

Meaning-Constitutivity

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I. One thing that, intuitively, stands out regarding the liar and sorites paradoxes is that although the conclusions of the relevant arguments are unacceptable, there is something about the meanings of the expressions centrally employed that virtually forces acceptance of the paradoxical reasoning. Take a standard version of the sorites paradox:

A man with just 1 hair on his head is bald.

For all n , if a man with n hairs on his head is bald, then so is a man with $n+1$ hairs.

So, for all n , a man with n hairs on his head is bald.

It is pretty much undisputed that it is the second premise that is at fault. At the same time, it appears somehow to be part of the meaning of 'bald' that the second premise should be true. Indeed, one might think that the vagueness of 'bald' consists in the fact that the predicate is tolerant of small changes, in a way that entails the second premise. Generally

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speaking, a predicate can be thought to be vague because it is *tolerant* of small changes in its parameter of application (hair for ‘bald’, age for ‘old’, height for ‘tall’, etc.): though a large enough difference between two objects in the parameter of application sometimes matters to the applicability of the predicate (e.g., a difference in age of thirty years can matter for ‘old’), there is, for vague predicates, intuitively a difference in the parameter of application that is too small ever to matter (e.g., one second for ‘old’). The sorites reasoning shows precisely that no predicate can actually be tolerant. This does not dispel the sense that somehow the vagueness in vague predicates has to do with tolerance.¹

Similarly, it is widely held that one lesson of the liar paradox is that the schema

X is true iff p,

where for the schematic letter ‘p’ a sentence is put and for the schematic letter ‘X’ a name of the sentence substituted for ‘p’ is put, cannot be accepted as valid. But it seems to be, somehow, a matter of the meaning of ‘true’ that this schema should be valid.

Objections can be raised against these intuitive remarks. But the issues that I want to pursue lie theoretically downstream. Suppose we want to hold on to the impression that the culprits in these respective paradoxes are such that somehow, it is part of the meanings of the expressions employed that they are true; suppose, that is, that we want to defend some sort of *meaning-inconsistency view* on the paradoxes. (Meaning-inconsistency views of different kinds have been defended by, e.g., Michael Dummett (1975), Charles Chihara (1979), Stephen Yablo (1993), Matti Eklund (2002, 2005), Jody Azzouni (e.g. 2003, 2006, and this volume), Douglas Patterson (forthcoming, and this

volume), and Kevin Scharp (forthcoming, and this volume).) How, exactly, should our thesis be construed? The claim that it is part of the meanings of the expressions employed in sentence S that S is true is normally understood as tantamount to the claim that S is *analytic*. But analyticity, as ordinarily understood, implies truth, and the assumptions responsible for the paradox to arise cannot all be true.² A more promising thought, which I will spend some more time on, is that the informal talk about part of meaning is to be cashed in terms of what *semantic competence* requires. To say that it is part of the meanings of the expressions employed in sentence S that S is true is then to be understood as something of the form

(C) It is constitutive of semantic competence with the expressions employed in S to bear R to S,

where R is some suitable broadly cognitive relation. The question is what relation R might be. An immediate suggestion is

(C1) It is constitutive of semantic competence with the expressions employed in S to *(tacitly) believe* S.

Those who talk about what is constitutive of semantic competence often talk in terms of belief, so the proposal is natural. Moreover, what we wanted to explain was why the culprits in the liar and sorites paradox have the sort of pull they have: why it seems one

somehow must, as a competent speaker, be attracted to them even though they cannot be true. (C1) provides an immediate explanation.

However, it seems that at least anyone familiar with the liar and sorites paradoxes is within her semantic rights, so to speak, to fail to believe the culprits to be true. But by (C1), such a person would not be fully competent with the expressions employed in stating the culprits.

One possible response to this worry regarding (C1) is to retreat and say instead

(C2) It is constitutive of semantic competence with the expressions employed in S to *be disposed to believe S*.

