

Alethic fictionalism, alethic nihilism, and the Liar Paradox

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Abstract Recently, several philosophers have proposed fictionalist accounts of truth-talk, as a means for resolving the semantic pathology that the Liar Paradox appears to present. These alethic fictionalists aim to vindicate truth-talk as a kind of as if discourse, while rejecting that the talk attributes any real property of truth. Liggins (Analysis 74:566–574, 2014) has recently critically assessed one such proposal, Beall’s (The law of non-contradiction: new philosophical essays. Oxford University Press, New York, pp 197–216, 2004) constructive methodological deflationist (henceforth, ‘CMD’), offering objections to Beall’s proposed alethic fictionalism that potentially generalize to other alethic fictionalist accounts. Liggins further argues that CMD supports a classically consistent response to the Liar Paradox—one that can be extracted from CMD, while leaving its putatively problematic fictionalist elements behind in favor of alethic nihilism. In this paper, after establishing that Liggins’s criticisms of CMD are off base, we show that the classical resolution of the Liar Paradox that he proposes is unworkable. Since his resistance to alethic fictionalism turns out to be unmotivated, we conclude that this approach is still worth considering as a framework for a resolution of the Liar Paradox.

Keywords Truth · Liar Paradox · Fictionalism · Pretense

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Over the last thirty-five years, a number of philosophers have proposed fictionalist accounts of various fragments of discourse, in order to resolve certain puzzles or problems. We think, for example, of Field (1980) on mathematical discourse, Evans (1982) and Walton (1990) on existence-talk, Rosen (1990) on modal discourse, and Kroon (2001, 2004) on identity- and existence-talk, among others who have proposed *philosophical fictionalist* accounts of certain ways of talking. Recently, several philosophers have proposed fictionalist accounts of truth-talk, as a means for resolving the semantic pathology that the Liar Paradox appears to present.¹ These *alethic fictionalists* aim to vindicate truth-talk as a kind of *as if* discourse, while rejecting that the talk attributes any real property of truth.

Liggins (2014) has recently critically assessed one such proposal, JC Beall's (2004) constructive methodological deflationism (henceforth, 'CMD'), offering objections to Beall's proposed alethic fictionalism that potentially generalize to other alethic fictionalist accounts. Liggins further argues that CMD supports a classically consistent response to the Liar Paradox—one that can be extracted from CMD, while leaving its putatively problematic fictionalist elements behind in favor of alethic nihilism. In this paper, after establishing that Liggins's criticisms of CMD are off base, we show that the classical resolution of the Liar Paradox that he proposes is unworkable. Since his resistance to alethic fictionalism turns out to be unmotivated, we conclude that this approach is still worth considering as a framework for a resolution of the Liar Paradox.

1 Beall on truth

Beall (2004) proposes that, for a certain kind of deflationism about truth, the "story of truth" is, in a sense, made up—or, as he puts it, *constructed*. He further contends that if this is the case, then the inconsistency that truth-talk appears to manifest is more palatable and humdrum, since it does not actually reveal any inconsistency in the world. Indeed, he (Ibid., p. 197) aims to show that dialetheism, the view that some truths have true negations (and, thus, that some contradictions are true as well as false), is, in the context of CMD, far from a radical or wholly implausible view, but is instead "a simple and natural theory of language." CMD might therefore make dialetheism more palatable than it may have initially seemed.

Beall (Ibid., pp. 200–201) motivates the view that truth and falsity are constructed notions by considering an overt, or explicit, pretense (making *as if*). One is to imagine a revised version of English from which we have removed the expressions 'is true' and 'is false' and have replaced them with the expressions 'Aiehtela accepts' and 'Aiehtelanu accepts'. These expressions are governed by the following schemata,

- (T) Aiehtela accepts \underline{A} iff A.
- (F) Aiehtelanu accepts \underline{A} iff $\sim A$.
- (D) Aiehtela accepts \underline{A} or accepts $\sim \underline{A}$,

¹ See Beall (2004), Woodbridge (2005), Burgess and Burgess (2011), and Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2013), (2015).

where ‘A’ is a variable that ranges over all declarative sentences of English, and ‘A’ is filled in with the name of any sentence that goes in for ‘A’. Of course, there is no Aiehtela or Aiehtelanu; these names, and the expressions that employ them, are just made up. But speakers of this language can employ these expressions, which will play the expressive roles that the alethic predicates play in English.

