts is to help guide our deliberation about non-epistemological matters, then it's natural to think that debates over the proper application of epistemological concepts in situations in which they cannot play that role are merely verbal.

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