A defender of (C2) can say that although those of us familiar with the liar and sorites paradoxes do not actually believe the culprits to be true, we still have the disposition to believe them to be true; it is only that this disposition is overridden. However, someone intent on pressing the original objection can say, and seemingly reasonably, that even someone who would lose any *disposition* to accept the culprit would count as competent.

Other replies are available. One might for example insist on the distinction between (mere) competence and full competence, where one is (merely) competent with an expression already if one in fact uses the expression with its customary meaning, while one is fully competent only when this is so non-deferentially. In Putnam's famous example, Putnam is competent, but not fully competent, with 'elm'. Given this distinction, one might reply to the objector by insisting that someone who lacks any

disposition to believe the culprits is not fully – non-differentially – competent with the expressions involved.

Maybe a reply of this kind can be made persuasively. But at any rate, more can be said in response to the objection. Recall that the bigger project is that of finding a way in which the culprits in the paradoxes can be part of meaning despite the fact that they are not true. We arrive at suggestions like (C1) and (C2) from this general thought in two steps. First, by cashing talk of what is part of meaning in terms of semantic competence; and then, second, by substituting talk of (dispositions to) belief for R in the schematic (C). What I will argue is that even if (C1) and (C2) really must be abandoned, that only shows that these proposals are not the best ways to make (C) more precise.

II. It may help to compare a somewhat broader issue. Conceptual role semantics (CRS) is the view that in some sense some inferences are meaning-constitutive. The claim that inferences are meaning-constitutive is in turn standardly taken to be a claim about what semantic competence with the expressions involved entails. In a number of works (2003, 2006, forthcoming), Timothy Williamson has argued as follows against CRS. If CRS is true, then inference rule so-and-so is meaning-constitutive for expression(s) such-and-such. But a speaker can be fully competent with the relevant expressions without inferring in accordance with inference rule so-and-so, or, as I will put it, without *accepting* the relevant form of inference. So CRS is false.³

One of Williamson's (2003) examples concerns Vann McGee's (1985) famous purported counterexample to modus ponens, and McGee's view is that modus ponens is not in fact a valid rule of inference for 'if...then' of English. Suppose for argument's sake

that McGee is wrong and his counterexample doesn't work. Still we wouldn't want to say that McGee is not competent with 'if...then'. But if there are meaning-constitutive inferences at all, surely modus ponens is meaning-constitutive for 'if...then' (assuming arguments like McGee's fail).

Of course, nothing hinges on the specifics of the case. For many seemingly basic forms of inference, we can find philosophers – experts in the field – who deny that these forms of inference are valid. Surely some of these philosophers are wrong. Any case where the philosopher is wrong would serve Williamson's purposes.

Williamson considers the possibility that one can get around the problem by appealing to deference. He rejects the suggestion on the ground that McGee is himself one of the experts. But this is not obviously directly relevant. The question is not whether McGee is an expert on conditionals: rather, we should ask whether it is only by virtue of standing in the right relations to other members of his linguistic community that McGee in fact uses 'if...then' with its customary meaning. This can be so even if McGee is an expert.

Williamson's argument is a potentially powerful argument against any version of CRS according to which an inference is meaning-constitutive only if any fully competent speaker must be disposed to accept it. However, a defender of this version of CRS does have some possible replies. She can try to argue that it is only if McGee has at least an *overridden* disposition to accept modus ponens that he is indeed fully competent with 'if...then'. Or she can try to argue that we must be slightly more careful regarding what semantic competence involves: mere appeal to what we actually (are disposed to) accept and believe is too simple-minded.

Note that the moves available to the conceptual-role semanticist in face of Williamson's argument and the moves available to someone defending the meaning-inconsistency view on the paradoxes are parallel. This should not be surprising. To embrace a meaning-inconsistency view is to say that there are some principles to which competent speakers bear some sort of privileged cognitive relation. This is a cornerstone of CRS. CRS tends to focus on inferences, but it is easy to reformulate the meaning-inconsistency view so that it too speaks of inferences.

