Interview with Kevin Scharp

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Introduction. Kevin Scharp is Reader in Philosophy and Director of Arché Philosophical Research Centre at the University of St Andrews.

Kevin has developed a conceptual engineering approach to the liar paradox, according to which the concept of truth is intrinsically defective and needs to be replaced with other concepts, when doing semantics. This method can be applied across philosophy, giving rise to a new methodology and a new way of thinking about philosophical problems. Kevin is also interested in the semantics for normative concepts. He and Bryan Weaver are going to publish a book titled *Semantics for Reasons* at Oxford University Press in 2019.

Thanks for having us.

Thanks for inviting me.

I have a first question about what is philosophy for you. At the very beginning of your book *Replacing Truth* you say that you see philosophy, basically, as the study of inconsistent concepts. What do you mean by that?

Ok, so, I think that some of our concepts are defective in the sense that they can be used properly, but even when used properly they can lead someone to believe a contradiction or pursue contradictory plans, and be irrational. So, it is not that someone is misusing or misapplying the concept, for the person is using them properly, but is the concept itself that is defective. And so, I think that this way of thinking about concepts is very plausible in the case of standard philosophical concepts: the concepts that philosophers have been investigating for the last 2000 years. I think that is the case with respect to Truth, but also Goodness, Beauty, Value, Freedom, Knowledge etc. So, I think it makes sense to say that all of these standard philosophical concepts are defective, or inconsistent, and that this goes someway to explain why philosophical disputes are so intractable, and why they make such slow progress, and why philosophy is not like the sciences, at least the hard sciences.

Ok, and do you think that science is basically old philosophy? That when a concept becomes tractable it goes into the sciences?

It does not always happens, but yes, frequently it does. Though, sometimes it just gets kicked out completely. For example, alchemy was part of philosophy and all these various alchemical concepts were part of philosophy, and then most of them got kicked out. It is not that they became a science, but eventually a different science started, chemistry. And when the concepts of oxygen etc. got "cleaned up" from their alchemical background, and when those were sufficiently clean and in good shape, then they could be spun off as a science and they were no longer part of philosophy. I think you can see the sequence of sciences, you know, being immitted by philosophy over the last 400 years.

A question on Brandom. You did your PhD in Pittsburgh, Brandom was there. You said that he, more than everyone, has had an impact on your work. So can you tell us more about how he helped shape your current philosophical views?

I first encountered Brandom when I was a graduate student in Northwestern. So, I first started my PhD at Northwestern. I took a couple of seminars on Brandom's work. And I became really obsessed with his book *Making it explicit* and I felt like this was a really different and intesting way of thinking about standard philosophical issues and problems. He was drawing this very big picture: big

sweeping claims about the history of philosophy and how parts of philosophy interact with one another and about how whole vocabolaries relate to one another. And that really struck me as well: I like big pictures, and I think he was underepresented in philosophy and I though he was doing really well. So, then the people I wanted to work with at Northwestern left and so I got lucky and got accepted at Pittsburgh as a transfer student. And the paper that I wrote for my application was a criticism of Brandom. And he ended up liking it and I was in, and I was able to work with him, and he was the supervisor for my PhD. That was sort of a dream come true. I had never met him before, so being able to have him as a mentor was spectacular.

Is Brandom's pragmatism related to your conceptual engineering ideas?

I think so. He actually uses the term "conceptual engineering" in a paper from 2001, and The paper is a transcript of a talk he gave in 1999, and around the same time Blackburn uses the term in his book *Think*. But both of them when they use the term "conceptual engineering" they were just throwing remarks, they are both describing what do and what I care about, but they are not doing it in a kind of detailed way. I mean, the word occurs only once in each piece. But yes, the way Brandom thinks of concepts: the idea that even though surely we have a grip on concepts, in the way we "possess them", concepts also "have a grip on us", they "do things" to us, too. They almost have a sort of life of their own, to some extent. They are not these pure 100% accurate gems handed down from heaven or something like that. They are messy, and made up by humans over 1000 of years sometimes. It would be ridicoulus to expect them being anything other than a mess. And that is a big aspect of Brandom's work that had an influence on me.

