

The Liar Paradox in Plato

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Abstract

Although most scholars trace the Liar Paradox to Plato's contemporary, Eubulides, the paper argues that Plato builds something very like the Liar Paradox into the very structure of his dialogues with significant consequences for understanding his views. After a preliminary exposition of the liar paradox it is argued that Plato builds this paradox into the formulation of many of his central doctrines, including the "Divided Line" and the "Allegory of the Cave" (both in the *Republic*) and the "Ladder of Love" (in the *Symposium*). Thus, Plato may have been the first to formulate the view that Graham Priest calls dialetheism, roughly, the view that some contradictions are, in an illuminating way, inescapable and true. The paper argues that Plato builds this Liar paradox into the formulation of his signature views because he holds that the attempt by finite human beings to theorize about transcendent realities results in the simultaneous necessity, and impossibility, of transgressing the limits of language—leading to the paradoxes (contradictions). Finally, it is argued that the existence of these paradoxes in these Platonic doctrines is the direct result of an intrinsic hermeneutical circle in Plato's aforementioned signature views.

Keywords: Plato, liar paradox, Kierkegaard, Dilthey, Wittgenstein, dialetheism

Socrates: Then there is no lying poet in a God?
Adeimantus: Not in my opinion.

(Plato, *Republic*, 382d)

Plato is a poet and a dramatist. And this does not mean, besides being a philosopher. He is a poet because he is a philosopher. (Randall, *Plato: Dramatist of the Life of Reason*, 3)

It is always difficult interpreting the works of a great philosopher, but this is especially so in Plato's case. There are

many reasons for this but one important reason is that Plato is neither just a philosopher nor an artist but a “Philosophical Artist” (Schleiermacher 1992, 4). In particular, although Plato’s dialogues are themselves poetic (Elias 1984, 1; Griswold 2012, § 6), Plato’s Socrates characterizes poets as liars (tellers of falsehoods) (Plato 1968, *Rep.* 382d). The self-reference in Plato’s views about poetry yields a paradox. Since poets are liars, and Plato is himself a poet, his own views are lies (false). But if his own views are lies, then his view that the poets lie is also false—and so poets, including Plato himself, are *not* liars. This paradox derives from the fact that the “old quarrel” between philosophy and poetry (Plato 1968, *Rep.* 607b) is internal to Plato himself. Consequently, Plato weaves (something like) the Liar Paradox (hereafter **LP**) into *the very form of presentation* of many of his signature views in his dialogues—with the result that these views are *inevitably* logically paradoxical.

LP is a paradox of *self-reference*, and Plato (or to be more precise, certain characters in his dialogues), make statements about the views in the dialogues that have a similar paradoxical character. The paper focuses on “The Divided Line” (**DL**) where Plato gives one of the central expositions of his “theory of Forms”. The paradox arises because **DL** is an image, and one of **DL**’s own claims is that images are the most inadequate way of representing the truth. I argue that the self-reference in **DL** is paradoxical in a sense *analogous* to **LP**. Thus, if **DL** is an adequate statement of the view then it is *not* an adequate statement and if it not adequate then it is adequate. I also argue that analogous paradox is found in Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” (**AOC**) in the *Republic* and his “Ladder of Love” (**LOL**) in the *Symposium*. Plato thereby makes it logically impossible to state a *non-paradoxical* interpretation of these of his core views—insuring that the hermeneutical questions surrounding the dialogues are *inescapable*.

§ I explains the basics of **LP**. § II argues that **DL** is paradoxical in a sense *analogous* to **LP**. § III argues that by building (something like) **LP** into the presentation of his views, Plato insures that his views are inescapably logically paradoxical and he does this because he believes such paradox is inevitable given the limits of human cognition. § IV explains

the relevance of these insights to the hermeneutical issues surrounding Plato's dialogues.