Given a version of English supplemented with Aiehtela-talk, Beall (Ibid., p. 203) claims that sentences such as the following automatically arise.

(*) Aiehtela does not accept the starred sentence.

Given (*), together with the principles governing Aiehtela-talk and logic, one appears to be able to generate a contradiction as follows. [Cf. Liggins (2014, p. 571)].

- (1) Either Aiehtela accepts the starred sentence or Aiehtela does not accept the starred sentence.
- (2) Aiehtela accepts the starred sentence iff Aiehtela does not accept the starred sentence.
Therefore,
- (3) Aiehtela accepts the starred sentence and Aiehtela does not accept the starred sentence.

If we were to accept the principles of Aiehtela-talk, we would seem compelled to accept the resultant contradiction.

Beall (2004, p. 205) takes (*) to reveal an inconsistency in Aiehtela-talk that motivates combining it with an endorsement of dialetheism (along with a paraconsistent logic). According to Beall (Ibid., p. 207), “the story of truth (falsity) is as constructed as the story of Aiehtela(-nu).” He (Ibid., p. 210) continues, “[t]he heart of CMD is that truth-talk is fundamentally no different than Aiehtela-talk—except that in the latter case we are conscious of our *as if* attitude.” He takes this to motivate and potentially make more palatable endorsing dialetheism with respect to our actual truth-talk, at least in part to benefit from its tidy solution to the Liar.

2 Liggins’s charge of psychological implausibility

Liggins’s main objection to CMD is that it is psychologically implausible to take truth-talk, the fragment of discourse involving the truth- (and falsity-) predicate, to be a constructed fictional discourse in the way that Beall proposes. This objection stems from the particular understanding he has of *as if* accounts of fragments of discourse. Commenting on Beall’s account, Liggins (2014, p. 567) says, “I take this to mean that when we engage in truth-talk we engage in pretense, although we are unaware that we are doing so. We pretend that sentences have truth-values.” He (Ibid., p. 568) further claims that, because CMD holds truth-talk to involve pretense, as speakers employing this talk “we do not believe any ascriptions of truth but instead accept them in a spirit of pretense.”

In making these claims, Liggins reveals that he is working with some problematic assumptions about what a fictionalist account of some fragment of discourse involves. The first is his assumption that the appeal to pretense such an account makes will amount to a claim about what speakers employing the discourse are doing. The second is his assumption that such an appeal to pretense should be understood in terms of the psychological (specifically, epistemic) attitudes that these speakers adopt (or refrain from adopting) with regard to their talk. We address each of these problems in turn.

Regarding the first assumption about fictionalist accounts, while it is not uncommon,² it is also not mandatory. Contra Liggins (and others), one does not have to locate pretense at the level of speakers (or, more generally, language-users), when explaining some fragment of discourse as pretense-involving. To do so is to postulate pretense operating in the pragmatics of the discourse in question. A better place to postulate pretense at work is in the semantics of the discourse, as part of the mechanisms that determine the content of its instances. It is widely recognized that language-users need not understand, or even be aware of, the semantic mechanisms at work in their discourse. Indeed, if speakers did need to understand these mechanisms, in order to use language competently, the majority of speakers would be incompetent language-users. Since they are not, it follows that competence with language does not require such understanding. Thus, a fictionalist account of some way of talking can view speakers as using the talk to make claims that appear on the surface to saddle them with certain commitments—in the present case, to properties of truth and falsity—where it turns out that, perhaps unbeknownst to those speakers, the pretense mechanisms at work in the discourse block any such commitments. On this understanding, *theorists* can explain fragments of discourse via an appeal to pretense without claiming that any language-users who competently employ the relevant ways of talking are engaging in, or are even aware of, any pretense at all.³

In fact, the theorist that Liggins heralds at the beginning of his article, Kendall Walton, is a prime example of someone who rejects the first assumption. While Walton (1990, Chapters 10 and 11) takes both existence-talk and talk putatively of fictional characters to be pretense-involving, in both cases he explicitly denies that speakers who use such talk are *engaged* in any pretense, nor would he *ever* contend that, when employing (e.g.) existence-talk, speakers “pretend” that certain things exist or fail to exist. Walton posits pretense at work in the fundamental semantic operation of the *talk*, in a way that allows such talk to serve as an indirect means for saying something other than what it appears to say on the surface. The communicative results that speakers achieve with the discourse are redirected away from the surface phenomenology of its instances, making this phenomenology effectively irrelevant. This content-redirection is implemented by the semantic machinery at work in the discourse, including various language-world links established by the relevant pretense’s principles of generation, which here govern the use of the discourse’s characteristic locutions—the linguistic expressions that

² See, for example, Kroon (2004), Kalderon (2008), and Daly (2008).