Another aspect is that he enphasises that a theory of meaning should be "expressively complete", which means that it should be able to give the meaning of its own sentences, the sentences that make up the theory. So, for example, a verificationist theory of meaning, the one the positivists had, says that the meaning of some term is its method of verification. Yet this claim itself cannot be verified. This was one of the problems critics where pointing out: it looks like the positivists theory of meaning is self-undermining. And so Brandom made an explicit constrain on his theory of meaning so that it should not have this feature, so that it should not be self-undermining like that.

So, when I started thinking about truth, I saw the same kind of problem: lots of theories of truth do not apply to the language in which they are formulated. And so for me I think seeing Brandom having that kind of constrain on his views on meaning made a bit easier for me to insist on something like that in the realm of truth, while everyone else on truth was saying: "That is wrong, that's a mistake". There's a couple of other people, Vann McGee I think is a great example

of one other person out there insisting on this sort of constrain. When I started taking this constrain seriously, a lot of my ideas on truth kind of fell into place.

Thanks for bringing this out, since I wanted to talk about your book on Truth. So, the stuff you just said is related to revenge paradoxes. People usually come up with a solution to the Liar paradox, but somehow what they say about the paradox can get turned around and made into a new paradox that the theory can't handle. And so, you insist that this is a serious issue, it's not just a "puzzling thing". Since no conceptual analysis can solve this, so we need to replace the concept itself, at least in logical frameworks: in everyday life we can just get way with using the old inconsistent concept.

Exactly. There are a couple of more steps there. The concept is defective, yet it is useful. The defect is a problem for some of its uses. In particular, doing a semantics for a particularly rich language, like natural language. And so, in a situation like that, when you have an inconsistent concept that is preventing you from doing what you want to do with it, then it makes sense to replace it with one or more other concepts that do that job without having that defect. So, these are the boxes that you have to check in order to get to the replacement.

Gotcha. So, we can go a little deeper into this. Let me summarize briefly the issue and your solution. In standard semantics we want the so called T-schema: P if and only if P is true, for every sentence P. Yet, having this schema unrestrictedly gives rise to the liar paradox: there is a sentence that says of itself that it is not true. So, if it is true, it is not true, and if it is not true it is true. To avoid this, you say, we should replace Truth with two other concepts: Ascending and Descending Truth. With either of these concepts, you don't have the full T-schema. One satisfies only the left to right part of the T-schema, the other only the right to left. How can we be sure that the job that Truth does can be done with these concepts?

That is a difficult thing to show. I focus only on this one job of doing semantics, and on attributing truth-conditions to the sentences in question. If you want a theory that attributes truth-conditions then it's going to run into a liar paradox problem. The kind of theory that I propose does not offer truth-conditions to sentences, but instead it offers ascending truth-conditions and decending truth-conditions, using ascending and descending truth, respectively. And so then, the question is: "Great, why would I want these ascending and descending truth-conditions? How is that even doing semantics?" Well, in almost all cases, the ascending and descending truth-conditions are the same: they are just the truth-conditions. There are only differences when it comes to things like liar sentences, and only then they differ, and that is the key to avoiding the paradox. So in what sense is the theory that I offer really doing what we want to do, but bet-

ter? The sense is that it reduces to the truth-conditional theory in all the normal circumstances, it changes only in the circumstances that the truth-conditional theory simply can't handle, at all.

What about the idea that some people have, that paraconsistent logic is the answer. They say: "Yeah, that is a paradox, and that's it", you have to learn to live with the fact that something is both true and not true. How do you argue with that?

Yes, the price there is that you end up with a very weak logic as a result, and a very counterintuitive one, as well. One where usually modus ponens fails, if, for example, we are in Priest's Logic of paradox. I mean, you can go paraconsistent without that, right? You can have BX, which is a relevant logic, which is what Beall endorses. So you don't have to have that counterintuitive consequence of no modus ponens, but you still have others. Whenever you go paraconsistent, you are gonna have extremely counterintuitive consequences.

