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THE LIAR, CONTEXTUALISM, AND THE STALNAKERIAN VIEW OF CONTEXT¹

SUMMARY: My aim in this paper is to amend the Stalnakerian view of context in such a way that it can allow for an adequate treatment of a contextualist position regarding the Liar Paradox. I discuss Glanzberg's contextualism and the reason why his position cannot be encompassed by the Stalnakerian view, as it is normally construed. Finally, I introduce the phenomenon I call "semantic dissonance", followed by a mechanism accommodating the Stalnakerian view to the demands of Glanzberg's contextualism.

KEYWORDS: contextualism, Stalnaker, liar paradox, context, semantics, Glanzberg.

INTRODUCTION

There are several contextualist responses to the threat caused by the Liar Paradox (LP).² One of the prominent proponents of this position, Glanzberg (2001), suggests that we need to thoroughly redesign the Stalnakerian view of context to be able to give an account of the context shift that is supposed to occur in (LP).

What I want to argue for is that no such drastic modifications are needed. The plan for this paper is as follows. First, I roughly present (LP) and lay out the generic contextualist solution to it. Then, I discuss some details of Glanzberg's position, with the special stress on his motivations for rejecting the Stalnakerian

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² E.g. the work of Parsons (1974), Simmons (1993).

view. Finally, I present my suggestions as to how the Stalnakerian view can be adapted to fulfill the demands of Glanzberg-like contextualism.

THE LIAR PARADOX

The standard version of (LP) rests on an observation that it is possible to formulate a sentence that says of itself that it is not true: *This sentence is not true*. It is easy to see that when assumed to be true, it comes out not true; and when assumed not true, it comes out true. This is a dreadful contradiction, a philosopher concludes. More formally:³

- (1) (L): (L) is not true.
- (2) Suppose (L) is true.
- (3) Given what (L) says, if it is true (from (2)), it is not true.
- (4) So, (L) is not true. ✘
- (5) Suppose (L) is not true.
- (6) Given what (L) says, if it is not true (from (5)), it is true.
- (7) So, (L) is true. ✘
- (8) So, supposing either (a) that (L) is true or (b) that (L) is not true leads to a contradiction (from (4) and (7)).

The generic approach that contextualists take on how to deal with the above contradiction involves what is sometimes called the “Chrysippus intuition”.⁴ This intuition captures what are supposed to be plausible truth valuations of (L), and of the judgment expressing the ascription of the truth value to (L). As far as (L), as we saw, leads to a contradiction, it should be judged as not true. On the other hand, a judgment assigning the truth value of non-true to (L) seems to be perfectly legitimate, even though it takes (L) itself to express it. Imagine the following pair of utterances:⁵

- (A) [uttered at t_1 by Obama] “What Obama says at t_1 is not true.”
- (B) [uttered at some later t_2 , after hearing Obama’s (A), by Clinton] “What Obama says⁶ at t_1 is not true.”

³ This analysis is a simplified version of Gauker’s (2006, p. 395).

⁴ The label comes from Gupta (2001).

⁵ Based on Newhard’s (2009, pp 345–346).

⁶ Nothing hinges here on the use of the present tense in (B).

(A) is (L)'s look-alike. This means that it is paradoxical and, therefore, not true. (B), though, assessing (A)'s truth value correctly, as not true, is true. The puzzling detail about this plausible truth valuation is that both utterances seem to be saying the same thing. Therefore, the contextualist concludes, some context shift must have happened after the utterance of (A) that allowed for the difference in truth value of propositions expressed by two tokens of the same sentence. Note that this explanation is similar to the one employed for explaining how "I am the president in April 2016" is true when uttered by Obama, but not by Clinton.

GLANZBERG'S CONTEXTUALISM

Glanzberg shares the view that there must be some kind of subtle context change in cases like the one described. What follows from this is that sentences like (L) are context-sensitive (Glanzberg, 2001, p. 230). The general idea driving his investigation is that the problem of (LP) must be a problem related not to truth alone, but to truth and truth bearers, which he takes to be propositions resulting from utterances in contexts (Glanzberg, 2001, p. 226).

