

REPLACING TRUTH

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Of the dozens of purported solutions to the liar paradox published in the past fifty years, the vast majority are “traditional” in the sense that they reject one of the premises or inference rules that are used to derive the paradoxical conclusion. Over the years, however, several philosophers have developed an alternative to the traditional approaches; according to them, our very competence with the concept of truth leads us to accept that the reasoning used to derive the paradox is sound. That is, our conceptual competence leads us into inconsistency. I call this alternative the *inconsistency approach* to the liar. Although this approach has many positive features, I argue that several of the well-developed versions of it that have appeared recently are unacceptable. In particular, they do not recognize that if truth is an inconsistent concept, then we should replace it with new concepts that do the work of truth without giving rise to paradoxes. I outline an inconsistency approach to the liar paradox that satisfies this condition.

0. INTRODUCTION

Of the dozens of purported solutions to the liar paradox published in the past fifty years, the vast majority are “traditional” in the sense that they reject one of the premises or inference rules that are used to derive the paradoxical conclusion (i.e., the liar sentence is true and false).¹ Over the years, however, several philosophers have presented alternatives to the traditional approaches; according to them, our very competence with the concept of truth leads us to accept that the reasoning used to derive the paradox is sound.² That is, our conceptual competence leads us into inconsistency. I call these alternatives *inconsistency approaches to the liar*. It is the purpose of this paper to explore some issues associated with these approaches and present what I take to be the most promising version.

Much of the interest in inconsistency approaches stems from frustration with the fact that traditional approaches tend to give rise to new paradoxes (called *revenge* paradoxes) that are

¹ I assume that the reader is familiar with the liar paradox and has some acquaintance with prominent attempts to “solve” it.

² See Chihara (1979) for an example.

structurally identical to the liar; thus, they do not really solve the paradox, and they have to be restricted so that they do not apply to languages in which the revenge paradoxes can be formulated. However, it is not just the fact that traditional approaches fail to solve the paradox; it is the *pattern* of failures that suggests there is something deeper going on. There are also a number of positive reasons to favor an inconsistency approach, but I am not going to review them here.³

It is crucial to distinguish between inconsistency approaches to the liar and *dialetheism*, which is the view that some contradictions are true.⁴ Although a dialetheist accepts all the premises and inference rules used to derive the contradiction, he or she also accepts the conclusion (i.e., that the liar sentence is both true and false). According to the dialetheist, people have been troubled by the liar because they have accepted the principle of mono-aletheism (i.e., no sentence is both true and false). However, the dialetheist need not think that competence with the concept of truth leads one to accept the premises and inferences used to derive the contradiction. In fact, the primary reason that dialetheism seems like a non-starter to so many people is that the principle of mono-aletheism is taken to be constitutive of the concept of truth; thus, it seems impossible to reject it while retaining the concept of truth. Indeed, from the point of view of an inconsistency theorist, the dialetheist is no better off than someone who advocates a traditional approach—neither of them realizes that our conceptual competence leads us to both accept the premises and inferences of the liar reasoning and reject its conclusion. The challenge for the inconsistency theorist is to provide a theory that avoids the problems with traditional approaches without falling into dialetheism.

³ See Scharp (Forthcoming).

⁴ For an overview of dialetheism, see Priest (2006).

1. INCONSISTENT CONCEPTS

One way to flesh out an inconsistency approach to the liar is to say that truth is an inconsistent concept. A concept is *inconsistent* if and only if its constitutive principles are incompatible. For example, consider the following definition:

(1a) ‘rable’ applies to x if x is a table.

(1b) ‘rable’ disappplies to x if x is a red thing.⁵

These rules are *constitutive* for **rable**⁶ in the sense that they determine the meaning of ‘rable’.

There are several ways of explaining the relationship between agents and constitutive principles, but a *prima facie* plausible explanation is that anyone who possesses a certain concept accepts that concept’s constitutive principles. Accordingly, if someone uses ‘rable’ but does not believe (1a) and (1b), then that person’s word ‘rable’ does not mean **rable**.⁷ However, for reasons I discuss below, a more subtle account of the relation is required.