And this is the main problem you have with paraconsistent approaches.

I think there is a number of problems here, and I want to emphasize the fact that the dialethic paraconsistent view on paradoxes has a lot going for it. It's not just a crazy view. I lived through a time in my graduate school when people thought it was just crazy. And that was the standard objection, and people laughed and poke fun about it. Thankfully those days are over. At least for philosophy of language and logic people don't act like that anymore and that's good. It is sort of difficult to come up with decent objections when people just have this standard just-gut reaction: "This is gonna be wrong". My own way of thinking about what is wrong with the dialethic paraconsistent view is the following. There's lots of concepts and vocaboulary that we have in natural language that paraconsistent logician has trouble dealing with and the standard example is "just true". So, if I wanna call something "just true", what I mean is that it's not false, it is just true. How do I do that in a paraconsistent view? It is a standard problem. Priest has a solution to this, which I think it does not work. And J. C. Beall recently put out his "shrieking approach" to just true and that generated a decent bit of attention. I just put out a criticism of his shrieking approach. First, here is what the shrieking approach consists in. If you take the shrieking line, everytime I am calling something "just true" what I am calling "just true" is actually a bit different than what I think it is, and I am just calling that thing just true. Suppose you want to say that a theory T is just true. Now J. C. Beall comes along and says: "Here s what you really said. You really said that this other thing, not T but T-shrieked is true, where in the shrieked theory you added a consistency assumption.

You add a bunch of rules to the thing, and you change the theory.
Exactly. Now suppose we are having a conversation about something and I say: "Hey, guess what! T is both true and false". And you say: "No, it s not! it's just true!" Now, according to the shrieking approach you are not talking about T, you are talking about something else.

It's a change of subject.
Yes, exactly. we are not even talking about the same thing anymore. That seems bad. It gets worse than that: the approach is part of the bigger project by paraconsistent logicians to understand what happens in situations in which we are assuming to be consistent. And you cannot just add a consistency assumption and "get back" classical reasoning in paraconsistent systems.

This is actually a big asymmetry between paracomplete theories like Field's and paraconsistent theories like Priest's and Beall's. A paracomplete logician can get classical reasoning back by assuming excluded middle. It works pretty well compare to the paraconsistent theorist. For, if you just assume consistency, that is perfectly consistent with paraconsistency for the paraconsistent theorist. So, it does not solve anything at all. Here you have a big asymmetry, there.

One of the other problems I point out is that, in the shrieking approach, we must assume that there are shrieking operators all over language, hidden inside every sentence.

Yes, you would have to change the logical structure of sentences, and that would imply some big semantic blindness of the speakers.
Yes, exactly, it would imply a massive semantic blindness.

What do you think in general about paraconsistent dialetheist approaches?
Well, in general paraconsistent dialetheist and conceptual engineers agree on a lot of stuff. We both think that something like the analytic principles for truth are inconsistent. Yet the dialetheist says: they are analytic so they must be true but they imply their falsity so they are also false, so they are both true and false. What I say, on the other hand, is that they are meaning-constitutive but that does not mean they are true: they are just false. In this way I can go in a different direction, by not abandoning classical logic. I am rather after a consistent theory of inconsistent concepts.

The method you suggest has tons of ramifications. If you are right about truth, it might be that a lot of the philosophical discussion right now might be methodologically faulty, and we might rather try to revise our terminology in our philosophical discussion.
Yes. Firstly, the question is: how do you think about the pile of paradoxes that

show up around philosophy about different concepts? I am thinking about the paradox of Free will and Determinism, or the paradoxes of Knowledge, or of Goodness, or of Naturalness in metaphysics. Does that show that these concepts are defective? If so, you have to think about the use of these concepts. What do you want to do with them? And how might these defects get in the way, and if they do get in the way how do you replace these concepts with another team of concepts that do not have those defects to begin with. I think that in each of these cases the answers are different, because the uses of these concepts are different. So, there is no across-the-board recipe that works in every case. You really have to think through the details of each particular case and then make some suggestions on how to replace these concepts with others that are tailored to that particular case.