The parallel is good news for the meaning-inconsistency view. Whatever should in the end be said about the problem we are focusing on, at least a meaning-inconsistency view is – as far as this problem goes – defensible if CRS is.

Finding a parallel does not immediately help with the question of how to understand relation R. In fact, the problem with R can be made to seem worse. An immediate idea for getting around Williamson's argument would be to try to find some *weaker* relation that R can be identified as. But there is another problem for CRS, which points in a direction opposite from the direction in which Williamson's problem points. Take a speaker who actually accepts or believes all principles that are meaning-constitutive for the expressions of a given natural language. It may be important to note that such a speaker is not necessarily thereby a fully competent speaker of this language. For one may believe all meaning-constitutive principles without believing that these principles are any different in kind from other truths. Our speaker will believe that the sentence "all bachelors are unmarried" is true but if she doesn't see that this sentence somehow differs in status from "all bachelors are F" for some predicate F such that, for contingent – or even necessary but non-conceptual – reasons, it applies to all bachelors,

she does not appear to be fully competent. Even if, setting aside the problem that Williamson presses, belief in a meaning-constitutive principle is necessary for competence, it still is not sufficient only to believe the meaning-constitutive principles; the cognitive relation involved is more demanding.

III. A distinction relevant to Williamson's McGee objection is that between what actually governs a speaker's use of an expression and the speaker's explicit theory about the meaning of the expression. This distinction is especially apt to be overlooked when we are considering a theory, like CRS, on which what, in some sense, governs a speaker's use of an expression is something we can think of as a theory. But even in a case like this we must distinguish between the – perhaps tacit – theory or conception that in fact governs a speaker's usage and the speaker's explicit theory about that usage. Of course, to emphasize this distinction is not to say anything about exactly how the CRS theorist should conceive of semantic competence. It is only to emphasize that competence is not the same thing as having a correct explicit theory.

Once the distinction is in place, we can ask regarding Williamson's McGee: is he supposed *only* to have a mistaken explicit theory, or is the mistaken theory also supposed to be such that his actual use of 'if...then' is affected? In the former case, there is no problem. In the latter case, matters depend on the extent to which the use is affected. But the CRS theorist can say that either use is not affected in such a way that there is any reason to think, given CRS, that McGee is less than fully competent, or use is, given CRS, such that McGee is less than fully competent. But in the latter case – where the mistaken theory affects use in relevant ways – it is not clear that it cannot comfortably be

said that McGee fails to be fully competent, or more precisely, that McGee either does not use ‘if...then’ with its customary meaning or uses it with its customary meaning only in virtue of deference.⁴

Similar remarks apply in the case of the meaning-inconsistency view. Take a theorist who is well aware of the liar or sorites paradox, and so whose explicit beliefs will be that some instances of the T-schema are untrue or that tolerance principles are never true. The worry was that we might have to say that this theorist – virtually any expert on truth or vagueness! – would be less than fully competent. But we can now ask questions analogous to those brought up with respect to Williamson’s McGee objection. Are our theorist’s beliefs supposed to affect how she, so to speak, actually cognitively treats the expression or not? If not, then, as above, there is nothing to worry about. Suppose then that the beliefs do relevantly affect how the speaker cognitively treats the expression. But again, if it does so affect the speaker’s use of the expression, then it need not be problematic to say that the speaker either fails to use the expression with its customary meaning or only uses it with its customary meaning in virtue of deference. The important point is that there is no longer any direct argument from the meaning-inconsistency view coupled with one of the claims about R that we have seen to the conclusion that experts on the liar and the sorites paradoxes tend not to be fully competent. This point can be put in service of a defense of (C1) or (C2), but taken by itself the point is completely neutral regarding the issue of how R is best identified.

IV. A problem different from, but arguably related to, the problem with (C1) and (C2) with which our discussion began stems from the fact that these proposals do not seem

adequately to distinguish between what it takes to *understand* an expression and what it takes to actually *use* it. One can think that to use an expression whose meaning is inconsistent, I must have the right dispositions regarding what to believe and accept, but to understand the expression it is sufficient that (I tacitly know that) if I were to use the expression, that is what my dispositions would have to be. I can know how to play chess without ever exercising this knowledge; I always use my chess pieces to play checkers instead.

