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Posted by u/Kevin_Scharp **Kevin Scharp** 4 years ago

Week 16 - Conceptual Engineering

Weekly Discussion

I'm Kevin Scharp, professor of philosophy at The Ohio State University. About two years ago, I published a book, *Replacing Truth*, in which I carry out the following project: treat the liar paradox and the other terrible paradoxes associated with truth as symptoms of an underlying defect in the concept of truth itself. Then replace our defective concept of truth with a pair of concepts that together will do some of the jobs we try to use truth to do. In particular, I focus on the job of explaining the meanings or contents of natural language sentences by way of natural language semantics, which in a very popular form attributes truth conditions to each sentence. Because of the family of paradoxes affecting truth, it simply cannot do this job well. However, the replacement concepts, ascending truth and descending truth, can do it perfectly. And the resulting theory agrees with truth conditional semantics as a special case everywhere the latter provides coherent results. That is much like the relationship between relativistic mechanics (from Einstein) and classical mechanics (from Newton). I did a weekly discussion thread on this topic back in March 2014; thank you for the great feedback.

It has dawned on me that this kind of philosophical methodology (i.e., replacing defective concepts, which are responsible for philosophical troubles) can and should play a much larger role in philosophical theorizing. Indeed, I have come to think that most, if not all commonly discussed philosophical concepts are inconsistent—some in the same way as truth and others in more subtle ways with one another. As such I have come to think that philosophy is, for the most part, the study of what have turned out to be inconsistent concepts. We can say quite about inconsistent concepts, but for now we can think of them as having constitutive principles that are inconsistent with each other and with obvious facts about the world. Following Simon Blackburn, I've called this methodology *conceptual engineering*. On my view, the inconsistent concepts relevant to philosophy include truth, knowledge, nature, meaning, virtue, explanation, essence, causation, validity, rationality, freedom, necessity, person, beauty, belief, goodness, time, space, justice, etc.

This idea, developing the methodology practiced in *Replacing Truth* for all of philosophy, will be the focus of a short book I'm currently writing. The book opens with substantive chapters on conceptual engineering and philosophical methodology. Then there are five "application" chapters about replacing entailment, replacing knowledge, replacing naturalness, replacing personhood, and replacing innateness. The title is *Replacing Philosophy*.

I gave some of this material over three lectures at the University of St. Andrews in January 2015 and at my inaugural lecture in Columbus in April 2015. There is a VIDEO of the latter and a HANDOUT for that talk as well.

Feel free to ask anything about this project, my other work, or academic philosophy in general. Below is a short summary of the talk and the handout.

One way to flesh out this picture of philosophy and arrive at a legitimate philosophical methodology is to appeal to Socrates, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein.

- Socrates (early Platonic): the unexamined life is not worth living, and by this he means the life bereft of critical thinking (i.e., subjecting one's beliefs to critical scrutiny).
- Nietzsche: in the absence of any divine or objective standards for human life, we ought to craft our own. One ought to take an active role in creating the structure of one's life.
- Wittgenstein: the aim of philosophy is to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle. Philosophical problems are manifestations of being trapped by our language, and philosophy should take the form of therapy that ultimately dissolves the philosophical problems.

Conceptual engineering is taking a Socratic (critical) and Nietzschean (active) attitude toward one's own conceptual scheme. Many of us already think that we should take this critical and active attitude toward our beliefs. We should subject them to a battery of objections and see how well we can reply to those objections. If a belief does not fare well in this process, then that is a good indicator that it should be changed. By doing this, one can sculpt and craft a belief system of one's own rather that just living one's life with beliefs borrowed from one's ancestors. The central idea of conceptual engineering is that one ought to take the same critical attitude toward one's concepts. Likewise, if a concept does not fare well under critical scrutiny, the active attitude kicks in and one crafts new concepts that do the work one wants without giving rise to the problems inherent in the old ones. By doing this, one can sculpt and craft a conceptual repertoire of one's own rather that just living one's life with concepts borrowed from one's ancestors. As Burgess and Plunkett write, "our conceptual repertoire determines not only what we can think and say but also, as a result, what we can do and who we can be," ("Conceptual Ethics I," p. 1091).

I see conceptual engineering as in the service of an overarching therapeutic program. Wittgenstein's infamous conservatism is no part of this program because I think that some things are not fine as they are. Our beliefs are not fine. Our concepts are not fine. But we can make them better. However, the radical therapeutic program does share with Wittgenstein's methodology the goal of showing the fly the way out of the fly bottle. How can conceptual engineering help? Consider the thesis that philosophy is the study of what turned out to be inconsistent concepts. Putting this idea

into the Wittgensteinian program results in the following picture: philosophers are arguing about how best to make sense of concepts that are inconsistent. The arguments consist in privileging certain constitutive principles here and others there, but ultimately the debates rarely make discernable progress because the concepts being analyzed and the concepts used to conduct the debate are defective. That is one reason philosophers end up dealing with so many paradoxes and conceptual puzzles. That is the fly bottle.

How do we escape? For the past 400 years, philosophy has been shrinking. That is a sociological fact. Physics, geology, chemistry, economics, biology, anthropology, sociology, meteorology, psychology, linguistics, computer science, cognitive science—these subject matters were all part of philosophy in 1600. As the scientific revolution ground on, more and more sciences were born. This process is essentially philosophy outsourcing its subject matter as something new—sciences. The process is rather complicated, but the most important part of it is getting straight on the right concepts to use so that the subject matter can be brought under scientific methodology. Ultimately, the radical therapeutic program – showing the fly the way out of the fly bottle – is taking an active role in this outsourcing process. Identify conceptual defects (Socratic idea) and craft new concepts that avoid the old defects (Nietzschean idea) with an eye toward preparing that philosophical subject matter for outsourcing as a science. The ultimate goal of this process is the potential end of philosophy – escape for the fly. The end of philosophy is merely potential because it is likely that our new technologies will give us new inconsistent concepts that are philosophically significant, and these will need to get sorted out. So it is not obvious that our stock of defective concepts will ever effectively decrease. It really depends on how much conceptual engineering occurs. Speeding it up is up to us (philosophers). The speed with which we get new defective concepts is mostly not up to us—people just make them up as needed or wanted. Nevertheless, one can envision a world where we have succeeded in making philosophy evaporate, but some time after that, it shows up again with new, philosophically significant defective concepts. After that, philosophy might break out during especially rapid technological or social growth, like acne.

The scientific element in this radical therapeutic picture is called *metrological naturalism*, and it is separable from the conceptual engineering element. Recall that each of these two elements played an important role in *Replacing Truth*, and the two go together well: metrological naturalism is more successful with consistent concepts, and in order to do conceptual engineering well, we need to know what kinds of replacement concepts to aim for. So it seems that metrological naturalism without conceptual engineering is empty; conceptual engineering without metrological naturalism is blind.