Now, let's say that you have replaced truth with two concepts, and knowledge and Goodness with some bunch of concepts. Now instead of three concepts we have, say, fifteen concepts. How three or four concepts interact with one another is quite a complicated issue but not crazy complicated, right? How fifteen concepts interact with one another: that's way more complicated. So, the number of decisions you have to make in thinking through how these replacement concepts interact with one another goes up as you replace one concept with two or three. So, that is one kind of a headache for my kind of a method. Yet, in some sense it is a good thing because it makes the project more rich and interesting. It is an additional step in the project that other philosophical methodologies do not have, at all. So, what I am thinking about now is how to extend this methodology across philosophy and thinking of philosophy as the study of what turned out to be defective concepts. If that's the case quite often, then how should our methodology be like? I think conceptual engineering in such cases is the right answer. But it needs a lot of detail: it turns out quite difficult to say much in general about how to do conceptual engineering, without looking at particular cases.

Is conceptual engineering what you mainly focus on in your work on deontic modals, as well? I know that you are going to publish a book titled *Semantics for Reasons* with Bryan Weaver in a few months.
So, my angle on Ought is somewhat different. It comes from thinking about reasons. There are a lot of people that want to say that Ought and Reasons are connected in important ways. So, if you have good reasons to do something, then that's what you ought to do, and what you ought to is what you have most reasons to. That's the basic idea. Now, the work on Ought in the literature is really interesting because it's been kind of "invaded" by philosopher of language and linguists and people doing natural language semantics. There is a tremendous amount of smart people thinking hard about how to understand the se-

mantics for 'Ought' statements. And what are the philosophical consequences of that? I think they are huge and they spread all across meta-ethics, moral psychology, normative ethics etc. But there has been not, at least since a couple of years ago, a semantics about reasons, at all. So, this is what the book I co-authored with Bryan Weaver is about: a semantics for reasons. Now, I don't think that one's approach for the semantics for reasons dictates one's approach for the semantics for Ought. I am kind of partial to the Kratzer style semantics for Ought[1] even though it does not always play super-nicely for the semantics for reasons-claims me and Weaver ultimately endorse. Two main things to think about when it comes to the semantics for reasons and that kind of lessons you might want to draw from other areas are these. Firstly, in the literature on reasons in meta-ethics there is a vast number of distinctions: internal-external, normative-motivating, and million others. Now, how are those distinctions related to one another? No one knows, right? And how are they related to the meaning of the word "Reasons"? Are these distinctions disambiguations? So, are they different meanings of the word "Reason"? Or are they rather different assumptions on what reasons are and they presuppose the same meaning for "Reasons"? How do they work?

So, one of the big things with our semantics theory is that we lay out six or seven major distinctions people appeal to in the literature and we explain each of those and how are they related to one another in term of their semantics. And so, you can see exactly how they are related to one another and you can see which are semantic distinctions and which are not semantic distinctions. We give a nice sort of method for distinguishing those in a simple way, with a simple linguistic test.

So, basically, the book would help the discussion between different sort of people, am I right? Like the psychologists and the linguists and the philosophers.
Yeah, that's the idea. The main focus of the whole project though is getting to a philosophical payoff. The idea is: now that we see what the semantics for reason is, we can think about whether the ontology of reasons are any good. We can think about whether the discussion between reasons and rationality are any good. And we can also judge the debate about moral reasons and other kind of reasons, as well. One of the main things that we do is use the semantics to develop a "reasons first" approach in general, where all normative phenomena can be explained in a certain sense in terms of reasons. But it's not the case that reasons can be explained in terms of other normative phenomena. So, reasons

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[1]A Kratzer style semantics is a Neighbourhood semantics for modal logic: it can handle modal logics where K ($\Box(P \rightarrow Q) \rightarrow (\Box P \rightarrow \Box Q)$) or Necessitation (if P is a theorem then $\Box$ P is a theorem) fail.

are fist in the normative realm. This is one of the main philosophical stance you can defend using this semantics.

That all sounds really interesting. Thanks for the good chat and for your time.
Cool great! Thanks so much!

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