

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Merely verbal disputes and common ground

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Abstract

In this paper I offer a new characterisation of what makes a dispute merely verbal. This new characterisation builds on the framework initially outlined by Jenkins and additionally makes use of Stalnaker's notion of 'common ground'. I argue that this 'common ground account' can better classify disputes as merely verbal, and can better explain cases of playing devil's advocate.

KEYWORDS

common ground, devil's advocate cases, merely verbal disputes, non-merely verbal disputes

Discussions about verbal disputes normally begin with some examples. Numerous ones have now appeared in the literature, but some notable examples include Hirsch on whether a glass is a cup (2005, p. 69); Bennett on whether some odd alcoholic concoction in a V-shaped glass is a martini (2009, p. 50); Chalmers on whether, in William James' famous case, the man goes 'round the squirrel' (2011, pp. 515–16); and Jenkins on cases where words such as 'baldie' are assumed by one disputant to be pejorative but not by the other disputant (2014, p. 26).

Some of these characterisations or definitions target simply 'verbal disputes'. Others aim to be finer-grained and propose a distinction between 'merely verbal disputes' and 'non-merely verbal disputes'. The former (roughly stated) are cases where both sides accept all the relevant facts, but fail to realise that the same thing is being picked out by two synonymous terms. For example, two disputants fail to realise that 'soccer' and 'football' as spoken by each of them picks out the same sport.

The latter (also roughly stated) are substantive disputes about language. For example, take a disagreement about the use of the word 'literally'. Two speakers might have a substantive disagreement about how that word should be used and whether to accept certain uses as legitimate. In such cases, the source of the disagreement is about some meaning fact, arising out of semantic deviation, or in virtue of some difference concerning language.

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These disputes about meaning facts (or other facts about language) are non-merely verbal disputes.¹

Providing a good account of the distinction between merely and non-merely verbal disputes has not been easy. In this paper, rather than starting from scratch, I will be building upon, and providing a modification of, the account offered by Jenkins who states that:

MVD: Parties A and B are having a merely verbal dispute iff they are engaged in a sincere *prima facie* dispute D, but do not disagree over the subject matter(s) of D, and merely present the appearance of doing so owing to their divergent uses of some relevant portion of language. (Jenkins, 2014, p. 21)

The aim of this paper is not to critique other characterisations or definitions. Instead, I aim to build on Jenkins' account in such a way as to allow us to better diagnose whether a given dispute is merely verbal, non-merely verbal or non-verbal. More specifically, I will suggest removing the notion of 'subject matter', and introducing that of 'common ground'. This, I argue, provides a clearer account of what is happening in cases of merely verbal disputes, and how they differ from non-merely verbal and non-verbal disputes.²

Some caveats: that this paper aims for the diagnosis of cases where disputes are merely verbal, rather than a definition, means that the proposal I offer will be successful if it results in the classification of examples under the intuitively correct label. It will also be assumed that the participants in a dispute have taken a certain position in the dispute, and that people are having a dispute if they are exhibiting certain characteristic dispute behaviours. That is, I will focus on what Jenkins calls *prima facie* disputes, where 'a *prima facie* dispute is something that, at first glance, would appear to be a dispute' (Jenkins, 2014, p. 21). I will also mostly be discussing what Jenkins calls 'sincere' disputes (Jenkins, 2014, p. 23) to leave aside cases where, for example, actors are performing a scene in which their characters are engaged in a merely verbal dispute (which would count as an insincere dispute), though I will discuss the somewhat similar phenomena of 'playing devil's advocate' later in the paper.

Lastly, real-life disputes of course often involve people in middle-ground states between two positions, or cases where someone is waiting to be persuaded of something, and someone could ask for a more precise account of what a dispute *is*. However, I leave these complications aside here in the hope that a more nuanced version of the claims here could be produced that take into account such issues in the future.

1

The examples that I will introduce are ones where the dispute involves some ambiguity over the subject matter of the dispute. That is, the disputants unknowingly are disagreeing due to a failure to recognise that each of them assumes the subject matter of the dispute to be (subtly) different.