With this distinction in place, one can attempt to defend (C1)/(C2) from some objections by saying that although those aware of the paradoxes no longer form the relevant beliefs, they can know what it takes to use the expressions with their customary meanings. Consider the case not of using a language but that of *employing a theory*. Let T be an inconsistent theory and suppose I am aware of the inconsistency. It may be unlikely that I actually use it. But I still know what it is to employ T – to reason in accordance with it – and I can still employ it, if a situation arises where it is reasonable to do so.

But while these remarks are right as far as they go – and they are quite important – they would be misbegotten as part of a defense of (C1)/(C2). For in order that I employ T it is not necessary that I in any sense *believe* this theory. It might for instance be sufficient that I treat T *as if* I believed it. If we exploit the supposed analogy between employing a theory and using a language we should not say that to use a language one must have the right dispositions regarding what to believe or accept. Rather, to use the language it is enough to cognitively treat the meaning-constitutive principles in the right way, to use the same locution as above. And analogously, one can insist that to

understand the language is to have the capacity to cognitively treat the meaning-constitutive principles in the right way.

The emphasis on (the ability to) cognitively treat an expression the right way, together with the points familiar from the literature on the distinction between competence and full competence and the distinction between explicit theories and the implicit conceptions that actually guide use, is an important part of the response to the objection to the meaning-inconsistency view with which we are concerned, and to Williamson's objection to CRS. A theorist aware of the liar paradox can still have the ability to cognitively treat the T-schema the right way. McGee can have the right implicit conception of what 'if...then' is like and can cognitively treat it the right way, despite having a mistaken explicit theory.

But what is "the right way"? One can say that it is to treat the meaning-constitutive principles *as if* one believed or accepted them, or that it is to *suppose* the meaning-constitutive principles to be true. But while this, roughness aside, may be acceptable as a statement of a sufficient condition for treating the principles the right way, it is hardly adequate as a necessary condition. For once confronted with a paradox, one might justifiably reject some meaning-constitutive principle, and that is hardly treating the principle as if one believes or accepts it.

I think that there is in fact no simple statement of what "the right way" is. But I do not think one need be too worried about that. For consider the following analogy. I decide to obey whatever you command. You give me subtly inconsistent instructions. In a situation where the inconsistency is plain to me and relevant to how I should act, I can manifest that I still aim to follow the instructions you have laid down for me – e.g.

through the uncertainty I express, or through acting in the way which seems to me closest to your intentions. That is treating your instructions in ‘the right way’: my behavior manifests that your wish is still my command. (Contrast the case where upon noting the inconsistency I decide to simply disregard your instructions.) Similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, in the language case. We can for some purposes regard the meaning-constitutive principles as some sort of rules; and a speaker who, in effect, realizes that the meaning-constitutive principles for her language are inconsistent can still show that she follows, or aims to follow, the relevant ‘rules’, analogously to how I can still follow, or aim to follow, your instructions. It may be hard to state just what the use of the rules must be in order that the user counts as aiming to follow the rules. But surely one can still aim to follow the inconsistent rules.

V. Let us compare, briefly, a different approach to meaning: that of Davidsonian truth theories. It is worth stressing that despite the differences between CRS and a Davidsonian approach, the same issues arise. The Davidsonian requires that for every sentence of the language under study there be, in the truth theory that serves as a meaning theory, a theorem of the form

X is true iff p,

where for ‘X’ we put a name of the object language sentence in question and for ‘p’ we put a metalanguage sentence that in fact is a translation of this object language sentence.

But the liar reasoning presents problems, at least if the truth theory is required to be consistent.

There are different reactions to this problem. One is that we should conclude that the liar reasoning can serve as a refutation of Davidson's program. Another reaction, the one that relates to adopting the meaning-inconsistency view above described, is to say that a Davidsonian theory of the traditional kind is appropriate to its purposes despite what the liar reasoning entails. This is the line taken by, e.g., Ludwig (2002) and Patterson (forthcoming). (Obviously these aren't the only two reactions possible.)

