The Liar Paradox

Yablo's Paradox is closely analogous to the Bomber's Paradox, since one paradox can be turned into the other by substituting talk of bombs going off for talk of sentences being true. But there is also a respect in which the two paradoxes might seem to come apart, at least initially.

My response to the Bomber's Paradox was based on the claim that no bombs could ever be configured in the way that the paradox requires. It is not initially clear, however, that an analogous response is available in the case Yablo's Paradox.

Whereas in the case of the Bomber's Paradox we were speaking of hypothetical bombs, in the case of Yablo's Paradox we are talking about sentences of *English* (or, more, precisely sentences of the language that results from enriching English with unproblematic logical notation). And one might think that unlike the bombs, which don't actually exist, the relevant sentences do, in fact, exist -- not in the sense of being represented by actual blobs of ink or spoken sounds, but in the sense of being well-defined and available for use by English speakers.

That is one reason Yablo's paradox is so interesting. But there is another...

The Liar Paradox
Paradox Grade: 10

Yablo's Paradox teaches us something important about the most famous of all the semantic paradoxes:

The Liar Paradox
Consider the starred sentence:

($\star$) The starred sentence is false.

Is the starred sentence true or false? If it is true then what it says is true, so it is false. If it is false, what it says is false, so it is true.

It is tempting to think that the Liar Paradox is, at root, a puzzle about self-reference, and that the way out of the paradox is to find a way of disallowing sentences that make reference to themselves in "vicious" ways.

But Yablo's Paradox suggests that self-reference isn't really the root of the problem. For none of the sentences involved in Yablo's Paradox makes reference to itself. So any solution to the Liar Paradox that is general enough to apply to Yablo's Paradox must not rely essentially on considerations of self-reference.

Here I'll describe my own view about the Liar Paradox. As you read on, please keep in mind that my view is not orthodoxy. The paradox has generated an enormous literature over the years, and there is no real consensus about how it ought to be addressed. (If you'd like to learn more, have a look at the readings I suggest at the end of this lecture.)

My views on the Liar Paradox starts with a fairly radical claim about language. I believe it is a mistake to think that sentences have meanings independently of the interpretations that are agreed upon by language users in the context of particular assertions.

Accordingly, linguistic communication is best thought of as a coordination game between Speaker and Hearer. The goal of the game is for Hearer to interpret Speaker's assertion as Speaker intends. When Speaker and Hearer successfully coordinate on an interpretation for Speaker's assertion, the asserted sentence is thereby rendered meaningful in the relevant context. When they fail to coordinate, the sentence remains meaningless.

What resources do Speaker and Hearer use to coordinate on an interpretation for Speaker's assertion? They use what they know (and assume one another to know) about past linguistic usage. But they also use what they know (and assume one another to know) about the context in which the assertion takes place.

Here is an example to help illustrate the role of context in successful coordination.

Suppose that I am Speaker and you are Hearer. I make an assertion. Your knowledge of past linguistic usage is enough to establish that what I said is either ''the last word in Zoyman's assertion is obscene'' or ''the last word in Zoyman's assertion is 'obscene' ''.

But you cannot immediately decide between these two interpretations because quotation marks are not pronounced in English. (Note that in the first case, I am referring to an obscenity-laced assertion, and in the second, I am referring to an assertion that ends with the word "obscene".) So you turn to context for help. Here are three different scenarios:

- Suppose, first, that Zoyman is a drunken sailor who speaks no English and is notoriously vulgar. You and I are in a bar with Zoyman, and you can't understand what he's saying.

  When my assertion is made in this context, you can reasonably interpret me as saying ''the last word in Zoyman's assertion is obscene''. Since I can reasonably assume that my assertion will be so interpreted, I wouldn't have made it in that context unless I intended it to be so interpreted. So we have coordinated successfully.

- Next, suppose that Zoyman is not a drunken sailor but an Oxford don. We are all sitting at high table and he makes an assertion in the context of a conversation about Victorian standards of lewdness. Someone sneezed at a crucial moment, and you and I can see that you couldn't quite catch Zoyman's last word.

  When my assertion is made in this context, you can reasonably interpret me as saying ''the last word in Zoyman's assertion is "obscene" ''. Since I can reasonably assume that my assertion will be so interpreted, I wouldn't have made it in that context unless I intended it to be so interpreted. So, again, we have coordinated successfully.

- Now consider a third scenario. Suppose that *I* am Zoyman, and that it is common knowledge that this is so. It is also common knowledge that the only relevant assertion I have made is the very assertion you are trying to interpret. Then your ability to find a stable interpretation for my assertion will break down.

  If you assume that the last word of my assertion is "obscene'', then you will be forced to interpret me as asserting an obvious falsehood (since "obscene'' is not an obscene word). And if you assume that the last world in my assertion is the result of putting quotes around "obscene", then again you will be forced to interpret me as asserting an obvious falsehood (since the word " "obscene" " does not refer to itself: it refers to the word "obscene'').

We have seen that when it is common knowledge that I am Zoyman, you loose the ability to find a stable interpretation for my assertion. But note that there is nothing mysterious or paradoxical going on.

Here is an analogy. Suppose we decide to play a game in which one wins if one does something Martha is not doing. Most people are in a position to do well in such a game, but poor Martha is not, since in her case the strategy of doing something Martha is not doing becomes unstable. A game has been set up, and it is built into the rules that the game cannot be won by Martha.

Something similar is going on when it comes to my assertion about Zoyman. A coordination game has been set up. In most ordinary contexts, the game can be won because the assertion is readily interpreted. But when things are set up so that I am Zoyman and the only assertion I have made is the very assertion you are trying to interpret, ordinary interpretative strategies become unstable.

I claim that something similar is going on in the Liar Paradox.

In most ordinary contexts, an assertion of "the starred sentence is false" is easily interpretable. For example, in a context in which the starred sentenced is "walruses are tuskless" one would have no difficulty interpreting an assertion of "the starred sentence is false".

But a context in which the starred sentence is "the starred sentence is false" is like the context in which I am Zoyman: efforts to interpret the relevant assertion become unstable, and coordination between Speaker and Hearer becomes impossible. As before, nothing mysterious or paradoxical is going on: a coordination game has been set up, and our ordinary interpretative strategies are such that the game cannot be won in the relevant context.

I have argued that an assertion of "the starred sentence is false" cannot be interpreted in a context in which the starred sentence is "the starred sentence is false". But recall that, on my view, it is a mistake to think that sentences have meanings independently of particular contexts of use. Instead, Speaker and Hearer render a sentence meaningful by coordinating on a suitable interpretation in a particular conversational context. Since "the starred sentence is false" resists such coordination in the relevant context, it fails to rendered meaningful and is neither true nor false.

(This is all very rough, of course, but I develop these ideas further in one of the articles listed at the end of this lecture.)

If I had to assign the Liar Paradox a paradoxicality grade I'd assign it a perfect 10. This is partly to do with the tenacity of the problem: even though versions of the Paradox have been known since antiquity, philosophers have yet to settle on a answer that generates broad agreement. It is also to do with my own assessment of the problem: I think the Liar Paradox calls for a fairly radical rethinking of the way language works.

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