For example, consider two people disagreeing over the truth of the utterance 'Manchester City won the league'. In this dispute, one person takes 'league' to refer to the Premier League, the highest level of professional football in England and therefore accepts the utterance as true. The other person, though, being a fan of Italian football, initially takes 'league' to refer to

¹The category of the non-merely verbal is closely related to the notion of metalinguistic negotiation, where a metalinguistic negotiation is a form of communication aimed at 'communicating information about how [...] an expression should be used' (Mankowitz, 2021), such that both non-merely verbal disputes and metalinguistic negotiation could be interpreted as substantive disputes, albeit substantive disputes about language. For more on metalinguistic negotiation, see Thomasson (2017); Plunkett (2015); Plunkett and Sundell (2013, 2014) and Burgess and Plunkett (2013a, 2013b).

²This new 'common ground' account will also bear some similarity to Balcerak Jackson's (2014) view wherein verbal disputes arise due to 'conversational defects', and verbal disputes are happening 'we cannot identify a mutually agreed-upon question that both parties attempt to address' (2014, p. 42). See fn. 4 for some discussion of Balcerak Jackson's account, in particular with reference to Vermeulen's (2018) discussion.

Serie A, the highest level of professional football in Italy. Therefore, for the second person, the utterance is false, as rather ‘Internazionale won the league’ is true. Crucially, neither is disagreeing with the facts of the matter. Both know which teams won the 2020–21 iterations of the two leagues. However, their dispute arises because they fail to realise that they take the subject matter of their conversation to be different.

Now, this case is one that is easily solved in real-world situations. The speakers will likely instantly realise the issue as speakers who know which team won the league will also likely know that football teams only play in one domestic league, and hence any claim (true or false) involving Manchester City (*/Internazionale*) must refer to an English league (*/Italian league*). This dispute would be quickly settled, but what is important for my purposes is that it shows that disputes may arise due to assumptions speakers make about the subject matter of a conversation, and (as I will argue later in the paper) due to divergent ways that the speakers express some proposition that is part of the common ground.

It will help to examine a similar case in more detail. Suppose a group of people are in the pub discussing recent election results in the United States.³ As it happens, after a while the group naturally splits into two discussions – the table being too big for those on either end to easily converse with each other. The discussions at each end of the table are therefore distinct – they have different sets of interlocutors – but are both still about the election results.

Aidan and Evan are on either end of the table, and so due to their location, they end up taking part in distinct threads of this general discussion, and are not initially speaking directly to each other. The conversation naturally quietens at some point, and through the silence, all at the table, including Evan, hear Aidan say: “Sanders won the election with 79.6% of the vote”.

Being an expert on the Sanders campaign, Evan hears this and responds: “No, he won with 69.8% of the vote”. Aidan and Evan then proceed to have an argument about which of them is correct. The dispute appears to be factual – it is a fact of the matter about what share of the vote Sanders received – and it appears to be non-verbal as disagreeing about what percentage of the vote Sanders received is not a disagreement about some part of language. But, as it happens, and unknown to Aidan and Evan, the distinct threads of conversation had moved on from the more general discussion that was being had at the beginning. Aidan intended his claim to be about the Alaskan primary; Evan intended her claim to be about the Hawaiian primary. Both are, as it happens, factually correct.

Despite initially looking like a non-verbal dispute, this dispute between Aidan and Evan is merely verbal. In this case, both Aidan and Evan would, if asked, accept and agree upon what percentage of the vote Sanders received in each state. No non-linguistic (or linguistic) fact is disagreed upon in this example. They only present the appearance of disagreeing because of a divergent use of language, where the divergence arises from using ‘the election’ to refer to different events. I also take the dispute to not be non-merely verbal. It is not that Aidan and Evan disagree about how to best express some fact, or as to what some word means.