I. The Liar Paradox

"[One can speak of logical paradoxes when one has] a situation in which, by reasoning that seems perfectly sound, we can show both that something must be true and that it must be false. ... From earlier times we have the example of the [liar] paradox of Epimenides. ... Paradoxes of this sort were puzzling, but down through the ages logicians have not attached much significance to them [believing that they] surely involve some trifling sort of verbal confusion, ... That comfortable illusion has been shattered in recent times." (Barker 1964, 82-83)¹

Although some scholars trace **LP** to the Epiminides paradox (circa 600 BC),² most trace **LP proper** to Plato's rough contemporary, Eubulides: "[S] says he is lying. Is what S says true or false?" (Dowden 2001, § 1) Since all propositions are either true or false, if it is true that S is lying, then since lying is telling falsehoods, it is false that S is lying. But if it is false that S is lying, then S is telling the truth when he says he is lying. If it is true that he is lying, then it is false that he is lying. P implies not-P. But if it is false that he is lying, then it is true that he is lying. Not-P implies P. It seems that Eubulides' statement is true if and only if it is false.³

Eubulides' formulation, however, contains inessential elements. There is no need to refer to a *person*, to what s/he *says*, or even to invoke the difficult *social* notion of *lying* (Mahon 2008, § 1). The essence of **LP** is captured in the self-referential sentence Q: "This sentence is false" (Dowden 2001, § 1). If Q is true, then it's true that Q is false. So Q is false. On the other hand, if Q is false, then it's false that Q is false. So Q is true. Q is true if and only if Q is false.

Some distinguish between the "simple falsity" **LP** ("This sentence is false") and the "simple untruth" **LP** ("This sentence is not true"), but it is sufficient for my purposes to treat these as two versions of *simple LP* (hereafter **SLP**) (Beall and Glanzberg 2011, § 1.2). Similarly, some see analogies between **LP** and Liar Cycles, Boolean Compounds and Infinite

sequences involving self-reference (Beall and Glanzberg 2011, §§ 1.3–1.5), and, some distinguish both the “Strengthened Liar Paradox and the Contingent Liar Paradox from **LP** proper (Dowden 2001, § 1). The strengthened **LP** is illustrated by: “This sentence is not true, i.e., it is false or meaningless” (Dowden 2001, § 1). An example of the Contingent **LP** (hereafter **CLP**) is the case in which the last sentence in today’s *NYT* is “The last sentence is tomorrow’s *NYT* is true,” and the last sentence in tomorrow’s *NYT* is “The last sentence in yesterday’s *NYT* is false” (Dowden 2001, § 1). This is called a contingent liar paradox because the paradox depends on contingent facts about the *NYT*. Fortunately, Liar Cycles, Infinite Sequences, Boolean Compounds, **CLP** and Strengthened **LP** are inessential to this paper. Although some of these exotic forms of **LP** may be found in Plato, I here argue only that (something like) **SLP** is found in Plato.⁴

It is worthwhile briefly to discuss the Epimenides-Paradox (hereafter **EP**). Although some scholars do not classify **EP** as a version of **LP proper**, it does *prefigure* **LP** in certain respects. The 19th century philosopher, Thomas Fowler (1969, 163) explains **EP** as follows:

Epimenides the Cretan says, 'that all the Cretans are liars,' but Epimenides is himself a Cretan; therefore he is himself a liar. But if he be a liar, what he says is untrue, and consequently the Cretans are veracious; but Epimenides is a Cretan, and [so] what he says is true; hence the Cretans are liars, Epimenides is himself a liar, and what he says is untrue. Thus we may go on alternately proving that Epimenides and the Cretans are truthful and untruthful.⁵

Fowler represents **EP** as involving a *dialectical* movement from one horn of the paradox and the other. Fowler is correct that if all Cretans are liars, and Epimenides is a Cretan, then Epimenides is a liar. But his subsequent reasoning is flawed. He goes on to infer that “the Cretans” (i.e., “all Cretans”) are veracious. But if Epimenides’ universal claim is a lie (false), that only implies that *some* Cretans are veracious (Quine 1966, 8-9). One *cannot* infer either that Epimenides is or is not veracious. Epimenides’ statement is not paradoxical when false. Thus, **EP** is similar in some respects, but *not* logically equivalent to **SLP**.

In **SLP** the self-reference that leads to the paradox is internal to the sentence and does not involve any essential reference to a *speaker* who refers to the truth of what s/he *says*.⁶ Nor does **SLP** presuppose any contingent facts about the speaker or situation so it is distinct from **CLP**. The next section discusses the role of (something like) **SLP** in Plato’s dialogues.

