Commentary on Schwed

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My reaction to Professor Schwed’s paper is greatly colored by a book I have written but which has not been published. My book, *Non-Contradiction* has two volumes. In the first volume I retell the story of Greek Philosophy from Heraclitus through Aristotle. I do not go on into the Megarian-Stoic-academic period. I argue that the main issue in the period I look at is the truth of the law of Non-contradiction. Heraclitus denied it. Parmenides affirmed it but got it into all kinds of trouble. And Plato and Aristotle defended it. The fact that they defended it so strenuously means that they accepted it as being a real *issue* and did not think, as we tend to today, that it is just a foregone and unquestioned proposition.

Plato tried to save Non-contradiction by surrendering the ordinary empirical world as unreal and moving to another world, the world of Forms. But the contradictions that Plato saw in the empirical world followed Plato, in the later part of the Parmenides, into the world of Forms and even into the world of Parmenides’ One. It was therefore left to Aristotle to defend Non-contradiction in the way that would satisfy most of later Western thought, by arguing that the empirical world itself was consistent.

In my book, I take this to basically settle the issue of Non-contradiction, as far as most later Western thought was concerned, and this despite some left-over problems, such as Zeno’s paradoxes and the Liar, which Aristotle left not really solved. In volume II, therefore, I skip ahead to Hegel, where the law becomes again dialectically unstuck. However, I did not look at the Greek period after Aristotle.

In his paper, Schwed looks at this period. I find what he says very agreeable. He is saying that Non-contradiction and related themes remain a live issue. The Liar is a live argument on a live issue. The debate continues as in the previous period. This all strikes me as very likely true. Now I turn to a terminological point.

The Aristotelean truth theory contains three propositions; Non-contradiction, excluded middle, and the correspondence theory of truth. I shall call this the *Aristotelean* theory and refer to its opponents as *anti-Aristoteleans*. Schwed calls this theory the *realist* theory of truth and refers to its opponents as *skeptics* and *anti-realists*. But I find this terminology unhappy. It may be that some anti-Aristoteleans are accurately referred to as skeptics or anti-realists. Perhaps those in the period Schwed is discussing are. But one’s position on Aristotle’s truth theory is not in general happily described in these terms.
On my interpretation, Heraclitus accepts the ordinary empirical world as fully real. He thinks he has knowledge of this world. He thinks he knows for instance that it is full of contradictions. He therefore rejects Non-contradiction. Now it doesn’t matter here whether this is really the historical Heraclitus’ position. It is a possible position. It is very anti-Aristotelean. But it isn’t skeptical or anti-realist. It seems to be instead a very incautious realism.

Next comes Parmenides. On my interpretation, Parmenides affirms Non-contradiction. Being cannot not be. (Fr. 2) And he affirms excluded middle. Being must either be or not be. (Fr. 8) And there are at least hints of the correspondence theory. I will not allow you to say or think or imagine what is not. (Fr. 6) No doubt he affirms these principles in a somewhat mangled form, but he clearly affirms them. From this, he deduces that the ordinary world around us is unreal and unknowable. Only the One is real and we can only know that it is. It certainly seems strange to describe Parmenides as more realist and less skeptical than Heraclitus.

Next comes Plato. He is defending Non-contradiction. But he too, on my interpretation, rejects the ordinary world as not really real, as a bunch of Berkelean appearances and full of Heraclitian contradictions. Of course, he is realist and nonskeptical about the Forms. It is only when we get to Aristotle himself that realism, non-skepticism and Non-contradiction get into sync. Therefore, I shall speak of the Aristotelean and anti-Aristotelean positions, rather than of realists and skeptics.

Now I turn to a more interesting point. Granted that the liar argument is an anti-Aristotelean argument, is it really, as Schwed says, a reductio ad absurdum? I think that there is a lot of room for speculation here as to how exactly the liar argument was deployed.

To dramatize the possibilities, I shall take the role of the anti-Aristotelean and suppose that you are my intended target audience, the would-be Aristoteleans. I might proceed as follows:

I accept and expect you to accept Excluded Middle. I derive that the liar statement is either true or not true and I expect you to accept this also. I accept and expect you to accept the correspondence theory of truth. I derive that the liar is either true and so not true and so both true and not true, or it is not true and so true and so again both true and not true. So I accept and expect to force you to accept that the liar is both true and not true, contrary to Non-contradiction.

In this reconstruction, the argument is not a reductio. I am not trying to get you to reject the premises to avoid the concluding contradiction. I am trying to get you to accept the contradiction. I am giving a direct proof of a contradiction, not a reductio argument. In my second reconstruction, there is an actual reductio.
Here I look at Schwed’s own reconstruction. As he presents it there is a main argument and a backup argument. But to me the main argument is pointless and all the real work is done by the backup argument. The main argument says that if realism is true, the liar statement has a truth value. But the liar statement doesn’t have a truth value, according to the backup argument. Therefore realism is false.