As far as Glanzberg involves contexts, sentences and propositions in his picture of the liar, he is willing to reformulate (L). Now what it is really saying is that it does not express a proposition that is true (Glanzberg, 2001, p. 228). Given this, we can construct an analogous paradox again. We start with the new version of (L), call it (LL), which is the sentence saying of itself that it does not express a true proposition. Then, we assume that it expresses a proposition. If that proposition is true, then, it contradicts what (LL) says. Therefore, the proposition that (LL) expresses is not true. This leads to a contradiction. On the other hand, if that proposition is not true, then it is in agreement with what (LL) says and makes the proposition expressed by (LL) true, which also leads to a contradiction (Glanzberg, 2001, p. 228). What needs to be noted at this point is that despite how it may seem, the above reasoning has not led to a global contradiction yet. The result is just the falsification of the assumption that (LL) expresses a proposition. What we need in order to retrieve our paradox, known from the Obama and Clinton example, is to push our result a bit further (note that the current stage is the counterpart of (B); in other words, at this very moment we conclude that (A) and (LL) respectively cannot be saying anything true). To do so, it is enough to realize that from (LL)'s non-expression of a proposition (i.e. the result that we already have), it follows that it does not express a true proposition, either. A cautious reader will see that this new result is just the same thing that (LL) says (Glanzberg, 2001, p. 229). More formally, the reasoning looks as follows:⁷

⁷ For a slightly simpler presentation of this reasoning see the work of Simmons (2018, pp. 771–772). A more formal one is available in Sagi (2016, pp. 922–923).

- (1') (LL): (LL) does not express a true proposition.
- (2') Suppose (LL) expresses a proposition.
- (3') Suppose (LL) expresses a true proposition.
- (4') Given what (LL) says, if it expresses a true proposition (from (3')), it does not express a true proposition.
- (5') So, (LL) does not express a true proposition. ✘
- (6') Suppose (LL) expresses a proposition that is not true.
- (7') Given what (LL) says, if it expresses a proposition that is not true (from (6')), it does not express a proposition that is not true.
- (8') So, (LL) does not express a proposition that is not true. ✘
- (9') So, supposing either (a) that (LL) expresses a true proposition or (b) that (LL) expresses a proposition that is not true leads to a contradiction (from (5') and (8')).
- (10') So, (LL) does not express a proposition (from (2') and (9')).
- (11') So, (LL) does not express a true proposition (from (10')).
- (12') (11') = (LL), so (LL) expresses a true proposition.

So now, what we get by conducting a chain of good inferences based on good premises must itself be true. This means that our reasoning shows that (LL) both expresses (at the very last stage, when we realize that what we have arrived at is exactly what (LL) says; this is the counterpart of concluding that (B) is true) and does not express a true proposition (in the penultimate step, when we get that (LL) does not express a true proposition since it does not express a proposition at all; Glanzberg, 2001, p. 229). This is the very contradiction that Glanzberg's efforts aim to resolve.⁸

He does so by allowing (LL) to be context-dependent.⁹ This possibly permits us to say that there is no contradiction in one sentence's expression of a true proposition and non-expression of it, since whether it does express a true proposition depends on the context in which it is uttered.

⁸ I am going to follow Gauker (2006, p. 402) in thinking that this is the correct place to locate the context shift, contrary to what Glanzberg (2001, p. 233) suggests.

⁹ This, of course, requires a new reformulation of (LL). Glanzberg does it by adding the world parameter as a *relatum* for the relation of expressing a proposition and a context set parameter relative to which the proposition is to be expressed. For details, see (Glanzberg, 2001, pp. 236–237).

GLANZBERG AND THE STALNAKERIAN VIEW OF CONTEXT

As plausible as it is, this idea needs to be accompanied by some explanation of how the context shift—needed by the contextualist—may occur. The context shift has to be such that the first context forbids (LL)¹⁰ to express a true proposition, and the new one, after the shift, allows for it. The natural candidate becomes the Stalnakerian view, whose core idea is that context changes with every successful assertion made during a conversation.

