

Empiricism and tensions with Chris Daly

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Abstract. In his review of Chris Daly's book *Philosophical Methods*, Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa debates with Daly over the value of using the word "tension," which Daly describes as a weasel word. Ichikawa disagrees. I raise a worry that Ichikawa's response will not convince Daly and try to help Ichikawa out. Then I outline a traditional empiricist objection to Daly.

In his review of Chris Daly's book *Philosophical Methods*, Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa uses the word "tension." Then in a footnote, Ichikawa writes:

Daly suggests that 'tension' in contexts like this is 'a weasel word' that should be avoided because it is unclear what exactly it is meant to convey. (2011)

I don't know exactly what a weasel word is, but I guess the worry in this case is as follows: the person saying, "There is a tension in your system regarding these two components," intends for you to take this as equivalent to saying, "There is a logical contradiction," so you argue that there is no contradiction; but then the person says, "Yes, those are consistent. But I didn't really mean there was a contradiction." What did they mean then? Perhaps they will retreat to "I meant this is a counterintuitive combination, given what we are accustomed to." There is a person like this, though they will probably expect you to explain what they mean!

Ichikawa adds that he disagrees with the claim that "tension" is a weasel word:

I do not agree that this sort of language is in general inappropriately vague. At any rate, in this instance, when I say that these elements of Daly's view are 'in

tension,' I mean that there is sufficient prima facie conflict such that someone averring both views ought to recognize that they constitute a surprising conjunction and remark on how, contrary to appearance, they may be consistent and mutually well-motivated. I suspect this is approximately what most philosophers mean when they say that various claims are 'in tension' with one another. (2011)

That is useful, but if Daly regards "tension" as a weasel word, would he not regard "conflict" as a weasel word as well? Perhaps it is harder to withdraw from the claim that "conflict" means contradiction, in various philosophical contexts, making it not a weasel word.

Anyway, here is an attempt to remove that word as well, though it differs subtly in other ways from Ichikawa's footnote quoted above. We have decided to discuss the views of a philosopher, call him R. Below are three stages that occur.

(Stage 1) We read summaries of philosopher R's views and encounter no explicit contradiction: no statement or conjunction of statements of the form "Proposition P is true and proposition P is not true." We provisionally assume there is no contradiction.

(Stage 2) We are now examining R's views in more detail, doing such things as clarifying terms or identifying implications or proposing missing justifications for views which are not self-evident. The examination so far is not complete but gives us reason to no longer assume the absence of contradiction. It is not unlikely that there is a contradiction between two components of this system of views, given the examination so far.

(Stage 3) We judge that there is an onus on those who accept R's philosophy to continue the examination in a way that proves that there is no contradiction or prevents the analysis at

stage 2 from leading to its likelihood of contradiction, given what we know; or else they must explain why a contradiction is not a problem.

Perhaps after enough hidden contradictions have been found in enough philosophers, it is strange to provisionally assume what we do in stage 1, but let us say that we do assume this, as if we did not have these experiences – there may well be reason to. In stage 3, if not the stage before, it makes sense to speak of a tension within R's system.¹

I think there is another objection to Daly's claim that "tension" is a weasel word, from traditional empiricism, but I confess that I only understand it in broad outline. Let us take a traditional empiricist theory of concept learning: that we have sensory experiences and then we develop concepts of specific things and by "operations" conducted on those concepts, we develop more abstract concepts. One starts with the concepts of a backache and a neckache and then develops the more general concept of an ache, say. The outline of the argument is this:

(Premise) Traditional empiricist theory of concept learning.

Other premises...

(Conclusion) It is natural for human beings to discuss contradictions, or likely contradictions, within philosophical systems using a more concrete language, such as speaking of tensions.

But I am having trouble filling in the details at present. In my experience, in philosophy we do not teach empiricist views on how words for abstract things often rely on concrete metaphors,

¹ An example is that we, or some bad people much worse than us, are examining the separateness of persons doctrine: that (i) people are separate individuals and (ii) this separateness ought to be respected. How can these two be combined, because an opportunity could arise in which it is in an interest of mine to not respect a right of yours and (i) implies that I am totally separate from you, so what reason is there for me to respect it, as (ii) implies? "You are not me or part me, so why should I?" We are not saying that there is no reason to respect it, but we await a specification of the details which establishes that there is no contradiction. In this situation, we speak of a tension between (i) and (ii).

but one can glimpse at the topic in a book on Locke (Lowe 2005: 107; see also Strathern 1995: 8); and it seems to me someone might well be interested in pursuing an argument along these lines. I suppose Daly could say that “tension” is still a weasel word in these contexts, even if it is natural to use it; but it is a potential problem if “To meet your standards, we have to go against human nature.”

References

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