Let us see if Jenkins’ account of a merely verbal dispute can accommodate this example. Initially we might think that the Aidan-Evan example could be covered by Jenkins’ proposal with enough flexibility with respect to the ‘contextually shifty’ notion of the subject matter. That is, if we allow that the subject matter is vague enough, or changes during a dispute, Jenkins’ account might succeed. Indeed, Jenkins seems to be happy to accept that ‘subject matter’ is shifty precisely to accommodate this sort of example (2014, p. 28).

However, we can only do this by accepting a lack of precision about the notion of ‘subject matter’ and the ways that it can be contextually shifty. We are not told what the limits beyond

³Now, admittedly, only somewhat recent election results, and mostly forgotten about given what electorally has happened since. However, this example is drawn from a real-world experience in a pub in Dublin in 2016.

which the subject matter is not merely contextually shifty but actually distinct. This also means that we cannot begin to consider whether particular cases are merely verbal disputes without first knowing how we are meant to identify the relevant subject matter in the particular cases. The example above brings this out explicitly. The very reason that we intuitively want to say that the debate is merely verbal is because we know something about the subject matter. But Jenkins' account provides us with no principled way to clarify what it is about the subject matter that renders the dispute merely verbal.

The issue does not only occur for Jenkins' proposal either. Chalmers states that 'we cannot just speak of a "verbal question," independent of context' (2011, p. 518), and suggests that 'for two speakers to have a dispute at all, they must share a context' (2011, p. 522fn), but does not provide us with any tools to assess what is the right context to see if a dispute within that context is verbal, merely verbal or non-verbal. Without a clear way to delineate the context, or subject matter, we struggle to assess the Aidan-Evan case.

To stress, this is not to say that those or other accounts *cannot* accommodate this case. That would be too strong a claim. I want to agree with Jenkins that 'the contextual shiftiness of "subject matter" is a relevant feature of many cases where the classification of a dispute as merely verbal or otherwise looks like a somewhat subtle business' (2014, p. 28). Rather, what I will do in this paper is introduce some formal tools from the philosophy of language that will help clarify the notion, improving our account of what a verbal dispute is by removing some of the ambiguity in the notion of 'subject matter'.

2

The tool I suggest we introduce is Stalnaker's idea of 'common ground' where:

Common ground: It is common ground that ϕ in a group if all members *accept* (for the purpose of the conversation) that ϕ , and all *believe* that all accept that ϕ , and all *believe* that all *believe* that all accept that ϕ , etc. (2002, p. 716)

Conversations therefore require a common ground shared between the speakers, where the common ground is a set of accepted beliefs, and where to accept a belief is to treat it as true (at least for that conversation). This means that what I accept as true – accept as part of the common ground – for one conversation may be different from what I accept as true for another conversation. Importantly, the common ground can be implicitly accepted by speakers, nor does it require that speakers make explicit all aspects of the common ground prior to beginning to converse.

Including common ground within our account of merely verbal disputes, I propose that:

A dispute is merely verbal iff α and β are engaged in a sincere prima facie dispute, and relevant propositions are part of the common ground shared by α and β , and α and β merely present the appearance of disagreeing owing to α expressing $\langle p \rangle$ and β expressing $\langle q \rangle$ but both α and β accept $\langle p \rangle$ and $\langle q \rangle$ as part of the common ground but do not realise the other's assertion is part of the common ground due to divergent uses of some relevant part of language and are not intending to disagree over linguistic facts used to express $\langle p \rangle$ and/or $\langle q \rangle$.

I will call this the 'common ground account'. This characterisation will look very similar in places to Jenkins. This is deliberate. As noted above, just as Jenkins did, my intention was to build on the strengths of previous accounts. A weakness of Jenkins' account (as also noted by

Vermeulen, 2018) is that it provides no way to specify the ‘subject matter’ of a dispute.⁴ My suggestion is that the notion of common ground can help with this.