Contrast this radical therapeutic picture centered on conceptual engineering with what is probably the most prominent methodology in contemporary philosophy—the Canberra plan, which owes much to the work of David Lewis. One begins by assembling the platitudes for a philosophical term, and then one tries to figure out what real, relatively fundamental, thing they might describe. If the platitudes are inconsistent, then one tries to make a weighted majority of them true, and that is what the philosophical term in question designates. This methodology is static, having nothing to do with change or improvement. Indeed, Lewis writes: “One comes to philosophy already endowed with a stock of opinions. It is not the business of philosophy either to undermine or to justify these preexisting opinions, to any great extent, but only to try to discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system.” (*Counterfactuals*: 88).

WeirdAlcoholic 8 points · 4 years ago
That was a great read, I really found it interesting how you talk about philosophy dying. It made me wonder what fields of philosophy we study now will be seen as a common field of science in the future.

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Kevin_Scharp **Kevin Scharp** 6 points · 4 years ago
Thanks! I love thinking about that topic. One recent discussion from the opening of Metasemantics (edited by Alexis Burgess and Brett Sherman) reads:
It's not easy being a philosopher of language these days. Work is hard to come by; and we don't just mean jobs. The subject matter itself seems to be getting smaller and smaller. What were once proprietary issues in the field (like the semantics of names, descriptions, quantifiers, etc.) are now quite rightly seen as scientifically tractable research programs in linguistics and psychology. This trajectory warrants disciplinary pride and anxiety in equal measure. On the one hand, the marked progress of linguistic semantics obviously owes volumes to the foundational work of philosophical luminaries like Frege, Russell, Tarski, Davidson, Montague, and Lewis, who helped erect a basic framework for articulating and evaluating claims about verbal meaning. As these foundations have solidified, however, questions once assumed amenable to apriori reflection have been exposed as properly empirical quarries. Handmaiden to the science of meaning might be a perfectly respectable job title. But some of us who self-identify as philosophers of language will naturally want to seek out new work.

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UsesBigWords Φ 8 points · 4 years ago
Thanks for doing this discussion! Here are a few questions:

1. You use the word "replace" to describe what you're doing with ascending/descending truth, but your project seems to be similar to Carnap's explication, where we respect some central aspects of the concept, but stipulate

the others. Do you take your methodology of conceptual engineering to be different from something like Carnap's conceptual explication?

2. Do you worry that we might lose important features of our ordinary (but inconsistent) concepts by using the engineered concepts in their place? For example, perhaps we replace the pre-theoretic concept of consequence with something like a concept of necessarily preserving truth between premise and conclusion. But in so doing, we lose the normative dimension of consequence that informs our ordinary reasoning. Is there a way to address this worry within the conceptual engineering methodology?
3. Furthering question 2, would conceptual engineering do away with family-resemblance concepts? For example, game theory games are very different from board games. Would we have a separate concept for each of these, such that the "game" concept ceases to be useful? If so, would we lose anything important?
4. Suppose far into the distant future, someone has a conceptual scheme consisting of entirely engineered concepts (supposing this is possible in the first place). Is such a conceptual scheme preferable to the one we have now, in virtue of its consistency? Will this conceptual scheme be incommensurate with our own?

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Kevin_Scharp **Kevin Scharp** 2 points · 4 years ago

I love doing these, and they are usually super helpful.

1. I take explication to be a kind of conceptual engineering, but there are others. I don't take my work on ascending and descending truth to be an instance of explication. My reason is that ascending truth isn't just a clearer version of truth, nor is descending truth. There are too many constitutive principles of truth that aren't constitutive principles of ascending truth or of descending truth. But that's to some extent a matter of taste, I think. And it depends on how exactly one understands explication.
2. I tend to think that if there is some use for a concept with certain properties, then we'll use a concept with those properties. I like your example, and tinkering with one's conceptual scheme is sure to have unintended consequences, but I see no reason that any problems that arise couldn't be fixed within the new scheme.
3. Not at all. Family resemblance concepts are very helpful. Moreover, I'm not advocating that we get rid of these concepts. I think people should use whichever concepts they want to use. Rather, I think certain concepts shouldn't be used for certain theoretical projects (in cases where using these concepts impedes the project). That's what I think is happening with truth in natural language semantics. But people should keep using the concept of truth in ordinary circumstances -- the chances that it causes any problems are very small.
4. I don't think consistency alone makes the entirely engineered scheme preferable. It would have to be as useful as our own as well. So I think the answer to your first question is no. The second question is very difficult because it turns on the issue of how those of use who know that a certain concept is inconsistent should interpret people who don't. I've argued that an assessment-sensitive semantics does the best job here, but answering this question is in its early stages.

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UsesBigWords Φ 3 points · 4 years ago

Thanks for the detailed response! I have a (maybe) quick follow up question in light of your answer.

So, I read a normative component to the conceptual engineering project, where you write:

> The central idea of conceptual engineering is that one **ought** to take the same critical attitude toward one's concepts. Likewise, if a concept does not fare well under critical scrutiny, the active attitude kicks in and one crafts new concepts...

But you also say

> I think people should use whichever concepts they want to use.

I fully realize that these two quotes aren't in direct opposition, but I'm wondering where you envision the project to be situated (or headed), normatively speaking.

Is your stance that we should use engineered concepts for, say, theory-building and formal semantics, while maintaining that there's no normative bearing on which concepts people use in ordinary practices?

If there's a normative component at all, how strong is it? Is it something like an obligation to avoid inconsistent concepts? Or a strong reason to?

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Kevin_Scharp **Kevin Scharp** 3 points · 4 years ago

You're right to push me on this. I stand by both quoted claims. Here are some details. Any rational entity with the relevant means and information ought to critically scrutinize her concepts. But that means think critically about whether those are good concepts to have for the purposes at hand. And I think that any such entity should craft new concepts if this critical scrutiny turns up some kind of conceptual defect that impedes some project.

However, I don't think that the old defective concept should be eliminated. First, I'm not sure how to even do that (public service announcements? targeted lobotomies?). Second, in most cases, these defective concepts work perfectly well. It's only for certain applications that one should use the new concepts. So I think people should use whichever concepts they want (in general), but people should also use the right concepts for the job.

Here's an example. Truth is an inconsistent concept (or so I say -- just give me this assumption). And it should be replaced for certain purposes with ascending truth and descending truth. But it makes no sense to use ascending truth

and descending truth in every circumstance. Instead, in most situations people should use truth. Imagine a conversation about whether Heather is trustworthy. It's fine to use 'true' in this conversation and to say things like "everything she's ever said to me has been true as far as I know". Yes, maybe you'll generate a liar sentence, but even if you do you probably won't know it and it won't have an impact on the result of your conversation. Yes, you could do the whole conversation using ascending truth and descending truth, but it would be terribly inconvenient to keep track of that distinction. My rule of thumb is: if you would get the same result anyway, then just use truth. The same goes for other defective concepts. You don't use general relativity to design a bridge despite the fact that mass in a Newtonian framework is an inconsistent concept.

That's a long way of saying Yes to your first question.