II. The Liar Paradox in “The Divided Line”

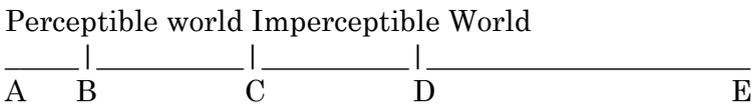
“Among the ancients Plato is termed the inventor of dialectic. ... We are aware that everything finite, instead of being stable and ultimate, is rather changeable and transient; and this is exactly what we mean by the dialectic of the finite, by which the finite, as implicitly other than it is, is forced beyond its own immediate or natural being to turn suddenly into its opposite.” (Hegel, 1978, § 8)

“[A] profound experience in Socrates own life impels us to ask whether [...] the birth of an artistic Socrates is altogether a contradiction in terms. (Nietzsche 1967, § 14)”

The central importance of “the Divided Line” (**DL**) in Plato’s writings is indubitable (Smith 2005, § 6.a). Although there are many interesting points about **DL** that could be made, the present section focuses on one aspect of its logical structure. Plato’s aim in **DL** is to give a picture (image) of the hierarchy of the different levels of reality and the different levels of cognition appropriate to these different ontological levels (Brumbaugh 1981, 14). Socrates draws a line which is first divided into two parts of *unequal* lengths, AC and CE:



The top (right) part, CE, represents the imperceptible world, and the bottom (left) part, AC, represents the perceptible world. Each of these two parts is further subdivided in the *same* proportions as the original division of the line, yielding four parts in total:



AB represents the *lower* part of the perceptible world. BC represents the *higher* part of the perceptible world. CD represents the *lower* part of the imperceptible world. DE represents the *higher* part of the imperceptible world.

Ontologically, DE represents the highest level of being, the Forms. CD represents the next highest level, roughly, mathematical objects. BC represents perceptible objects. AB represents images of perceptible objects. There are four levels of being, from the highest to the lowest degree of reality: Forms, mathematical entities, perceptible objects and images.⁷

Despite the fact that the higher level, CE, represents various grades of imperceptible entities, and the lower, AC, various grades of perceptible entities, there is a *resemblance*, although imperfect, between items at one level and those at the next.⁸ The images in AB resemble the objects in BC, which, in turn, resemble the mathematical objects in CD (perhaps as an imperfect physical cube resembles a perfect mathematical cube). Finally, the mathematical items in CD resemble the perfect Forms in DE.⁹

A similar division characterizes the epistemological interpretation of the line. Corresponding to the Forms in DE is the type of cognition appropriate to Forms. Corresponding to the mathematical entities in CD is “thought” which Plato explains by analogy with the kind of hypothetical thinking in geometry and calculation (Plato 1968, *Rep.* 510c). Corresponding to the physical objects in BC is belief (*doxa*), including what *we* (not he) would call empirical knowledge. Finally, corresponding to the level of images in AB is opinion or illusion. The idea is that human beings begin their cognitive lives with illusory opinions, rise *via* experience to empirical beliefs about perceptible objects, until, with a grasp of mathematics, human beings rise to the level of thought by grasping the mathematical patterns in physical phenomena, and finally, a few gifted individuals may rise to the level of genuine philosophical “dialectical” knowledge (Plato 1968, *Rep.* 511b-c).

There are many interesting points one can make about the nuances in DL, but for present purposes, what is of interest is only one aspect of its “logical” structure. Specifically, it is a part of the thesis of DL that the mode of cognition appropriate

to **AB** is so far removed from reality that it is tantamount to *illusion*. Insofar as one cognizes an object in that way, perhaps via a visual or auditory image of a tiger, one is far removed from genuine knowledge. As delightful as such images are, no one could confuse the image of a tiger on paper or Blake's verbal image in "The Tyger" with scientific knowledge of tigers.