The definition of ‘inconsistent concept’ might cause some confusion since the constitutive principles for **rable** are not *logically* inconsistent. The problem with **rable** is instead that its constitutive principles have false consequences (e.g., there are no red tables). We could stipulate that an inconsistent concept has constitutive principles that are incompatible with the empirical facts, or we could say that an inconsistent concept has some false constitutive principles.⁸ I do not see much difference between these amendments.

A person who employs **rable** might believe and assert that a red shirt is not a rable and that a brown table is a rable. However, such a person will run into trouble when confronted with a red

⁵ I use ‘disappplies’ as an antonym for ‘applies’.

⁶ I use bold type for names of concepts.

⁷ One might notice that I am not distinguishing between the meaning of an expression and the concept it expresses; although there is a place for this distinction, it does not affect any of the points I make in this paper.

⁸ Notice that this formulation implies that familiar examples like ‘Boche’ and ‘tonk’ express inconsistent concepts (e.g., the constitutive principles for ‘Boche’ imply that all Germans are cruel and prone to barbarism). See Dummett (1973) on ‘Boche’ and Prior (1960) on ‘tonk’.

table because the rules governing the use of **rable** imply that it both applies and disapplies to red tables. For example, let 'R' be the name of a red table. R is a table; hence, R is a rable. R is red; hence, it is not the case that R is a rable. Thus, R is a rable and it is not case that R is a rable. We have arrived at a contradiction via intuitively plausible steps from intuitively plausible assumptions. Consider another example. Assume for reductio that some red tables exist. Let 'R' be the name of a red table. The reasoning above shows that R is a rable and R is not a rable. Contradiction. Therefore, no red tables exist. We have proven an obviously false sentence via intuitively plausible steps from intuitively plausible assumptions. If one accepts some basic logical principles and treats 'rable' as univocal and invariant, then it will be difficult to avoid these unacceptable conclusions. Since most people do not believe that any contradictions are true (even ones involving odd concepts like **rable**) and they believe in the existence of red tables, it seems that adding **rable** to one's conceptual repertoire corrupts it in a certain way.

I can imagine a reader who has been protesting: there is no such thing as an inconsistent concept! The attempted stipulation above failed to define any term at all because the definition is illegitimate. Therefore, 'rable' doesn't mean anything, and no conceptual harm has been done.⁹

Consider an actual case of conceptual revolution popularized by Hartry Field. Field discusses an excellent example of an inconsistent concept: **mass** as it occurs in Newtonian mechanics.¹⁰ In Newtonian mechanics, physical objects have a single physical quantity: mass. According to this theory, **mass** obeys the two laws (which are considered equally fundamental): (i) mass = momentum / velocity, and (ii) the mass of an object is the same in all reference frames. We can think of these as constitutive principles for **mass**. In relativistic mechanics, physical objects have

⁹ See Wright (1975) and Patterson (Forthcoming c).

¹⁰ Field (1973).

two different “kinds” of mass: proper mass and relativistic mass. An object’s *proper mass* is its total energy divided by the square of the speed of light, while an object’s *relativistic mass* is its non-kinetic energy divided by the square of the speed of light. Although relativistic mass = momentum / velocity, the relativistic mass of an object is not the same in all reference frames. On the other hand, proper mass \neq momentum / velocity, but the proper mass of an object is the same in all reference frames. Thus, **relativistic mass** obeys one of the principles for **mass** and **proper mass** obeys the other. Since we live in a relativistic universe (i.e., one where momentum over velocity is not the same in all reference frames), **mass** is an inconsistent concept. That is, before the 20th century, we used a concept whose constitutive principles are inconsistent with the way the world is (i.e., they imply that momentum/velocity is the same in all reference frames).

Although the objection in question (i.e., that there are no inconsistent concepts) might seem convincing for ‘rable’, it is not plausible to claim that ‘mass’ is simply meaningless. It has an established use, sentences containing it participate in inferential relations, people use these sentences to express propositional attitudes, etc. To say that such an expression is meaningless severs the concept of meaning from most of things for which we use it. In addition, if the objection were correct, then when we discovered that the constitutive principles for **mass** are incompatible, we would have also discovered that our word ‘mass’ is meaningless. However, it does not seem like an entire community of people can be wrong about whether a word is meaningful. It does not even seem possible to discover that a word one has a history of using is meaningless. (It is somewhat more plausible to think that one might be wrong about the meaning of a word, but that is quite different from being wrong about whether a word is meaningful at all.) Perhaps that is why there are no examples of this sort of thing actually happening.

