In the quagmire of quibbles: a dialectical exploration

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Abstract

Criticism may degenerate into quibbling or nitpicking. How can discussants keep quibblers under control? In the paper we investigate cases in which a battle about words replaces a discussion of the matters that are actually at issue as well as cases in which a battle about minor objections replaces a discussion of the major issues. We survey some lines of discussion dealing with these situations in profiles of dialogue.

Keywords Criticism · Difference of opinion · Freedom rule · Hairsplitting · Nitpicking · Objection · Profile of dialogue · Quibble · Talking at cross-purposes

1 Introduction

When it comes to argument, whether arguing oneself or challenging others to argue or criticizing their arguments, one enters into a world with many dangers. There is always a jungle of emotions, a maze of digressions, a desert of irrelevance, and a mountain of ignorance. But, in this paper, we shall explore the quagmire of quibbles.

A confrontation with a quibbling opponent can be highly irritating. While you picture yourself as a serious discussant, your opponent's contributions seem continually to be missing the point or lacking in relevance. Instead of either accepting your argument—be it with some minor emendations about which you would prefer not to quibble—or rejecting it for some prima facie solid reasons (which however you may be able to defuse), your opponent ignores the gist of your argument either by twisting the meaning of your words or by continually raising minor points as if they were sufficient to overthrow the argument altogether. The most irritating circumstance is that none of the points raised by your opponent may be fallacious in itself; yet, one has the impression that some kind of fallaciousness inheres in this quibbling behavior as a whole. As Walton says, "it is more of a global problem" (Walton 1996, p. 54).

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However, simply outlawing all quibbling behavior in a normative protocol for reasonable argumentation would be disastrous. By curbing the freedom of discussants to bring up whatever argument or criticism they, rightly or wrongly, consider pertinent, it would directly conflict with the ideal notion of argumentation as a means for rational conflict resolution (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004).

In this paper we want to investigate whether there are other means—short of a ban on quibbles—that could be introduced into a normative protocol to keep potential quibblers under control, while all the same giving them some room to express their particular criticisms.

It is not our purpose to draw a line between what definitely constitutes a quibble and what does not. Rather we want to leave it to discussants themselves to sort this out in every particular case. What we do want to clarify is how the problem of quibbling can crop up in an argumentative discussion and along what lines the parties could discuss the problem. There is no guarantee that such discussion would lead to mutually acceptable solutions, but neither is it excluded that it would eventually do so. Discussants may come to agree that certain points of criticism carry weight or that some circumstance clinches the argument.

Below we shall first present and discuss some cases of what appear to be quibbles in argumentative and non-argumentative contexts (Sect. 2) and then discuss two kinds of quibbles in more detail: Semantic Quibbles in which a battle about words and their meanings replaces a discussion of the matters that are actually at issue (Sect. 3) and Remonstrative Quibbles in which a battle about minor objections replaces a discussion of the major issues (Sect. 4). For dealings with either type we propose profiles of dialogue. We do not pretend that these two types exhaust the subject, and as we shall see there is also some overlap between them.

2 Some cases

"Quibbling" has some synonyms or near-synonyms, such as "caviling," "hairsplitting," and "nitpicking," which are in some contexts more appropriate. Quibbling, for example, relates specifically to a context of argument, whereas "nitpicking" could consist of excessive concern over details, without a context of argument.

As a typical case of nitpicking you may consider the well-known anecdote about Oscar Wilde (some may have heard it told about Gustave Flaubert):

Case 1. *A comma*
"[…] he [Oscar Wilde] related also, with much gusto, how in a country-house he had told his host one evening that he had spent the day in hard literary work, and that, when asked what he had done, he had said, 'I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning and took out a comma.' 'And in the afternoon?' 'In the afternoon—well, I put it back again.'" (Sherard 1905, p. 72; quoted by Quote Investigator, 2015)

Thus Oscar Wilde (or Gustave Flaubert) spent his whole day nitpicking; just picking one nit twice, one could say. Notice that the nitpicking in this case does not occur in a context of argument.

The Dutch language, too, has a number of expressions to denote quibblers or nit-pickers. One of them, *mierenneuker,* is a kind of funny expression but calling someone by that name may be presumed to be offensive (its literal meaning being antf***er), yet many people quite commonly use it. The next case shows that even a judge may think the word is not that bad:

Case 2. *Mierenneuker*
"Calling an overzealous traffic warden a 'mierenneuker' is allowed in The Netherlands. This was the verdict of a judge in Alkmaar. A driver had parked his car on the sidewalk for quickly withdrawing some cash from an ATM. When the man got back to his car, a traffic warden was already writing out a ticket. The man got angry and called the traffic warden a 'mierenneuker,' at which the traffic warden felt offended and threatened, so he had the driver arrested by the police. The driver refused to pay the 220 euro fine and went to court with it…
The judge decided that the driver was right! Based on the authoritative Dutch dictionary *Van Dale,* he concluded that the word 'mierenneuker' is not offensive. According to the judge, a 'mierenneuker' [antf***er] or a 'muggenzifter' [sifter of mosquitoes] is a person who is very meticulous at his job. The judge found the remark inappropriate, but the traffic warden could have interpreted 'mierenneuker' as a compliment too…" (Dutch Gurus 2008, with minor changes)

Case 2 does not only illustrate the leniency of Dutch judges, but also how a charge of nitpicking can be raised against a critic. Here we assume that the traffic warden by writing out a ticket was criticizing the driver's behavior. Yet the writing out of the ticket, though it implies criticism, cannot be seen as a criticism raised in an argument and therefore, in Case 2, the alleged act of nitpicking again does not occur in an argumentative context. That is not to say that the traffic warden and the car driver couldn't have had a ferocious argument about the ticket and about the qualification used by the driver. Most likely they had. And the argument went on in court. The issue of the case there—whether or not the term used by the driver is to count as offensive—is, moreover, of a nature that is prone to give rise to further nitpicking and quibbling.