An account of merely verbal disputes that makes use of the notion of common ground encourages us to consider whether or not the relevant information is suitably shared by all disputants, and/or the dispute is arising from how some shared part of the common ground is being expressed. And, it allows, at least in principle, the possibility that we could identify the particular proposition that is part of the common ground shared by the speakers, the divergent expression of which is the cause of the merely verbal dispute. These are, in my view, advantages over the contextual shifty notion of ‘subject matter’. Furthermore, the notion of common ground has already been developed and discussed extensively in the literature. This suggests the potential to better integrate our account of verbal disputes into our wider theories of language, and to make new connections between this initial sketch of the common ground view and other work that uses the notion of common ground.⁵

Applying the common ground account to the Aidan-Evan case, the two facts of the matter concerning how many votes Sanders received in each state are part of the common ground for both Aidan and Evan. That is, in our example, both accept both facts of the matter concerning how many votes Sanders received in each state. Both also accept the propositions that express those facts. The relevant propositions expressing those facts are therefore part of the common ground shared by Aidan and Evan. But, due to the divergent uses of language that is caused by a false assumption of co-reference for their statements, they fail to realise that the other is stating a proposition that is part of the common ground. Aidan and Evan might still exhibit disagreement behaviours, but this is a merely verbal dispute. There is no disagreement over what propositions are the common ground, nor are they disagreeing about the linguistic facts to express those propositions. If the propositions in the common ground were more carefully and explicitly laid out, there would not be even the appearance of a disagreement.

Under the common ground account, we can say that Aidan and Evan were exhibiting disagreement behaviour because they thought that the other speaker was expressing a different proposition within the common ground than the one that was being expressed. That is, in our case, there are two propositions that are part of the common ground: $\langle p \rangle$ and $\langle q \rangle$. The disagreement behaviour occurs when Evan thinks that Aidan is expressing $\langle q \rangle$ when he is actually expressing $\langle p \rangle$. Evan’s belief that Aidan is trying to express $\langle q \rangle$ comes from the fact that both propositions are part of the common ground, and that Evan thinks that Aidan must have simply misspoken as he tried to express $\langle q \rangle$.

This connects to the notion of ‘subject matter’ discussed earlier. Aidan and Evan exhibit disagreement behaviour not because they disagree about any statement of fact, or even how it is

⁴Vermeulen also notes that this is a problem for Balcerak Jackson’s view. Balcerak Jackson (2014) holds that verbal disputes arise due to ‘conversational defects’, and verbal disputes are happening ‘we cannot identify a mutually agreed-upon question that both parties attempt to address’ (2014, p. 42). This means that for Balcerak Jackson what is important to diagnose a verbal dispute is a recognition of what is shared between the parties, and whether (or not) there is some question that they could be taken to be disagreeing about. As Vermeulen, in my view, rightly notes, though, Balcerak Jackson does not provide an account of what is shared between the parties. Interestingly, Balcerak Jackson does use the phrase ‘common ground’ in outlining his view (2014, pp. 42, 46), but it is not intended to refer to the Stalnakerian notion that I will introduce in this paper and hence my account differs in that it uses this notion to provide a way to illuminate what is shared between parties when merely verbal disputes occur. Vermeulen’s own account of merely verbal disputes is ‘pragmatic’ and based on the distinction between utterance meaning and speaker’s meaning. Vermeulen holds verbal disputes arise when ‘Parties use the same utterance-type *S* with different speaker’s meaning such that what *A* means by uttering *S* (*p*) does not conflict with what *B* means by uttering not-*S* (not *q*), and *A* and *B* do not have beliefs whose content conflicts with what the other one means (not *p* and *q* respectively). (2) Each party ascribes the negation of their own speaker’s meaning to the other (not *p* and *q* respectively)’ (2018, p. 343). This account handles Vermeulen’s ‘beamer-disputes’ well, but it straightforwardly cannot account for the Aidan-Evan dispute as they are not using the same utterance-type.

