What is the significance of the semantical paradoxes for natural languages? In [1] Tarski answers this question as follows, taking the Epimenides as his point of reference. If a language satisfies certain conditions, then the Epimenides will be formulable in that language. If the Epimenides is formulable in a language, then that language is inconsistent. Any natural (colloquial) language is universal. If a natural language is universal, then it satisfies the conditions alluded to above. Thus, the Epimenides is formulable in a natural language. Thus, natural languages are inconsistent. Plainly, English is a natural (colloquial) language. Thus, if Tarski's reflections on the significance of the semantical paradoxes are correct, English is inconsistent.

The thesis about the inconsistency of English can strike us as mysterious for it seems utterly unclear what it means to say of a natural language (as contrasted with a logistic system or a formal theory) that it is inconsistent.

Paul Ziff is one philosopher who seems thus struck by Tarski's reflections on the Epimenides. In [3] he responds to the Tarskian reflections by arguing to the conclusion that no natural language is or can be inconsistent. While we reject Ziff's argument, we defend something similar to its conclusion: No language, natural or otherwise, is or can be inconsistent in the way that Tarski holds languages capable of formulating the Epimenides are inconsistent.

Ziff's general attitude toward the thesis that English is inconsistent is that it really makes no sense and relies for its appearance of sense on a tacit assumption about English, namely, that English is at bottom much like a logistic system. Since, according to Ziff, it makes sense to say of a logistic system that it is inconsistent, this tacit assumption lends an aura of sense to the corresponding claim about English. But really, he suggests, the claim about English lacks sense since the assumption is false. More specifically, Ziff says the following:

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The fact that the semantic paradoxes can be formulated in English has led some philosophers, primarily logicians, to the conclusion that English is in a muddled state. Some have, I believe, gone so far as to say that English is "inconsistent." What that is supposed to mean is difficult to say. To suggest that English may be inconsistent is, as it were, to liken a natural language to a logistic system. There is of course something of an analogy between the two. ([3], p. 134)

The analogy, according to Ziff, is that to the formation rules of a logistic system there correspond syntactic regularities of English, and that to the transformation rules there correspond semantic regularities. So Ziff concludes:

Thus to claim that the antinomy of the liar proves that English is inconsistent is to claim that the semantic regularities pertaining to 'true' and 'false' are analogous to transformation rules that, in conjunction with other analogues of formation and transformation rules to be found in English, lead to a contradiction. ([3], p. 135)

Can regularities lead to a contradiction? It does not seem so. For regularities are features of the world and it makes no sense to say such features lead to a contradiction. The most plausible reading we can give to Ziff assumes he was aware of this.

Given this assumption Ziff's view comes to this: (1) A logistic system can be inconsistent, for the formation and transformation rules of a logistic system can lead to a contradiction in the system. When the rules thus lead, the system is inconsistent, otherwise it is not. (2) A natural language is inconsistent only if what corresponds in the natural language to the formation and transformation rules of a logistic system could themselves lead to a contradiction in the natural language. Now (3) what corresponds in a natural language to the formation and transformation rules of a logistic system are syntactic and semantic regularities. But (4) regularities are not rules: they are features of the world and thus cannot lead to a contradiction. Thus (5) no natural language is or could be inconsistent.

II

Let's now see how Tarski might reply to Ziff. Consider the following string of symbols:

The string of symbols first displayed in Section II is not true.

Now (α) the string of symbols first displayed in Section II = 'The string of symbols first displayed in Section II is not true' and (β) 'The string of symbols first displayed in Section II is not true' is true if and only if the string of