Our next case too—about a debate in the House of Lords—concerns an issue that is prone to give rise to nitpicking. The Lords debate what gay marriage should be *called.* One may wonder if it wouldn't be more to the point to debate the institution itself. But in fact, when this discussion occurred, the Lords had already approved gay marriage.

Case 3. *Le mot juste*
"The Lords rarely let you down. […] On Monday they returned to the topic of gay marriage. The principle of the bill having passed by whopping majorities in both houses, the peers were reduced to nit-picking—but only the finest, hand-crafted, artisan nit-picking, using mother of pearl and gold nit-combs.
The topic was what gay marriage should be called. Lord Hylton didn't like 'marriage', which he thought referred only to a man and a woman. 'The proposed change recalls Alice In Wonderland, or Orwell's Newspeak!' he said. He wanted the word 'union' instead. Lord Cormack agreed, but said there should be something, somewhere between 'civil partnership' and 'marriage' which didn't use

the term 'marriage' but made it clear that the arrangement was more than just a partnership. He didn't know what word to choose, but I thought 'best mate-ship' might work. […] It's no sillier than some of the other suggestions.

Lord Phillips came up with the word 'espousal.' It was an 'anachronistic' word but we needed it.

Still the words kept coming. The Marquis of Lothian […] suggested 'matrimony' but then added that this was derived from the Latin for mother, 'mater,' which would not work for most gay partnerships […].

Lord Armstrong […] refer[red] to Humpty Dumpty, who was a prime source for this dispute, since he famously said: 'When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less … the question is, which is to be master?' […]

Lord Ilminster was worried that the very existence of gay marriage would deter heterosexuals from getting married. 'This mish-mash may make them unwilling to go ahead!' he said, so adding another new euphemism: 'same sex mish-mash.' The debate was getting more bizarre. […]." (Hoggart 2013)

In Case 3, which is our first case of nitpicking (or quibbling) in an argumentative context, the Lords debate a petty issue using rather petty arguments. One may think it a waste of time to quibble over words in this way. Yet, despite their quibbles, the Lords do make some progress in their debate as they defend their own proposals and criticize those tabled by others. From this case, quibbling appears to have some positive value as it brings to light minor considerations that may nevertheless together support a well-founded decision.

Among philosophers, a well-known case of quibbling is the squirrel case related by William James:

Case 4. *The squirrel*
A squirrel is on the trunk of a tree, circling round it; a man also goes round the tree but never catches sight of the squirrel because the tree-trunk is always in between the two. The question is whether the man is going round the squirrel or not. James, returning from a walk, finds two parties hotly debating this issue. Each party wants James to take their side. But then James draws a distinction pointing out an ambiguity in the term "going round," which was used in a different sense by either party.

"If you mean passing from the north of him to the east, then to the south, then to the west, and then to the north of him again, obviously the man does go round him, for he occupies these successive positions. But if on the contrary you mean being first in front of him, then on the right of him, then behind him, then on his left, and finally in front again, it is quite obvious that the man fails to go round him, for by compensating movements the squirrel makes, he keeps his belly turned towards the man all the time, and his back turned away. Make the distinction, and there is no reason for any farther dispute."

Thus the dispute is shown to have been occasioned by a spurious difference of opinion and the arguments adduced in it are in hindsight reduced to mere

quibbles, as we might say.[1] This should have been the end of it, but some of the quibblers charged William James himself with quibbling: They called William James's "speech a shuffling evasion, saying that they wanted no quibbling or scholastic hair-splitting, but meant just plain honest English 'round.'" (James 1919, pp. 43–45)[2]

Cases 3 and 4 show that there are different kinds of quibbles over words (Semantic Quibbles): The two parties debating the squirrel case were talking at cross-purposes: they were not aware that their disagreement was merely verbal and that they were actually involved in a verbal battle; in other cases, such as that of the hairsplitting practiced by the Lords in Case 3 (*Le mot juste*), people are quite aware that they are arguing over words though they would not call it "quibbling." William James, when he introduced a distinction, was charged with quibbling in this latter sense of hairsplitting. Both kinds of quibbles over words we call "Semantic Quibbles" (see Sect. 3). But not all quibbles are semantic, for people may also quibble over bonuses, numbers, expenses, procedures, forecasts, promises, offenses, priorities, commas, and what not. We illustrate this with just one case of alleged nitpicking that relates to quibbles over levels of executive reward rather than to quibbles over words.

Case 5. *Unbelievable nitpicking*
"The chairman [Gerry Robinson] of drinks group *Allied Domecq* yesterday dismissed shareholders' concerns about increasing levels of executive pay as 'unbelievable nit-picking.'
Gerry Robinson, whose chief executive Philip Bowman was last year paid £1.6 million including a £738,000 bonus, said debate about executive remuneration and bonuses had got completely out of hand. It was absolutely necessary to pay top salaries to recruit and retain talent, he insisted.
His comments were made at the *Allied Domecq* annual shareholders' meeting, where he faced criticism on the huge rewards handed out to *Allied's* board last year. […]
A spokesman for the national association of pension funds—which speaks for £650 billion of shareholder investments and has been an outspoken critic of many of the most generous pay deals—said Mr. Robinson's comments were ill-judged. 'Shareholders have no objections to high levels of reward except for low levels of performance,' he said. 'He seems to have forgotten that shareholders own companies. To accuse them of nit-picking is to effectively criticise the owners of the business.'

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[1] William James himself did not use the term "quibbling" to characterize the verbal battle about going round the squirrel.

