

Occasion Sentences and Eternal Statements

A Comment on Laurence Goldstein's 'A consistent way with paradox'

In a recent issue of *Philosophical Studies* Laurence Goldstein has put forth the most recent version of his treatment of the (semantic) antinomies/paradoxes (Goldstein 2009). As in the series of respective papers he claims that the distinction between sentences and statements made by using sentences (on an occasion) provides the cornerstone to a consistent and revenge immune solution to the antinomies.

Goldstein's approach proceeds by a form of gap theory, the solution to the antinomies being that they are neither true nor false. Such gap theories have been heavily criticised as falling prey to Strengthened Liars and 'Revenge', which reintroduce the bifurcation needed for the antinomic reasoning (cf. the introduction and the papers in the volume *Revenge of the Liar* [Beall 2007]). Goldstein's theory is rather based on pragmatics than semantics (in invoking the distinction between sentences and statements made by intentional speech acts of asserting sentences on an occasion). Other pragmatic theories have also been heavily criticised as falling prey to Strengthened Liars or inexpressibility of semantic/pragmatic facts (cf. Bremer 2008). Especially dialetheists, who deal with the antinomies by claiming (some of) them to be both true and false, have proposed a general *hypothesis*: A linguistic framework that solves some antinomies and is capable to express its own linguistic resources is confronted with strengthened versions of the antinomies (cf. Bremer 2005: 27-28).

I will not rehearse these arguments here, although they seem to me on the right track. I will focus here instead on Goldstein's basic building block: his distinction between sentences and

statements. Despite the importance of that distinction it seems not clear that it can carry the burden Goldstein lays on it. In several places Goldstein's use of the distinction is too vague to make much of it.

I structure my complaints into three paragraphs. §1 deals with the minor issue of 'this' and 'that'. §2 introduces the supposed exaggeration in laying stress on statements, rather than on sentences. §3 challenges Goldstein on a formal explication of the distinction.

§1 'this' and 'that'

The word 'this' can be used as a deictic expression roughly synonymous with 'that' or as a strictly reflexive indexical. So

- (1) This sentence has five words.

can mean – in one reading to be disambiguated –

- (2) That sentence (over there) has five words.

or it can mean – in another reading to be disambiguated –

- (3) This (very) sentence (I am using right now) has five words.

In expositions of the antinomies one often uses 'this' in the sense of (3), e.g.

- (4) This statement is not true.

As the 'this' is strictly reflexive its reference does not vary from occasion to occasion (of using sentence (4)). So Goldstein's remarks about pointing and his pointing device combining an arrow with an indexical (cf. p. 384), seem to mistake the 'this' in (4) for an indexical the reference of which varies on occasion. His remarks thus are beside the point, exploiting an ambiguity where disambiguation is at hand.

On first sight it may seem to be petty-minded to complain about this, but on second sight a larger issue raises its head here.

§2 Statements are eternal

Statements result when a speaker uses a sentence on an occasion. Sentences often are indexical and thus are neither true nor false as they stand. The indexicals have to be anchored to a situation of usage. *What is said* on that occasion then can be true or false. One may agree with this, and Goldstein refers to Austin's and Strawson's classic work on this distinction. The distinction has found use not only in pragmatics, but is part *inter alia* of the framework of situation semantics. Nonetheless Goldstein seems to neglect the crucial idea that in contrast to sentences, which often have to be tied to an occasion, statements are eternal. Statements can be presented by eternal sentences or by some abstract representation (like 'infos' in situation semantics or state of affairs in other ontological frameworks). In these abstract representations any indexical part present in the sentence used is replaced by the item/referent talked about in the statement: "I" is replaced by the speaker, "sit on" by the relation of sitting on, "that chair" by that chair, including times and places, and so forth. Statements are eternal and objective; Strawson's *Introduction to Logical Theory* (Strawson 1952), which highlights the distinction between sentences of some language and statements over and over again, is clear on that. Therefore: An occasion of using a Liar sentence gives rise to a Liar statement, which is eternal, and refers to this very statement, and the property of truth, and so forth. For the statement (i.e. this objective content, which could also be specified as a tuple of items including that very statement) it is of no importance how the items are referred to. Thus when Goldstein reasons about (4) that (4) has no semantic value, and thus is not true, he *is not making another statement* than (4) does (or somebody using (4) does). He can speak French or whistle, as long as some conventions of fixing reference are in place he is making the same statement. His whole discussion on using 'another token' (pp.285-86) thus is beside the point. Of course his speech act takes place on another occasion than mine, two tokens of sentence (4) are used. But he makes the same statement that anybody makes who uses (4). And as his reasoning leads back to the statement made by (4), the antinomic reasoning proceeds as it

always does. One may be misled by the usage of ‘this’ or other natural language renderings of the antinomies, but shortcomings of phrasing the antinomies in these ways should be surmounted by formalization.

§3 Assertion formalized

Some of the problems concerning whether some sentences really ‘say’ something or not, as Goldstein proposes, might be solved by trying to be more precise on the formal side of the sentence/statement distinction. Unless one believes that natural languages are beyond formal treatment – a thesis Goldstein does not seem to endorse – there have to be some formal means/representations which capture that distinction. Logicians exploring the logic of assertion and rejection sometimes use the syntactic derivability sign (i.e.: \vdash) or some new device (like: \Vdash) to capture assertive force. As Goldstein supposedly shares the dialetheist’s assumption that there is no hierarchy of ever more removed meta-languages (otherwise the whole gap approach would be superfluous), he has to share the thesis that assertive force can be represented in natural languages themselves, which, of course, pretty nicely explains that we can write papers about it.

Now, as the sign of assertive force might define what distinguishes a statement from other ways of using sentences, and as this operator/sign is part of the formal machinery of language, one can distinguish well formed formulas containing it at the proper place from others. Thus we can define the class of statements (or statement representing sentences). As this is a syntactic identification, the process of doing so is primitive recursive. Therefore we have all reasons to believe that the antecedent conditions of the *Diagonal Lemma* are fulfilled, and thus that there is some sentence λ equivalent to the sentence that asserting λ results in a false statement. As no indexicals are involved that sentences λ not accidentally is usually taken as the eternal sentence representing the Liar (statement). Once we have that eternal sentence in the context of an assertion sign it seems to be pretty *ad hoc* to deny that it says what it says.

Even if no one bothers to utter it right now someone may do so, and λ just has the objective content it eternally has.

References

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