Although Plato's intuitive idea in **DL** has had tremendous influence, it too is a disguised paradox when it is applied *self-referentially*. For, **DL** claims that images are the lowest and most illusory form of cognition. Unfortunately, **DL** is itself an image. Even worse, as an image, which yields only illusions, it is employed to represent the highest form of cognition. **DL** offers, not a cognition of imagination, which would not necessarily be paradoxical, but of an imagination of cognition, which is.¹⁰

A logician asks: If S tells you she is lying, should you believe her? Similarly, if Plato tells you that his view about the relation of the perceptible and imperceptible worlds is given in the form of an image (**DL**), part of the meaning of which is that images are the most illusory form of cognition, should you believe him? If **DL** is an adequate cognition, then, since **DL** is itself an image and images are illusory, then **DL** is itself illusory. On the other hand, if **DL** is illusory, then its assertion that images are illusory is itself illusory. But then **DL**'s imagery is *not* illusory. If the imagery in **DL** is adequate, then it is not adequate, and if its imagery is not adequate, then it is adequate. The logic of **DL** parallels that of **SLP**.

There are, of course, major dis-analogies between **SLP** and the present account of **DL**. Most obviously, the notions of truth and falsity, so central to the proper formulation of **SLP**, are replaced, in the present account, respectively, by adequate and inadequate, and there is a big difference between saying that something is true and that it is adequate, and between saying that something is false, and that it is inadequate.

That is true, but the present claim is not that **DL** is a simple mechanical rendering of **SLP**. The claim is that the logic of **DL** is *analogous* to **SLP**. It is in Plato's nature never simply to *copy* some idea, such as **SLP**, from another thinker, but, with

all artistry and logical acumen at his disposal, to transform it into something distinctly his own.¹¹

In fact, one need not use only the truth-predicates, true and false, in order to generate a paradox analogous to **DL**. Consider the sentence **Z**: “This sentence is profoundly misleading”. Once again, it is assumed that **Z** is either true or false. If **Z** is true, then, since **Z** states that **Z** is profoundly misleading, it is true that **Z** is profoundly misleading. But that means that it is profoundly misleading that **Z** is profoundly misleading. So **Z** is not profoundly misleading. P implies not-P. On the other hand, if **Z** is false, then, since **Z** states that **Z** is profoundly misleading, it is false that **Z** is profoundly misleading. But that means that it is true that **Z** is profoundly misleading. Not-P implies P. Although this formulation of the paradox replaces the truth-predicate, “false”, with the predicate “profoundly misleading”, one gets a paradox *analogous* to **SLP**. Since **DL** implies that **DL** is itself *epistemologically and metaphysically* profoundly misleading, **DL** is akin to **Z**: “This sentence, **DL**, is profoundly metaphysically and epistemologically misleading.”¹² That is, Plato employs in **DL** (something like) the paradox of self-reference in **SLP** to express what he sees as a basic *metaphysical* and epistemological paradox rooted in the limitations of human cognition.¹³

It is, however, *possible* to state the paradox in **DL** in a form much closer to the standard formulation of **SLP**. In the *Sophist*, Plato talks of images as true or false (Cornford 1957, 188, 201, 212, 302; Kalkavage 2001, 15). Thus, if Plato tells you that **DL** is true, should you believe him? If **DL** is true, then, since **DL** states that images are false, and since **DL** is itself an image, then **DL** is false. On the other hand, if **DL** is false, then **DL**’s claim that images are false is false. But then **DL** is true. If **DL** is true, then it is false, and if it is false, it is true. The logic of **SLP** and **DL** are *analogous* because both involve similar kinds of *self-reference*.

Despite the possibility of stating **DL** in this form closer to **SLP**, the present author prefers the *weaker* formulation according to which **DL** is only *analogous* to **SLP**. That is, although it is possible to *recast* **DL** in a form that looks more like a straightforward logical paradox, the product would no

longer be Plato's **DL**, but a watered-down substitute. What I find intriguing about Plato's version of **DL** is that he *transforms* **SLP** by *enriching* it with his own metaphysical and epistemological views and casts it in his unique artistic form in order to express his unique insight into a fundamental paradox in finite human cognition.

It is significant that a similar logic is found in other passages in Plato as well. It is found in the "Allegory of the Cave" (hereafter **AOC**), with which **DL** is closely connected. For **AOC** presents a picture of humankind's capacity to achieve philosophical truth, where part of the meaning of **AOC** is that **AOC** itself is profoundly inadequate to convey that kind of truth. If Plato tells you that he is going to give you an allegory to convey the nature of philosophical truth, where, he explains, part of the meaning of which is that his allegory is profoundly inadequate to convey what it attempts to convey, should you believe him?