Okay, the last question is really hard. There's a huge debate about whether we have any positive reasons to be rational, and most theorists think that avoiding inconsistent beliefs and unsound reasoning is part of being rational. I think there are reasons to be rational, but lots of major people in this debate (Kolodny, Broome) disagree with me on that. I flag this point only because my answer to your question depends on it. I think there is a normative component -- other things being equal, you should avoid reasoning with inconsistent concepts *when doing so impedes the project you are pursuing*. Is that just an instance of "choose the right means for your ends"? Maybe. I'm working on a project right now on reasons, and as far as I know, there is almost no work on the relationship between reasons, rationality, and formal logic. I aim to correct that in the near future. So I think this is a great topic, super interesting, and there's almost no work on it. You should look at the Burgess and Plunkett pieces linked above for a start.

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MaceWumpus Φ 2 points · 4 years ago

Re: the "replacing" issue: As you may or may not know, Jody Azzouni defends something like the idea that we should take his preferred regimentation of truth as a normative constraint on our typical uses of "true." That is, if in some case we find a place where our normal idea conflicts with the regimentation, that's precisely where we should say that we have actually made a mistake in applying truth. It seems as though you're advocating something similar: in most cases, our old concept will do fine, but there are going to be certain circumstances in which it is problematic to apply it, and in those circumstances we ought to opt for the conceptually engineered concept. To this extent, it doesn't at all replace the old concept, but it normatively guides its application (if you like, you can even say that this is what Einstein is doing to Newton as well).

Anyway, I recognize I'm a bit late to the party, but I do have a bit of a question. Suppose I opt into this conceptual engineering picture. It seems as though the only reasons that I can have for choosing one solution over another are pragmatic reasons. Suppose both the Scharp and Azzouni solutions work to this extent. We seem to have three options in regards to which ones we choose:

1. Opt for one over the other on the basis of other conceptual engineering projects (i.e., to avoid an untoward result in a related concept like *consequence*).
2. Opt for over the other on the basis of how close they are to our original concept (which seems to me to let the Canberra plan back in in all but name).
3. Be pluralist about the solutions.

I'm wondering what options you think are legitimate (given the assumption that both solutions do in fact work).

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Kevin_Scharp **Kevin Scharp** 2 points · 4 years ago

On the first point -- I'm not a fan of Azzouni's approach for several reasons. First, he thinks natural languages are trivial in that every sentence follows from every other sentence and every sentence is both true and not true. That seems to me *a bit* extreme and totally unfounded. Second, it's easy to generate revenge paradoxes for the regimentation he offers, so it doesn't really address the underlying problem. Also, the new concepts do replace the old concept for certain purposes. In those situations, you're using the replacements, not the old concept of truth. So I reject the idea that the replacements guide the usage of the old concept. I don't think Azzouni is even for changing our conceptual scheme at all, but I could be wrong about that -- it depends on how one construes the regimentation. However, I agree 100% with the Einstein/Newton comment.

Great question. I think that when choosing which concepts to use as replacements, there are going to be many factors in play. 1 will certainly be a major factor. 2 seems to me less important because being too close to the old concept would be a bad thing. I have a hard time saying "we should use my concepts over yours because overall mine are closer to the original"; that just has no pull for me. 3 is much more my style if two approaches are tied on explanatory power, simplicity, conservativeness, and fruitfulness in other conceptual engineering projects (your 1). However that case seems pretty unlikely. Also, being a pluralist would like replacing the old concept with all the replacements in each of the accepted solutions. Probably some would work better for some applications and others better for others.
There is another issue that would factor into which replacements to adopt, and that's how scientific the concepts are. I'd prefer replacements that are amenable to a measurement theoretic treatment. That's part of the above picture I call metrological naturalism. It isn't the emphasis of this post, but it is an integral part of the overall methodology.

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MaceWumpus Φ 2 points · 4 years ago

> There is another issue that would factor into which replacements to adopt, and that's how scientific the concepts are. I'd prefer replacements that are amenable to a measurement theoretic treatment. That's

> part of the above picture I call metrological naturalism. It isn't the emphasis of this post, but it is an integral part of the overall methodology.

Hmmm. I'm generally down. I do have the following sort of worry, however. It seems (to my mind) rather common to find philosophers whose replacements involve a certain self-imposed austerity that appears necessary only because of a lack of imagination about the sort of things that are scientifically acceptable (I'm thinking here specifically of Field's early work on truth).

In that context, the rush to "measurable" alternatives seems like it could very easily lead us down paths that may not be preferable--we need to figure out why we want the particular concept in our theory *first* and then only after can we figure out how to measure it. If we just go for the nearest currently-measurable notion (*cough* Bayesians and "evidence" *cough*) we can end up with tools that are insufficient to do the work that they were originally ordered for. That is not, of course, a objection to your program--it's unquestionable that other programs have and do lead to any number misguided theories--but it's a reason why (2) might be a worthwhile factor (in some cases and when properly parsed).

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Polycephal_Lee 3 points · 4 years ago

Th s is amaz ing! Answer whichever you know most about, I know there's probably too many for you to do them all. I'm really interested in epistemology in case you can't tell.

1. My understanding of "truth" is mostly informed by Nietzsche. As I understand it, truth became fetishized because it was publicly useful. And Nietzsche is skeptical of truth in absolute, so he warns against this fetishization, a siren song towards something that doesn't exist. This seems like the root of your project, is that correct? Maybe you can provide a little roadmap from Nietzsche's Truth and Lies to where you currently are?
2. Have you read Chomsky's "The Mysteries of Nature?" I'd like to get your thoughts on his writings where he says that many phenomena are beyond understanding fundamentally. Occult forces, action at a distance, mind-body problem, etc escape understanding, yet we are forced to accept them from the empirical facts we see in the world. Does your project hope to address even these mysteries, and if so, how?
3. The joke religion of Discordianism seeks to dissolve paradoxes in understanding by saying that reality is happening on a level lower than that of concepts, so any concepts will necessarily be lossy abstractions, and depending on how they are abstracted, may result in conflicting concepts. Are you trying to get at True Reality, or get better at talking about individual truths?

> With our concept making apparatus called "mind" we look at reality through the ideas-about-reality which our cultures give us. The ideas-about- reality are mistakenly labeled "reality" and unenlightened people are forever perplexed by the fact that other people, especially other cultures, see "reality" differently. It is only the ideas-about-reality which differ. Real (capital-T True) reality is a level deeper than is the level of concept.

4. Then we have New Mysterianism theory which places limits on understanding due to the machinery of the human brain. Do you think we'll develop machinery that is better than brains which can comprehend things incomprehensible to us humans? Do you think part of our defective concepts come from limitations of our machinery?

Thanks so much, I am looking forward to reading your work, regardless of the answers here!

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Kevin_Scharp **Kevin Scharp** 3 points · 4 years ago

Thanks!

