

## EPIMENIDES

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**Abstract.** This presents the Epimenides and some related paradoxes with a brief history. It is then argued that the paradoxes arise from mistaken assumptions about what the relevant problem sentences say. For example, one paradox has the sentence A: “The sentence A is not true” and two premises: (i) that a sentence is true iff what it says is true and (ii) what the sentence A says is that the sentence A is not true. Premise (ii) is false. A similar mistake about what is said is involved in the Epimenides. Paradoxes involving other “propositional attitudes” such as belief, require different treatment, but the proper interpretation of the words involved is, again, the primary requirement for relief.

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1. Eubulides of Megara was a contemporary of Aristotle. He is associated via translation with “I am lying”. Much has been made of the question as to what is to be made of that. As a scholarly question, it is unpromising. The general question, what is to be made of someone’s saying “I am lying” is worse, a complex (=loaded) question with the false presupposition there is some one thing that is what is to be made of someone’s asserting that sentence. The range of options was reduced by moving to “What I am saying is false” and then finally, to “A. The sentence A is not true”, eliminating the user and leaving the sentence to do the speaking. Then, against the (correct) background assumption that a sentence is true iff what it says is true, the judgment that (Says): what the sentence A says is that the sentence A is not true, entails that the sentence A is true iff the sentence A is not true. That is a contradiction. Combined with that correct standard for truth of a sentence, (Says) leads to a contradiction. I

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conclude that (Says) is false. But (Says) just follows the words of A. If a sentence doesn't accurately convey what it says, what can?

2. I have argued that A says that A is not true and in so saying, also says that it is not true that A is not true. That being contradictory, and thus false, A is not true. That is, I believe, much better than the ruling that A is true iff A is not true. A verdict of "contradiction" is preferable to a contradictory verdict. (It is also common to attribute the contradictory verdict to some other "agent", usually the language that allowed the construction of the sentence.) My verdict is based on the inconsistency of A. A's saying cannot have that basis. Having the basis and providing it are fundamentally different.

3. My assessment of A has been dismissed with the comment that a proper analysis is conducted under the stipulation that A says "only that A is not true" – that and nothing else. The idea that such stipulation is possible is encouraged by the nominalist idea that the premises or conclusions of arguments are sentences. So one who says "What I am saying is false" cannot be saying that it is false that what they are saying is false, because that requires a different sentence. If someone says to me "Bill is a bachelor" and I reply "So Bill is not married" and they reply, "I didn't say that", I am warned that this may be a difficult conversation. It may turn out Bill has a baccalaureate degree. It is not impossible there may be communication. But recognizing that a sentence may convey a proposition that could be made clearer in different words is an essential step in understanding dialogue.

It is crucial to go even farther, to see that the proposition expressed by words may depend on who is using them and how they are used, not merely in general, but by that person. My use of the same words as A expresses a different proposition. So "the proposition that A is not true" is a slippery descriptive phrase. This is the fundamental difficulty raised by the semantic paradoxes –the difficulty of adequately describing what is said. When I speak using such as "the proposition that A is not true", I am inclined to say that A, in asserting that, "also" asserts that it is not true that A is not true. But then, "that" is not what I assert when I assert "the proposition that A is not true". This is a source of unclarity. I

sometimes speak of such as “that A is not true” as “a proposition simulacrum”. That will not suffice, but I hope there will be a point here that can be seen through what follows.

It is helpful to keep in mind that such as B: “B is both true and not true” or C: “C is not true and not-not true” have not been regarded as posing any special difficulties. They are simple contradictions. The trouble with A is the assumption that the proposition that it is not true that A is not true is not said by A –it just follows from what is said by A. This assumption overestimates the adequacy of repeating the words of a sentence as a means of conveying what it says. For many sentences, this is adequate, especially when indexical terms are successfully replaced. Paradoxes are just one warning against complacency about the assumption. (For another warning, just try making sense of a historical philosopher relying entirely on direct quotations.)

4. I have been asked to talk today about the Epimenides Paradox. The essential idea for relief from paradox is the same, though many different related paradoxes have each their own interesting features. (Today, you may not witness any broken records, but I may sound like one.)

Epimenides of Knossus, in Crete, was much earlier than Eubulides. His dates are unknown, but his name is firmly associated with the translation “All Cretans are liars”. It is interesting that, while the general question as to what is to be made of someone (a Cretan) saying that is even worse than with Eubulides, the scholarly question is more fruitful. St. Paul, in his Epistle to Titus (1.12) warns that Cretans are untrustworthy, saying “one of their own prophets said ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.’ This is true.” Paul is capable of irony, but there is reason to regard his understanding of the quotation from Epimenides as accurate. Epimenides was angry at his fellow Cretans for denying the immortality of Zeus. He is translated as writing “They fashioned a tomb for you, holy and high one, Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies\*. But you are not dead: you live and abide forever, for in you we live and move and have our being.” (\*Note that “lazy gluttons” and “idle bellies” are translations of the same original.) This could have been an inspiration for Cleanthes’ much later Hymn to Zeus. Epimenides had no intention of calling himself a liar and even less of claiming that every

assertion ever made by a Cretan is a lie. Furthermore, someone could assert "We Cretans are liars", including himself, with no intention of referring to that assertion.