The same pattern is also present in Diotima's image of the "ladder of love" (hereafter **LOL**) in the *Symposium* (Plato 1997d, 211e), where part of the meaning of her image is that the understanding of beauty achieved by images is profoundly inadequate to the true vision of "beauty's very self—unsullied, unalloyed, and freed from the mortal taint that haunts the frailer loveliness of flesh and blood". But that "mortal taint" infects Diotima's **LOL** itself. When Diotima gives her image of the nature and apprehension of Beauty, where part of the point of her image is that such images are profoundly inadequate to the kind of truth he is trying to convey, should Socrates believe her? It would seem that the "ways of paradox" (Quine 1966, 20) are deeply entrenched in Plato's dialogues. This should not be a surprise. It is simply another manifestation of the fact that a poetic philosopher, who vehemently denounces poets as liars but delivers his signature philosophical views in poetic form.

III. Logical Paradox and the Limits of Language and Thought

"[O]ne should not think slightly of the paradox. For the paradox is the source of the thinkers passion, and the thinker without paradox is like the lover without feeling: a paltry mediocrity. But the highest

pitch in every paradox is ... to will to its own downfall and so it is ... the supreme paradox of Reason to seek a collision, ... The paradox of all thought is to discover something that thought cannot think. This passion is ... present in all thinking, even in the thinking of the individual [who] participates in something transcending himself.” (Kierkegaard 1974, 46)

Although many scholars have remarked that Plato creates obstacles to understanding his real views, there is a qualitative difference between using various artistic devices to make it *difficult* to discern his views and building a logical paradox into the very formulations of those views. But Plato did precisely that insofar as he builds (something like) **SLP** into the very fabric of his dialogues at **DL**, **AOC** and **LOL**.

It is important to note that the logic of **SLP** is inherent in **DL** itself. It does not matter whether **DL** is asserted by Plato, by one of his characters, or by anyone at all. Just as “This sentence is false” is internally paradoxical, so too is **DL**. But why would Plato wish to make the expression of his signature views inherently paradoxical?

In his essay on Plato’s lecture on the Good, Whitehead (1966, § XIII) suggests that creativity involves the “inflow from the infinite into the finite”. However, for anyone who holds that the perceptible world is an inherently imperfect copy of the perfect imperceptible world, such an “inflow” is inherently problematic. Since Plato’s own words are part of the imperfect perceptible world, the imperfect human medium of words must also be incapable of conveying the infinite perfection of the imperceptible world.

Kierkegaard suggests that any attempt by finite human beings to “participate in something transcending” themselves *inevitably* involves one in the “supreme paradox of all thought” – the discovery of something thought cannot think. Plato’s “theory” of Forms is just such an attempt to think a transcendent something that cannot be thought. If Plato is self-conscious about the paradox in such an attempt, it is only to be expected that his chosen form of expression must reflect these limitations. The present suggestion is that Plato’s dialogues are not so much an attempt to think the Forms *per se* as to think the fact that human beings both must, and yet cannot, adequately think them.¹⁴ Thus, all such attempts must be

paradoxical. If this is correct, the logical paradox woven into the fabric of **DL**, **AOC**, and **LOL** is not merely the form in which Plato clothes the message but is the essence of the message itself. To view Plato as a straightforward theorist of the Forms, without taking account of the intrinsic paradox in the attempt to think what cannot be thought, is to fail to see that, using Kierkegaard's words, the aim of the dialogues is to think "the supreme paradox of Reason, ... though this paradox must in one way or another, prove its [own] undoing."¹⁵ **DL** "proves its own undoing" insofar as, sharing the logic of **SLP**, it implies that if **DL** is an adequate cognition, then it is not adequate, and if it is not an adequate cognition, then it is adequate.