> 1. I think you are right that Nietzsche thinks that absolute truth is problematic and he seems to think that truth is relative to a perspective. I have no problem with absolute truth. Instead, I think that the rules for using the concept of truth allow one to reason one's way into contradictions. That doesn't seem to be a part of Nietzsche's thinking. Anyway, I think that because truth has this feature (inconsistent rules), it is perspectival in a certain sense -- here I rely on a new tradition in natural language semantics that is called relativistic semantics.
> 2. I haven't read that paper, but I'm not a fan of declaring some phenomenon beyond human understanding. This has happened over and over in the past and we've come to understand lots of these things. My own project does address this issue because I think that one of the things that leads people to the conclusion that something is beyond understanding is thinking with inconsistent concepts. Navigating the conceptual inconsistency over and over can make it seem like no one could ever figure this stuff out.
> 3. I'm trying to improve our conceptual schemes. I'm not convinced that any concept whatsoever will fail to grasp True Reality. One problem I have with this whole line of thinking is that those who are pursuing it are thinking with the concept of True Reality -- that's just a concept like any other.
> 4. Yes, I do think we'll develop technology that is better at understanding certain things than we are. I'm not sure those things are incomprehensible to humans, however. We might be able to use this technology to come to understand it ourselves, even though we might not have ever discovered this understanding on our own. Yes, I think that some of the defects in our concepts come from our own cognitive bias, which are to some extent rooted in our cognitive machinery.

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Polycephal_Lee 0 points · 4 years ago

Thanks for responding! I do encourage you to read Chomsky's paper, it's only 30 pages, and full of quotes from many different philosophers and scientists throughout the ages, giving a good exploration of topics in the past that were considered beyond human understanding.

One point that is made is that for Newton, action at a distance was spooky. He could not come to grips with the fact that gravity happens. Today, our intuition is comfortable with gravity, but that doesn't mean we've come to understand *why* it does what it does. We have the same explanatory gap in explaining why that so scared Newton.

Chomsky brings in Richard Popkin to talk about "constructive skepticism":

> Science proceeds by doubting our abilities to find grounds for our knowledge, while accepting and increasing the knowledge itself... the secrets of nature, of things-in-themselves, are forever hidden from us.

This seems to me an accurate depiction of how knowledge works. For example I have no rational grounds for induction, but I use it anyway to increase knowledge. I'm trying to suss out your fundamental axioms, mine are experience and induction, everything else is built from them.

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Kevin_Scharp **Kevin Scharp** 3 points · 4 years ago

I'll take a look at the Chomsky.

> I think you're wrong about Newton and gravity. Today we have general relativity, which explains gravity as the deformation of spacetime due to mass. There's no action at a distance and we understand pretty well why gravity does what it does.
>
> If you have no rational grounds for induction, how could it increase your knowledge?
>
> I'm not sure I have fundamental axioms -- if I do, experience certainly isn't one of them. Induction is great; deduction too. So are lots of other things like emotions and perceptions and actions. I'm not committed to some kind of reductive project were you explain everything in terms of a few simple basic bits.
>
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MaceWumpus Φ 1 point · 4 years ago

> > One point that is made is that for Newton, action at a distance was spooky. He could not come to grips with the fact that gravity happens.
>
> Not really. He's not perfectly consistent on the issue: there are places where is more insistent on a sort of "instrumental," to be sure, but the best way to understand these seems to be as claims about the mechanism by which gravity operates. But he absolutely was committed to gravity itself *not* being instrumental, and he knew that gravity had to be some sort of "real" attraction for the theory to work.
>
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somewhathungry333 2 points · 4 years ago

> Occult forces, action at a distance, mind-body problem, etc escape understanding

Neil on "God of the gaps", basically replace god with "ignorance of the gaps"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytaf30wuLbQ

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Polycephal_Lee 1 point · 4 years ago

Neil is really only giving surface reactions to shallow thinking. There is a lot more to knowledge and science than meets the eye. For example here's Bertrand Russell:

> Science tells us what we can know, but what we can know is little, and if we forget how much we cannot know we become insensitive to many things of very great importance. Theology, on the other hand, induces a dogmatic belief that we have knowledge where in fact we have ignorance, and by doing so generates a kind of impertinent insolence towards the universe. Uncertainty, in the presence of vivid hopes and fears, is painful, but must be endured if we wish to live without the support of comforting fairy tales. It is not good either to forget the questions that philosophy asks, or to persuade ourselves that we have found indubitable answers to them. To teach how to live without certainty, and yet without being paralyzed by hesitation, is perhaps the chief thing that philosophy, in our age, can still do for those who study it.

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somewhathungry333 2 points · 4 years ago

> There is a lot more to knowledge and science than meets the eye.

The problem is everyone who says this does so from ignorance that their own brain is not good at reasoning:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYmi0DLzBdQ

I'm willing to bet that people's brains are bad than that there is anything wrong with the universe.

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[deleted] 1 point · 4 years ago

Bertrand Russell wasn't trying to support any kind of mysterianism or cognitive closure.

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[deleted] 1 point · 4 years ago

> Occult forces, action at a distance, mind-body problem, etc escape understanding, yet we are forced to accept them from the empirical facts we see in the world.

What empirical facts do we see backing occult forces? What about the mind-body problem escapes understanding (rather than having partisans of certain views *loudly insisting* that it *must* escape understanding, even though the partisans of *other* views think they understand just fine)?

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Polycephal_Lee 1 point · 4 years ago

Could better be called the "physical - consciousness" problem, and it's not the only one.

The hard problems, forever mysteries, are things where we can empirically see phenomena happening, but have no explanation for why it happens that way instead of some other way. Why is the speed of light c for example. We know that it is, but we cannot explain why it is. Same deal with consciousness / matter explanatory gap. We don't know how matter can have consciousness, but it clearly does. Existence in general is a forever mystery, why is there something instead of nothing?

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[deleted] 1 point · 4 years ago

> The hard problems, forever mysteries, are things where we can empirically see phenomena happening, but have no explanation for why it happens that way instead of some other way.

That these are "forever mysteries" is a very partisan viewpoint. Many respected academics don't believe that they're mysteries, and many likewise don't believe that things currently unknown will remain forever unknown.

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flyinghamsta 1 point · 4 years ago

no, that's the hard problem of hard problems you are thinking about, and it is a forever mystery, sorry. ô(ô

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penpalthro 3 points · 4 years ago

Thanks for the write up Professor, it's a very interesting read! Anyway, I have two questions that'd I think would help me get a better idea of what you're saying here:

1. This has more to do with Replacing Truth than Conceptual Engineering, but it's sort of a methodological question so I hope it's not too far off. So am I right in saying the argument goes very roughly: "It's impossible to give an account of truth, as traditionally conceived, that avoids paradox and inconsistency. So we need a new concept that can avoid these"? But my raw intuition seems to be that the reason we want to avoid inconsistency stems from facts about truth, as traditionally conceived. Specifically, that a set of inconsistent sentences cannot have every member true. So can we give an account of why we want to avoid inconsistency using ascending and descending truth? Or do we even need to tell this story?
2. As philosophy outsources different parts of itself to other subjects, do you see any part of it will remain philosophy indefinitely? Put another way, do you think any part of philosophy has to be philosophy *necessarily*?

Anyway, thanks again for taking the time to do this discussion!

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Kevin_Scharp **Kevin Scharp** 4 points · 4 years ago

Thanks -- happy to do it.