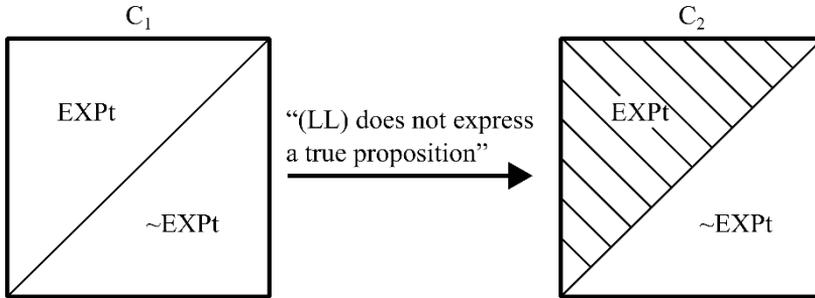
Stalnaker's position rests on the following pillars. Propositions are sets of possible worlds. Context is a set of all propositions commonly presupposed by the parties in a conversation. That makes context a set consisting of the intersection of sets of worlds. What a new assertion does, is that it divides the context set into two subsets. One of them consists of those worlds of the common ground in which the asserted content holds, and the second of those in which it does not. When the asserted proposition becomes accepted by other members of the conversation, the context set, and therefore context as such, is updated in such a way that the latter subset is eliminated (Stalnaker, 1978).

Let's see how this framework can handle the liar case. Imagine a random conversation with a random common ground represented by the context set C_1 . When the reasoning leads the conversationalists to asserting that (LL) does not express a true proposition, C_1 is divided into two subsets, one with worlds in which (LL) in fact does not express a true proposition, and the second, with those in which it does. After the utterance is accepted, the context set is updated by wiping out the latter subset. In the new context C_2 , it is a part of the common ground that (LL) does not express a true proposition, and the context set includes only those worlds in which that is the case. When, then, at C_2 the conversationalists want to make the Clinton-like statement, we seem to encounter a problem. (LL), when uttered at C_2 , contrary to our Chrysippus intuition, cannot be expressing a true proposition, because there are no worlds in the context set in which this would be true. In other words, there are no true propositions left to be expressed by (LL) (as uttered at C_2) in our domain. A little diagram will make the situation more vivid:¹¹

¹⁰ Or its modified, contextualist, version.

¹¹ EXPt stands for "(LL) expresses a true proposition".

Diagram 1



As we see, when at C_2 we are to conclude, after realizing that it follows from what was uttered at C_1 , that (LL) does not express a true proposition, and that it is exactly what (LL) says, it is incompatible with the set of worlds available to us for it to be the case. If (LL) now, in accordance with the Chrysippus intuition (and Glanzberg’s reasoning), is to be true, it must be expressing a true proposition at C_2 . As the Stalnakerian framework cannot give an account of how that situation could possibly occur, Glanzberg concludes that we ought to look for the right account somewhere else (2001, p. 239).

The main reason why Glanzberg does not see a chance of mending the Stalnakerian view is that after asserting (LL) at C_1 , we simply run out of worlds in which (LL) might express a true proposition at C_2 . Why the framework is malfunctioning is that it does not allow for any new source of worlds. It is monotonic in the sense, that it only allows the set of worlds to be narrowed down as we progress in a conversation (Glanzberg, 2001, p. 247).

We do not want to become entrenched in too much detail about Glanzberg’s idea. Suffice it to say that, according to him, the needed source of new worlds comes from our ascent in a hierarchy of contexts. Every step higher in the hierarchy offers us more truth conditions to choose from, and therefore more expressive power for our utterances. So after (LL) is uttered at C_1 , for it to be expressing a true proposition at C_2 this new context must have a bigger expressive capability.

HOW TO FIX THE STALNAKERIAN FRAMEWORK

Now, in the final section of the paper, I offer my simple way of amending the framework. I would like to focus our attention on what happens around C_2 .

In my opinion, the crucial thing to be noticed is that members of the conversation “realize” that what is uttered at C_1 becomes a part of the common ground (Stalnaker, 1998, p. 99). This must result in what I call a *semantic dissonance*—i.e. a situation of incongruity between the set of worlds they updated to and the propositions present in the common ground. In our particular case, the semantic dissonance occurs because all the worlds that are left in C_2 are worlds

in which (LL) does not express a true proposition, but at the same time, the members of the conversation become aware that (LL) is a part of their common ground so that they must be taking its truth for granted. This last phase of rehabilitation¹² of (LL) is exactly what makes the Chrysippus intuition so plausible.¹³ This, I say, suggests that there must be some mechanism that can deal with these kinds of situations when we need to make the content of propositions belonging to the common ground and the worlds available to us coherent with one another.

I consider that this mechanism can be best expressed by the following rule:

If you realize that the content of a proposition correctly added to the common ground causes an incompatibility between the contents of propositions constituting the common ground and the possible worlds available in a conversation, retract the update caused by this assertion and accommodate the context set accordingly to what the contents of the propositions in the common ground say.