[2] The case is quoted in full and discussed in Walton (1996, pp. 48–51). Since in Walton's exposition there is no reference to quibbling, one may wonder whether he sees the dispute about the squirrel as a kind of quibbling. That this is indeed the case is shown by his later remark that the problem with one of Beardsley's examples of quibbling (our Case 7 (*Free enterprise*)) "appears to be the same kind of problem as posed by the squirrel case" (1996, p. 52). Dufour (2016) also discussed the squirrel case in connection with quibbling. In his discussion of various kinds of quibbling classified according to the conjugation of the verb *pinailler* (to quibble): *je pinaille, tu pinailles,…* Dufour uses the squirrel case to illustrate the third person plural (*ils pinaillent*) in which a discussion is evaluated from a global point of view. When some quibblers charge William James with quibbling, this would be a 2nd person singular case: *tu pinailles*.

Allied's chief executive was one of three *Allied Domecq* directors to be paid more than £1 million last year. […] The payments took into account future service, even though there is no guarantee they will stay with the company.

Mr. Bowman was awarded his bonus based […] partly on 'key management objectives' which *Allied Domecq* does not disclose to its shareholders.

At the time the payments became public […] the group said Mr. Bowman had earned the bonus not because of any outstanding achievement but because he had avoided making any mistakes.

Mr. Bowman has also been awarded a large share option incentive […].

The company also came under fire yesterday for the £2.3 million it has paid to Tony Hales, Mr. Bowman's predecessor. Mr. Hales left the company after years of underperformance in 1999 with a £1 million golden handshake.

The former chief executive demanded a larger sum, and after protracted negotiations, Allied last year agreed to hand over a further £1.3 million. […]" (Finch 2003)

Whether chairman Robinson's characterization of the shareholders' criticism of these awards as "unbelievable nitpicking" holds water, we shall not attempt to judge.

3 Semantic Quibbles

Quibbles are prone to lead the discussion away from what really is at issue, and they may do so by a seemingly unproblematic appearance of problematically ambiguous expressions but also by a seemingly serious appearance of insignificant objections. As announced in the introduction, we distinguish between two types of quibbles: Semantic Quibbles (quibbles over words) and Remonstrative Quibbles (quibbles over objections), that may, however, overlap, since objections may concern the use of words. Where they do not overlap, they give rise to quite different patterns of challenges and responses, so that it will be convenient to treat them separately. In Sect. 4, we deal with Remonstrative Quibbles, where the discussion threatens to miss the core of the issue because of an inadequate dealing with minor objections that are being raised. In the current section, we go more deeply into Semantic Quibbles, where the discussion threatens to go off track because of an inadequate dealing with words and their meanings.

Semantic quibbles are argumentative contributions with which a discussant evades the real issue and avoids being genuinely responsive to his interlocutor by playing on the vagaries (ambiguities, shifts of meaning, vague expressions) of language. Above, when discussing Case 3 (*Le mot juste*) and Case 4 (*The squirrel*), we saw that there are again at least two subtypes of Semantic Quibbles: the discussion may (as in Case 4) turn into a merely verbal battle, in which case we speak of Talking at Cross-Purposes but it may also shift to an altercation over words and their meanings (as in Case 3), in which case we speak of Hairsplitting. To these two types of semantic quibble, there correspond two ways of charging someone with semantic quibbling: You may charge your interlocutor either with (1) using in his opposition the same words as you do but in a different sense (Talking at Cross-Purposes) or with (2) creating the illusion that

your expressions stand in need of more precision (Hairsplitting). If you are the one who introduced the expression at issue in the dialogue, you may raise such charges and all the same acknowledge your responsibility for having introduced the expression. In both cases, the (alleged) quibbler need not have advanced his quibbles in a fully deliberate way, but at least there must be, or so your charge implies, an element of self-satisfaction and of contentedness with (in the first case:) the expression of an opposing point of view or (in the second case:) a criticism of your use of language—whereas in fact, so you contend, the quibbler's contributions engage only with the words you uttered and not with the case you presented.

3.1 Talking at cross-purposes

Let us first have a closer look at the first type of semantic quibble. Words are vague or ambiguous and allow people to express various meanings with the same words. More specifically, if Party A is in discussion opposed by Party B, Party B may use an expression that has been used earlier by Party A but in a different sense and thus engage in a merely verbal battle, which we call "Talking at Cross-Purposes." Now, Party A may detect such an ambiguity on Party B's part, and suspect that this is part of either a calculated or else a rather unmindfully used strategy to avoid a really responsive discussion about the topic at issue. In Party A's view, the wording used by Party B creates the false impression that Party A's statements are incompatible with Party B's position, and the resulting verbal disagreement may even mask a substantial agreement between the two. In such a case, Party A can charge Party B with playing on the ambiguity of the expression at hand. If Party A fails to notice the hitch, they may continue to talk at cross-purposes.

We conceive of William James's criticism of the exchange in Case 4 (*The squirrel*) as a prototypical example of charging discussants with Talking at Cross-Purposes, albeit that the story's hero is—at least initially—not a party to the dispute and intervenes as a bystander in the disputants' behalf. In our reading of the story, James charges *both* sides with quibbling, as each side shows contentedness with developing its own case without due concern for whatever the other is trying to express. These quibbles are characterized by—to use Naess's (1966) terminology—a *verbal disagreement* (in the neutral sense of the verbal expression of disagreement) that, initially unknown to the disputants, disguises a *propositional agreement* and therefore can be called a *merely* verbal disagreement. Naess speaks in such cases of a *pseudodisagreement* (1966, pp. 84-5).[3]

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[3] Chalmers (2011) discusses a kindred notion that he labels a "(broadly) verbal dispute," i.e. a dispute over a sentence S in virtue of differing beliefs, which may be tacit, regarding the meaning of an expression in S (Chalmers 2011, p. 522). In his terminology, a verbal dispute is "narrowly verbal" if, for each interlocutor, S expresses a distinct proposition. Yet, a verbal dispute that is not narrowly verbal may still be "broadly verbal" if both parties are committed to use the expression "with deference to their linguistic community, so that what they mean by the expression is determined by the expression's meaning in the wider community" (p. 519) As a consequence, a semantic externalist can say that, for example in a "deferential squirrel case" where both interlocutors are committed to use "go round" with deference to their linguistic community, both mean the same with the sentence about the squirrel (one being right; the other being wrong) but even so, they are engaged in a verbal dispute if they have different beliefs about what the sentence happens to mean within their community (pp. 519–521).