1. That's roughly my argument, but I don't think a single concept will do it. We need a team of replacement concepts. I think we want to avoid inconsistency as a matter of logic, not as a matter of truth. Even in very basic logical systems that don't contain any truth predicates, there can still be the law of non-contradiction. Since I don't think we should change our logic to deal with paradoxes, I don't think we need to tell the story of how ascending truth and descending truth make us want to avoid inconsistency.
2. I don't think so. I don't think there is a good argument either way on this topic. There's no good reason to think any one particular thing will remain forever in philosophy. I think the progress we've made already is cause for optimism, but that's not a very strong reason.

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penpalthro 1 point · 4 years ago

Ah right, I think I understand the motivation for ascending and descending truth better now.

As far as 2 is concerned, I find that interesting. Because it seems like your presentation of conceptual engineering is a kind of meta-philosophy and so would be considered philosophy in general. And though it's tough to say what kind of field conceptual engineering itself my develop into, it's certainly fun to think about. Maybe it (and other meta-philosophy) would be reducible to some very complicated psychophysiological story that advanced neuroscience could tell. Or something else. So I think you're definitely right, there don't seem to be many hard arguments either way. But it's a lot of fun (and maybe beneficial?) to consider.

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Kevin_Scharp Kevin Scharp 1 point · 4 years ago

Yes, conceptual engineering is part of philosophy and my understanding of it involves using certain philosophical concepts. And, according to my view, these concepts are probably inconsistent. So if my own view is right, then my own view is formulated using defective concepts. So it's hard to see how my view could be right. I think this is a serious challenge, and it's one I intend to follow up on. It is very interesting to speculate on how metaphilosophical speculation might be exported to the sciences. Probably different bits to different sciences is the most likely.

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ajmarriott 2 points · 4 years ago · *edited 4 years ago*

Thanks for the very interesting post, it certainly got me thinking, but I'm not sure I understand the significance of everything you say, so I have three questions to ask if I may...

Firstly, you maintain that it's the defective concept of truth that causes the liar and other similar paradoxes (e.g. Russell, Curry, Yablo, Montague). But these all have hidden self-referential of recursive structures within them. I don't know of any truth paradoxes without such hidden recursive structures - are there any? If not, then this suggests these paradoxes are the result of self-referential or recursive 'bugs' in language use?

Seeing them as such obviates the need to 'solve' them, and we can continue to conduct other areas of philosophical discourse, those where we do not encounter such recursive sentences, using the ordinary concept of truth. What I'm trying to get at is are you only introducing the two new truth concepts to solve problems with recursive sentences?

Secondly, you say:

> As such I have come to think that philosophy is, for the most part, the study of what have turned out to be inconsistent concepts. That is, philosophical concepts have constitutive principles that are inconsistent with each other and with obvious facts about the world. These concepts include truth, knowledge, nature, meaning, virtue, explanation, essence, causation, validity, rationality, freedom, necessity, person, beauty, belief, goodness, time, space, justice, etc.

I notice that you do not directly mention 'change' as in Zeno's paradoxes. Replacing our ordinary idea of truth with ascending and descending truth invents new replacement concepts, and I can see how this might be useful for special sentences, but how is this possible with something so immediately experienced such as change or causation? Even if you replace the idea of change with some other idea for use in a philosophical discourse, (for example to solve Zeno's paradox in some new way), *the reality of change in the world still exists independent of our conception of it*; we live through it. Aren't some of these allegedly defective concepts going to be very difficult to engineer away, simply because the existing defective concept is so 'good'?

Thirdly, you also say:

> The end of philosophy is merely potential because it is likely that our new technologies will give us new inconsistent concepts that are philosophically significant, and these will need to get sorted out. So it is not obvious that our stock of defective concepts will ever effectively decrease.

Is it *inevitable* that all such concepts have the potential to produce inconsistencies? If so could there be a common reason *why*? Something in the nature of conception in itself which means that there is always the potential for inconsistency.

I'm thinking here of some general property of concepts; for example, any concept is 'partial' in that it focuses on some aspect of the world, and in some sense 'uproots' this aspect into an abstraction. We then create new thoughts that combine these uprooted abstractions with others in unforeseen ways. Sometimes they simply don't fit together very well. I'm interested if you've have had any thoughts along these lines concerning general properties of defective concepts.

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Kevin_Scharp Kevin Scharp 1 point · 4 years ago

Thanks for the comments.

1. There is a dispute about the extent to which Yablo's paradox (which involves an infinite sequence of sentences) is self-referential. I don't think that dispute is very important. You're right that if there are paradoxes pertaining to truth in some language, then that language has some sort of capacity to refer to its own sentences. However, this can be very subtle. Since Godel's work in the 1930s, we've known that simply expressing arithmetic is enough to generate paradoxes (again, if there's a truth predicate as well). So theorists today are very reluctant to blame self-reference or to try to limit self-reference to avoid the paradoxes. Self-reference is as innocuous as arithmetic. Moreover, let's say you're right that the paradoxes are the result of recursive bugs in the language -- that still doesn't help us much. We still don't know the truth value of the liar sentence, we still don't know where the liar reasoning goes wrong, we still don't know how to interpret someone who's language has all the makings for paradox. So I don't see that your diagnosis obviates the need to solve the paradoxes. Can you help me out here?
2. I really like this question -- you're right that I say nothing about paradoxes of change, and you're right that my methodology applied to these paradoxes suggests we need new concepts of change. I'm not sure how to tell that story yet (I haven't researched it in detail yet). Yes, there will probably be concepts that are so "good" that it is difficult to replace them in many contexts. However, remember that I'm not saying we should totally get rid of truth (or any concept). We should use the replacement concepts in certain circumstances (for truth, it's when we do natural language semantics). It might be that the concept of change doesn't cause much trouble in most

situations. In that case, it being so "good" might not be such a problem. Still, you're right that this is a serious concern.

3. Great question and I have very crappy answers here. No I don't think it is inevitable that concepts are inconsistent. For sure, if we found that there was a pattern here, then we would want to know why, but I think it's too soon to say there's a pattern. However, I like your diagnosis -- it's right on track with what I'd say if I were to give an account like this. It's also similar to what Mark Wilson thinks (check out his Wandering Significance). Still, I'm holding out hope that we can achieve a conceptual scheme with all the consistent concepts we need to do what we want. I admit I have no good reason to think that's going to happen. On this topic, it's important to remember that the concepts we are using to think about this topic (including the concept of a concept) are probably inconsistent. So we shouldn't trust our reflections on this topic too much.

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ajmarriott 1 point · 4 years ago

Thanks for the reply. Regarding the first point, I'm not saying that academics should not try and solve paradoxes, that would be no fun whatsoever! And from what you say there's clearly much more to this than I properly understand.

My profession is in computer programming (C++) and I was thinking about these paradoxes 'as if' they were expressions in C++. Some types of programming bug involve recursive loops that never terminate. If you write a function which returns a boolean value but infinitely recurses, for example:

```
bool liarParadox() { return liarParadox(); }
```

... you never get a return value, so you can never know whether it is true or false. The bug is not fixed by changing the return value type, you have to eliminate the recursive loop; hence my question.