5. "A speaker's intentions do not always determine what the speaker has said." That is very true, notably in legal dealings about contracts. Not having intended to accept a certain obligation does not mean that you have not done so in signing the contract. That is not a good standard for dialogue in philosophy. This is not to say that a speaker cannot unknowingly and unintentionally accept a certain obligation or become committed to something false. It is just that this cannot be fairly determined in general merely by what is generally understood from sentences initially asserted in the dialogue. A speaker may learn, to their chagrin, that what they intentionally said entails a falsehood. But this has to begin from what is intentionally, knowingly said.

6. The descent from Epimenides' "All Cretans are liars" to (Ep) "All Cretan assertions are false" (as a Cretan assertion) is further from the original intention than in the case of the Eubulides. On the standard interpretation, which takes all assertions as either true or false and takes the sentence asserted to be or to exactly represent the proposition asserted, Ep cannot be true, since its truth entails its falsity. It is held that this entails that some Cretan assertion is not false, and thus true. This did not seem as disturbing to the uninitiated as the Eubulides, since it is so obvious that there must have been many true assertions by Cretans. Mavens were not so complacent. They held that it is only a contingent truth that some Cretan assertions are true and the also contingent premise that a Cretan asserted (Ep) should be logically independent of that.

7. One response is appeal to the Kantian doctrine that lying is not universalizable, that it is impossible for there to be a language in use in a community such that all assertions made in it are lies. Then the contingent premise that there is a Cretan language in use would suffice to prove that some Cretan assertion is true, so that including the additional premise that a Cretan asserted (Ep) would not require it to have any paradoxical consequence. However, the Kantian view about lying not

being universalizable is questionable and only complicates the logical question about (Ep).

8. That complication can be avoided in the following descendant. We build a shed, working in complete silence. We go in and assert (Shed) "All assertions made in this shed are false". Then we go out and burn the shed to ashes, seemingly having ensured that (Shed) is the only assertion made in the shed. That assertion cannot be true and that entails, on the standard view, that at least one assertion made in the shed is not false, but true. On the standard view, there is no such assertion. That is not consistent with the verdict that (Shed) is false.

9. My response is that what is asserted by uttering the words of (Shed) in the shed includes the assertion that it is false that every assertion made in the shed is false. Asserting that all A's are B's accomplishes predicating being a B of each thing that is an A. This need not be accomplished knowingly. I assert that all men are mortal and thereby attribute mortality to each of some eight billion humans. For the vast majority of these, I do not know I have attributed mortality to them, because I know nothing of them, but I have. (Note that these unknowing and unintended attributions of mortality are fairly ascribed because one who knowingly asserts that all men are mortal should know that entails making such attributions.) An assertion that every assertion of kind H is K attributes being K to every assertion of kind H, whether or not the assertor knows they have done that. To attribute truth to a proposition is to assert it. To attribute falsity is to assert its negation. Asserting (Shed) in the shed attributes falsity to the proposition that all assertions made in the shed are false. That takes assertoric responsibility for the negation, that it is false that all shed assertions are false.

10. So what is the verdict about shed assertions? There was an assertion made using (Shed) and it is contradictory. If that was the only assertion in the shed, then all shed assertions are false. That is using the words of (Shed). But I am not making the same assertion as was made using those same words in the shed.

Suppose that, rather than (Shed), all we said in the shed was “Bill is a bachelor and Bill is a plumber” and Bill is married and is a plumber. Count the conjunction as what was said and all assertions made in the shed are false. But asserting “P and Q” is asserting P and asserting Q. And also “P and Q”? We can count one false, or one false, one true, or two false, one true. What about “Bill is a bachelor plumber”? In a formal system, counting parts can be, well, more systematic. But the important point is not missing what is said. Counting is usually not so important.

It may seem important for my approach. I say that asserting the words of (Shed) in the shed asserts the contradiction that all assertions in the shed are false and it is false that all assertions in the shed are false. It may seem that, if that conjunction were all that was said in the shed, then since it is contradictory and thus false, its first conjunct must be true. Since conjuncts in an assertion are themselves asserted, there is a true assertion in the shed after all. This easily leads into paradoxical inconsistency.

If the only words in the shed were (Shed+): “All assertions made in this shed are false and it is false that all assertions made in this shed are false”, what is asserted is unproblematically false. Does that mean the first conjunct is true? And would that make the second conjunct true? And would we then be in a paradox? What we need to keep track of is what we are making of the words, what we are finding them to say. If that judgment of ours is contradictory, then we are mistaken. That what is said is contradictory can be correct.

The proposition simulacrum “that all assertions made in the shed are false” causes confusion because its words do not simply express one proposition which remains fixed regardless of who is using those words.