It is important not to confuse my central thesis here with the mere epistemological claim that one cannot know Plato's real views in the dialogues. It is, in fact, my opinion of that one can, at least sometimes, know some of Plato's views. The point of the present paper is logical, not epistemological, although it *may* have consequences for the way one conceives such epistemological issues. My claim is, rather, that one cannot formulate certain key views in the dialogues (**DL**, **AOC** and **LOL**) without falling into (something like) **SLP**, that is, into logical paradox. This does not imply that one cannot know those doctrines. It implies that one cannot know them un-paradoxically. Nor does anything in the present argument imply that one cannot *infer* Plato's these doctrines from the views of the characters in the dialogues. Once again, it only implies that one cannot infer them from the views in the dialogues un-paradoxically. Thus, even in his signature "views," and perhaps especially there, Plato presents the reader, not some much with views as paradoxes. *Dialetheias* is the 20th-21st century view, associated with modern paraconsistent logics, that some contradictions are true, where this is seen as deeply illuminating (Priest 2009, § 2.2).¹⁶ On the present view, Plato holds that it is deeply illuminating that the human intellect, given its limitations, cannot know the *ultimate* truth about the cosmos without falling into (something like) logical paradox, and he builds this humbling insight into the logical structure of key views stated in his dialogues. Perhaps, therefore,

dialetheias too must be reckoned among those many “footnotes to Plato” to which Whitehead (1978, 39) alludes.

IV. Hermeneutical Implications of Plato’s Liar Paradox

“[When] Medieval metaphysics seeks to reconcile the Greek system of eternal truths with the plan of God, the insolubility of the contradiction manifests itself. For one cannot harmonize the living ... experience of the will ... with the immutable world of eternal ideas [...]” (Dilthey 1988, 286)

Hermeneutics, most generally, takes the *interpretation* of texts far more seriously than is usual (Grondin 1994, 20). One of the most important hermeneutical principles is called the “hermeneutical circle”—the view that the understanding of the parts of a text turns on the understanding of the whole text, which, in turn can only be understood on the basis of the understanding of the parts of the text (Rickman 1979, 34; Ramberg 2005, § 1 *et sq.*). This circular relationship between part and whole creates a dialectical “movement” back and forth between the understanding of the parts and the whole (Ramberg 2005, § 1). I argue that the fact that Plato builds something like **LP** into the very formulation of his views means that a *de facto* hermeneutical circle is built into the very fabric of such views.¹⁷

As noted earlier, Schleiermacher and others have observed that Plato chooses certain artistic “forms of communication” that make the issue of interpretation more pressing in Plato’s case than it is for most philosophers. But it is one thing for Plato to employ a means of communication that make understanding his view difficult. It is quite another for him to formulate his views in such a way that they are *inherently logically paradoxical* (i.e., if the view at issue is true then it is false and if it is false then it is true). By formulating his views in this paradoxical way Plato insures not merely that there *is* no definitive statement of his views but that there logically *cannot* be a definitive *consistent* formulation of his views.¹⁸

To see the importance of this point consider Schleiermacher’s (1992, 5) suggestion that despite all the roadblocks Plato places in the way of discerning his real views

someone S might claim “as far as possible to divine” Plato’s views when they are not obvious. Schleiermacher admits such divination is achieved only with great difficulty.¹⁹ But Schleiermacher has not appreciated the full depth of the problem. For, even if S has somehow managed correctly to divine Plato’s views, S must face an additional problem not seen by Schleiermacher, i.e., if S has correctly divined Plato’s views, what precisely has S divined? Since, on my view, what S has divined (in **DL**, **AOC**, **LOL**, etc.) is *inherently* logically paradoxical then S, even with the benefit of his/her divination, has *not* managed to get hold of anything unambiguous and clear-cut. Rather, S has only managed to divine something that is true if false and false if true. Thus, even if S has somehow “divined” Plato’s views, the question of interpretation, and the associated “dialectical movement” back and forth between parts and whole, *necessarily* remains at the fore.

Second, on my interpretation, Plato builds something like the hermeneutical circle *into the very logical fabric* of his views. Consider the image in **DL** of a hierarchy of four different levels of understanding, with images at the very bottom, belief/opinion at the next highest level, (mathematical) thought at the next higher level, and “dialectic” at the highest level. Let us call the image drawn by Socrates to convey the view of **DL** *a part* of the meaning conveyed by **DL**. Similarly, let us call the *entire* set of verbal formulations of that view conveyed by **DL** *the whole* represented by **DL**! One must now ask: How is one supposed to employ that mere part, the image drawn by Socrates to understand the whole **DL**-view conveyed by that image-part? Since that image, being a mere image, cannot, so to speak, “show its sense”,²⁰ it stands in need of interpretation by reference to the whole **DL**-view allegedly conveyed by that image. For *it is only by reference to that whole DL-view* that the significance of such image-parts is explained. There is no general problem with the fact that an image used to convey a more encompassing view. Einstein employed certain images to convey his theory of general relativity and there is no *general* objection to that procedure. Plato’s case, however, is different. For, when one consults *the whole formulated view* of **DL** in order to grasp the significance of the image-part of **DL**, one