A second characteristic example of Talking at Cross-Purposes, of a more serious nature, is suggested by an example of the fallacy of equivocation found in Salmon (1973, pp. 133, 136-7; also discussed by Walton, 1996, p. 52). Our reconstruction in the form of a dialogue runs as follows:

Case 6. *Selfish*
A: People sometimes act unselfishly. Think of saints and heroes.
B: No, people never do. Even saints and heroes act from their own motivation.
A: Now, we're talking at cross-purposes, because where I was talking about unselfish acts in the sense of altruistic acts, you make it look like our discussion is about unselfish acts in the sense of acts that do not arise from one's own motivations.

Beardsley's (1950) account of quibbling is close to ours of Talking at Cross-Purposes. He characterizes *quibbling*, and more specifically *quibbling on a term* (p. 44), as a special kind of equivocation that takes place in a dispute, with a party A arguing in support of a conclusion and another party B arguing against the same conclusion, where B uses a term that has already been used by A, but in a different sense, with the possible result that B's reply is "beside the point" and that "their dispute is merely verbal" (p. 45). He offers the following example (discussed by Walton, 1996, pp. 51–52), which we see as a non-prototypical yet intriguing example of Talking at Cross-Purposes:

Case 7. *Free enterprise*
"A *says*: 'I believe in free enterprise; therefore no government interference with business should be permitted. […]'
B *says*: 'I believe in free enterprise, too; therefore I conclude that the government should prohibit combinations in restraint of trade, and conspiracies by one part of industry directed at other parts […]'" (Beardsley 1950, p. 44)

Beardsley's example, however, differs considerably from Case 4 (*The squirrel*) and Case 6 (*Selfish*) in that the two parties subscribe to the very same sentence in which the term "free enterprise," occurs. Party A uses the term "free enterprise" in the sense of "the absence of any laws regulating private industry" and Party B uses it in the sense of "conditions of maximum competition in industry" (p. 45). Beardsley points out that by wording their contrary positions in these ways, "they will merely frustrate and annoy each other" (p. 45). He adds that in other cases, but not in the case at hand, the elimination of the quibble would even show that the dispute is merely verbal.

In our understanding of the example, it is useful to make a distinction between the statement "I believe in free enterprise" and the connection between that statement and the standpoint justified by means of it. The parties can be expected to be well aware of the fact that they are subscribing to different values by affirming the sentence "I believe in free enterprise." They are not engaged in just a pseudo-disagreement about the value of free enterprise, but in a genuine, propositional disagreement about what one ought to

value, as the disambiguations show.[4] Instead of evading the bone of contention, Party B seems to succeed in using this very same statement for a sufficiently transparent and rhetorically interesting expression of his contrary position. If the quibble is not to be found in A's or B's premise, but A and B reject each other's arguments, is it then to be found in another part of these arguments?

In the two arguments the ambiguous statement "I believe in free enterprise," is used to support different conclusions, and so they convey a different unexpressed connection premise, i.e. a different premise to plausibly connect the first premise with the conclusion it supports. Party A's connection premise reads "If one believes in free enterprise one should not allow government interference with business" and Party B's connection premise reads "If one believes in free enterprise one should allow such-and-such government interferences with business." By emphatically using the free enterprise statement to support a conclusion completely opposite to Party A's conclusion, Party B expresses his disagreement with the way Party A uses the premise for A's conclusion, and so with A's connection premise. And possibly—Party A is suggesting a parallel disagreement with B's connection premise. Then, the dialogue exemplifies a disagreement about at least one (and possibly both) of these connection premises. However, the disambiguation of each connection premise would result in a statement that happens to be acceptable to both parties (as they become well-nigh tautological), and so, quite plausibly, the parties are engaged in a pseudodisagreement vis-à-vis these connection premises. The Talking at Cross-Purposes occurs in the silent part of the argument. Thus, we tend to think that, after all, Beardsley's example allows of a reading where it exemplifies Talking at Cross-Purposes, the kind of Semantic Quibble that is characterized by a merely verbal disagreement (pseudodisagreement). The source of the quibble is then to be located in the unexpressed connection premise of (at least) Party A's argument.[5]

Before turning to Hairsplitting as a second type of Semantic Quibble, we turn to the issue of whether Talking at Cross-Purposes is a kind of fallacy.

Beardsley thinks Talking at Cross-Purposes is a Fallacy of Equivocation. According to his definition, a Fallacy of Equivocation has been committed if "in the course of an argument a term changes its meaning in such a way that the conclusion seems to follow when it doesn't" (p. 44). For two reasons, we do not follow Beardsley in this respect. First, in Case 4 (*The squirrel*), Case 6 (*Selfish*), and in Case 7 (*Free enterprise*),

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[4] Neither are they involved in what Naess calls a pseudo-agreement, in which case two parties verbally agree to a statement but propositionally disagree. They are not, because there is between these interlocutors no misunderstanding about what each believes in (Naess 1966, p. 85).