³ For a discussion of how this works, see Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2015), Chapter 2.

the pretense takes as its props.⁴ (It is this aspect of Waltonian pretense accounts that Liggins underappreciates.⁵)

Although Beall has not fleshed out a detailed pretense account of truth-talk (and perhaps has not worried enough about speaker-engagement issues), there is no reason to think that his account must differ from a Waltonian one on this front. So, even though Beall claims that truth-talk is fundamentally no different from the recognizably pretense-involving Aiehtela-talk, we can take this as just telling us something about how the *talk* operates. We do not have to take it as telling us that speakers employing the talk are engaged in, or are even aware of, any pretense, nor must we take it as claiming that such speakers “pretend that sentences have truth-values.”

Liggins’s second problematic assumption—that an appeal to pretense should be understood in terms of the psychological attitudes that speakers adopt with regard to their talk—is, at least in part, a consequence of his taking Beall’s proposal as a case of *hermeneutic fictionalism* and of his taking hermeneutic fictionalism about a discourse to be “the thesis that we [speakers employing the discourse] do not believe the propositions expressed by the sentences of the discourse, and, when we assert these sentences, we do not assert these propositions.” (2014, p. 568) While Beall’s CMD might involve hermeneutic fictionalism, the problem here is that Liggins is working with a misunderstanding of this theoretical approach.

Hermeneutic fictionalism is not a thesis about what language-users employing the relevant fragment of discourse do or do not believe, nor is it a view about what speakers do or do not assert. Instead, it is a thesis *about the relevant fragment of discourse*. In order to see this, consider how hermeneutic fictionalism contrasts with its rival, revolutionary fictionalism. Jason Stanley (2001, p. 36) originally drew the distinction as follows.

Revolutionary fictionalism would involve admitting that while the problematic discourse does in fact involve literal reference to nonexistent entities, we *ought* to use the discourse in such a way that the reference is simply *within the pretense*. The *hermeneutic fictionalist*, in contrast, reads fictionalism into our actual use of the problematic discourse. According to her, normal use of the problematic discourse involves a pretense.

Revolutionary fictionalism is a *prescriptive* enterprise. It tells us how some genuinely problematic discourse should be reconceived, and how it *will* be

⁴ In the account that Walton gives of existence-talk in particular, the redirection away from the surface phenomenology is enhanced by the fact that his analysis involves what he calls “prop-oriented” make-believe, rather than “content-oriented” make-believe (see Walton (1993)). As a result, existence-talk serves, on his view, as an indirect means for talking specifically about the *props* involved in the pretenses it invokes, rather than about the content of the make-believe at work in instances of existence-talk, including the pretenses displayed in their surface appearances. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing us to elaborate on these points.

⁵ Liggins seems not to distinguish “Waltonian” accounts from fictionalist accounts generally, which he (Ibid., pp. 572-573) understands in terms of story-prefixes. But this is to miss important differences between pretense-based fictionalist accounts and story-prefix fictionalist accounts. For more on these differences, see Caddick Bourne (2013) and Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2015), Chapter 1.

reconceived, come the revolution. Hermeneutic fictionalism, by contrast, is a *descriptive* enterprise. It purports to offer the proper understanding of some putatively problematic fragment of discourse as it currently functions in ordinary speech. Theories of this type maintain that a correct account of how the discourse operates will show that it already involves fiction in a way that renders it unproblematic.⁶ But, as is clear, none of this involves any claims explicitly about what language-users do, or do not, believe, or what they assert or fail to assert.