The objection might seem plausible at first because it also seems plausible that if a concept is inconsistent, then anyone who possesses the concept knows that it is inconsistent. However, the ‘mass’ example should dispel this impression. The rules for the employment of a concept often incorporate features of the environment in which it is used; if the employers of a concept are ignorant or mistaken about some features of their environment, then the concept in question can be inconsistent without their knowledge. No amount of “reflection on their concepts” will inform them that their concept is inconsistent; they have to go out into the world and discover empirical facts to discover the conceptual inconsistency.

Perhaps the examples of ‘rable’ and ‘mass’ are not convincing to someone who is dead-set against the existence of inconsistent concepts. Either way, I am going to assume that there are such things and move on.

2. THEORIES OF INCONSISTENT CONCEPTS

So far, I have mentioned inconsistency approaches to the liar paradox, introduced the idea of an inconsistent concept, and defended the view that there are such things. In this section, I present several objections to some of the existing inconsistency approaches before discussing my own view in the following section. Here I focus on the theories proposed by Douglass Patterson, Jody Azzouni, and Matti Eklund since they are the most recent and well-developed inconsistency approaches to appear so far.

2.1. PATTERSON AND AZZOUNI

Patterson and Azzouni (independently) start with the idea that an agent who understands a language bears some more or less cognitive relation (knowing, believing, etc.) to a semantic

theory for that language. If the language contains a word that expresses an inconsistent concept, then the semantic theory for that language is inconsistent.¹¹ Thus, linguistic competence is being cognitively related to a semantic theory, and competence with an inconsistent concept is being cognitively related to an inconsistent semantic theory. Patterson argues that because the semantic theory for an inconsistent language is inconsistent, the expressions of that language are meaningless. He claims that even though the sentences of an inconsistent language are meaningless, communication is still possible as long as the participants bear the same cognitive relation to an inconsistent semantic theory.¹² Furthermore, we can translate from an inconsistent language into a consistent one if the need arises (where translation is preservation of perceived meaning).

Azzouni agrees with Patterson that speakers of inconsistent languages are cognitively related to inconsistent semantic theories, but he thinks that it follows that inconsistent languages are trivial. A language is *trivial* if and only if all its sentences are both true and false. Azzouni claims that we can *regiment* an inconsistent language by mapping it into a consistent language (i.e., one whose semantic theory is consistent). For any given inconsistent language there are multiple ways of regimenting it depending on one's interests and purposes.¹³ Both Patterson and Azzouni agree that the presence of a truth predicate renders a language inconsistent (given other assumptions about the language); thus, Patterson thinks that all natural languages are meaningless, while Azzouni thinks they are all trivial.

I can imagine someone thinking: the traditional approaches to the liar paradox have to be better than saying that all the sentences of English are meaningless or that they are all true and

¹¹ They do not actually discuss inconsistent concepts; instead they focus on inconsistent languages, but I assume that a language is inconsistent if and only if it contains a word that expresses an inconsistent concept.

¹² See Patterson (Forthcoming a, Forthcoming b, Forthcoming c).

¹³ See Azzouni (2003, Forthcoming).

false! *I agree*. I would much rather accept a traditional approach than say that English is meaningless or trivial. I cannot imagine an argument for either of these claims whose premises I trust more than the negation of the conclusion. Above I said that inconsistency theorists face the challenge of avoiding the problems faced by traditional approaches to the liar without resorting to dialetheism. However, both the claim that natural languages are meaningless and the claim that they are trivial are even *less* plausible than dialetheism.

Of course, Patterson and Azzouni downplay the radically implausible consequences of their approaches by arguing that it does not matter that all natural languages are meaningless or trivial. All that matters is that we take them to be meaningful and non-trivial. As long as we treat a language as meaningful and non-trivial, we can get along without any problems. Moreover, most of us never notice that our language is meaningless or trivial because we do not bother to follow out the consequences of our beliefs. These moves do not make much difference to the overall plausibility of their views because if they were correct, then being meaningful or non-trivial would not be very important features of a language. However, most philosophers think that being meaningful and non-trivial are such important characteristics of languages that it does not even make sense to say that a natural language is meaningless or trivial. In fact, on every theory of language of which I am aware, being meaningful is the defining feature of a language, since languages are individuated in part by the meanings of the words they contain. Thus, if Patterson is right, then English does not even count as a language—it is just a bunch of grunts and marks.