In the case of the liar paradox, by introducing your two truth concepts you do actually terminate the recursion, and I'm asking whether it is the elimination of the recursion that actually resolves the paradox. In which case by introducing new truth concepts is it still the liar paradox?

My own (revisable-in-the-light-of-argument-I-understand) view is that the self-referential liar sentence does not have a truth value because of the recursion.

P.S. Thanks for the pointer to Wandering Significance - a subject I've been 'mulling over' for ages. Luckily I have some book tokens left over from last Christmas ...

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Kevin_Scharp Kevin Scharp 1 point · 4 years ago

There's a ton of work on the liar paradox and programming languages. I think that's a fruitful way of looking at it.

On your question, no, I don't think eliminating the non-terminating recursion is the key to solving the paradox (although this is a popular view still). Here's why. In the literature, the term 'grounded' is used for sentences that get truth values eventually in your recursion. Those that don't are ungrounded. So the liar is ungrounded. However, there are lots of sentences that clearly have truth values but are ungrounded (i.e., non-terminating recursion). For example, 'no sentence is both true and not true'. Because it is a sentence, it quantifies over itself and so is ungrounded. There's no way to fix a truth value for it using the recursive technique. But it's obviously true (or at least those of us who aren't dialetheists think it is). So saying that the ungrounded sentences have no truth value is overkill -- it implies that lots of unproblematic sentences have no truth value. There are other problems with this approach as well -- i.e., it is easy to generate new liar-like paradoxes for it (e.g., 'this sentence is either false or ungrounded).

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ajmarriott 1 point · 4 years ago

Thanks for this. I'm not sure I properly understand the idea of grounding from what you say. Just because the indirect self-reference in your example 'no sentence is both true and not true' is benign, in that the sentence is clearly true anyway, it doesn't necessarily follow that the recursion in the liar isn't the cause of it not having a determinate truth value.

To illustrate your point, so as I can understand it, all that is needed is an example of a sentence that does not have a determinate truth value and does not have *any* form of direct or indirect recursive structure or behaviour.

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[deleted] 1 point · 4 years ago

> Firstly, you maintain that it's the defective concept of truth that causes the liar and other similar paradoxes (e.g. Russell, Curry, Yablo, Montague). But these all have hidden self-referential of recursive structures within them. I don't know of any truth paradoxes without such hidden recursive structures - are there any? If not, then this suggests these paradoxes are the result of self-referential or recursive 'bugs' in language use?

Ok, this strikes at my own profession (computer science) a little bit.

One of the philosophically interesting things about the Curry-Howard Isomorphism is that only terminating programs (viz: finite proofs) can inhabit non-False types (prove propositions other than False). A program that *never* terminates, on the other hand, is the canonical proof of False.

Verbal paradoxes tend to have infinite-loop structure because, when translated into computational models by the brain, they *must* have infinite-loop structure. In mathematical logic *only* a nonterminating program models a contradiction.

In a classical logic (corresponding to acontinuation-passing program calculus), we would normally have two "propositional values": `P true` and `P false`. A paradox is then a program that loops infinitely setting `P true` *and* `P false` in alternation.

Terminating recursive structure, which bottoms out somewhere, is *fine*, though -- even if it's self-referential. Hence, "ascending truth" and "descending truth" sound like good new concepts to me: they seem to break the loop and set the logical flow in only one direction, thus rendering the resulting logic nonparadoxical.

> I notice that you do not directly mention ‘change’ as in Zeno’s paradoxes.

I thought Zeno's Paradox of movement was solved by Newton's use of integrals, no?

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ajmarriott 1 point · 4 years ago · *edited 4 years ago*

I have limited experience with functional languages and no previous knowledge of CHI, but a quick search tells me that CHI equates function arguments with propositions, and function return values with proofs.

If this is correct, and if I understand you correctly, you are saying that for a function to ‘prove’ something as ‘true’ it has to at least return a value. If it never returns anything this is held to be false.

From one perspective this makes sense - the function has not returned ‘true’, therefore it is ‘not true’, which is equivalent to false. Unfortunately, for non-trivial functions (i.e. large complex code) it would take an infinite amount of time to *know* that the function had not returned, unless you have faster than light computation or have solved the halting problem! So although you can know for certain that a function returns true, you can never be certain that it’s false - you just get sick of waiting, (if it is non-trivial and doesn’t terminate).

In the case of the liar paradox what you say renders it *false*. Intuitively I don’t think this is correct, hence I prefer an alternative logic: if the function does not return it is neither true nor false. To be true or false it has to return a value. In practical terms this equates a non-terminating function/program as one containing a bug, and in the real world, this is how programs are written.

I’m not sure I understand your point about ...

> Verbal paradoxes tend to have infinite-loop structure because, when translated into computational models by the brain, they must have infinite-loop structure. In mathematical logic only a nonterminating program models a contradiction.

Perhaps you could clarify?

I accept that splitting true into ascending and descending true is a clever idea, and *in a sense* it curtails the recursion in the liar sentence. But the question remains, if you replace a word in a sentence is it still the same sentence? For example compare “The cat sits on the mat” and “The dog sits on the mat”. Clearly different sentences describing different situations. Now take “This sentence is not true” and “This sentence is not ascending-true”. Why are they not different sentences?

So I still maintain that the liar sentence has no determinate truth value, and this is because the ‘evaluation’ never terminates.

Regarding Zeno’s Paradoxes it seems debate is still rife even given so many proposed solutions. There are some good links from Wikipedia and the paper below gives a flavour of some of the issues:

http://www.ge.infn.it/~zanghi/arntzenius-velocities.pdf

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Kevin_Scharp **Kevin Scharp** 1 point · 4 years ago

check out my reply to /u/ajmarriott

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Purgecakes 2 points · 4 years ago

This sounds like a bold and possibly revolutionary project. It seems like it ought to be obvious now that you have explained it. I think I'll need to read your work to understand it better. It is obviously opposed to the Canberra plan. It seems likewise opposed, if less obviously, to Nagel's idea of more and less objective viewpoints. Though maybe it isn't.

What guiding ideas can we actually have if we're dispensing with ordinary and philosophical concepts? If you're just taking existing concepts and fixing their flaws then that doesn't seem radical. But replacing concepts entirely seems like it would be aimless, because there would be no direction.

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Kevin_Scharp **Kevin Scharp** 2 points · 4 years ago

> It seems like it ought to be obvious now that you have explained it.

This is always the best compliment.

I agree that conceptual engineering alone seems unguided. That's why I think metrological naturalism is an important component in the overall picture. We should be aiming for replacements that can be integrated into an overall scientific

system. I think the key to such integration is amenability to measurement theoretic treatment. That, plus practical demands and explanatory power provide a lots of constraints on the direction of conceptual engineering.

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Purgecakes 1 point · 4 years ago

Well I somehow missed that crucial paragraph in your OP.

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[deleted] 1 point · 4 years ago · *edited 4 years ago*

I don't know if I'm fully understanding this. What I'm gathering is that civilization is becoming "philosophically bankrupt" (can't argue there), that new science begets new philosophy, and that our current use of philosophy (and current concept of truth) are to blame for paradoxes?

