

A neglected deflationist approach to the liar

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1. *Introduction*

Consider the following familiar sentences.

- (1) (1) is false.
- (2) (2) is not true.
- (3) (3) is true.

(1) is the simple liar; (2) is the strengthened liar; and (3) is the truth-teller. That these sentences engender paradox is familiar enough – so much so that no review is required.

What do these familiar paradoxes teach us about our (English) language? To this question there are many different answers. The answer at issue in this paper is a common one; it is, perhaps, the most common *initial* response to the given paradoxes.¹ The response in question is one according to which none of (1), (2), or (3) are *meaningful*; each of the given sentences, according to the going response, is meaningless – they ‘say nothing’, ‘express no proposition’, or so on.

The trouble with the given response, and perhaps the reason that it tends to be only an *initial* response, is that it appears to be ad hoc, in addition to being implausible. The implausibility of the response arises from the fact that nobody has trouble *reasoning* about (1), (2), or (3); indeed, it is such effortless reasoning that leads one to recognize that the sentences are, alas (allegedly) meaningless. But this is puzzling; for one would think that such apparently successful reasoning is possible only if the given sentences are meaningful. For this reason the appearance of ad hocery is difficult to avoid; the only way of avoiding it is to provide *independent* reason for thinking that (1), (2), and (3) are meaningful; but this task, as is familiar, has not been an easy one.

¹ In my experience the following response is by far the most common initial response of students and even professional philosophers, upon their first encounter with the given paradoxes.

My aim, here, is not to review the various proposals for saying that (1), (2), and (3) are meaningless. My aim, rather, is to note one natural response that seems to have gone unnoticed, a response that arises from the spirit of deflationism about truth (or ‘truth’). The next section presents the basic point.²

2. *Deflationism and eliminability*

I assume familiarity with deflationism, and in particular with the subtle differences among many so-called deflationist theories. My concern, here, is not with trying to represent the letter of any particular deflationist theory; rather, my concern is only to point out that the *spirit* of deflationism seems to afford an independent reason for maintaining that (1), (2), and (3) are meaningless.

The basic spirit of deflationism about truth (or ‘truth’) is that, while truth may well be a genuine property, there is little more to truth than what is given by disquotation; that is, ascribing truth to *A*, as in ‘*A* is true’, adds little more than what is ascribed to the world by (an assertion of) *A*. To say that ‘grass is green’ is true is to say nothing more than that grass is green; and vice versa. Accordingly, truth (or ‘true’) affords no interesting philosophical analysis. All that need be said about the truth of a sentence is exhausted by that sentence’s disquotation principle: that ‘*A*’ is true if and only if *A*.³

The foregoing is rough and leaves substantive details aside. Still, the important point for present purposes has to do with the idea of *eliminability*. The basic point is that deflationism, more than any other theory of truth, is in position – though not obliged, perhaps – to maintain that ‘truth’ is *in principle eliminable* from any meaningful sentence. After all, the deflationist treats ‘truth’ as in many respects an ‘after thought’ of the language: ‘true’ may be very important, perhaps even essential, in our aim to describe reality; however, any such importance or essential role of ‘truth’ – for example, in making generalizations over many sentences (see Horwich 1990) – is due solely to our finite, contingent circumstances. Our aim is always to describe reality; in this quest, as Quine (1970) would put it, we may semantically descend. When one says that ‘grass is green’ is true one may achieve the same end by semantic descent – by saying only that grass is green.

² That the proposed response is *natural* is in large part what I suggest in the next section; that it is *neglected* is evidenced by its absence from prominent discussions of deflationist theories, including, for example, David 1994, Horwich 1990, Soames 1999, Stoljar 2000, or even in McGee 1992.

³ I trust context to disambiguate between use and mention with respect to occurrences of ‘*A*’ and the like.

Of course, as Horwich (1990) has emphasized we cannot always semantically descend. Sometimes, especially for purposes of making ‘long’ generalizations, we simply must use ‘truth’ on pain of not expressing what we wish. Nonetheless, the deflationist may say that such ‘essential uses’ of ‘true’ are ‘essential’ only because of our finite resources; God, it would seem, could say all that we want (or need) to say about reality without ever using ‘true’. In this respect the deflationist may say that ‘true’ is *in principle eliminable* from any meaningful sentence.

The key point, here, is not that deflationists *must* say that ‘true’ is in principle eliminable from any meaningful sentence; the point is that deflationists, given their approach to truth, may naturally say as much.

The application to the liar, strengthened liar, and truth-teller sentences should now be clear. The main trouble facing the view that (1), (2), and (3) are meaningless is that, absent independent explanation for such a charge, the position appears to be terribly ad hoc. An invocation of the deflationist spirit removes such ad hocery. The deflationist has *independent* reason for saying that the given sentences are meaningless: such sentences are meaningless because, in each case, ‘true’ (or ‘false’)⁴ cannot be eliminated, not even eliminated in principle.

The proposal, then, is that deflationists maintain the line that (1), (2), and (3) are meaningless; inasmuch as each of them contains an (in principle) ineliminable use of ‘true’ (or ‘false’, ‘not true’) each is thereby ruled out. Again, the nice thing about this reply is that it is independent of the paradoxes in question; and this is a major triumph, at least for those who wish to maintain the line that (1), (2), and (3) are meaningless.

Once pointed out, the foregoing point seems to be obvious. Interestingly, the point seems to have been overlooked. While many (Soames, Horwich, Stoljar, McGee, Tarski, Quine, et al.) have commented on the problem deflationists face with respect to (1), (2), or (3), nobody, as far as I know, has noted that deflationists, unlike virtually everyone else, seem to have a non-ad hoc reason for maintaining that the given sentences are meaningless. This point, I think, ought to be noted.⁵

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⁴ I assume, as per standard deflationist theories, that ‘falsity’ is treated in a similarly deflationary fashion – perhaps, as is natural, a derived term defined via (deflationary) truth.

⁵ In response to a liar-related talk I gave at Victoria University of Wellington (NZ) Kim Sterelny raised questions and objections that inspired this paper. To Kim: thanks. (For the record, I should note that while I am sympathetic to deflationism I think that the best, final solution to paradoxes of self-reference will be a dialethic one; however, this is a different story, and it doesn’t undermine the basic point of this paper.)

References

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