

# The liar, states of affairs, and truths

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There is a distinction between, on the one hand, states of affairs and facts and, on the other hand, sentences and truth. States of affairs are bivalent: a given state of affairs either obtains or it does not. It cannot do both, it cannot do neither. That cannot fail.

A given sentence being true is a state of affairs, so it either obtains or it does not. In particular, the state of affairs of the liar, “the liar is not true”, being true either obtains or it does not. It cannot do both, it cannot do neither. That cannot fail.

We have *tried* to mirror the perfect bivalence of states of affairs in language by, for each indicative sentence, having its negation be true if and only if the sentence itself is not true. Unfortunately, a sentence not being true and its negation being true are two different states of affairs, so that is not guaranteed to be the case by the bivalence of states of affairs. And we have *tried* to mirror the states of affairs of sentences being true by having a predicate in language that is meant to apply to a term designating a given sentence just in case the state of affairs of that sentence being true obtains. Unfortunately, a sentence being true and another sentence saying that the former sentence is true being true are two different states of affairs, so that is also not guaranteed to be the case.

Both of those desiderata fall on the language side of the distinction, and they can fail. They are just elements of the attempt by fallible human beings to communicate about facts by assigning conventional truth conditions to sentences. Because of the pair of sentences “the liar is not true” and “the liar is true”, at least one of them must fail.

It follows that some of the truth conditions that we have tried to assign to sentences are impossible. It cannot be the case that the state of affairs of the liar being true obtains if and only if the state of affairs of the liar being true fails to obtain. Hence the truth condition of the liar sentence cannot be what it seems to be. I do not know what the actual truth condition of the liar sentence is according to existing conventions. That is an empirical question. But no matter what the actual truth condition is, any theory that is correct about what it is will seem to be wrong, because it will imply that

the truth condition of the liar is different from what it seems to be. That does not imply that the theory is wrong.

In order to avoid the conclusions above, one might, as Priest (2006, 51–54) does, reject the premise that states of affairs are bivalent. But why? All we have deduced from it is that humans are imperfect. We knew that already.

## Reference

Priest, G. (2006). *Doubt Truth to be a Liar*. Oxford University Press.