So are you proposing we "trim the fat" from philosophy, so to speak, and define a more "athletic" philosophy that does not lend itself to the observance of mistruths? In other words, we ought to just do-away with most of our current philosophical infrastructure and preserve what might be important for later? And that this so-called "conceptual engineering" is the vehicle to do this?

These are good ideas, but one wonders if new paradoxes would arise from this? Or, perhaps, if the issue isn't with how we conceptualize truth -- but rather the linguistic characteristics of truth and the verbalization of logical connections in relation to our cognitive interpretations?

I'm also a little confused about the definitions of ascending and descending truths. If someone could explain that to me, then it would be greatly appreciated.

The implications of this could be hugely dramatic. A sort of new era of philosophy, something we're definitely in need of!

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Kevin_Scharp **Kevin Scharp** 2 points · 4 years ago

Let me try to explain two things in more detail, and then I'll get to your questions.

First, truth. There are lots of principles that guide our use of the concept of truth, but two central ones have to be the following:

(1) it's a mistake to say or believe that p and to deny that p is true.

(2) it's a mistake to say or believe that p is true and to deny that p.

I think these principles hold no matter what declarative sentence you stick in for p. The problem is that we can use these principles to derive a contradiction. So it seems like the central principles for the concept of truth are inconsistent. I think we should use two new concepts, ascending truth and descending truth. Here are some principles for them:

(3) it's a mistake to say or believe that p and to deny that p is ascending true.

(4) it's a mistake to say or believe that p is descending true and to deny that p.

Notice that (3) is like (1) and (4) is like (2). However, (3) is about ascending truth and (4) is about descending truth. There is no general principle like (1) about descending truth and there is no general principle like (2) about ascending truth. That's how to understand the definitions of truth, ascending truth, and descending truth.

Second, conceptual engineering. I think that many of the problems and puzzles that concern philosophy today and throughout its history are symptoms of something deeper. That something deeper is that the concepts on which philosophers focus are inconsistent. A typical philosophical dispute (say, about knowledge) consists of one group of people emphasizing certain principles of knowledge arguing with another group of people emphasizing different principles of knowledge. I'm saying that we should first blame the right culprit -- our own concepts are defective. Then we should get to work figuring out how to craft new concepts that will do what we wanted the defective concepts to do without giving rise to philosophical puzzles and contradictions.

Now on to your question -- won't new paradoxes arise? Yes, probably. It seems unlikely that the first attempts at eliminating certain conceptual inconsistencies would be entirely successful. However, the process can be repeated to deal with new defects in the replacement concepts. You might think that no matter how much one works at it, it is impossible to eliminate paradoxes and problems in our conceptual scheme. I see no reason to think that's true, but I admit that I don't have a good reason to think it's false either.

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[deleted] 0 points · 4 years ago

Thank you for your response, I resoundingly agree with pretty much everything said here. Our concepts of truth (among other key philosophical concepts) are rather loose, which certainly does not lend itself to the precise logic required of philosophical thought.

A wise man once said that 90% of philosophy is defining concepts.

It's interesting to think about the "paradox of paradoxes." Whether or not all paradoxes may be resolved by one logical truth, or if new paradoxes should arise. I personally believe that the answer lies somewhere within the convergence of eastern and western philosophical styles.

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[deleted] 1 point · 4 years ago

But things that just cannot be proven will always stay philosophy, like metaphysicys

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Kevin_Scharp **Kevin Scharp** 2 points · 4 years ago

I disagree. Very few things can be proven. The sciences are full of results that cannot be proven. So are other topics like law, history, and business. So philosophy does not consist of just the things that cannot be proven.

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RaisinsAndPersons Φ 1 point · 4 years ago

One thing you might look at if you haven't already is Eric Olson's paper There is no problem of the self. I love this paper, because it takes a philosophical term of art, shows how many ways it's been used to discuss completely different subjects, and concludes that there's no *unified* notion there to discuss. (It turns out there's a bunch of different ones we can discuss piecemeal, like the issue of how first-person pronouns refer.) Maybe you've come across it already in your research on the "person" concept, but if you haven't, I highly recommend it.

(There's also Barbara Montero's paper Post-physicalism, where she argues that the emptiness of "the physical" necessitates a re-framing of the mind-body problem. It sounds like your work in spirit, but more conceptual demolition than engineering...)

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Kevin_Scharp **Kevin Scharp** 2 points · 4 years ago

Great pointers, thank you. Olson is definitely in the same ballpark. Montero might not be. There is an important difference between saying that nothing satisfies some concept (like 'round square') and saying that a concept is defective. Presumably nothing satisfies an inconsistent concept, but surely there are consistent concepts that nothing satisfies (again, like round square). I think Montero might be saying that physical is like round square -- there is nothing like that.

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RaisinsAndPersons Φ 1 point · 4 years ago · *edited 4 years ago*

I read Montero as saying that "physical" is empty because none of the proposed definitions help the physicalist to state their views. So if you try to fill out the following schema:

> P is a physical object/event/property if and only _____

you don't really get a notion of the physical that helps the physicalist out. Either their thesis becomes trivial ("whatever physics tells us there is counts as physical," which leaves open the possibility that physics will discover paradigmatic mental properties) or dogmatic and maybe anti-scientific ("physics will never discover that mentality is fundamental"). On that reading, we could read Montero as offering a challenge to the physicalist: give us a plausible notion of the physical. Is this an invitation to conceptual engineering? (There's actually a cottage industry devoted to this issue.)

edit: Sorry to belabor this, but another case study in conceptual replacement might be the debate over how to understand delusions, and whether they're beliefs or not. This paper by G. Lynn Stephens and George Graham is a good look at the landscape; they think of the right strategy in the debate to be one of replacing the traditional concept of delusions as belief. That's pretty telling, and might be of interest to you.

One sign that you've hit upon a fecund methodology is that it turns up all sorts of surprising and cool things, and helps us rethink old issues in a new light. Well done!

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Kevin_Scharp **Kevin Scharp** 2 points · 4 years ago

Okay, good -- I see how you're reading Montero now. That can be construed as an invitation to conceptual engineering.

Great idea to look at delusion. I have a colleague who works on this and a graduate student starting a project on it.

> One sign that you've hit upon a fecund methodology is that it turns up all sorts of surprising and cool things, and helps us rethink old issues in a new light. Well done!

Agreed! Thank you.

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[deleted] 1 point · 4 years ago

> you don't really get a notion of the physical that helps the physicalist out. Either their thesis becomes trivial ("whatever physics tells us there is counts as physical," which leaves open the possibility that physics will discover paradigmatic mental properties) or dogmatic and maybe anti-scientific ("physics will never discover that mentality is fundamental").

From the standpoint of actually-existing naturalists, this is a feature, not a bug. We want to find what's actually in reality, not presuppose that we possess a complete theory of everything before the data is in.

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RaisinsAndPersons Φ 1 point · 4 years ago

Then you'd agree with Montero that naturalism isn't physicalism.