Accordingly, if Beall's proposal is a version of hermeneutic fictionalism, then he need not view CMD as making any claims at all about what language-users believe. Hence, both Liggins's reading of 'hermeneutic' and the conclusions regarding Beall's CMD that he draws from that reading need to be rethought. In fact, we do not see why Beall would agree with Liggins that, on the *as if* view that he sketched, speakers do not believe any ascriptions of truth but instead only accept them in a spirit of pretense. If Beall were to follow Walton, there would be no bar to viewing speakers as believing what they say (indirectly) with truth-ascriptions. This might seem to miss Liggins's point, since he could be attempting to apply the believe/accept-in-the-spirit-of-pretense distinction to what instances of truth-talk say literally, on their surfaces. But that would be to ignore the important distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic pretense.⁷ In cases of the former, which plausibly would include truth-talk, if it were given a Waltonian analysis, pretense is always involved in the relevant utterances having any content at all. In contrast with cases of external pretense, here there is no "pretense-free", literal, surface content that one could accept in the spirit of pretense rather than believe. The only content that utterances involving intrinsic pretense put forward is the content they express indirectly, via the operation of the pretense. There is thus no reason to think that employing a pretense-involving discourse of this sort requires that speakers not believe the only content the utterances have. If that is right, then what Liggins is assuming about Beall's account is incorrect.

This has a direct impact on the argument that Liggins offers to show that CMD is psychologically implausible. His argument is as follows: We take ourselves to believe many ascriptions of truth. However, according to CMD, we do not believe any ascriptions of truth but instead merely accept them in a spirit of pretense. Thus, Liggins concludes, CMD clashes with our pre-theoretical view and, as a result, is psychologically implausible. This is because it entails that we are wrong about some of our own mental states.⁸

⁶ Walton (1990) on existence-talk is a prime example here. So are Crimmins (1998) on attitude ascription, Kroon (2001) on identity-talk, Yablo (2005) on number-talk, and Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2015) on proposition-, truth-, reference-, and satisfaction-talk.

⁷ For more on the intrinsic pretense/extrinsic pretense distinction, see Woodbridge (2005) and Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2015), Chapter 2.

⁸ We should note that another response one might make to this argument is to bite the bullet and acknowledge that, as cognitive agents, we often, or even typically, are wrong about our own mental states. This simply requires rejecting introspective psychology, which is something we explicitly repudiate. (See Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2015), Chapter 2.)

We have already explained why we reject (and think Beall should reject) the second premise of Liggins's argument. However, whatever one's attitude might be towards that premise, there are additional reasons for thinking that Liggins's argument does not work. These include a different problematic assumption that he makes in his first premise.

Liggins assumes that ordinary, linguistically competent speakers of English *take themselves to believe* many ascriptions of truth. Now, it is clear that ordinary English-language-users regularly engage in truth-talk when they make assertions. Such speakers, if they are being sincere, believe what they assert and, thus, believe what is expressed by the 'true'-involving sentences that they assertorically utter. But ordinary speakers rarely reflect further on such matters. In general, they do not tend to have any attitudes about their own beliefs. They do not typically think about such things; they just assert and believe.⁹ Hence, while ordinary, linguistically competent speakers of English do believe many ascriptions of truth, they rarely *take themselves to believe* such truth-ascriptions.

If a speaker were to come to take herself to believe any of her truth-ascriptions, it is important to recognize that this "taking" would be directed at the content of a belief-attribution in which her truth-ascription would be embedded, rather than at the belief-attribution itself. On a fictionalist account of truth-talk that explains the discourse as involving pretense intrinsically and thereby expressing content only indirectly, the content of this belief-attribution could very well be non-transparent or even disjunctive or schematic.¹⁰ This would mean that the speaker who takes herself to believe her truth-ascriptions might not know the content of the belief-attribution that she makes, and this undercuts the likelihood that she does manage to take herself to believe her truth-ascriptions.¹¹ But the assumption, that we, as linguistically competent speakers of English, take ourselves to believe many ascriptions of truth, is crucial for Liggins's criticism of Beall's view as entailing that we are wrong about many of our mental states. Since a crucial premise for this conclusion is highly suspect, Liggins's argument that Beall's view is psychologically implausible fails to convince.

We have provided reasons for resisting Liggins's main arguments against Beall's proposed alethic fictionalism, and we have corrected some misconceptions about certain aspects of pretense accounts. We turn now to investigating the plausibility of Liggins's proposed classically consistent solution to the Liar Paradox.

