

A NOTE ON SELF-REFERENTIAL STATEMENTS

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The standard resolution of the semantical paradoxes arising from self-referential statements is to dismiss these statements *en bloc* as meaningless. In a recent article, A. N. Prior deplors this wholesale solution as too drastic, and urges a more selective procedure. ("On a Family of Paradoxes," *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, vol. 2 [1961], pp. 16-32.)

Prior's approach—if I understand him aright—is to dismiss as *prima facie* meaningless only those self-referential statements which cannot consistently be classified as either true or false. This includes not only the various well known semantical paradoxes such as that of the Liar, but also the following interesting case (due, in its essentials, to John Buridan of Buridan's Ass fame): Messrs. A, B, C, and D make statements on a certain occasion, A and B both uttering some palpable truth (say: $1 + 1 = 2$), C a palpable falsehood (say: $1 + 1 = 1$), and D saying that just as many speakers speak truly as falsely on this occasion. (Thus if D's statement is *classed* as true, he speaks a falsehood; and if it is classed as false, he speaks a truth). In such cases, Prior would reject the pivotal statements as meaningless specifically because they cannot viably be classed as true or as false—and *not* generically because they involve self-reference. Had Mr. "Liar" said that his (self-same) statement was *true*, then—since no impossibility inheres in classing *this* statement of his as true—Prior would (I take it) be prepared to accept the self-referential statement as meaningful. Or again, had Buridan's last speaker said that *fewer* truths than falsehoods were spoken on the occasion in question, his self-referential could be classed as false without giving rise to difficulties, and would thus be meaningful on Prior's criterion.¹ Prior's solution thus has the important merit

1. An interesting if not strictly relevant case arises if D says that a least three truths are spoken. For this statement—which could feasibly be classed as false—is self-validating: if taken as true it *is* true.

of liberality—it exiles self-referential statements from the domain of the meaningful not as a matter of inflexible policy, but only in cases of actual necessity.

One immediate—and of itself by no means unacceptable—consequence of this criterion is that not merely will certain self-referential statements be *meaningful*, but some of them will even have to be regarded as *necessary*. For example the statement “There are false statements,” symbolically “ $(\exists p)\sim p$,” will have to be regarded as a necessary truth. (It cannot be classed as false, since it can be inferred from its own denial; on the other hand no difficulty ensues if it is accepted as true.)

So far so good. But now, as Prior points out, a further much more subtle complication must be introduced, namely that self-referential can be such that if certain preconditions fail to be satisfied these statements “cannot even be made” (in Prior’s language) or rather, they are only *conditionally meaningful* (as I would prefer to put it).

Suppose that Epimenides the Cretan says that nothing said by a Cretan is the case. Then we could readily class Epimenides’ statement as false, though it could not possibly be true. But this, as Church has pointed out, commits us to accepting as true the *contradictory* of this statement, viz. that something said by a Cretan is true. Now since the only Cretan statement we have been told about is false, this true Cretan statement—which we are thus committed to suppose—must be some other statement. Thus, if we are to regard Epimenides statement as meaningful (and thus false), we are committed to presuppose the existence of at least one true Cretan utterance [a contingent fact]. Epimenides’ statement is thus—on the approach—only conditionally meaningful. It is indeed conditionally L-false. It will have to be classed as false whenever meaningfulness-condition is assumed to be satisfied.

Similarly—and somewhat more unpleasantly—it is easy to devise an example of a conditionally L-true statement. Suppose that Mr. X makes (in Noplacese) the statement that someone has (at some time or other) made a false statement (in Noplacese). We cannot possibly class this statement of X’s as false, for in doing so we *eo ipso* render it true. Thus if we are to regard the statement as meaningful we must class it as true. But it then entails the existence of a Noplacese utterance distinct from itself (viz. one that is false). Therefore, if we are to regard Mr. X’s statement as meaningful (and thus true) we are committed to presuppose the existence of at least one false Noplacese utterance (a contingent fact). Mr. X’s statement is thus only conditionally meaningful, and is indeed conditionally L-true. It will have to be classed as true whenever its meaningfulness condition is assumed to be satisfied.

The disadvantage of Prior’s approach is illustrated by these examples. In certain cases it leads to the consequence that there are statements whose very *meaningfulness* (and not merely truth or falsity) can hinge upon a matter of contingent fact. And moreover this contingent meaningfulness gives rise to the anomaly that there are *conditionally* L-true (and L-false)

statements—statements which in the very logic of things *could* not possibly be meaningless if some *purely contingent* precondition failed to be satisfied.

I confess to being much in sympathy with the spirit of Prior's approach of avoiding the somewhat Procrustean policy of dismissing self-referential statements *en bloc* as meaningless. Very possibly the advantages of such greater liberality could outweigh its having certain somewhat distasteful consequences must, however, be recognized.

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