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[deleted] 1 point · 4 years ago

I think so, except that I'd note that "physicalism" appears a strawman set up to attack naturalism by mischaracterizing it. For instance, I don't think I've ever seen one paper seriously arguing for a "physicalist" position about *anything at all*. Half a dozen varieties of naturalism, yes, but never "physicalism".

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RaisinsAndPersons Φ 2 points · 4 years ago

No, physicalism is an actual view.

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[deleted] 1 point · 4 years ago

It seems very strange to me to assert that *fewer* things are real than figure in our best scientific theories (since those already include things like "information", "quantum foam" and "virtual particles" that are *nothing like* Aristotelian intuitions of "the physical").

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RaisinsAndPersons Φ 2 points · 4 years ago

I'm sorry, I don't understand your response.

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[deleted] 2 points · 4 years ago

TL;DR: "Physicalism" seems to be a kind of ontological paraphrasing of Newtonian physics. This makes it a deeply problematic view, because Newtonian physics is wrong, and our best theories of physics feature all kinds of stuff that the Newtonian and the classical philosophical "physicalist" would not consider "physical". Therefore, physicalism should be dropped in favor of a more scientifically informed naturalist position.

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chaosofstarlesssleep 1 point · 4 years ago

If I understand this correctly, many problems in philosophy are due to the inconsistency of the concepts involved, and new concepts should be engineered to take their place; and that in philosophy, conceptual analysis is undertaken with the assumption that these concepts are consistent. For example, that truth admits paradox and cannot be defined so to escape these paradoxes, without re-conceptualizing what truth fundamentally means.

How do we tell a concept is inconsistent?

Is that it admits paradox enough to warrant conceptional engineering, or is it its truth conditions have not been adequately identified? What's the difference between conceptional engineering and conceptional analysis? It seems philosophy defaults to conceptional engineering when conceptional analysis is unfruitful.

Why is it expected that conceptional engineering would produce less inconsistent concepts than those we already have? Engineered concepts, I suspect, would have different inconsistencies, and lunge our concepts into a perpetually cycle of being re-engineered with little secure foundation.

And last, why can't we identify how concepts are inconsistent and simply set a condition to disallow for cases that fall victim to these inconsistencies, which seems commonly attempted.

I apologize if I've mistaken you, and thanks for the write up and participation.

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Kevin_Scharp Kevin Scharp 2 points · 4 years ago

> How do we tell a concept is inconsistent?

We can tell a concept is inconsistent when its constitutive principles are inconsistent with some facts. A principle is constitutive if it is used as a guide to interpretation; that is, if someone denies the principle then you question whether that person's word means the same thing as your word. For example, in the case of truth it's constitutive that it's a mistake to say that p is true and deny p, and its constitutive that it's a mistake to say that p and deny that p is true. The facts involved are: certain logical principles hold, and liar sentences exist. The following are inconsistent: truth's constitute principles, basic logical principles, the existence of liar sentences. I don't think it makes sense to dismiss the logical principles or the existence of liar sentences, so truth is an inconsistent concept. That's the basic outline of my argument in the book.

> Is that it admits paradox enough to warrant conceptional engineering, or is it its truth conditions have not been adequately identified?

No, I think the inconsistency has to impede some project and that project has to be worthwhile enough to go through the trouble of replacement.

> What's the difference between conceptional engineering and conceptional analysis? It seems philosophy defaults to conceptional engineering when conceptional analysis is unfruitful.

Conceptual analysis is figuring out how to define one philosophically significant concept in terms of others that are thought to be somehow more basic (e.g., a brother is a male sibling). I don't think conceptual analysis on philosophical concepts is ever successful. There are several projects one might engage in even if one rejected conceptual analysis -- one could try reductive explanations (they are not as demanding as conceptual analysis) or some kind of expressivist project (which are usually taken to be nonreductive). Conceptual engineering is identifying philosophically significant defective concepts and figuring out the best way to replace them (if they need to be replaced at all).

> Why is it expected that conceptional engineering would produce less inconsistent concepts than those we already have? Engineered concepts, I suspect, would have different inconsistencies, and lunge our concepts into a perpetually cycle of being re-engineered with little secure foundation.

Well, I think one can demonstrate in the case of truth that ascending truth and descending truth (my preferred replacements) are less defective than truth. In every case studied so far where using truth yields contradictions, using ascending truth and descending truth does not. Maybe there will be cases where they yield contradictions and so they might turn out to be inconsistent, but truth would surely yield contradictions in those situations as well. So progress has been made even if ascending truth and descending truth aren't entirely consistent.

> And last, why can't we identify how concepts are inconsistent and simply set a condition to disallow for cases that fall victim to these inconsistencies, which seems commonly attempted.

I'm sorry, I don't understand -- can you give me an example?

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chaosofstarlesssleep 1 point · 4 years ago

Thanks for the answers, first of all. They've been very illuminating.

> And last, why can't we identify how concepts are inconsistent and simply set a condition to disallow for cases that fall victim to these inconsistencies, which seems commonly attempted.
>
> > I'm sorry, I don't understand -- can you give me an example?

I had in mind Gettier cases: an inconsistency is shown in the definition of knowledge and additional criteria for something being counted as knowledge is sought, so the concept as defined does not fall victim to such inconsistencies. Upon review of the question and reading your answers, it seems cases like the liar's paradox and truth and Gettier problems and knowledge are quite different, though I doubt I could articulate exactly how. But it seems, with truth, there is something fundamentally inconsistent, whereas, with knowledge, perhaps insufficient conditions only.

The kernel of the question was why couldn't these inconsistent concepts merely be modified to avoid the trappings of inconsistency, rather than replacing them whole clothe? But it seems what is most useful in the replaced concept remains, and that the replacement is necessary. It was a silly question, and could have been better stated.

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gistya 1 point · 4 years ago

I like where you're going with this. Hopefully a rigid framework for interpretation of written laws can be developed so that precedent can be made obsolete. I would like to see a society where the laws we pass mean what they mean and are not subject to interpretation.

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godx119 1 point · 4 years ago

Does your view on the therapeutic flow of philosophy into science adopt a positivist take of science? I ask because it seems on your account, once philosophy prepares a subject for science, that's the end of philosophy's involvement -- as if to say at this point only science has the tools to say anything more about the subject.

If so, I wouldn't be able to endorse your view because of my anti-postivist convictions. I believe philosophy helps to keep the sciences in check from their meta-narratives, and so elucidates what you would call the "defective concepts" that are present in the scientific apparatus.

Perhaps this is what you mean concerning philosophy's role in technological expansion? I might be having a hard time visualizing this picture because technology and science do not equate for me. I'm also just inclined to believe that as long as we practice science, there will be a need for philosophy to investigate that practice.

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Kevin_Scharp **Kevin Scharp** 1 point · 4 years ago

No, I'm not committed to a positivist view -- I agree with you about philosophy's role in critically scrutinizing scientific concepts, and yes that's what I meant by the technical expansion comment.

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rmeddy 1 point · 4 years ago

Interesting stuff.

What is your take on meme theory?

I'm currently focused on the idea of utility of bad beliefs, and why do bad ideas flourish and the how function in tandem with good ideas

Like Newton and his alchemy

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