⁹ Of course, if a speaker were asked whether she believes something she has asserted, she might *then* reflect on her doxastic state and *come to take herself* to believe it. But this is not something that she will normally do, in the ordinary course of speaking and believing.

¹⁰ See Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2015), Chapters 3 and 5, for an explanation of this.

¹¹ Of course, if we were to ask speakers whether they believed the truth-ascriptions they assertorically utter, it seems quite likely that they would say that they do believe them, which might make it appear that they take themselves to believe them. But to arrive at the conclusion that they take themselves to believe these truth-ascriptions, we must assume introspective psychology, which, again, is something that we explicitly repudiate. Thus, even if they would *claim* that they do believe these truth-ascriptions, it does not follow that they do, for they might very well be wrong about what they take themselves to believe. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing us to make this point.

3 Liggins's proposed classical resolution of the Liar

Liggins maintains that, contra Beall, CMD does not support dialetheism but instead underwrites a *classical* solution to the Liar. We have some concerns about Liggins's analysis of CMD on this front. But even if we are right that his target deviates from Beall's official account, this might not concern Liggins much, since he seems mainly interested in extracting his own solution to the Liar Paradox from CMD, while leaving the fictionalist aspect of Beall's view behind. To that end, Liggins claims that we can get a classically consistent solution to that Liar Paradox, if we adopt alethic nihilism and maintain that nothing (and, so, no sentence) is true. Consider a liar sentence, (L) = '(L) is not true'. Liggins (2014, p. 571) sets out the reasoning that appears to yield inconsistency given (L) as follows.

- (4) Either (L) is true or (L) is not true.
- (5) (L) is true iff (L) is not true.

Therefore,

- (6) (L) is true and (L) is not true.

In order to block this contradictory conclusion, Liggins proposes to reapply his response to the reasoning that seems to yield (3) from (*) in Aeihtela-talk. In that case he claims that, since adults know that Aeihtela does not exist, "they believe the right-hand side [of the biconditional (2)] but do not accept the left." (Ibid., p. 570) As a consequence, he claims, they should not accept the biconditional as a whole, thereby blocking the derivation of the contradiction. While considering how CMD can deal with the contradiction we seem to be able to derive from (L), Liggins offers two proposals. The first proposal is that we should refuse to assert (5), thereby blocking the derivation of the contradiction, on the grounds that "we should suspend judgement on the left-hand side and the right-hand side, and thus suspend judgement on the whole biconditional." (Ibid., p. 571) The second strategy argues that we should deny (5), given the CMD thesis that really there is nothing to truth. That is, "[i]f we believe that nothing is true, then we should deny the left-hand side, assert the right, and thus deny the whole biconditional." (Ibid.). Liggins concludes that "[w]hichever option is taken, the CMDist should refuse to assert the second premiss of the argument, thus blocking the derivation of the contradiction." (Ibid.) When it comes to extracting his classical solution to the Liar Paradox as presented by (L), Liggins seems more wedded to the second proposal, with its denial of (5). We will therefore consider this approach first for what follows.

Before doing so, however, we offer some clarifying points. First, rather than framing the discussion of these putative derivations of contradictions both in terms of mental attitudes like believing, accepting, and not accepting (as Liggins does with the Aeihtela-talk case) and in terms of speech acts like asserting and denying (as Liggins does with the strengthened liar sentence, (L)), we will just employ the speech-act framework. Moreover, within the speech-act framework,

we will pair denial with *affirmation* (rather than *assertion*), since these are more precise duals.¹²

Second, we take it that what we affirm and deny are not *sentences*, but, rather, what sentences *say*. To make this clear, in what follows we recast Liggins's reasoning intended to block the derivation of a contradiction from (L) as follows: Given his alethic nihilism, we should either (i) refrain from affirming or denying what either the left-hand side or what the right-hand side of (5) say, and thus refrain from affirming or denying what the whole biconditional says, or (ii) deny what the left-hand side says, affirm what the right-hand side says, and thus deny what the whole biconditional says. Given either option, assuming Liggins's alethic nihilism, we should refuse to affirm what (5) says, thereby blocking a derivation of the resultant contradiction.

