

Bad Concepts, Bilateral Contents

Mike Deigan
mike.deigan@rutgers.edu

<https://mikedeigan.com>

Nov. 20, 2020
ILLC DIP Colloquium

Broader project: epistemology of concepts

A concept is ...

a mental particular?

an abstract object?

an ability to classify/infer/etc.?

an ability to think some content(s).



Epistemology of belief: what contents should we believe? How should we revise our beliefs in light of the evidence? etc.

Epistemology of concepts: what contents should we be able to think? How should we revise these abilities in light of our evidence? etc.

CONCEPTUAL
ENGINEERING
and
CONCEPTUAL
ETHICS



EDITED BY

alexis
BURGESS

herman
CAPPELEN

david
PLUNKETT

Not: what concepts is it
practically good to have?

Not: what should our
words mean?



*“We must know the truth;
and we must avoid error, —
these are our first and great
commandments as would-be
knowers; but they are not
two ways of stating an identical
commandment, they are
two separable laws.”*

– William James
“Will to Believe”

What errors could there be in merely possessing a concept?

Even necessarily empty predicates (ROUND SQUARE, GREATEST PRIME) seem good to have.

If there is no such error, concept epistemology is likely to be trivial.

Plan

I. Inconsistent Concepts

II. The Problem for Representationalism

III. The Bilateralist Solution

IV. What Defect?

PART I

Inconsistent Concepts

KEVIN SHARP

REPLACING TRUTH



A concept is *S-inconsistent* if its correct application with respect to some actual facts leads to contradiction.

- (1) a. 'rable' applies to x if x is a table.
b. 'rable' disappplies to x if x is a red thing.



Scharp (2013): NEWTONIAN MASS, TRUTH

Dummett (1973): BOCHE

PART II

**The Problem for
Representationalists**

Inferentialism

semantic: concepts' meanings are rules of use rather than truth conditions, reference, etc.

metasemantic: to possess a concept is to be related to rules of use in some fairly direct way (e.g., to believe them, be disposed to apply the concept in accord with them, etc.)

- (1) a. 'rable' applies to x if x is a table.
b. 'rable' disapplies to x if x is a red thing.

“[(1a) and (1b)] are *constitutive* for rable in the sense that they determine (in part) the meaning of 'rable' and the identity of the concept expressed by it. There are several ways of explaining the relationship between agents and constitutive principles, but a prima facie plausible explanation is that anyone who possesses a certain concept accepts that concept's constitutive principles. According to this view, if someone uses 'rable' but does not believe [(1a) and (1b)], then that person's word 'rable' does not mean *rable*.”

Scharp (2013, p. 36)



Concepts don't have constitutive rules, so... "philosophers who talk about inconsistent or incoherent concepts are misguided: trapped in a false theory that leads them to mischaracterize the phenomena under discussion."

(Cappelen, *Fixing Language*, p. 85)

Standard Representationalism

semantic: concepts' meanings are contribution to representational contents (like propositions with truth-conditions)

metasemantic: "A complex web of interactions and dependencies can hold a linguistic or conceptual practice together even in the absence of a common creed that all participants at all times are required to endorse."

(Williamson, *Philosophy of Philosophy*)

My main point: we can appeal to S-inconsistency even if we are Standard Representationalists.

But there is a problem for a common form of Standard Representationalism.

Unilateral Representationalism: contents are exhausted by a single, unilateral entity.

declarative thought: set of possible worlds

predicative concept: function from (possible) individuals to sets of worlds

nominal concept: individual

[[rable]]  = $\{w_1, w_{47}, \dots\}$

Is $w_@$ in this set or not?

If yes, then  is a rable. If not, it is not a rable.

No contradiction either way.

PART III

The Bilateralist Solution

Bilateralism: meanings come with two components, a positive and negative part.

My claim: we need bilateralism rather than inferentialism to make sense of S-inconsistency.

Most well known forms of bilateralism have an inferentialist flavor.

For Smiley (1996), Rumfitt (2000), et al., the positive part of a bilateral meaning is its assertability conditions, the negative part its rejectability conditions.

But there are other ways to be a bilateralist. . .

Truthmaker Semantics (van Fraassen (1969) and Fine (2017)): propositions modelled not as sets of worlds where sentence is true, but as sets of *facts that would make the sentence true*.

(2) I own a book.

(3) I do not own any books.

Bilateral truthmaker proposition:

pair of truthmaker set ($\llbracket \cdot \rrbracket^+$) and falsehoodmaker set ($\llbracket \cdot \rrbracket^-$)

This allows for S-inconsistency. Where $F_@$ are the actual facts:

$$F_@ \cap \llbracket S \rrbracket^+ \neq \emptyset \quad \text{and} \quad F_@ \cap \llbracket S \rrbracket^- \neq \emptyset$$

$$[[\text{table}]]^+ \text{  \cap F_{@} \neq \emptyset$$

$$[[\text{table}]]^- \text{  \cap F_{@} = \emptyset$$

$$[[\text{table}]]^+ \text{  \cap F_{@} = \emptyset$$

$$[[\text{table}]]^- \text{  \cap F_{@} \neq \emptyset$$

...

...

$$\llbracket \text{rable} \rrbracket^+ \text{  \cap F_{@} \neq \emptyset$$

$$\llbracket \text{rable} \rrbracket^- \text{  \cap F_{@} = \emptyset$$

$$\llbracket \text{rable} \rrbracket^+ \text{  \cap F_{@} = \emptyset$$

$$\llbracket \text{rable} \rrbracket^- \text{  \cap F_{@} \neq \emptyset$$

$$\llbracket \text{rable} \rrbracket^+ \text{  \cap F_{@} \neq \emptyset$$

$$\llbracket \text{rable} \rrbracket^- \text{  \cap F_{@} \neq \emptyset$$

(4) The red table is a rable and is not a rable.

Representationalist S-inconsistency!

PART IV

What Defect?

Picture I like: S-inconsistency is a defect, so when you find a defective concept, there's reason for you to get rid of it.

But why?

If there's both an actual truthmaker and an actual falsehoodmaker, isn't the proposition both true and false?

So shouldn't we just accept that some contradictions are true?



Descriptive dialetheism: some contradictions are true.

Normative dialetheism: there are some contradictions s.t. there's no reason not to accept them.

Proposal: go for the former without the latter.

Not *so* crazy to reject the Law of Non-contradiction in this way.

The idea that logic is normative, or descriptive only of laws of truth for an ideal language, seems to have been the view of Frege, Peirce, Russell, Tarski, et al.

But if one is a descriptive dialetheist, shouldn't one also be a normative non-dialetheist?



Two broad strategies for developing my proposal.

Structure Matching

(SM1) Concepts ought to carve nature at its joints.

(SM2) S-inconsistent concepts do not carve nature at its joints.

Internal Intelligibility

(INT1) Concepts ought to contribute to making one's view of the world internally intelligible.

(INT2) S-inconsistent concepts make one's view of the world less internally intelligible.

S-inconsistency is a promising avenue for trying to make sense of conceptual defectiveness.

Contra Cappelen, it doesn't require inferentialism. It requires bilateralism.

But more work needs to be done to explain why S-inconsistency would be a defect.

Thanks!