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PERFORMATIVE ANTINOMIES*

Take the antinomy of the Liar.

- (1) This sentence is not true.

The paradox is usually taken to reside in the impossibility of assigning consistent truth-values to (1). If it's true, it's not true, and if it's not true, it's true. The sources of the paradox are usually taken to be (i) the capacity for sentences of a natural language to contain descriptions of themselves, and (ii) the peculiarities of the predicate 'true' when negated. The classical solution¹, due to Tarski, is to make a distinction between object language and metalanguage, to permit 'true' to be a predicate of the metalanguage, not the object language, and to characterize the meaning of "true" as being given by the class of statements of the following form, for all sentences *P* of the language in question:

- (2) '*P*' is true if, and only if, *P*

However, paradoxes essentially like the Liar arise in natural language in performative sentences, where the notion of truth (strictly construed) is not applicable.

- (3) Don't obey this order.

It makes no sense to ask whether orders are true or false, but it does make sense to ask under what conditions they can be obeyed. If one asks such a question of (3), one finds that (3) can be obeyed only if it is not obeyed, and it can be disobeyed only if it is obeyed. This seems to be a paradox of the same sort as the Liar, except that the notion of truth is not involved, at least not obviously so. Such cases are not rare. The following is a short catalogue.

- (4) I promise not to keep this promise.

Again, it makes no sense to ask whether promises are true or false, but it does make sense to ask under what conditions they can be kept. (4) can be kept just in case it is not kept, and not kept just in case it is kept.

- (5) I recommend that you not follow this recommendation.

Such a recommendation can be followed only if it is not followed, and not followed only if it is followed.

- (6) I predict that this prediction will not come true.

Such a prediction will come true only if it doesn't come true, and will not come true only if it does come true.

- (7) I warn you that I won't carry out this threat.

Such a threat can be carried out only if it is not carried out, and not carried out only if it is carried out.

- (8) I advise you not to take this advice.

Such advice can be taken only if it is not taken, and not taken only if it is taken.

It would be nice if we could reduce (3)–(8) to cases like (1). I think we can, if we make appropriate use of Kripke's semantics for modal operators. We can get a hint of how to do this if we look at some of the felicity conditions for the performative verbs of (3)–(8).

- (9) An order is felicitous only if it is possible for it to be obeyed.
 (10) A promise is felicitous only if it is possible for it to be kept.
 (11) A recommendation is felicitous only if it is possible for it to be followed.
 (12) A prediction is felicitous only if it is possible for it to come true.
 (13) A threat is felicitous only if it is possible for it to be carried out.
 (14) A piece of advice is felicitous only if it is possible for it to be taken.

What we need to do is to extend the assignment of truth values for nonperformative sentences to the assignment of felicity values for performative sentences. Just as we have valuations like $V_w[P] = 1$ for ' P is true in world w ', where P is nonperformative, we will let $V_w[P] = 1$ stand for ' P is felicitous in world w ', where P is performative. Using Kripke's semantics for possibility, we will say that $V_w[\Diamond P] = 1$ IFF

$$(\exists w')(wRw' \& V_{w'}[P] = 1),$$

where R is, say, the S5 alternativeness relation. Consider, for example, (15), which is a paraphrase of (3).

- (15) I order you not to obey this order.

Let us represent (15) by ' P '. We can then represent (15) by (16) and (9) by (17).

- (16) ORDER ($a, b, \neg$ OBEY (b, a, P))
 (17) V_w [ORDER (a, b, Q)] = 1 only if $(\exists w')(wRw' \& V_{w'}[\text{OBEY-} (b, a, P)] = 1$

Letting ' Q ' in (17) be 'OBEY(b, a, P)', that is, " b obeys a by doing P ":

substituting for Q in (17), we get (18).

- (18) $V_w[\text{ORDER}(a, b, \neg \text{OBEY}(b, a, P))] = 1$ ONLY IF
 $(\exists w')(wRw' \ \& \ V_{w'}[\text{OBEY}(b, a, P)] = 1).$

But an order to do Q is obeyed in a world w' only if Q is true in w' . Thus it is required that there be a world w' such that

- (19) $V_{w'}[\text{OBEY}(b, a, P)] = 1$ and $V_{w'}[\neg \text{OBEY}(b, a, P)] = 1$, or, in other words,
 (20) $V_{w'}[\text{OBEY}(b, a, P)] = 1$ and $V_{w'}[\text{OBEY}(b, a, P)] = 0.$

Thus, (16) can be a felicitous order only if there is some possible world in which $\text{OBEY}(b, a, P)$ is both true and false. Since there is no such world, (16) is always infelicitous. Such an analysis provides the connection between the performative antinomies and the antinomy of the Liar, since it requires of a sentence, namely $\text{OBEY}(b, a, P)$, that it be true if and only if it is not true. Similar analyses can be given for the other performative verbs. I suggest that to make sense of performative antinomies one must extend the assignment of truth values to the assignment of felicity values, as was done above.

Considering all the attention that has been paid to (1), it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to (21).

- (21) This sentence is true.

(21) seems boring compared to (1), since a consistent assignment of truth values is possible for such sentences: just say they are true. But what does it mean to say that (21) is true? What could you check in the world to verify (21)? (21) seems to me to be just as much nonsense as (1), though this may not be obvious to some readers. The difficulties become much clearer when one considers corresponding performative examples. Imagine that you were a student taking an exam, and that you came upon the following question.

- (22) Question 3: What is the answer to question 3?

Similar cases arise for all of the performative antinomies considered above.

- (23) Obey this order.
 (24) I promise to keep this promise.
 (25) I recommend that you follow this recommendation.
 (26) I predict that this prediction will come true.
 (27) I warn you that I will carry out this threat.
 (28) I advise you to take this advice.

Just as there is no way to verify (21), so there is no way to answer the question in (22), or obey the order in (23), or keep the promise in (24), etc. In short,

(23)–(28), which are not reducible to the Liar, provide problems which are just as bad as (3)–(8), which are reducible to the Liar. Thus, the problems of self-referring expressions arise with just as much nastiness in positive sentences as in negative sentences, which is not all that surprising.

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NOTES

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¹ More recent work, which has been possible only because of Tarski's ground-breaking work in formal semantics, has provided an alternate solution. Tarski had assumed that every sentence had to be either true or false on an interpretation. If one assumes that some sentences can be neither true nor false on some interpretations (perhaps even on all interpretations), then solutions other than Tarski's are possible. This is the approach taken, for example, by Van Fraassen in 'Formal Semantics and Logic', Macmillan, 1970, and it is the position that I happen to find most congenial, for whatever that is worth.