⁵For example, we could draw upon work in the formal pragmatics literature that extends Stalnaker’s notion with the aim of modelling the dynamic nature of conversation (see Ginzburg, 2012; Roberts, 2012). Using that work we could further flesh out the basic common ground account offered in this paper to reflect how a conversation might, over time, become a merely verbal or non-merely verbal dispute due to the conversational moves, and rules governing those moves, made by the speakers. My aim in this paper is to introduce the common ground view. I leave more detailed discussion of these ways to integrate the view with existing work on the notion of common ground to future research, which might further extend and enhance the basic framework offered here. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this.

best to express those facts. Rather, what happens is that each thinks that the ‘subject matter’ under discussion is a different part of the common ground shared between them. Aidan aims to express $\langle p \rangle$, but Evan thinks Aidan aims to express $\langle q \rangle$. Furthermore, this account explains why both would immediately cease to dispute once they realise that the other is intending to express a distinct proposition from the one that they had initially thought was being expressed. That is, we can explain why, if the expressions used by the speakers are clarified or made more specific to better communicate what proposition was being expressed, the disagreement behaviours would be predicted to cease. Aidan and Evan would stop giving the appearance of disagreeing as they would realise that they were not really disagreeing at all. Theirs was a merely verbal dispute.

It might be objected that the Aidan-Evan case is simply not a verbal dispute. Perhaps, the notion of ‘use of language’ is too broad as it includes aspects that the speakers do not articulate but invoke implicitly. We might argue that these aspects are not genuine ‘uses of language’. It is true that this example relies on something implicit in the language. However, implicit conversational understanding should certainly count as part of our use of language, and hence it can, on occasion, be divergent between speakers. The reason for this is that unspoken aspects of language are crucial to conversation, and it is wrong to think that it is only the explicit parts of language that can lead to a dispute being rendered merely verbal. The implicit parts of conversation can have this effect too, meaning that the sense of pointlessness arising from a verbal dispute need not arise from some explicit part of language. Indeed, some of the most frustrating conversations are those in which, unbeknownst to us, some implicit assumption was not shared throughout, rendering the entire conversation pointless. While there are verbal dispute cases in which the pointlessness stems from something that a speaker articulates explicitly, we have no reason to suppose that this must always be the case.

It is also worth noting a possible special case. It is possible that the disputants are concerned with propositions such that $\langle p \rangle = \langle q \rangle$. As such cases are simply a special instance of the above schema, the common ground view can also help here. In this case, both speakers accept that $\langle p \rangle$ is part of the common ground. And they are not intending to disagree over linguistic facts used to express that proposition. However, they present the appearance of disagreeing owing to their divergent uses of some relevant portion of language to express that proposition. Therefore, the dispute is merely verbal as the disagreement arises due to divergent ways of expressing the same propositions which is part of the common ground.

3

For completeness, I will now outline how this characterisation can handle non-merely verbal cases. These cases are entirely linguistic, but in a way that is different from the merely verbal. They are disputes about language or meaning, rather than being caused by failing to realise that there are diverging uses of language.

The explanation of such cases is simple. Part of the common ground will be beliefs about how words (and other parts of language) should be used. But this will not always be the case. To repeat the example above, we might disagree about whether we should accept that the word ‘literally’ is used correctly in the sentence: ‘It literally blew my mind’. We can have a dispute about what is the correct meaning of the word ‘literally’ and consequently what are the acceptable uses of the word. In such a disagreement, the disputant’s beliefs about what the word means and how it should be used would explicitly *not* be part of the common ground. The dispute about the ‘correct’ use will not be a dispute about some proposition where that proposition is part of the common ground. It is rather about what should be included in our common ground – the belief about how certain words should be used. This dispute is therefore about divergent uses of language, where we are very much disagreeing, it just happens to be about language itself. The common

ground account can accommodate such cases as the common ground will contain meaning facts, and it is possible to sincerely disagree about those meaning facts.⁶

Interestingly, this means that the difference between non-verbal and non-merely verbal disputes, on this account, arises from the type of proposition under consideration.⁷ That is, if speakers disagree about whether Sanders won the Alaskan primary, they would be having a non-verbal dispute about the proposition that Sanders won the Alaskan primary. That proposition concerns some non-linguistic fact of the matter. Disagreeing about it would be a non-verbal dispute. If, though, those speakers were disagreeing about the acceptable range of uses of the word ‘literally’, that would be a disagreement about some proposition that expresses a linguistic fact. This might even rise to being a metalinguistic dispute about how we should use the word ‘literally’.⁸ This is a non-merely verbal dispute. Therefore, the common ground account can maintain the tripartite distinction outlined above.