In section one, I argued that we cannot discover that a word with an established usage is meaningless. Now try to imagine reading in the newspaper that scientists have discovered that the entire French language is meaningless. I, for one, cannot do it. The reason is that it is

inconceivable for us to discover an entire natural language is meaningless, much less *every* natural language. Discovering that every natural language is trivial seems even more inconceivable.

One final problem has to do with the source of the inconsistency in our language. Both Azzouni and Patterson think that our language is inconsistent *because* it contains a truth predicate (although there might be other troublesome words as well). If the problem has to do with truth, why should it spill over into meaning? In other words, why do they think that a suitable approach to the liar should have consequences for the meanings of sentences that have nothing to do with truth? It seems to me that Patterson and Azzouni adopt their views because of a commitment to truth-conditional semantics. They reason that no truth conditional semantic theory for a natural language can respect the principles everyone takes the truth predicate to have unless it is inconsistent; thus, if natural languages are meaningful, then they have inconsistent semantics. Azzouni performs a *modus ponens*, while Patterson goes with *modus tollens*. The problem, of course, is that they seem to be more confident that meaning should be explained in terms of truth conditions than they are that English is meaningful and non-trivial. That is, they are so sure that meaning should be explained in terms of truth conditions, it has convinced them that there is no such thing as meaning (at least as it is commonly understood); they retain the *explanans* at the expense of the *explanandum*. That is hardly a promising explanatory story; it is more like throwing out the baby *instead of* the bathwater.

2.2. EKLUND

Thankfully, one can endorse an inconsistency approach to the liar without claiming that natural languages are meaningless or trivial, and Eklund has just such a view. He focuses on the

constitutive principles for the concepts expressed by the words of an inconsistent language. For Eklund, a language is inconsistent if and only if its constitutive principles (i.e., the constitutive principles for the concepts expressed by the words the language contains) are inconsistent. Instead of following Patterson and Azzouni, Eklund explains linguistic competence in terms of dispositions to accept the language's constitutive principles. Eklund rejects dialetheism (i.e., the view that some contradictions are true), but he accepts that some of a language's constitutive principles might be false. As for the semantic theory for an inconsistent language, Eklund argues that the words and sentences of an inconsistent language have semantic values that come as close as possible to making the language's constitutive principles true. He admits that some constitutive principles might be more important than others, so that would have to be taken into account when deciding on a semantic theory. Also, there will probably be multiple equally good candidate semantic theories for an inconsistent language; thus, the semantic values of the words and sentences of an inconsistent language are indeterminate to that extent.¹⁴

Although Eklund's view is far superior to those of Patterson and Azzouni, it still has several problems. The first has to do with his account of the relation between an agent and a concept's constitutive principles. Let us consider a person, Otto, who has come to possess **rable** and realizes that it is an inconsistent concept. Assume also that Otto does not like the idea of accepting contradictions because he thinks that rational agents should avoid doing such things if at all possible. What can Otto do? If Eklund is right, then Otto needs to get rid of his newly acquired disposition to accept the constitutive principles for 'rable'. Let us assume that he does rid himself of the offending dispositions. Now that he is no longer disposed to accept its constitutive principles, in what sense does he still possess the concept? If Eklund is right that *being disposed to accept* is the relation between concept possessors and constitutive principles,

¹⁴ Eklund (2002, 2005, Forthcoming).

then Otto no longer possesses the concept once he has eliminated those dispositions. Perhaps Eklund would amend his view so that Otto still possesses the concept because he *used to have* the dispositions. If that is correct, then it does not seem like anyone could ever lose possession of a concept.

