

## Dissertation Abstract: The Impossibility of the Liar

Imagine a speaker who at a certain time  $t$  says, and says only, that they are not saying anything true at  $t$ . Let  $l$  be the proposition that this speaker is not saying anything true at  $t$ . When we try to assess whether  $l$  is true or not, we run into an antinomy. For suppose first that  $l$  is true. Since it's the one and only thing the speaker says at  $t$ , and it is true, then it isn't true that the speaker doesn't say anything true at  $t$ : after all, they say that they they are not saying anything true at  $t$ , which by hypothesis is true. Since that's a contradiction,  $l$  isn't true. So suppose instead that  $l$  isn't true. Again because  $l$  is the one and only thing said at  $t$ , then the speaker doesn't say anything true at  $t$ . But then  $l$  is true after all, since  $l$  just is the proposition that the speaker doesn't say anything true at  $t$ . So either way we go, we end up in contradiction. And so, because we have proved a contradiction, we may go on to infer any absurdity, such that the earth is flat or that  $2+2=5$ .

According to most recent work on the liar, the above argument is fallacious: it rests either on mistaken assumptions about truth or about logic. The view I articulate in the dissertation denies this. While the argument is in fact perfectly valid, it does not lead to any disasters. This is because it in fact constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of the original supposition. Generally, the argument shows the impossibility of the Liar: it shows that it is just not possible for anyone to say, at a certain time, that they aren't saying anything true at that time, and to say only this. Similar arguments reveal the impossibility of combining various other propositional attitudes with other worldly circumstances. This is not to deny that it is possible for someone assertively to utter the words 'I am not now saying anything true'. That's obviously possible. But even if someone did utter such words, they would not succeed in saying, and saying only, that they are not then saying anything true.

In my dissertation I articulate an approach to the Liar paradox along these lines. According to this approach, the paradox has its source in mistaken assumptions about the propositional content of various (actual or counterfactual) utterances, speech acts, sentences and mental states. In effect, the Liar paradox turns out to be a propositional attitude puzzle.

The chapters of the dissertation break down as follows.

According to some philosophers, the lesson of the liar paradox is that we ought to be revisionists about (propositional) truth: we ought to reject some instances of the naive propositional truth-schema 'It is true that  $\phi$  if and only if  $\phi$ '. In the first chapter, *The innocence of truth in semantic paradox*, I construct a novel semantic paradox, in which no principle even analogous to the truth-schema plays any role. I argue that this undermines the motivation for revisionism about truth. The reason is that my new paradox can only be resolved either by rejecting its underlying semantic assumptions (my preferred response) or by revising the logic it makes use of it. This threatens to expose revisionism about truth as pointless: there is little point in abandoning our naive view of (propositional) truth in

order to hold on to naive reasoning or naive semantic assumptions if some other paradox forces us to revise these anyway.

Hartry Field has argued that responses to paradoxes like the Liar that retain classical logic invariably undermine the capacity of truth to play several of its most central roles. In particular, Field argues that such approaches are committed to abandoning the *transparency* of truth, which in turn undermines the possibility of using truth (and untruth) attributions to express acceptance and rejection. Implicitly, this is an argument for pursuing solutions to the Liar in weakened logics, on the grounds that they need not undermine the purpose of truth in this way. In the second chapter, *Logic, alethic transparency, and the purpose of truth*, I turn the tables on the non-classical logicians, showing that they too face problems of the sort Field raises. Only an approach to the paradoxes which holds fast *both* to a (properly understood) naive logic of truth and to classical logic can retain the simple picture that motivates Field's criticisms. The possibility of such a picture, while not without its own problems, is not as obviously impossible as often claimed.

In the chapter *The unmysterious impossibility of the Liar*, I consider the charge that rejecting the very possibility of the Liar in the way I suggest engenders mysteries or places ad hoc restrictions on the space of possibilities. I argue that not only are such limitations not as mysterious on reflection as they might at first appear, but also show that even theorists who revise classical logic in order to accept the possibility of the Liar must admit equally ad hoc restrictions on what is possible, negating their apparent advantage on this score.

Another worry with the sort of approach sketched above concerns its ramifications for systematic semantics. It is often suggested, for instance, that it will require giving some sort of highly dubious semantics for ordinary language, or accepting crippling expressive limitations. In *Semantics, metasemantics & the liar* I refine and explore one approach suggested in the literature for avoiding this conclusion. According to the *Deviance* approach, the designated interpretation of a language like English suffers from neither of these defects, but is susceptible to chaotic and unsystematic shifts. After responding to some natural objections to this view, I argue that the deviance view still does face a serious problem. If it's correct, we sometimes will have shifts of interpretations in the course of rigorous logical arguments. I argue that this seriously undermines the point of engaging in careful deductive reasoning in such a language. The challenge is therefore to develop a semantic and metasemantic picture on which the Liar can be avoided, without needing to have recourse to such chaotic shifts in meaning.

In the final chapter, *Indefinite discernibility*, I articulate what such a picture can look like. The key feature is the rejection of the common assumption that bearers of propositional content, be they realised in language or in thought, enjoy unique designated interpretations. But this assumption is questionable on independent grounds. A popular and plausible approach to vagueness should lead us to reject it. According to the proposal I develop,

the (propositional) truth predicate as well as logical constants, express the same thing on every designated interpretation, but this is not so for propositional attitude vocabulary like 'asserts', 'believes' or 'supposes'. The paradoxes then arise from an (uneliminable) failure to discern between interpretations on which certain sentences involving such vocabulary express distinct and non-equivalent propositions. And while we still must recognise shifts in interpretation even on this approach, the relevant shifts are much better behaved and less dramatic in their consequences than on the deviance view. First, rather than shifting un-systematically and chaotically, I postulate an (open-ended) process in which it is reflection on a paradoxical case that induces a *sharpening* of the language, a directed process whereby previously designated interpretations become *undesigned*. Second, I show how the relevant sorts of shifts do not threaten the utility of deductive reasoning using the language, thus escaping what I took to be the most significant problem for the deviance approach.