4

An important benefit of the common ground account comes from devil’s advocate cases. In these cases, a person does not actually believe the position that they appear to be defending. Rather, a person will knowingly and deliberately defend a position that they do not actually believe. Accounting for devil’s advocate cases within our account of merely verbal disputes is therefore important to our thinking about how to define a merely verbal dispute. Hence, on the assumption that any account that cannot handle all of the proposed scenarios is *ceteris paribus* worse than one that can, being able to handle devil’s advocate cases is an important benefit of the common ground account.

First, such examples have been noted as being difficult to reconcile with some existing accounts of ‘verbalness’. On one side, it feels like it should be a merely verbal dispute as the disputants do not actually disagree about the facts making the dispute merely verbal. On the other side, the discussion may appear to be identical to one in which the disputants really do disagree, and we may wish to have a way to in principle distinguish these scenarios.

Second, devil’s advocate cases are quite common in ordinary and philosophical language. We frequently express ideas that we do not actually believe in the interest of furthering a debate, or challenging a certain viewpoint. For example, in the process of teaching, we often teach information to more junior students despite knowing that the real account is more complex, and that the simplified picture is false. And we often as teachers defend positions that we do not actually think are correct. I might, in teaching a first-year undergraduate course on metaphysics, have a discussion with a student defending the idea that universals exist, and respond differently to the student’s arguments against the claim than I would if it were a discussion at a metaphysics conference. In this case, I do not actually believe in universals, but I am pretending to believe in them in order to teach the students certain arguments that have been put forward in favour of their existence. I may even tell the student that my personal position is that universals do not exist, and yet still argue for their existence as a method to encourage the student to think more critically about their own view.

Given the prevalence of devil’s advocate cases (even if not so explicitly recognised) in our use of language, and the need for an account of merely verbal dispute to, ideally, accommodate

⁶Under some (hyper-Stalnakerian) accounts, the reference of definite descriptions like ‘the election’ are determined by the common ground. If this were the case, then the Aidan-Evan case might seem like a case of metalinguistic negotiation. However, the Aidan-Evan case is different from that of the ‘literally’ case. In the Aidan-Evan case, neither are arguing about what ‘the election’ refers to, and they think that they are disagreeing about factual matters, unlike in the literally case.

⁷My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this.

⁸Others have already introduced the notion of common ground to help explain metalinguistic negotiation. See, for example, Kocurek et al. (2020), Mena (2022) and Soria-Ruiz (2021). This, in my view, suggests the potential for future unification of the work on merely verbal disputes and metalinguistic negotiation through the shared use of the notion of common ground.

all possible scenarios, I will first outline how Jenkins' account struggles with devil's advocate cases, and then show how the common ground account can account for them.

Jenkins admits of an issue for her account in devil's advocate cases:

Insofar as such a person is insincere, MVD+ will make it impossible for a *prima facie* dispute in which one person is playing devil's advocate to count as a (real-life) merely verbal dispute. This may seem like an undesirable result; surely we want to distinguish between situations in which one person is playing devil's advocate in a dispute that resembles the merely verbal Tim/Tom case above, and situations in which one person is playing devil's advocate in adopting a position that straightforwardly opposes the other party's position in an obviously non-merely verbal way? Fortunately, we can still respect this difference in various ways. We can say, for instance, that the devil's advocate analogue of the merely verbal Tim/Tom case is something that would be a merely verbal dispute if only it were sincere, while the devil's advocate analogue of a straightforward, obviously non-merely-verbal dispute is not like that. (2014, pp. 23–4)⁹

We can see that the proposed explanation for devil's advocate cases is counterfactual. Some dispute, *D*, *would* be merely verbal *if* it were the case that the disputant were truly sincere about whatever claim is being made in that dispute.