Furthermore, Eklund's theory is intended to provide an approach to the liar paradox; his view is that **truth** is an inconsistent concept (or that any language with a truth predicate is an inconsistent language), but his theory appeals to the very concept it deems inconsistent. That is, his approach to the liar paradox gives **truth**, which he takes to be an inconsistent concept, a crucial explanatory role. However, the fact that **truth** is an inconsistent concept should cast doubt on its ability to perform such a role. Consider again the analogy to **mass**: once we discovered that **mass** is inconsistent, we stopped using it for serious theorizing. Why is the case of **truth** any different?

Consider this problem in a bit more detail. Let L be an inconsistent language and ML be the language in which Eklund's theory is formulated (L and ML might be the same language since, unlike traditional approaches to the liar, Eklund's theory does not require an expressively richer metalanguage). Both L and ML contain truth predicates, but it is the truth predicate of ML that is used by Eklund's theory (call it τ). We know that since τ is a truth predicate, it has certain constitutive principles. We also know that because τ expresses an inconsistent concept, not all of its constitutive principles are true (or valid). Eklund does not tell us which of **truth**'s constitutive principles fail, but we know that some do. The question is: how can τ function properly in Eklund's theory, which is supposed to provide a semantics for L , if some of its constitutive principles fail? Mono-aletheism (i.e., no sentence is both true and false) is an essential principle for a non-dialetheic semantics, and I do not see how a semantic theory could

assign the right truth conditions to the sentences of L unless the truth predicate it employs obeys the ascending and descending truth rules (i.e., $\langle p \rangle$ follows from $\langle\langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle , and $\langle\langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle follows from $\langle p \rangle$). However, these are the very principles that give rise to the liar paradox. Thus, some of them have to fail; otherwise, Eklund's theory would be inconsistent. In sum, Eklund's theory casts truth in a crucial explanatory role, and it implies that some of truth's constitutive principles are untrue; however, it seems that if some of truth's constitutive principles fail, then it is unsuited to play this explanatory role (I see this problem as an analog of a revenge paradox for Eklund's theory). At the very least, Eklund owes us an explanation of how truth can function properly in his semantic theory even though it is an inconsistent concept (and consequently, some of its constitutive principles fail).

3. REPLACING TRUTH

This section is dedicated to clarifying what I take to be the most important point in this paper: an inconsistency approach to the liar paradox should be part of a larger account of conceptual change, and in particular conceptual change with respect to truth. The following is a rough account of the stages of conceptual change:

1. *Pre-revolution*: people possess and use concept X and theory T in which X serves an explanatory role (e.g., **mass** and Newtonian mechanics).
2. *Early revolution*: people discover that X is an inconsistent concept; they have some idea of which situations cause problems for those who use X; because of these problems, doubt is cast on the explanatory force of X and the acceptability of T as fundamental theory; however, without an alternative, people still use T and X.
3. *Late revolution*: new concepts (say Y_1, \dots, Y_n) are proposed and a new theory (say U) is proposed in which the Y_i s serve an explanatory role (e.g., **relativistic mass** and **proper mass** and relativistic mechanics); U reduces to T in familiar cases, and the Y_i s agree with X on familiar cases; U is used to determine the cases in which it is acceptable to use T; at this point the conceptual repertoire and language have been extended.

4. *Post-revolution*: U has replaced T as the accepted fundamental theory, and the Y_i s have replaced X as the accepted fundamental concepts; people might or might not still use T (and thus X) in certain cases (e.g., phlogiston theory has been totally superseded, but Newtonian mechanics is still indispensable for everyday situations).

The fundamental problem with all the other inconsistency theorists is that although they attempt to give an account of our concepts and language at stage 1, and some of them (e.g., Patterson and Eklund) consider stage 2, they completely ignore stages 3 and 4. An inconsistency approach to the liar that does justice to stages 3 and 4 would propose replacement concepts for truth and replacement theories for the ones we currently have that appeal to truth. Truth is a very popular concept—it is used in theories of meaning, knowledge, assertion, belief, validity, objectivity, rationality, etc.; thus, replacing it is a big job. Obviously, it is a condition on acceptable replacements for truth that they can be used to construct new theories that replace the old ones.