[5] Alternatively, Party B's message might be that he disagrees with the way Party A uses the term "free enterprise." Then the dialogue would display a feature of, what Plunkett labels, a "metalinguistic dispute." In a metalinguistic dispute, a speaker expresses her disagreement with the way her interlocutor uses a specific term in a statement simply by denying that statement, *using* the term at issue "metalinguistically," rather than *mentioning* it (Plunkett 2015, p. 835). For example, when someone asks "What counts as tall in your country?" and the answer is "Feynman is tall," then a bystander may enter into a "metalinguistic dispute" by saying "No way. Feynman is not tall," thereby declaring the earlier use of "tall" to be linguistically inadmissible (Plunkett 2015, p. 834). Case 7 allows of a reading where A and B succeed in communicating a disagreement about how the term "free enterprise" ought to be used. But different from Plunkett's example, they don't do so by expressing a disagreement about a sentence that contains the term at issue but rather by expressing a disagreement about what follows from a sentence containing the term at issue. Thus interpreted, Case 7 is not an example of Talking at Cross-Purposes.

the problem has not been that one party makes a term change its meaning within an argument put forward by that party. Each party uses the disputed term consistently. Second, when a Fallacy of Equivocation goes unnoticed by the receiver, the receiver gets triggered to *agree* with the argument's premises and conclusion as well as with the connection between the argument's premises and its conclusion, so that the plausible result of a subtle equivocation is a pseudoagreement among the two parties, rather than the kind of spurious disagreement that characterizes quibbles in the sense of Talking at Cross-Purposes.[6]

Lewiński (2018) suggests that Talking at Cross-Purposes—and other kinds of quibbling—should be discussed in connection with the Straw Man Fallacy. Talking at Cross-Purposes and Straw Man are undoubtedly related, and it would be a good idea to investigate their relationship closer but here we must limit ourselves to the remark that not all cases of the first are cases of the second. In Case 4 (*The squirrel*), for instance, there is no reason to suppose that the debaters misrepresent each other's standpoints and it would be hard for them to do so without being aware of the ambiguity. In Case 6 (*Selfish*), A's second contribution can be interpreted as an accusation of Straw Man: According to A, B would have suggested that A's standpoint in her first contribution was that sometimes people do not act from their own motivations, and this would misrepresent what A said. But does the accusation hold water? B's interpretation, though not very charitable, could well be admissible —nonfallacious—in some contexts (Lewiński and Oswald 2013).

If Talking at Cross-Purposes is not a kind of Equivocation or Straw Man, cases of it may still be fallacious on their own account. For, plausibly, Talking at Cross-Purposes and other kinds of quibbling are detrimental to the resolution of differences of opinion. But in this paper we do not presume that all quibbles are fallacious.

3.2 Hairsplitting

The second type of Semantic Quibble, Hairsplitting, is occasioned by the circumstance that, because of the vagaries of language, there often is a need for expressions to be clarified, defined or made more precise in various directions, and this without there being a natural limit to the ever and ever higher levels of clarity, definiteness, and precision one may try to achieve. A party A may play on the vagaries of language by criticizing phrases, used by party B, as being insufficiently clear or precise for the dialogue at hand, and in dire need of clarification, disambiguation, or a more precise reformulation, even if the increase in clearness or precision would actually hamper the resolution of the initial disagreement: For instance, if spending resources on clearing up some semantic details would go at the cost of straightening out more vital aspects of the issue debated. We call this type of Semantic Quibble "Hairsplitting." We conceive

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[6] Walton is also reluctant to label (semantic) quibbling as a type of equivocation but for somewhat different reasons, among which his assumption that equivocation is a more local and quibbling a more global problem in dialogue. As our characterization of Talking at Cross-Purposes shows, we think that a Semantic Quibble can be quite local, in the sense of traceable to one particular contribution by one party in response to another party's contribution, and in this respect there seems to be no fundamental difference with equivocation. Note also that Walton characterizes quibbling as a conversation where the parties equivocate against each other (1996, pp. 51–54).

of the allegation in James's story, made against James's distinction between the two senses of "going round," as a prototypical example of a charge of Hairsplitting.

Hairsplitting is a form of Semantic Quibble because it exploits the vagaries of language for evading the real issue at hand, but it differs from Talking at Cross-Purposes in that it does not generate a spurious disagreement (and may even be advanced in an attempt to dissolve a spurious disagreement). The objection against James's distinction amounts to the charge that James steers the discussion in a direction that does not facilitate the resolution of the issue of whether or not the squirrel is going round the tree. Apparently, the objectors claim that the distinction made is irrelevant for the case at hand, or, if relevant, at least too fine-grained to have real weight and merit consideration. The dispute, so they say, was about "plain honest English" round and James's artificial distinction is far-fetched and distracting from the initial issue (cf. Mackenzie, 1988, p. 478, on the *Scholastic's Gambit*).