This counterfactual solution is unconvincing. Firstly, even assuming a method to do the required counterfactual analysis, the solution requires us to engage in potentially complex counterfactual analysis each time we want to consider whether a particular dispute is a merely verbal dispute or not. This means it is no longer enough that some dispute satisfies the conditions in MVD to see if it is merely verbal as we do not know whether either or both of the disputants are playing devil's advocate. Instead, for each example under consideration, we must also consider that one or both of the disputants are playing devil's advocate.

This is not a knock-down argument, but it certainly seems to be asking a lot of us in order to work out if some dispute is merely verbal or not. It asks us to consider whether MVD applies in some counterfactual scenario, thereby inheriting any prior worries we might have about the reliability of our ability to assess counterfactual scenarios accurately. Perhaps we do in fact consider these counterfactual reasoning when considering whether some dispute is merely verbal. However, as I show below, the common ground account is at least preferable for its theoretical simplicity in this regard as it does not require an appeal to counterfactual reasoning.

Second, Jenkins' account struggles because of the need for sincerity on the part of the disputants as it ties the notion of sincerity to a person's *actual* beliefs. On her account sincerity requires that you believe what you are saying. It was for this reason that Jenkins concludes that in the devil's advocate case I am being insincere (2014, pp. 23–4). This strikes me as somewhat counterintuitive. There is a sense in which in this pedagogical devil's advocate case I am being sincere at least in that I am trying to ensure that my student properly thinks through all of the available positions and arguments fully. And to do this, I am in that conversation genuinely defending a view, even if it is one that I might reject later. Indeed, for this to be an effective teaching tool, it might even be that the student needs to believe that I do genuinely believe the claims that I am making. The requirement that you believe what you are saying to count as sincere is not as plausible in these more fine-grained and complex cases.

For these reasons, I suggest that Jenkins' account struggles to accommodate devil's advocate cases. However, once we include the notion of common ground in our account, we can reanalyse what it means for someone to be sincere such that sincerity becomes relative to the

⁹The differences between MVD and MVD+ are not relevant to the topic of this paper.

dispute under consideration. Again, this is not to argue that the Jenkins' account *cannot* explain devil's advocacy cases, but that the common ground account is theoretically simpler.

On the common ground account, a disputant is sincere if, for the purpose of the conversation, they accept the relevant claim as true. This means that I can, for the dispute in which I am playing devil's advocate, agree to accept for the time being something that I do not actually accept or believe in the sense that in some other conversation, I would not accept those claims. Continuing the example from above, I might, for a discussion with a student, accept that universals exist, overlooking various arguments that I believe are persuasive against the existence of universals in order to ensure that the student fully think through their ideas. Within that particular conversation, I will have accepted the proposition 'Universals exist' as part of the common ground.¹⁰ In doing so, I am not committed to accepting that proposition in any other conversation. This shows that no theoretical addition is needed for the common ground account to handle devil's advocate cases, and no appeal to counterfactual thinking.

5

To stress, the overall aim of this paper is not to argue that Jenkins' account is deeply or fatally flawed. Quite the opposite. I think Jenkins' account goes a long way to providing a useful and accurate account of what a merely verbal dispute is. My suggestion, though, is that if we combine her account with the common ground architecture that I have outlined, we arrive at a view that main-tains the strengths of Jenkins' view, while being able to better accommodate further cases that we initially struggled to explain. The conclusion of this paper is therefore to suggest that we should accept Jenkins' proposal, albeit with the addition of the notion of common ground.

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¹⁰Assuming that in this case the student accepts the claim as being in the common ground also.

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