In an attempt to understand our language at stages 1 and 2, some inconsistency theorists (e.g., Eklund) have presented traditional semantic theories for inconsistent concepts/languages. Given the role of truth in understanding language, their actions are understandable. However, once we remind ourselves of the stages of conceptual change, we can see that they have jumped the gun—their semantic theories appeal to the concept of truth! Before we can explain our stage 1 and 2 language, we need to find replacements for our concept of truth. Then we can use the replacements to formulate a new semantic theory. Once we have that, we can use it to explain the languages we speak at each of the stages.

Notice that the case of **mass** is much less complicated than the case of **truth** because **truth** is a linguistic concept. We do not use **mass** to try to explain discourse involving ‘mass’. However, we do use **truth** to explain discourse involving ‘true’. If we had used **mass** in this way, then once we reached stage 2, we would have been tempted to use it to explain our stage 1 and 2

language. Thus, when discussing inconsistency approaches to the liar, it is essential that one maintain one's bearings by keeping the stages of conceptual change firmly in mind.

It is a condition on an account of inconsistent concepts (and thus, on an inconsistency approach to the liar) that it do justice to all the stages of conceptual change. If we accept a theory that appeals to truth (e.g., Eklund's theory), then we will not be able to progress to stages 3 and 4 without giving up the theory—we will be stuck in stage 2. Of course, as a provisional account of stages 1 and 2, it is fine to use the concept of truth, provided one keeps in mind that one is using an inconsistent concept to describe discourse involving that inconsistent concept and that the provisional theory should be superseded by a more fundamental one once we have acceptable replacement concepts (that is the way I think of Eklund's theory). Thus, I am suggesting that the other inconsistency theorists suffer from a lack of vision—they do not see the larger enterprise in which they are engaged. The moral is that if one endorses an inconsistency approach to the liar paradox, one should be in the business of replacing truth.

The discussion so far illustrates a deep divide between my approach and those of my contemporaries: I take a *dynamic* attitude toward the liar paradox, while theirs is *static*. That is, my approach focuses on what we can do and what we should do about the liar paradox. Their approaches are only about how to describe one aspect of the current mess we are in—they focus on how to understand languages that contain words that express inconsistent concepts. They care about where we are; I care about both where we are and where we want to be. Of course, it is important to understand our language as it is; without such an understanding, we would not know what problem needs to be fixed. In fact, we inconsistency theorists all agree that the biggest mistake made by those who propose traditional approaches to the liar paradox is that they misdiagnose the problem. *We* think that truth is an inconsistent concept (or that a language

containing a truth predicate is an inconsistent language), while *they* think that everyone taken in by the reasoning involved in the liar paradox is making some mistake. We think that competence with the concepts involved in the paradox predisposes those who employ them to accept all the assumptions and inferences involved in the liar reasoning. Although we (inconsistency theorists) all agree on this matter, we disagree about how to characterize inconsistent concepts and languages. From my point of view, the biggest mistake made by the other inconsistency theorists is that they do not consider what can be done to change our language and our conceptual repertoire to eliminate the liar paradox and its vengeful brethren. Only by understanding the process by which we change our concepts and our language can we really understand both our inconsistent language and what we should do to fix it.

Accordingly, my approach to the liar paradox has two parts: (i) a descriptive theory, which explains our inconsistent language and our inconsistent concept of truth, and (ii) a revisionary theory, which explains how we should change our language and introduces new concepts to take the place of our inconsistent concept of truth. It is essential that *the descriptive theory depends on the revisionary theory*. That is, the theory that explains our inconsistent concept of truth does not appeal to our inconsistent concept of truth. Instead, the descriptive theory appeals to the replacement concepts introduced by the revisionary theory. Otherwise, one could not accept the explanation of our inconsistent concept of truth without giving our inconsistent concept of truth a crucial explanatory role.

What could the replacements for truth be? We can think of the constitutive principles for truth as:

(2a) from $\langle p \rangle$ infer $\langle\langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle .

(2b) from $\langle\langle p \rangle \text{ is true}\rangle$ infer $\langle p \rangle$.¹⁵

It is these two principles (in conjunction with certain logical principles) that give rise to the liar paradox. As replacement concepts for our inconsistent concept of truth, I suggest **ascending truth** and **descending truth**. They have the following constitutive principles:

(3a) from $\langle p \rangle$ infer $\langle\langle p \rangle \text{ is ascending true}\rangle$.