4 Revenge for Liggins

Part of Liggins's second strategy, with its argument for the conclusion that, assuming alethic nihilism, we should deny what the biconditional (5) says, involves claiming that we should assert what the right-hand side of (5) says. Liggins does not say much about how we are to understand assertion, but it is clear that he will have to modify any view that holds that truth is a norm for assertion. Since, on his view, nothing is true, he might replace the normative role of truth with something like "factivity" in a schematic norm like

(A_L) One is entitled to assert what 'S' says only if S.¹³

As we explained above, we shall focus on 'affirm', rather than 'assert'. With this in mind, note that the other part of Liggins's second strategy, arguing for denying what the biconditional (5) says, involves claiming that we should deny what the left-hand side of (5) says. The reason he gives for this is that nothing is true, which means that what the left-hand side of (5) says is not the case. Thus, we can extract the following principle from what Liggins says.

(D_L) One should, *ceteris paribus*, deny what 'S' says, if what 'S' says is not the case.

Since, if we should deny what a sentence says, then we are not entitled to affirm it, it follows, in the context of Liggins's (D_L), that one norm pertaining to affirming is something like the following: We are not entitled to affirm what a sentence says if

¹² Given the dual nature of affirming and denying, related, as they are, to the expression of the mental attitudes of *acceptance* and *rejection*, you should never both affirm and deny what a given sentence token says. (The need for enlisting tokens is to take account of context-sensitive terms. Thus, it might be that we should deny what one occurrence of 'I am hungry' says, at one time, and affirm what is said with a different occurrence of that very sentence type at a different time.)

¹³ It bears noting that 'entitled to ϕ ', here and throughout, has the force of 'it would be acceptable for one to ϕ , though one is not, *per se*, obligated to ϕ '. In particular, in this sense of 'entitled', if you are entitled to ϕ , but you do not, you are not doing something wrong; you are, rather, just not doing something that it would be acceptable for you to do.

what it says is not the case. If that is right—and we believe that it is—then it follows that we are entitled to affirm what a sentence says only if what it says is the case. So, we propose the following principle.

(A1) One is entitled to affirm what ‘S’ says only if what ‘S’ says is the case.

For short, from (A1), one is entitled to affirm what ‘S’ says only if S.

While (A1) provides a necessary condition for when we are entitled to affirm, it does not provide a sufficient condition for this. However, (A1) and other things that Liggins says point towards a sufficient condition for being entitled to affirm. At least *prima facie*, if what ‘S’ says is the case, and you *know* that it is, then it seems that you are entitled to affirm what ‘S’ says. While this seems right, as far as it goes, it also seems a bit stronger than what we need. An alternative condition would replace the knowledge component just with our having established what ‘S’ says.¹⁴ We will work with this latter condition for being entitled to affirm and, so, propose:

(A2) If what ‘S’ says is the case, and you have established that it is, then you are entitled to affirm what ‘S’ says.^{15,16}

Although, as we have said, we take (A1) and (A2) to fall out of what Liggins says, as we will show, given those principles, it is possible to provide a revenge problem for Liggins’s proposed classically consistent response to the Liar Paradox.

To see the problem, consider the following sentence, *viz.*,

(λ) It is not the case that one is entitled to affirm what sentence (λ) says.¹⁷

Since Liggins assumes classical logic, it follows that either one is entitled to affirm what sentence (λ) says, or it is not the case that one is entitled to affirm what sentence (λ) says, by the Law of Excluded Middle. Let us suppose the first disjunct—that one is entitled to affirm what sentence (λ) says. If one is entitled to affirm what sentence (λ) says, then, by (A1) and *modus ponens*, what (λ) says is the case. Thus, if one is entitled to affirm what sentence (λ) says, it follows that it is not the case that one is entitled to affirm what sentence (λ) says. So, assuming the first disjunct of our instance of the LEM, it follows that it is not the case that one is entitled to affirm what sentence (λ) says. Suppose, now, the second disjunct, that it

¹⁴ This will block the generation of Moorean paradoxes, which is the point of the stronger knowledge component.

¹⁵ Thanks to an anonymous referee for impressing upon us the importance of revising both (A1) and (A2).