The following can be said in support of the latter suggestion. What should a Davidsonian say about sentences containing *empty names*? Some Davidsonians – see e.g. Richard Larson and Gabriel Segal (1995) – hold that the T-theorem of a truth theory for a sentence 'F(a)' might (where the metalanguage and object language are identical) be something like

'F(a)' is true iff F(a),

even when 'a' is empty. But under natural assumptions – assumptions that Larson and Segal appear to accept – this means allowing that some theorems of a truth theory aren't true: for under natural assumptions it holds first that if 'a' is empty then the right hand side is neither true nor false (or 'gappy'), and secondly that then the whole biconditional is neither true nor false (or 'gappy').

It is disastrous that some of a truth theory's theorems are untrue if a speaker's competence with a language is supposed to consist in the speaker's *knowledge* of what a

truth theory states. But already if what is claimed is merely that a speaker's competence with a language is supposed to consist in her *belief* in what a truth theory states, there is no *immediate* disaster. For it can in principle be part of competence to believe some non-truths. But the idea that it can be part of competence with a language to believe some non-true T-theorems faces the sort of pressure that the meaning-inconsistency view on the paradoxes faces. The worry is that those philosophers of language who steadfastly refuse to believe true any sentence which uses an empty name in the relevant position would be deemed to not be fully competent.

The available moves here parallel those we have seen earlier. One possible move for the Davidsonian is to say that what is required for competence is not strictly *belief* in what an appropriate truth theory for the language states but something weaker.

There is also a problem here which is parallel to the problem of sufficiency stressed above. What I am alluding to is what was famously stressed by J. A. Foster (1976). Foster's point against Davidson is often put the following way: for a speaker to know a language it is not sufficient for her to know what is stated by the theorems of a T-theory: she must also know *that the T-theory is interpretive*, where a T-theory is interpretive if its theorems of the form "S is true iff p" are such that the result of replacing "is true iff" by "means" yields truths.

So on the one hand it appears that the Davidsonian must agree that it cannot be *necessary* for competence to believe an interpretive T-theory; on the other hand it appears the Davidsonian must agree that it cannot be *sufficient* for competence to believe an interpretive T-theory.

One possible suggestion is that competence involves bearing to an interpretive T-theory the relation *(tacitly) believing to be interpretive*. This is a suggestion regarding competence that has been motivated independently by theorists in the Davidsonian tradition. But it is also a suggestion that faces well-known objections. For instance, it can be questioned how plausible it is that speakers have this sort of complex attitude toward the T-theory. But if it can be maintained that competence involves bearing the relation *believing to be interpretive* to an interpretive T-theory, this again leaves room for a meaning-inconsistency view. For one can, in principle, believe a T-theory to be interpretive without believing the T-theory to be true. (I do not endorse the suggestion adumbrated in this paragraph. But note that to the extent that it can be found attractive, it should be equally attractive, from the perspective of CRS, to identify R as *(tacitly) believing to be meaning-constitutive*.)

VI. Next, let us briefly turn to two other suggestions concerning what the relation R might be:

(C3) Semantic competence with L is a matter of, in Chomsky's sense, *cognizing* a semantic theory for L, through having the semantic theory represented in one's language faculty.⁵

(C4) Semantic competence with L is to for it to *seem* to one – for one to have the *quasi-perceptual impression* that – a semantic theory for L is true.

(Both (C3) and (C4) are salient in Patterson's discussions of these matters.) I formulate (C3) and (C4) for Davidsonian theories; it is straightforward to formulate versions that fit better with conceptual-role theories.

A "semantic theory for L" must be, in some sense, a semantic theory that successfully characterizes L. But it cannot be held that what the semantic theory says about L must be true. (For if we want to make room for the meaning-inconsistency view, we will have to allow that the theory may contain some untruths.) Instead a "semantic theory for L" must be a theory such that standing in the right cognitive relation to this theory is what makes for competence with L.