finds that mere images, such as that image-part of **DL**, are inadequate to convey that whole **DL**-view. The image-part of **DL** purports to represent the meaning of **DL**, but the whole **DL**-view implies that that image-part does *not* adequately represent the meaning of **DL**! But one is not done yet. Since the whole view conveyed by **DL** implies that the image-part of **DL** does *not* adequately represent the whole **DL**-view, one must infer that the thesis of the image-part of **DL** (that images are inadequate representations of the truth) is itself inadequate. But that means that the thesis of the image-part that such images are an inadequate means to convey the truth is adequate after all! Once again, this refers one back to the whole **DL**-view, which, again, informs us that such images *are* inadequate ... and so on. One is caught in a circular dialectical “movement” from part to whole, back to the part again, back to the whole again *ad infinitum*. The appearance of this dialectical *movement* at just this place in **DL** should not be surprising. Plato calls the most superior kind of knowledge in **DL** “dialectics” and describe a *movement* from the perceptible images to “the beginning of the whole” and “back down” to the images again (Plato 1968, *Rep.* 511b-c). Since **AOC** and **LOL** share the same basic structure as **DL**, a similar dialectical movement and hermeneutical circle is present in these passages as well.

In conclusion, whereas the orthodox view is that Plato is, in **DL**, **AOC**, and **LOL**, expressing some of his most profound philosophical “theories,” he is actually doing something quite different. He is trying to show that the attempt by finite beings to theorize about the relation between their finite “parts” (including their image-parts) and the transcendent whole leads to the simultaneous necessity, and impossibility, of transgressing the limits of language—resulting in a logical paradox analogous to **SLP**. Thus, Plato’s real “message” in **DL**, **AOC** and **LOL** does *not* consist in the statement of a theory about the relation between perceptible particulars and transcendent Forms. It rather tries to show that the attempt by finite beings such as our self to state such theories produces a paradox-generating hermeneutical circle. Indeed, one might say that the fact that this paradox-generating hermeneutical circle

occurs at these fundamental points in the dialogues, at the limits of finite language and thought, *is* the real message in **DL**, **AOC** and **LOL**. Perhaps that hermeneutical circle at the very base of the attempt to understand reality is also one of those “footnotes” to Plato to which Whitehead referred?²¹

NOTES

¹ See also Hofstadter (1999, 24) and Spade and Read (2009, § 1.2).

² It is not clear either that Epimenides himself, or St. Paul, in his reference to Epimenides’ statement in his *Epistle to Titus*, recognized its paradoxical character (Kneale and Kneale 1978, 28).

³ As becomes important later, paraconsistent logics see this as a possible view (Beall and Glanzberg 2011, §§ 4.1-4.1.1). Such views were not, however, current in Plato’s time, unless, perhaps, one counts some of the Sophists—but if the present paper is correct this sort of logic may be *implicit* in Plato.

⁴ This is not to deny that, with some ingenuity, some of these exotic species of **LP** *might* also be found in Plato. I do believe that something like **CLP** is found in Plato’s works but that is a matter for another paper.

⁵ For a modern formulation of the Epimenides paradox see Sorenson (2005).

⁶ For a good discussion of the paradoxes of self-reference see Barwise and Etchemendy (1989).

⁷ Brumbaugh (1981, 143-147) states that **BC** represents physical objects and human societies. In fact, Plato identifies the items in **BC** as animals, plants and artifacts (Plato 1968, *Rep.* 510a)—roughly, matter organized by mind (See Patterson 1985, 27), but this is a nicety for another occasion.

⁸ Although each level is an image of the level above it, something is lost in the copying from one level to the lower ones, i.e., Helen may be beautiful but she is not nearly so beautiful as Beauty-Itself.

⁹ The resemblance-claim is that items at one level are “likenesses” of items at the next (Plato 1968, *Rep.* 510a-b). In fact, the resemblance claim is more complicated (Patterson 1985, 29-31; White 1976, 72, 84 n 42), but this particular issue is not essential to the present paper.

