How well-motivated is the contextual approach to the liar?

Some philosophers have treated the liar paradox by arguing that sentences containing 'true' are indexical or context-dependent. In other words, what such a sentence says varies with the context in which it is used. Equivalently, tokens of the sentence in appropriately different contexts do not express the same proposition. Those philosophers include T. Burge (1979), K. Simmons (1993) and M. Glanzberg (2004). Their argument is that the idea of context-dependence is necessary if we are to vindicate a certain chain of reasoning. In their view, the reasoning is very intuitive but on closer inspection may well appear incoherent. The idea of context-dependence is thought to remove the appearance of incoherence. I will argue that, on the contrary, context-dependence undermines the reasoning, which in any case is not particularly intuitive.

The reasoning develops in three stages. One begins with the liar sentence

(L) (L) is not true

and derives a contradiction about it. To do so, one invokes the schema

(T) **S** is true iff p,

where, to get an instance, we must replace the letter 'p' with a declarative sentence and '**S**' with a name of that sentence. One instance of (T) is the biconditional '(L) is true iff (L) is not true'. Classical logic allows us, in more than one way, to infer from that biconditional to the contradiction '(L) is true and (L) is not true'. The derivation of the contradiction is stage (a) in the reasoning. One can then go on as follows: (L) is therefore semantically defective, since on pain of inconsistency we cannot apply schema (T) to it; thus (L) is not true—stage (b). One can even make a further step: And what has just been asserted, namely, (L) itself, is true—stage (c).

On the face of it, this reasoning is incoherent on more than one count. First, at (a) and (b), one adopts opposite attitudes towards (L). The sentence is used in the inferences that lead to contradiction in stage (a). There, one does not assert the sentence, nor is one at all willing to assent to it. At (b), on the other hand, one asserts it. Second, the

conclusion in stage (b) seems to be incoherent by itself. For, there, one asserts a certain sentence, (L), and at the same time asserts that it is not true. And third, the conclusions at (b)—'(L) is not true'—and at (c)—'(L) is true'—appear to contradict each other.

However, philosophers who argue for context-dependency find the reasoning intuitive. Not everyone shares that intuition. Stage (a) has indeed shown that there is a problem with (L). It is a sentence inviting paradox. But I do not find it intuitive to go on to claim that the sentence is not true. For the problem pointed out in (a) is just that, whether we assume (L) to be true or we assume it not to be true, we end up in contradiction. The assumptions are equally conducive to inconsistency. So it would seem that the proper response isn't to espouse one of them, but to refrain from committing oneself to either. As for the move from (b) to (c), there are serious reasons for finding it counterintuitive. It lands one in what appears to be a straightforward contradiction. And, after stage (a), we should be suspicious of applying schema (T) to (L) in the context of classical logic. But, in order to move from (b) to (c), one needs something like (T), and one has used classical logic in (a).

Those who find the reasoning intuitive answer the charge of incoherence by claiming that (L) and other sentences containing 'true' are indexical or context-dependent. Then, the opposite attitudes one adopts at stages (a) and (b) are no longer a problem. For the tokens of (L) in (a) may well fail to express the same proposition as the token of (L) at (b). The conclusion in stage (b) is not incoherent by itself. For what one endows there with assertoric force, namely, a certain token of (L), differs semantically from what one describes as not being true, which is the sentence (L) and not any token of it. The conclusions at (b) and (c) do not contradict each other. For the proposition expressed by the token of '(L) is not true' at (b) is not the negation of the proposition expressed by the token of '(L) is true' at (c).

In fact, this idea of context-dependency undermines the reasoning from (a) to (b) and then to (c). In order to realize that, we should see some general points about indexicality and context-dependence. Context-dependent sentences are not true. Just like imperative and interrogative sentences, they are not the kind of linguistic entity that can be true. The one-place predicate 'true' cannot apply to them. It is another matter that the two-place predicate 'true with respect to context ...' can apply to the ordered pair of a context-dependent sentence and a context. It is also another matter that the one-place

predicate 'true' can apply to a token of a context-dependent sentence. So the sentence 'I am young' is not true, although it may be true with respect to a context in which the speaker is X and the time is the year 2016 and although its tokens produced by X in 2016 may be true. The reason context-dependent sentences are not true is that they express no proposition. The sentence 'I am young' expresses no proposition, no information about how things are, although its tokens express propositions and the sentence itself can be said to express a proposition with respect to this or that context. (Here, we need again to distinguish between the one-place predicate 'expresses a proposition' and the two-place predicate 'expresses a proposition with respect to context ...'.)

Thus, schema (T) does not apply to context-dependent sentences. It is not only that instances of (T) in which 'p' has been replaced with such a sentence are themselves context-dependent and so not true. More importantly, their tokens are not true either, or if they are, that is an accident. When I say,

'I am a philosopher' is true iff I am a philosopher,

the biconditional token I produce is false. For I am a philosopher, but the sentence 'I am a philosopher' is not true. When I say,

'I am an archaeologist' is true iff I am an archaeologist,

the biconditional token is true, since I am not an archaeologist and the sentence 'I am an archaeologist' is not true. But the fact that the sentence is not true has nothing to do with the fact that I am not an archaeologist. It is just a coincidence that, just as I am not one, so the sentence is not true.

So the idea that (L) is context-dependent undermines the move from (a) to (b). For if (L) is context-dependent, it is to be expected that applying (T) to it will engender mistakes. Talking to Peter, I apply (T) and say,

The sentence 'You are a man' is true iff you are a man.

I infer that the sentence is true. Then, talking to Mary, I apply (T) again and say,

The sentence 'You are a man' is true iff you are a man.

Now I infer that the sentence is not true. So 'You are a man' has contradictory properties. What led to that mistaken conclusion was the application of schema (T) to a context-dependent sentence. The sentence presents no semantic defect. If (L) is context-dependent, the fact that we reach absurd conclusions by applying (T) to it does not show it to be semantically defective. So one loses the basis one had for deducing, at (b), that (L) is not

true.

Equally, the idea of context-dependency undermines the move from (*b*) to (*c*). For if a speaker asserts a context-dependent sentence, it is not reasonable to proceed to describe the sentence as true. What is reasonable is to call 'true' the token she produced in her assertion. If I say, 'I am a philosopher', I should not go on to claim that 'I am a philosopher' is a true sentence, but I may claim that my words were true, where my words are a token of the sentence. So if (L) is context-dependent, the move from (*b*) to (*c*) loses any plausibility it might have, and the claim at (*c*) ought to be replaced with something like 'And that token of (L) is true'.

However, one may vary the three-stage reasoning, and the idea of context-dependence may fare better with some variant. In particular, the reasoning may involve a sentence that does not refer to itself, like (L), but to a certain token of itself. Context-dependence may manage to vindicate (rather than undermine) the variants of the reasoning. I will argue that it does not.

References

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