¹⁶ A variant of (A2) seems to follow from the considerations behind Liggins’s (Ibid.) claim that we should assert the right-hand side of (5) (or, as we might put it, affirm what the right-hand side of (5) says), given the highly plausible claim that if we should ϕ , then we are entitled to ϕ . The converse clearly does not hold. There are plenty of cases in which we are entitled to do something that we, nevertheless, should not do, all things considered. Why should we assert what the right-hand side of (5) says, according to Liggins? On his view, nothing is true, so what the right-hand side of (5) says is the case, and, moreover, if we assume his account, we can establish that (L) is not true. These seem to provide the considerations in support of asserting what the right-hand side of (5) says, from whence we can get something like (A2).

¹⁷ Thanks to an anonymous referee for a very helpful suggestion about how we might revise our original revenge problem for Liggins.

is not the case that one is entitled to affirm what sentence (λ) says. From this it immediately follows that it is not the case that one is entitled to affirm what sentence (λ) says. So, by disjunction elimination from our instance of the LEM, we have established that it is not the case that one is entitled to affirm what sentence (λ) says.

Now, given the above, we have established that it is not the case that one is entitled to affirm what sentence (λ) says. But (λ) says that it is not the case that one is entitled to affirm what sentence (λ) says, which means that what (λ) says is the case, and, as we have seen, we have established that it is. It therefore follows, by (A2), that one is entitled to affirm what sentence (λ) says. Contradiction.

Liggins might try to avoid this contradiction by contending that what (λ) says is something that one is neither entitled to affirm nor entitled to deny. But this move does not make any sense here. Part of what this claim, as applied to (λ) , would amount to affirming is that it is not the case that one is entitled to affirm what (λ) says. Given that this just is what (λ) says, the maneuver would involve saying, of something one is affirming, that one is not entitled to affirm (part of) it. But this makes an attempt to apply this maneuver here self-undermining.

Thus, we have a revenge problem for Liggins's account, which generates precisely the sort of Liar-like inconsistency that he aims to avoid.

5 The “meaningless strategy” and more revenge

What can Liggins say in response to the problems that we have posed with respect to (λ) , beyond what we have considered thus far? One possible—albeit somewhat desperate—response would be to appeal to a “meaningless strategy” and claim that (λ) does not say anything. If this sentence fails to say anything, then it would seem to follow that (λ) provides nothing, by way of content, that we are entitled to affirm (or, for that matter, deny), in which case, to all appearances, paradox would be avoided. Although such a “meaningless strategy” raises immediate worries (for some of the worries, see Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2013)), we shall leave those aside here and instead consider the prospects for this possible response.¹⁸

It might appear that, if properly motivated, this response could block the contradiction in the case of (λ) . We think that this appearance is short lived, however, since we can generate a further revenge problem that exploits the central features of this attempted reply. To see this, consider the sentence,

$(\lambda+)$ It is not the case that $(\lambda+)$ says something that one is entitled to affirm.

Let us assume that $(\lambda+)$ says something and that what it says is that it is not the case that $(\lambda+)$ says something that one is entitled to affirm. By the Law of Excluded Middle, either $(\lambda+)$ says something that one is entitled to affirm or it is not the case that $(\lambda+)$ says something that one is entitled to affirm. Let us suppose the second disjunct, that it is not the case that $(\lambda+)$ says something that one is entitled to affirm.

¹⁸ Of course, if Liggins were to adopt this possible response, he would have to provide *reasons* for thinking that (λ) does not say anything, to avoid a charge of *ad hockery*. Although we do not see how Liggins could avoid such a charge, we leave it to him to motivate this possible response, should he choose to adopt it.

From this it immediately follows that it is not the case that $(\lambda+)$ says something that one is entitled to affirm. Let us suppose, then, the first disjunct, viz., that $(\lambda+)$ says something that one is entitled to affirm. From this it follows both that $(\lambda+)$ says something and that what it says is something that one is entitled to affirm. From the second conjunct, it follows trivially that one is entitled to affirm what $(\lambda+)$ says. But then, by (A1) and *modus ponens*, it follows that what $(\lambda+)$ says is the case. Since $(\lambda+)$ says is that it is not the case that $(\lambda+)$ says something that one is entitled to affirm, it follows that it is not the case that $(\lambda+)$ says something that one is entitled to affirm. Thus, by disjunction elimination from our instance of the LEM, we have established that it is not the case that $(\lambda+)$ says something that one is entitled to affirm.