(3b) from $\langle\langle p \rangle \text{ is ascending true}\rangle$ and $\langle\langle p \rangle \text{ is safe}\rangle$ infer $\langle p \rangle$.

(3c) from $\langle\langle p \rangle \text{ is descending true}\rangle$ infer $\langle p \rangle$.

(3d) from $\langle p \rangle$ and $\langle\langle p \rangle \text{ is safe}\rangle$ infer $\langle\langle p \rangle \text{ is descending true}\rangle$.

Notice that ascending truth obeys one of the constitutive principles for truth and descending truth obeys the other. The term ‘safe’ occurs in the constitutive principles as well. There are various technical ways of defining safety that I will not get into, but the rough idea is that if applying (3a), (3c), and their converses to a sentence leads to contradiction, that sentence is unsafe. Thus, the vast majority of sentences are safe, and **ascending truth** and **descending truth** are identical when restricted to the safe sentences.

There are plenty of issues surrounding these replacement concepts, but I do not have the space to go into them here. Nor can I give details of the semantic theory that appeals to them.¹⁶ I do insist that the descriptive theory that describes our inconsistent concept of truth employ the replacement concepts. In particular, when doing semantics for a language that contains a truth predicate, the semantic theory should not attribute truth values or truth-conditions; instead, it should appeal to ascending and descending truth (or some other type of semantic values—Fregean senses, conceptual roles, etc.).

¹⁵ There are others as well, but these are the relevant ones for my purposes.

¹⁶ See Scharp (2005, Forthcoming) for more information.

One might argue that some concepts are so important and fundamental that even if they are inconsistent, we should continue to employ them in all situations instead of searching for replacements; if the risks are relatively low, then giving them up would be more irrational than keeping them.

Consider again the example of **mass** as an analogy for what I am proposing with respect to **truth**. **Mass** is obviously a very important and fundamental concept. However, it would be a serious error to say that this fact should have prevented us from accepting relativistic mechanics and replacing **mass** with **relativistic mass** and **proper mass**. Thus, whether an inconsistent concept is fundamental or important does not have any bearing on whether it should be replaced.¹⁷

I have claimed that the descriptive theory (i.e., the theory that describes our inconsistent concept of truth and languages that contain predicates that express it) should appeal to the concepts that replace **truth**, and I have suggested that **ascending truth** and **descending truth** should be those replacement concepts. As a descriptive theory of our inconsistent concept of truth (or an inconsistent language), I favor an account that treats it as a confused concept; indeed, it seems fruitful to me to treat a wide range of inconsistent concepts as confused. A concept is *confused* if it fails to properly distinguish between two or more items (e.g., **mass**). In other work, I endorse Joseph Camp's theory of confusion and his logic for confused discourse (which is a version of relevance logic) as part of a descriptive theory for our inconsistent concept of truth; however, I am open to the possibility that some other kind of descriptive theory might turn

¹⁷ A defender of deflationism might claim that **truth** should not play an explanatory role anyway; thus, it is not a big deal that it is inconsistent. However, even deflationists admit that **truth** plays a fundamental expressive role (i.e., it allows us to endorse propositions that we cannot assert because there are too many of them or we are ignorant of which sentences express them). Although I cannot argue for it here, I claim that if **truth** is an inconsistent concept, then it is unsuitable for playing this expressive role in our language.

out to be better than this one.¹⁸ (If Eklund's theory were altered so that it appealed to the concepts of ascending and descending truth instead of our inconsistent concept of truth, then it might do a good job as well.)

As I have stressed, an inconsistency approach to the liar should do justice to the process of conceptual change. One feature that deserves special attention is the fact that it is permissible for people who know that the concept in question is inconsistent to continue using it in situations where they know it will not get them into trouble. For example, even though **mass** is an inconsistent concept, it is fine for an architect to use Newtonian mechanics (and thus **mass**) when designing a building because its constitutive principles do not conflict in situations like this. A theory that appeals to an inconsistent concept still might be useful even after the concept is discovered to be inconsistent. Although we know that a fundamental theory of the phenomena in question will have to use new concepts (and it is not until we have a new theory that we are confident about where it is permissible to use the old one), it should still be permissible to use the old theory and thus the old (inconsistent) concept. Hence, an inconsistency approach to the liar should not imply that anyone who uses an inconsistent concept is doing something wrong (like committing herself to contradictions).