Both (C3) and (C4) go well with the meaning-inconsistency view, and if otherwise acceptable they help deal with the problem we have been concerned with. One can have a semantic theory represented in one's language faculty which contains untrue theorems and which one doesn't actually believe. One can have a quasi-perceptual illusion that something is the case which one doesn't believe is the case. (Compare perceptual illusions like the Müller-Lyer illusion.) Both (C3) and (C4) at least relatively plausibly state sufficient conditions on competence. But they both face problems considered as necessary conditions.

Start with (C4). Suppose I am in the following situation. My dispositions regarding what to apply words to are the same as those of ordinary English language users. I tend to apply "white" only to white things and "black" only to black things in the way that others do. But matters don't "seem" to me the way that they do to other language users. When I call the kettle "white" it seems to me that I am calling it *black* and vice versa. It feels to me, that is, as if I am speaking untruly when I am calling the

kettle “white”, since, when calling it “white” it feels to me as if I am calling it black. Or maybe, if this sort of switching is hard to get one’s head around, suppose that when using “white” I do it with a feeling of non-comprehension, as when I use a word I do not quite master. This doesn’t appear to disqualify me from in fact using the relevant expressions with their customary meanings, or from doing so non-deferentially. (I could in principle be isolated from any community, speaking a solitary language.) In other words, I can still be fully competent. It might be objected that that with the familiar feeling of understanding missing, it sounds odd to say that I fully *understand* the language I use. I am not sure. But at any rate, if in the situation envisaged I do not count as understanding, that just forces a distinction between full, non-deferential competence on the one hand and understanding on the other. The question of what else is needed for ‘understanding’, if understanding goes beyond competence, is a question primarily for phenomenology.

Turn, then, to (C3). (C3) uses ideas from empirical semantic theory for a proposal about what competence involves. There are traditional philosophical reasons for being dissatisfied with any such proposal. Should differences in actual language processing really be relevant to the question of what language a speaker speaks? Can there not be, in principle, speakers (say, Martians) who speak the same language as we do but who have sufficiently different psychologies that they would, by (C3), not do so?

Note that (C3) could still correctly capture a sufficient condition on semantic competence. The example of the Martians presents a problem for (C3) as a necessary condition. Even so, one can well say, from a Davidsonian perspective, that ‘cognizing’ a semantic theory, in Chomsky’s sense, is sufficient for competence. What is unsatisfactory about this retreat, from the perspective of a meaning-inconsistency view, is that given

only a sufficient condition for semantic competence it is not shown that speakers are forced into paradox by their competence.

VII. Although I have not defended any specific suggestion regarding R, I have, in part through discussion of the analogy with Williamson's McGee objection, defended the meaning-inconsistency view against the objections with which we have been concerned, having to do with how the meaning-inconsistency theorist should conceive of semantic competence.

I now turn to a different question. Suppose some kind of meaning-inconsistency view is acceptable. Then we face other questions, regarding the details of the view. Specifically, if a meaning-inconsistency view on the liar and sorites paradoxes is true, what should we say about the semantic values (contributions to truth conditions) of 'true', and of vague predicates? I have pushed for the view that the semantic values are such as to make the meaning-constitutive principles come out as close to true as possible. Importantly, the view is not that the relevant expressions lack semantic values, or have empty extensions: such claims are, I think, plainly implausible. One question regarding my view concerns how to understand the appeal to closeness. I discussed the matter briefly in my (2005) and will not have more to say about that (difficult) topic here. Rather, I will compare my view to the alternative meaning-inconsistency views of Patterson and of Kevin Scharp.⁶

Turn first to Scharp (forthcoming, and this volume). Scharp's main criticism of the kind of meaning-inconsistency view I am propounding is that the theory I propose itself employs the concept of truth, which by my own lights is an inconsistent concept.