3.3 Profiles of dialogue for Semantic Quibbles

To conclude our discussion of Semantic Quibbles, we want to sketch profiles of dialogue (see for instance, Walton 1989; Krabbe 2002; Krabbe and van Laar 2015) for Talking at Cross-Purposes and Hairsplitting, i.e. we want to put forward plausible avenues for dealing with these phenomena in a critical dialogue. In these profiles a normative survey is given of plausible dialectical moves that one may make when confronted with a charge of Talking at Cross-Purposes or Hairsplitting, and some indications are given about how to continue the discussion. Hairsplitting has been discussed as a semantic quibble, but it can also be viewed as a special case of Remonstrative Quibbles. We shall return to this issue at the end of Sect. 4. Briefly stated the first profile, for Talking at Cross-Purposes, contains the following elements (for a schematic overview, see Fig. 1):
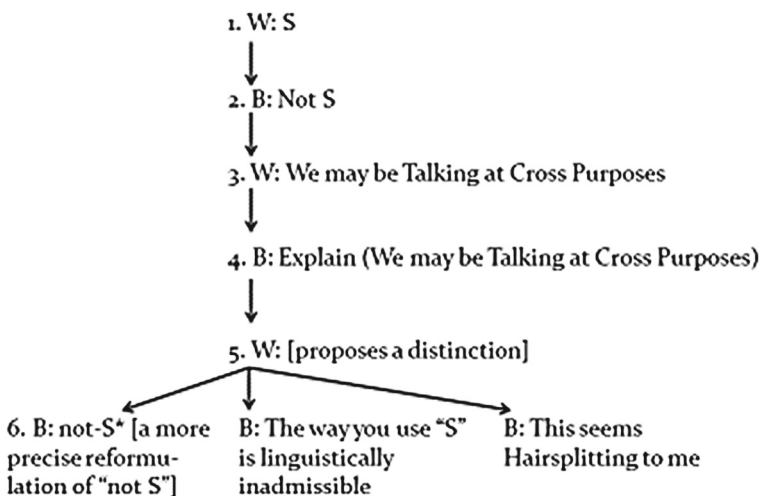

1. W: S

2. B: Not S

3. W: We may be Talking at Cross Purposes

4. B: Explain (We may be Talking at Cross Purposes)

5. W: [proposes a distinction]

6. B: not-S* [a more precise reformulation of "not S"]　　　B: The way you use "S" is linguistically inadmissible　　　B: This seems Hairsplitting to me

Fig. 1 A profile of dialogue for Talking at Cross-Purposes

If at some point in the dialogue Wilma alleges that Bruce engages in quibbling, in the sense of Talking at Cross-Purposes, Bruce may request Wilma to elaborate on her criticism, for example by formulating the distinct senses that are at issue, so as to make him understand what the charge amounts to exactly, and how to respond to it adequately. After Wilma has drawn a distinction, Bruce has a number of options. First, he may decide to acknowledge the problem and reformulate his position in a way that is more in line with the way Wilma has used the expressions at hand.[7] Second, he may consider Wilma's distinction as inadmissible for linguistic reasons, for example because in his view Wilma uses the expression at issue in a way that diverges from common usage (van Laar 2010, p. 138-9). In Case 7 (*Free enterprise*), B (Bruce) suggests that the *real* meaning of "free enterprise" concerns fair competition and not freedom from regulation. Thus, B forestalls a possible allegation by Wilma of quibbling, in the sense of Talking at Cross-Purposes, given that it may be parried by a rejection of Wilma's preferred meaning of the term as linguistically inadmissible. Third, Bruce may charge Wilma's allegation of Talking at Cross-Purposes as a quibble in the sense of Hairsplitting, in which case the parties move on to the second profile.

We now turn to this second profile (Fig. 2). When Wilma is charged with Hairsplitting, whether she has earlier brought forward an allegation of Talking at Cross-Purposes, as in Case 4 (*The squirrel*), or just goes into too much linguistic detail (compare the quibbling of the Lords in Case 3 (*Le mot juste*)), Wilma may acknowledge the problem (withdrawing her proposal as well as an earlier allegation of Talking at Cross-Purposes, if any) and return to the more substantial items on the agenda. But she may also attempt to explain what makes the distinction she drew a relevant one that has real bearing on the issue at hand, for example by showing in what way their disagreement is a spurious one or how drawing the distinction would facilitate the resolution of their real difference of opinion.[8]

A charge of Hairsplitting is a charge to the effect that the alleged hairsplitter advances trivial, nitpicking objections against one's use of language, proposing overly fine distinctions that are not helpful for resolving the difference of opinion. Thus Hairsplitting besides being a kind of Semantic Quibble is also a kind of Remonstrative Quibble, the topic to which we now turn.

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[7] Chalmers (2011) distinguishes between two ways of resolving (narrow or broad) verbal disputes: First by distinguishing between various senses of a key term; Second by means of the "method of elimination," which seems to come down to replacing the verbal dispute over *S* by a suitably related substantive dispute over a sentence *S'* that does no longer contain the key term in virtue of which the verbal dispute arose. He pleads in support of the second at the expense of the first, for "we are not always able to give a good articulation of what our terms mean (…) So it is useful to have a method that does not directly depend on the analysis of meaning in this way" (Chalmers 2011, p. 526). In our proposal Wilma need not offer a neat linguistic analysis, but she ought to show at least two ways of eliminating the key term, after which it is up to Bruce to determine whether and how to eliminate the key term. We do acknowledge the possibility of "vocabulary exhaustion" (p. 530), where the parties cannot really get rid of the key term at hand.

[8] It may be unclear for the disputants whether a distinction must be drawn so as to avoid Talking at Cross-Purposes or whether such a distinction would rather lead the discussion astray. One way to explore this issue would be by just investigating where making the distinction leads them.
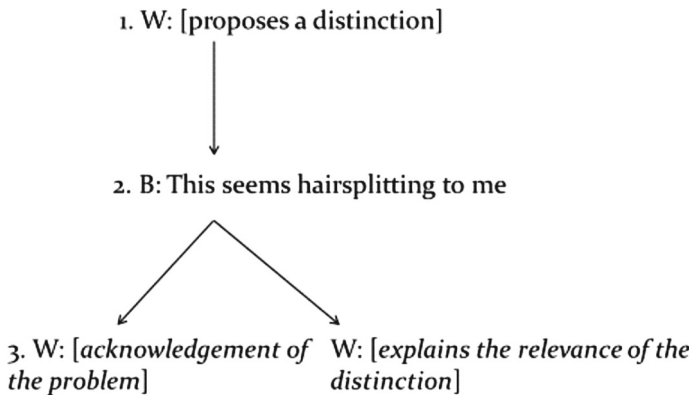
1. W: [proposes a distinction]