¹⁰ **DL** is actually presented to the reader an image of an image of an image, i.e., Plato’s image in written words of Socrates’ image in spoken words of an image drawn on some surface. With this artistic device Plato emphasizes just how *enormously* distant **DL** is from conveying adequate truth.

¹¹ Consider, for example, Plato’s transformation of the old Pythagorean views into his views in the *Timaeus* (Plato 1997a).

¹² One might object that **Z** does *not* generate a paradox analogous to **SLP** because it can be true that it is profoundly misleading that **Z** is profoundly misleading without its being the case that **Z** is *false*. However, **Z** does not merely say that **Z** is profoundly misleading. **Z** says that **Z** is profoundly *metaphysically and epistemologically* misleading and when one reckons in the *details* of Plato’s metaphysical and epistemological views in **DL** one gets a version to **SLP**. For example, part of the metaphysical picture involved in

DL's image of the relation between the Forms and the perceptible world is that the Forms are like spatial and temporal individuals, e.g., an individual red patch resembles a universal. But the red patch is in space and time while the Form of redness is non-spatial and non-temporal (Wedberg 1971, 48). Thus, **Z** is not merely profoundly metaphysically and epistemologically misleading in some *general sense*. **Z** is profoundly metaphysically and epistemologically misleading in that *it asserts or implies literal falsehoods of the Forms*, some of which falsehoods, by the way, are similar to Parmenides' criticisms of the theory of Forms in the *Parmenides* (Plato 1997 d).

¹³ This is not meant to imply that Plato knew of Eubulides' **SLP**, although he may have (Sorenson 2005, 102). If Plato did not know of it, this only means that Plato independently formulated something *analogous* to it.

¹⁴ The idea that language about the divine is inherently paradoxical is found in religious Platonists such as Augustine (See O'Donnell 1985, 20-24 and O'Donnell 1994).

¹⁵ Aquinas, like many others, has failed to see this and misunderstood Plato as a straightforward theorist of the Forms. In *Summa Theologica* (Aquinas 1997, Q 88. Art. 1) Aquinas states the Plato thought that "immaterial substances" can be known by us, and known first, because the "immaterial Forms" are the "proper objects" of the human intellect. By contrast, Aquinas himself holds that human intelligence "in the present state of life" is suited only to understand material things, with the consequence that human beings cannot understand "separate immaterial substances by themselves." But Aquinas fails to see that Plato *shares* his reservations about the capacity of human minds in the present life adequately to cognize immaterial existences because he fails to recognize the paradox in Plato's formulations of **DL**, **AOC**, and **LOL**. These do not constitute a *theory* of Forms *per se*, but are, roughly, what Aquinas (1997, Q12. Art 3. Reply Obj. 3) calls a "vision of the imagination" employing "some mode of likeness" (See also Q88. Art 3. Reply Obj. 3). Aquinas (1997, Q12. Art 4) did allow that human beings *can* know "incorporeal substances", but held that this is possible, "in the present life", *not by nature, but only by grace*, an option not available to Plato. For, Plato finds himself in the position of a finite natural intelligence, without the benefit of God's grace to remedy his deficit, attempting to comprehend the supernatural Forms, *and it is that which generates the paradox in DL, AOC and LOL*.

¹⁶ The ideas that human thought, and, in some sense, reality its self, is inherently paradoxical, and that this is deeply illuminating, also appears in certain forms in Kant and Hegel (Taylor 1975, 529-30).

¹⁷ Although hermeneutics is often thought of as a modern development the word "hermeneutics" is a modern Latinized version of the word *hermeneutike* that is first found in several of Plato's works—although its precise intended meaning in Plato is controversial (Grondin 1994, 21-23).

¹⁸ It would not be inappropriate to recall the burst of philosophical creativity occasioned by Gödel's proof that there can be no consistent axiomatic system of arithmetic (Raatikainen 2015, §§ 4 and 6).

¹⁹ See Grodin's (1994, 21-23) discussion of Schleiermacher view that Plato's real views might be "divined".

²⁰ The expression is borrowed from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (4.022). See McDonough (1986, Chap. VI).

²¹ See note 17 above.

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