The first thing worth noting is that the rule is not triggered by ordinary cases in which a certain proposition is in the common ground and the members of the conversation attempt to update it with this proposition's negation. The reason for this is that in such situations, the inconsistency between the proposition's negation and the available worlds already exists before the potential, *incorrect* update. In other words, such an incorrect update does not cause the incompatibility between the contents of the propositions in the common ground and the worlds available in the conversation, but it is this very incompatibility that makes such an update incorrect.¹⁴

Let's see how this rule works when put to use in the case of (LL).¹⁵ At C₁ it is uttered that (LL) does not express a true proposition because of its semantic defectiveness. The new context set, C₂, is such that (a) it is a part of the common ground that (LL) is semantically defective and (b) it contains only those worlds in which (LL) does not express a true proposition. The participants in the conversation realize, though, that there is an incompatibility between the worlds they have left, and what the propositions in their common ground say (remember that they take elements of the common ground for granted, and therefore assume their veracity; at the same time, they do not have access to the worlds in which (LL) is true). This is what triggers our *rule*. What rational conversationalists do in such a situation is to retract the latest context update. In other words, they go to a context in which both types of worlds, those in which (LL) is true, and those in

¹² I borrow the name from (Simmons, 2018).

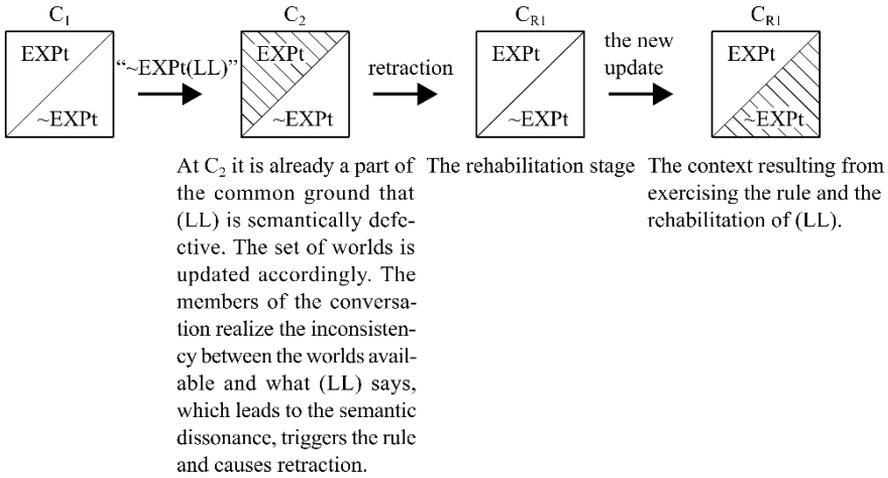
¹³ This is of course not to say that the members of the conversation think of their situation exactly in these technical terms. The relevant psychological equivalent is their realization that the truth valuation of (LL) has changed. (I would like to thank an anonymous referee for pointing out the need for this clarification).

¹⁴ The need for clarifying this issue was also signaled by an anonymous referee.

¹⁵ I found Simmons (2018, pp. 756–760) very helpful in formulating this part properly.

which it isn't, are still accessible (let's call this resulting stage the *rehabilitation stage*). It is very important to note that this new context is not quite the old C_1 . The difference between this new context (let's call it C_{R1}) and the old C_1 is that in the former, contrary to the latter, the members of our conversation already know that (LL) is semantically defective. That allows the rehabilitation to occur in C_{R1} and leads to the second update. The second update assumes (LL) to be rehabilitated (at C_{R1}) and, therefore, the new context is not C_2 but rather some C_2' . C_2' is such that it only consists of worlds in which (LL) expresses a true proposition since this is exactly what follows on from what (LL) says when reflected upon in the new circumstances. Again, I think that a diagram would make this more per-
spicuous to the reader:

Diagram 2



Note again that the relevant change in context that allows the change in (LL)'s truth valuation is that in C_{R1} , contrary to C_1 , it is already a part of the common ground that (LL) is semantically defective.

As may be inferred, we do not need to change the background domain of worlds to reach the true proposition expressed by (LL). This means that we do not need to employ any kind of hierarchy of contexts to make sense of the context shift that the contextualist needs to make her point. All we need is a plausible rule guiding our behavior in cases of semantic dissonance. This rule allows us to make a step backwards and retract the context update, which permits us to make sense of our Chrysippus intuition.

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