2. B: This seems hairsplitting to me

3. W: [acknowledgement of   W: [explains the relevance of the
the problem]   distinction]

Fig. 2 A profile of dialogue for Hairsplitting

4 Remonstrative Quibbles

A Remonstrative Quibble functions as an objection against a standpoint, for instance a proposal for some action or decision. The problem is that the proponent of an action proposal may consider as a quibble what the objector considers as a serious objection. As said before, we are not going to propose criteria to draw a line between true quibbles and merely alleged ones, but want to sketch how discussants can deal with a situation in which one of them, rightly or wrongly, considers one or more objections of the other as Remonstrative Quibbles, i.e. as too trivial to deserve attention.

4.1 Two Examples of Remonstrative Quibbles

Consider the following case:

> **Case 8** *The Parnassus*
> A city is planning a huge, impressive building, called the "Parnassus Tower," in which various cultural activities and facilities, which are now spread over the city, will be concentrated. Wilma, who is in favor of these plans, argues that they should go through because the building will not only provide ample room for a library, a cinema, and a debating center, but also promises to become a quite spectacular tourist attraction. Bruce, who is skeptical, objects that the building will be very costly, especially since tourists might not be interested, and that the library, the cinema, and the debating center are at present appropriately accommodated at various locations, and that moreover there will be the loss of some nice trees, a playground, a place for walking the dog, and some of the lines of sight directed at the city's medieval tower.

Wilma may be willing to seriously consider and discuss some of these issues, for instance the financial aspects, and the need for relocation and concentration of cultural facilities, but not be prepared to pay serious attention to what she may think of as mere quibbles. Since it may not be wise to overtly accuse the other of quibbling, she may

rather point out that the issues of, say, the trees, the playground, walking the dog, and the sight-lines are somewhat minor in comparison to the other issues, and suggest that discussion of these could be skipped, at least for the time being. She may also suggest discussing some of these issues not separately, but in clusters. For instance Wilma may propose to lump the issues about the trees, the playground, and walking the dog together into one debatable issue: that of adverse effects on the neighborhood.[9] Bruce may of course protest that all his objections are very much to the point and should be taken into account but he may also, perhaps after some discussion, agree to drop all or some of the minor issues. He may also admit that some of his objections, taken separately, do not carry much weight but, at the same time, maintain that taken together they constitute one or more major issues. Also Bruce could propose another way to cluster these minor, but not negligible, objections.

The clustering option can have advantages both for Bruce and for Wilma. An advantage for Bruce would be that he would avoid going on record as a quibbling nitpicker, while still having his points on the agenda. But an advantage for Wilma would be that she will not have to defuse each of Bruce's objections separately but may instead introduce another point that overrules all these small inconveniences and clinches that part of the argument. She could, for instance, point out some overriding advantages, for those living in the neighborhood, of living close to the cultural facilities provided by the new building.

As long as they are discussing proposals about how to divide or group various issues, Wilma and Bruce are not directly concerned with the plans for a new building but rather with the way in which to arrange a discussion of these plans, that is, they find themselves involved in a metadiscussion or metadialogue (Krabbe 2003). If the metadiscussion (which may contain both negotiation and persuasion dialogue) is successful, they will be better equipped for resolving their difference of opinion when returning to their original discussion about the plans for the Parnassus Tower.

A temporary retreat into metadiscussion can also be useful when the difference of opinion concerns a matter of evaluation; for evaluations often occasion detailed observations by one party that the other party considers as mere nitpicking or quibbling:

Case 9 *The dissertation*
Wilma and Bruce are professors who are jointly to evaluate a dissertation. Wilma is very much impressed by the originality and audacity displayed in the dissertation. She wants to give it an A + . But Bruce is rather more critical and proposes a D. He objects that the dissertation is in many places unclear, lacks a problem to be solved as well as a conclusion, and that its writing is full of mistakes in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Again Wilma may be willing to discuss some of Bruce's criticisms and try to convince him that these flaws are more than offset by the genius that appears all through the dissertation but other criticisms she would be inclined to reject as mere nitpicking.

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[9] Clustering minor objections and responding to whatever unites them is one of the strategies discussed against the Gish Gallop: "the fallacious debate tactic of drowning your opponent in a flood of individually-weak arguments in order to prevent rebuttal of the whole argument collection without great effort" (RationalWiki 2019). The individually weak arguments may be dispensed with as remonstrative quibbles, unless they are shown to add up to one or more weighty clusters of arguments.

Bruce could insist on discussing every misplaced comma, but he could also propose to cluster his linguistic objections into one major issue: sloppy writing. If Wilma accepts such a proposal, they will not have to debate each separate comma but may come to agree that the writing is, say, on a C-level and then focus their discussion on Bruce's other criticisms.

4.2 Profiles of dialogue for Remonstrative Quibbles

The procedures sketched above for dealing—in both Case 8 (*The Parnassus*) and Case 9 (*The dissertation*)—with a situation where one party considers some or all of the objections of the other party as mere quibbles can be incorporated into a profile of dialogue. In this profile a normative survey is given of dialectical moves that one may make when confronted with Remonstrative Quibbles. It also contains retorts to these moves, of which the allegedly quibbling party may avail itself, and gives some indications about how to continue the discussion. Briefly stated the profile contains the following elements (Wilma being the proponent and Bruce the opponent):

First Wilma submits a standpoint, say a proposal for some action, which is challenged by Bruce. Wilma defends her proposal by argument. Bruce is not convinced and offers a number of criticisms. These criticisms may be of various kinds and may consist of a counterproposal, which amounts to a rejection of Wilma's proposal, or focus on specific parts of the argument. Here we shall not go into details about the ways of criticism (see Krabbe and van Laar 2011). We just assume that Bruce raises a number of issues that function as objections to Wilma's proposal. The parties may differ in their assessment of the seriousness or relevance of these issues; what Bruce offers as a substantive issue, Wilma could perceive as a mere quibble.