Scharp thinks that an inconsistent concept should not be employed. The reason is that one should avoid “undertaking incompatible commitments”.⁷

It need not actually be true on all meaning-inconsistency views that employment of an inconsistent concept is somehow a matter of undertaking incompatible commitments. It is true on Scharp’s own view that it is so, but the idea of incompatible commitments has for example been absent from the discussion thus far. That said, I do actually find the talk of undertaking incompatible commitments congenial, so let me agree that to employ an inconsistent concept is a matter of undertaking incompatible commitments. I am still not persuaded by Scharp’s point, and for a simple reason. Of course it is true that *all else equal* one should not undertake incompatible commitments. But all else need not be equal. The inconsistent concept might for instance, due to its simplicity, be one that it is eminently practical to use.

Still one might perhaps share Scharp’s unease with resting theoretical weight on a concept deemed to be inconsistent. Scharp himself proposes replacing, for theoretical purposes, our actual inconsistent concept of truth with a pair of partially defined truth concepts. I can skip the details for the purposes of this discussion. I do not wish to take a stand myself on the issue Scharp focuses on, of whether the concept of truth should be replaced with another concept for theoretical purposes. Even if the inconsistent concept of truth should not be employed it can still meaningfully be asked which sentences are and are not true. (Compare perhaps: even if we ought not to use the word ‘Boche’ when we speak of Germans, we can still meaningfully ask what ‘Boche’ is and is not true of.) Someone who, like Scharp, does not utilize ‘true’ for theoretical purposes can in principle say that ‘true’ is meaningless, or that nothing is true, and the latter is also what Scharp

says. But if the meaning-inconsistency view were to lead to one of those conclusions, one should reject a step in the reasoning rather than these claims. That ‘true’ is meaningful and that some sentences are true are, as it is sometimes put, Moorean facts.

There are two issues which seem to me worth distinguishing between, for the meaning-inconsistency theorist. One is that of whether the predicate ‘true’ is meaningful and non-empty. The other is that of whether this predicate is one on which weight can be put in a theoretical account of language. It is possible that Scharp is right that the predicate should not be employed in theoretical account, and if so, Scharp’s project of finding replacement concepts – pursued in his forthcoming and in his contribution to the present volume – is a worthwhile project. But one should not conclude from this that ‘true’ is either empty or meaningless.

Patterson’s view (see especially his (forthcoming)) is that the sentences of a natural language do not actually have truth-conditions, or meanings. He believes that a broadly Davidsonian account is right. There will, for each natural language, be a truth-theory such that competence with the language requires standing in the right cognitive relation to the theory. But this theory does not really state what the truth conditions of the sentences are, for its theorems cannot be true. Patterson’s view, like Scharp’s, can be criticized for failing to respect Moorean facts.

One advantage that Patterson would claim for his meaning-inconsistency view over a meaning-inconsistency view such as mine is that since he denies that natural language sentences have truth-conditions, he does not face the difficult problem of saying what the truth-conditions of the sentences an inconsistent language actually are. But it is not clear to me that this is a problem that should be avoided. Suppose some form of

meaning-inconsistency view is right. Suppose further that a speaker works through the liar reasoning, arrives at a contradictory conclusion, and then concludes, via *ex falso quodlibet*, some arbitrary contradictory sentence “S and not S”. There is something she clearly does *wrong*. (Indeed, already when concluding that the liar sentence is true and not true she does something wrong.) More generally, even given the meaning-inconsistency view, there is a difference between correct assertion and incorrect assertion; between those sentences that are assertible (can be correctly assertively uttered) and those that are not. It does not seem that one can get around this. So there is an issue of what assertions are correct and what assertions are incorrect that arises even if Patterson is right about truth. And when, in (2005), I sketch how the truth-conditions of sentences are determined from inconsistent meaning-constitutive principles, it is essentially this issue that I seek to address. Patterson might insist that we need not regard the project of saying which sentences are assertible and which sentences are not as the project of ascribing truth conditions. And in some sense this is right: we *need* not. But suppose the project successfully carried out and that we have distinguished between assertible and non-assertible sentences. What exactly bars us from saying that we have found what the truth-conditions of sentences are? What we say about truth will of course not be fully in accordance with how intuitively we would think about truth; but that does not mean that our topic is not truth. (This said, it is not clear that there is more than a difference in theoretical book-keeping between Patterson’s view and mine. What does it matter whether we say that what is given is an account of truth conditions of sentences?)