Given the above reasoning and what $(\lambda+)$ says, it follows that what $(\lambda+)$ says is the case and we have established that it is. Thus, by (A2) and *modus ponens*, it follows that we are entitled to affirm what $(\lambda+)$ says. But if we are entitled to affirm what $(\lambda+)$ says, then $(\lambda+)$ says something, and we are entitled to affirm this something, which is to say that $(\lambda+)$ says something that we are entitled to affirm. But this contradicts our previous result, which was that it is not the case that $(\lambda+)$ says something that we are entitled to affirm. Hence, $(\lambda+)$ yields a contradiction, in roughly the same way that (λ) did.

The forgoing reasoning involves assuming that $(\lambda+)$ says something. If Liggins were to adopt a meaningless strategy in order to block the contradictions that (λ) appears to yield, then he might want to say the same about $(\lambda+)$ —that it is not the case that $(\lambda+)$ says something. If so, then Liggins would accept that it is not the case that $(\lambda+)$ says something and, thus, in order to avoid an expressibility gap with respect to his own solution, would both accept that the sentence, ‘It is not the case that $(\lambda+)$ says something’, says something and, indeed, accept what that sentence says. Let us now consider the plausibility of this response.

As is familiar, a natural language like English has the feature of *monotonicity*.¹⁹ In particular, there is a direct inference from “It is not the case that ‘S’ says something” to (e.g.) “It is not the case that ‘S’ says something funny”. Hence, if what the former says is the case, then what the latter says is the case, too. The current attempted response to (λ) and, now, $(\lambda+)$ involves contending that what ‘It is not the case that $(\lambda+)$ says something’ says is the case and thus, as we have seen, it follows that this sentence says something. But then it follows that ‘It is not the case that $(\lambda+)$ says something funny’ says something—and, more importantly, the same must hold for ‘It is not the case that $(\lambda+)$ says something that we are entitled to affirm’. Hence, it seems that if Liggins were to accept, as a possible response to (λ) and $(\lambda+)$, that it is not the case that these sentences say anything, then it would follow that $(\lambda+)$ says something after all.

As a more desperate response, Liggins might deny that English has the monotonic property that we have highlighted above, but that seems like a highly revisionary measure, one that would require substantial argument. For this reason, we dismiss this last response and conclude that Liggins cannot resolve the paradoxicality that $(\lambda+)$ presents simply by denying that this sentence says

¹⁹ For a discussion, see Armour-Garb (2012) and Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2015), Chapter 5.

anything. Thus, $(\lambda+)$ presents a further revenge problem for Liggins's view that his alethic nihilism can provide a consistent solution to Liar-like inconsistency.

6 Concluding remarks

As we have seen, Liggins has attempted to show that at least one version of alethic fictionalism should not be adopted and that the proposed impetus for adopting such a view is unmotivated. We have shown that Liggins's objections to Beall's CMD are unfounded, and, after teasing out some implications of Liggins's proposed alternative of alethic nihilism, we have presented some new cases of putatively paradoxical sentences, which cannot obviously be treated by Liggins's approach to the Liar Paradox. In so doing, we have removed the impediments that Liggins claims thwart the adoption of Beall's (and possibly other) version(s) of alethic fictionalism, and, by generating the revenge problems, we have provided reasons for worrying about Liggins's alternative to Beall's CMD.

We have thus re-opened the door to investigating whether some version of alethic fictionalism might succeed where alethic nihilism—at least Liggins's version—has not. Beall's own CMD, for example, with its dialethic framework, might embrace the inconsistency that (λ) and $(\lambda+)$ seem to present, perhaps by expanding the scope of the fiction involved in the notions of truth and falsity, to treat talk putatively about *things said* by sentences (i.e., propositions) as involving pretense as well, taking certain inconsistencies that arise in this way of talking as thereby harmless. This expanded fictionalist view is an approach that we think well worth investigating and developing, though that is not a task that we will take up here.²⁰

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²⁰ See Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2012) for a pretense account of talk putatively about propositions, and see Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2015), Chapters 3 and 4, for the details of how such an account might be combined with a version of alethic fictionalism.

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