**11.** Other paradoxes involve other propositional attitudes. Unlike asserting, believing that all A’s are B’s does not entail believing, of each thing that is an A, that it is a B. It is hard to imagine a realistic case of a Cretan believing “All Cretan beliefs are false”. It is simpler to post Ypostego in the shed not knowing that is where he is and somehow convinced that (ShedCred) all beliefs explicitly formulated in the shed at that time are false. Unbeknownst to him, that belief applies to itself and so cannot be true. Does the falsity of (ShedCred) entail that some explicitly formulated shed belief is true? That question reflects equating the words of (ShedCred) with some one proposition. There is no basis for concluding that Ypostego

believes that it is false that all explicitly formulated shed beliefs are false. This is quite unlike the assertion case. A nominalist approach according to which the object of propositional attitudes is just the words of (ShedCred) cannot make the necessary distinction. There is no simple logical proof of Ypostego having any specific explicit true belief. Ypostego believes something –*ex hypothesi* –he was “somehow convinced”. It is hopeless to figure out what he believes, since there is no such person. It is a mistake to think the words of (ShedCred) are enough.

**12.** There can be clear examples of explicitly formulated beliefs, but the general idea breaks down under pressure. Explicitness is a feature of sentences (and of “adult” films –hopefully the ambiguity is not distracting). Sentences are not the objects of beliefs, contrary to the view that belief is inner speech. If you can say to yourself something you do not believe, inner speech is not belief. If you cannot, it is not speech. The introduction of “explicit” reflects a nominalist bias in favor of sentences and oversimplified assumptions about the ease of determining what is said or believed or etc.

**13.** I concede that an Ypostego type belief must be false. Taking that to entail that some belief of the kind it is about must be true results from equating the words with a belief. Being more specific requires being more specific about the case, which interferes with generality. Without going into that, I will say that in most natural cases, Ypostego believes the shed exists and that is (*ex hypothesi*) dead right. This is likely to seem annoyingly easy. Opponents will complain that the belief is not explicit. I have objected to that device.

**14.** There is Prior’s case of the man who fears that all his fears are unfounded, that is, that for any P such that he fears that P, not-P. There is the man who prays that all his prayers go unanswered, that is, if he prays that P, then not-P. And so on. These are worth discussing, but not now.

**15.** I will expand on criticism of sentences as objects of assertion and other propositional attitudes. There are many cases, such as (i) “No one knows this sentence is true” and (ii) “No one believes this sentence is true. Consider B: “Taylor Swift does not believe this sentence is true”.

It is reasonable to class B as true. The reference of "this sentence" can be cloudy, but tokens presently under review have not been seen by Taylor Swift. She is not in a position to think about them and must be without opinions on them, thus not believing a relevant B true. Now we present her with a token of B on a placard and ask for her opinion. On one crude approach, she is now contemplating a proposition and deciding whether to press the "accept" button. If she does not, B is true and she is declining to accept an obvious truth. If she does, B is false and she has erred. Unlike the situation with (i) and (ii) we are fortunately placed to consistently point out these logical facts. She cannot deal well with the proposition we can handle easily.

16. Too easily. "We" do not know, in general, what Taylor Swift thinks about B. What we think about B depends on what we think about her thoughts. Being unable to talk with her, we can imagine doing so, hoping to bring out one clear possibility. TS reads B and concludes that if she were to believe it true, it would be false. She concludes that she is too smart to believe something that is so self-falsifying and thus becomes sure she does not believe B is true. If this is correct, then B is true. She summarizes the situation: "B is true but I do not believe that B is true. This is a case of Moore's Paradox: P but I do not believe that P." Some of us may decide this is sincere. Others may argue that TS cannot believe what she said. To believe P entails believing you believe P, belief being self-intimating. It is impossible to believe that you believe you believe and also that you do not believe that you believe. That would be consciously believing an explicit contradiction, which, they insist, is impossible. But they agree she has asserted that and also that the assertion is not contradictory.

17. I do not agree that it is impossible to consciously believe an explicit contradiction and am thankful to sincere Dialetheists for providing examples. Whether it is possible to consciously believe an explicit contradiction about a serious topic is not so clear. The most likely question for students told that the Liar is true and that it is also the case that the Liar is not true is "Will this be on the exam?" If they are told that their tuition fees will be tripled next semester, the response is likely to be much livelier. Unless it is added that it is also not the case their fees will be tripled, in which case there is likely to be considerable confusion, driven by concern to know what is going to happen about tuition.



18. The sentence B does not represent a proposition common to the case in which we know TS has no thoughts about B and a case in which we are discussing B with her. The case above (16) is only one possible line that could emerge in dialogue. It is not what TS should think – there is no such thing. It is something that could be thought in a possible case. It does involve TS in a position Moore called “absurd”. But it is a coherent possible development. There can be other dialectical directions. Taking the sentence as the proposition obscures the point that the proposition only emerges in the dialectical development.

19. So what does determine what is said? There is no recursive formula for such determination. There is an analogue for such determination in a formal system and it is recursive. This will be taken as strong reason to prefer the approach of formal systematic response to paradoxes. That encourages solutions which restrict what can be said. I hope that adequate attention to particular cases can support my side. But that takes time. I can only try to be duly appreciative of the time I am given.

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