Another problem, naturally, is that if a notion of assertibility is employed, then the problems sidestepped by avoidance of the notion of truth would appear to be immediately

reintroduced, whereas if no notion of that kind is employed something seemingly essential to language use is not accounted for.

Two other worries I have regarding Patterson's approach concern generalizability. First, consider the liar and sorites paradoxes. I am struck by certain similarities between these paradoxes. As stressed early on, in both cases it seems that it is somehow in virtue of our semantic competence that we are led to accept absurd conclusions. I provide analogous accounts for these paradoxes. I say, in both cases, that the paradoxes arise because there are meaning-constitutive principles that are jointly inconsistent. It is unclear to me how Patterson could possibly extend his account to cover the sorites. When 'F' is a lexically simple vague predicate, the axiom for 'F' will simply be something like:

For all x, 'F' is true of x iff x is F.

In other words, the axioms for vague predicates look just like the axioms for all other predicates. The axiom is consistent with the meaning of 'F' being somehow inconsistent or incoherent, but does not itself shed any sort of light on the issue. (Lepore and Ludwig (2005) briefly bring up the meaning-inconsistency view of vagueness and note that it is not *inconsistent* with the Davidsonian view. But to stress, it is not the mere consistency with a Davidsonian view that is primarily at issue.⁸) Second, Patterson's discussion deals squarely with *language*. But one might have thought that the liar paradox and other paradoxes such that their resolution calls for an analogue of the meaning-inconsistency view at the level of thought: for the concepts we employ. It is trivial to generalize my proposal to thought. Instead of talking about what is part of competence with a particular

linguistic expression, I could speak of what is part of competence with a particular concept. But it is unclear how Patterson's theory can generalize to the case of thought. There are two separate worries here. First, the idea that competence is a matter of standing in the right cognitive relation to a Davidsonian truth-theory works well in the case of semantic competence; but it is at best unclear how this could possibly work for *conceptual* competence. Second, Patterson's view on language is that linguistic expressions do not really have meanings. The analogous view on thought would be that our thoughts do not have content. I do not see how Patterson could comfortably accept this view on thought. His formulations all demand that our thoughts have contents. While one might think that he could reformulate things if he would wish, it remains to be seen whether this can be pulled off. Patterson insists that the paradoxes do not arise at the level of belief. But I fail to see that there is good reason for treating belief differently from language.

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¹ See further my (2005), and also the discussions in Dummett (1975) and Wright (1975).

The notion of tolerance was introduced in Wright’s paper. (Wright’s discussion is critical of the idea.)

² On *dialetheist* views there can be true contradictions. So on a dialetheist view, there can be inconsistent analyticities. Still, dialetheism doesn’t provide a viable alternative to the kind of view discussed in the main text. This is clearest in the case of the sorites paradox: for there is no way that anyone can sensibly treat the sorites reasoning as in fact sound.

For discussion of dialetheism as an alternative to the meaning-inconsistency view on the liar paradox, see my (2002a).

³ Sometimes when conceptual roles are discussed, the accounts given are of the contents of concepts rather than meanings of expressions. But many of the issues that arise are analogous. I will take the liberty of going back and forth between talking about concepts and expressions.

⁴ Compare Bealer (2002), pp. 111-3.

⁵ The *modularity* isn't primarily what's at issue here. What matters is having the semantic theory be represented in one's mind, in the "psychologically realistic sense".

⁶ Unfortunately, there is not space for comparison with all the alternative meaning-inconsistency views.

⁷ Scharp (forthcoming), p. 43 of ms.

⁸ Lepore and Ludwig (2005), p. 141.