The profile then offers an opportunity for Wilma to deal with any or all of the issues raised. But, second, Wilma may propose to dismiss some or all of these issues since they are, in her opinion, quibbles (i.e. they are nugatory or irrelevant) and ask Bruce to withdraw these issues. This amounts to a charge of quibbling. Yet such a charge is different from a fallacy charge,[10] since it functions as a mere request and not, like a fallacy charge, as an assertion that could be challenged by Bruce. Hence there will be no burden of proof on Wilma to show that Bruce's objections are "actually" quibbles. Third, Wilma may also put forward a clustering proposal, that is, she may propose one or more clusters of allegedly minor issues: these minor issues will then not be discussed separately, but each cluster will count as a substantive issue. A clustering proposal can be presented in combination with a proposal to dismiss some issues, i.e. to not even cluster them. Before moving on, it must be clear whether Bruce accepts Wilma's clustering proposal. At this point, the profile of dialogue provides the following options for Bruce:

(1) Bruce accepts Wilma's clustering proposal (if there is one) and withdraws all (non-clustered) issues that Wilma wants to dismiss (he agrees that they are

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[10] A fallacy charge would be in order when Bruce would jump to the conclusion that some mere quibble sufficed to reject Wilma's proposal without due consideration of the merits of the latter. The fallacy committed would be Whately's Fallacy of Objections (Whately 1836, III.17, p. 200, see also Krabbe 2007, pp. 52–53, 62–63).
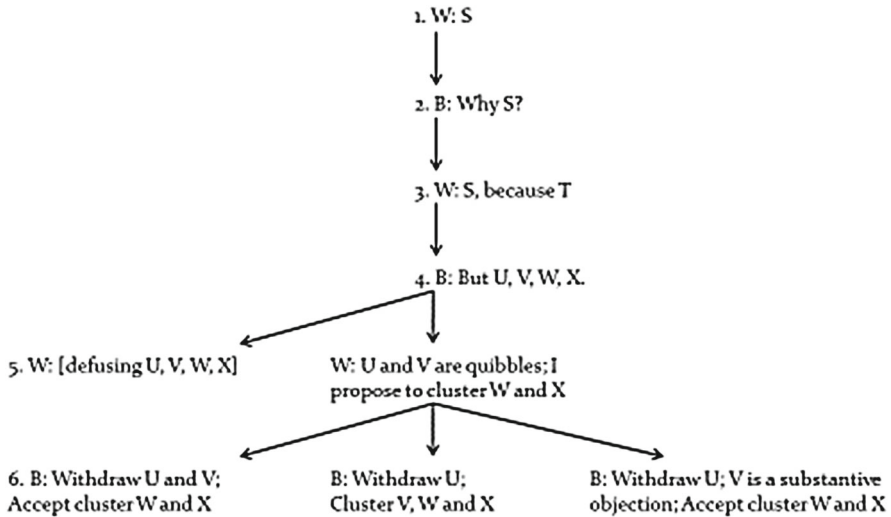
Fig. 3 An instance of a profile of dialogue for Remonstrative Quibbles

quibbles). The discussion can now continue about what both parties agree are substantive issues (if there are any issues left).

(2) Bruce does not accept Wilma's clustering proposal (if there is one). He withdraws perhaps some but not all of the issues Wilma wanted to dismiss or cluster. He then submits his own clustering proposal in which each of the remaining issues that Wilma wanted to dismiss or cluster is clustered.

(3) Bruce may or may not accept Wilma's clustering proposal and may or may not withdraw some issues, also he may submit his own clustering proposal if he does not accept that of Wilma, but anyhow *Bruce maintains as a separate substantive issue at least one of the issues that Wilma wanted to dismiss or cluster.* If there is at least one issue left that Wilma agrees to be substantive, the discussion can continue about such an issue. When these issues have been discussed, Wilma may repeat her request to withdraw or cluster some issues. When there are still issues left but none that Wilma agrees to be substantive, she must in order to convince Bruce be prepared to discuss the issues she actually perceives as mere quibbles.

An abstract, but not wholly general, instance of this profile of dialogue is given in Fig. 3.

The dialogue move "This seems hairsplitting to me" (see Fig. 2) can be seen as a special case of the charge of remonstrative quibbles, targeting the proposition that a linguistic distinction is required ("U is a quibble"). The clustering option is irrelevant for this special case, so that the remaining options are (i) to acknowledge the distinction to be a (semantic and remonstrative) quibble, and thus to withdraw it ("Withdraw U"),

and (ii) to explain the relevance of the distinction, and thus to maintain it ("U is a substantive objection").[11]

5 Conclusion

Such theoretical reflections as are provided in our paper can lend support, but only some, to the improvement of our ways of dealing with alleged quibbles, which however ultimately needs to be realized in practice. Yet we hope to have shown that on the one hand critics need not acquiesce in their criticisms being disposed of as mere quibbles, whereas on the other hand arguers need not acquiesce in a persistently quibbling attitude of their critics.

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[11] Note, however, that Talking at Cross-Purposes and Remonstrative Quibbles are different phenomena, in that it would be inconsistent to charge one's opponent with Talking at Cross-Purposes as well as with advancing Remonstrative Quibbles in one and the same move, for the first charge deals with major formulation issues and the second with minor substantive issues.

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