This condition makes it difficult for inconsistency theorists to give an account of the relation between a concept possessor and a concept's constitutive principles. We know that the relation cannot be belief, because in the case of an inconsistent concept, a person can come to reject a concept's constitutive principles even though he or she still possesses it. Eklund suggests that a concept possessor is *disposed to accept* the concept's constitutive principles. Although this view accommodates the fact that a person can reject a concept's constitutive principles while retaining possession, it has problems of its own. In particular, once one discovers that a concept is

¹⁸ Camp (2002); see Scharp (2005, Forthcoming) for details.

inconsistent, one does not have to condition oneself to eliminate the dispositions to accept the concept's constitutive principles. One's acceptance of a concept's constitutive principles is conditional on the assumption that the concept is not defective.

Perhaps someone who possesses a concept accepts that if that concept is consistent, then its constitutive principles are correct. However, this suggestion would require concept possessors to have beliefs about the consistency of their concepts, which seems implausible. I suggest that instead of using cognitive relations like belief, we should consider epistemic relations. Of course, knowledge is too strong since it implies belief. However, Burge's notion of entitlement is perfect for the job.¹⁹ Someone who possesses a certain concept is *entitled* to the constitutive principles of that concept. That is, the person is warranted in believing the constitutive principles provided he or she has no reason to doubt them. However, one can be entitled to a principle without believing it, and entitlement is defeasible. Thus, if a person has evidence to the contrary, then he or she is not warranted in believing the principle. In most cases, concept possessors will not only be entitled to the constitutive principles in question, they will also accept them, since they will not have any reason to doubt them. Only in cases where a person has evidence that his or her concept is inconsistent would the person reject its constitutive principles. If one knows that a concept is inconsistent, one will reject one or more of the concept's constitutive principles. Instead of accepting the concept's constitutive principles, a person in this situation will probably accept similar principles that permit exceptions. For example, one might accept that *in non-relativistic situations*, the mass of an object is the same in all reference frames.²⁰

¹⁹ See Burge (1993); see also Eklund (2005:50) where he appeals to default acceptability, which is similar.

²⁰ Thinking of the relation between an agent and constitutive principles as one of entitlement represents a change from the account given in Scharp (2005, Forthcoming), in which I distinguish between concept possession and concept employment, and I argued that someone who *employs* a concept is *committed* to its constitutive principles.

Another difficult issue concerns the semantic features of words that express inconsistent concepts. It seems to me that if it is permissible to use an inconsistent concept in certain situations (e.g., by asserting that ‘grass is green’ is true), then words that express inconsistent concepts have non-empty extensions and anti-extensions.²¹ In fact, it seems fine to me to include as many items to the extension or anti-extension of an inconsistent concept as one can without contradicting oneself. If that is correct, then my approach is somewhat like Kripke’s theory with respect to the extension and anti-extension of ‘true’.²² However, that is where the similarity ends because on Kripke’s theory, truth is a consistent concept that is suitable for use in serious theorizing; not so for my view. In discussing the extension of ‘true’, truth values, truth conditions and the like, one should always remember that one is dealing with an inconsistent concept, which is not suitable for use in certain situations. In particular, using an inconsistent concept (i.e., truth) to describe sentences that contain a predicate that expresses an inconsistent concept (i.e., ‘true’) is especially risky; only a full theory of ascending and descending truth will be able to explain where one can trust truth-conditional semantics and where it breaks down. If one wants to know the “real” semantic features of a word or sentence, then one should consult a theory that appeals not to truth, but to ascending truth and descending truth.²³

²¹ This again is a change from my previous view on which words that express inconsistent concepts have empty extensions and anti-extensions.

²² Kripke (1975).

²³ Thanks are due to Bob Brandom, John McDowell, Hartry Field, Stewart Shapiro, Neil Tennant, Matti Eklund, JC Beall, Doug Patterson, Jody Azzouni, A. Duncan Kerr, Eric Carter, Michael Miller, Owen King, and Dan Scharp for helpful conversations on the topics addressed here. Special thanks to Doug Patterson for organizing this special issue on theories of inconsistent concepts and languages.

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