But this argument seems rather pointless. The Aristotelian theory contains three propositions: excluded middle, Non-contradiction, and the correspondence theory of truth. It is excluded middle in particular that seems to imply that the liar statement has a truth value. If the liar statement doesn’t have a truth value, why conclude that realism in general is false, why not specifically excluded middle? Anyway the back up argument is a reductio. Can one deploy a reductio without Non-contradiction? And if the backup is really to prove that the liar doesn’t have a truth value, it also needs to assume the correspondence theory. So the backup accepts two parts of Aristotle’s theory in order to reject the third. I therefore present the backup as the whole argument and as a reductio of excluded middle.

I assume for reductio purposes the law of excluded middle and therefore that the liar statement is either true or not true or has a truth value. I myself reject these assumptions and hope to force you to reject them too. I now accept and expect you to accept the correspondence theory. I derive the contradiction. I reject this contradiction and expect you to also reject it. Therefore, I expect you to reject excluded middle and the idea that the liar has a truth value or is either true or not true.

Now this is a real full-fledged reductio. But notice that I cannot regard my own argument as decisive unless I accept two parts of Aristotle’s theory in order to refute the third. Now I suspect Schwed will find both my first two reconstructions to be historically implausible and I am inclined to think so as well. In these reconstructions, the anti-Aristotelian accepts two of Aristotle’s three points and rejects only the third. One suspects that the actual anti-Aristoteleans had some difficulty with all three parts of Aristotle’s view.

Of course, if I don’t accept Non-contradiction and reject contradictions, I can’t really accept a reductio argument as decisive. I couldn’t really offer such an argument as one I believe in, I could only offer it in an ad hominen manner, as an argument that I expect you to accept. I shall consider an ad hominem reconstruction a bit later.

For my third reconstruction, I want to consider, a particularly radical anti-Aristotelean who, paradoxically accepts all three parts of Aristotle’s theory - in a way. This radical character is described by Aristotle himself. Aristotle says that anyone who accepts a contradiction equates being and nonbeing and therefore must accept all contradictions and accept \( p \) and accept \( \neg p \), for every \( p \). Aristotle says (1008b10ff) that this character is no better than a vegetable as far as discourse is concerned. In my third reconstruction, I want
to play the role of this vegetable character. This will require some preliminaries to set things up.

Aristotle says that no one can really hold the vegetable position in real life. If one is going to negotiate through a practical situation, you need to make discriminating judgments. I agree with this. So to make the vegetable character a possible debater, I shall suppose he accepts all propositions and their negations in his official philosophical position, but on a more practical level he is able to discern the facts of his dialectical situation and is to deploy arguments in an effective manner.

Aristotle also argues that it is not really possible to believe a contradiction. Here I shall assume a view from an earlier paper of mine. It is possible to accept $p$ and simultaneously to accept $not-p$. But you must either accept a proposition or reject it or remain neutral. You cannot simultaneously accept and reject the same proposition. So if you accept $p$ and also accept $not-p$, then you are in violation of the constitutive rules for negation. These rules say you are supposed to accept not $p$ just in case you reject $p$, and to reject $not-p$ just in case you accept $p$, otherwise to be neutral about both. So if you accept $p$ and accept $not-p$, you violate these rules because you cannot accept $p$ and also reject $p$.

Now I am this character. I accept every proposition and therefore the negation of every proposition. I am wildly out of accord with the constitutive rules for negation. In giving the liar argument, I want to make you more like me. I accept all of Aristotle’s propositions, but I also accept their negations. I neither reject nor am neutral about anything. So I don’t want to make you reject or be neutral about any proposition. I accept Non-contradiction, though I don’t reject contradictions, I accept them. And, of course, though I accept Aristotle’s view, I don’t accept it his way. He rejects the opposites of what he accepts. I accept the opposites of what I accept. I accept Aristotle’s view, but I do not adopt his stance, so to speak. And I want to make you more like me.

So I accept and expect you to accept Excluded Middle. I accept and expect you to accept the Correspondence Theory. I derive the contradiction. I accept and hope to force you to accept it as well. But I do not therefore hope that you will give up accepting Non-contradiction. I accept it, and will be happy if you do too.

Now this argument is clearly not a reductio; it is, like my first reconstruction, a direct derivation of a contradiction. However here there is no effort to go on and force rejection of Non-contradiction. So the question arises: if this argument is not a reductio, is it at least a refutation? Well, in a sense no. I accept everything and am not trying to get you to reject anything or even to give up accepting anything. But in other ways, it is a refutation. I am trying to get you to give up your stance if not your view. And I am trying to get you to accept negations of things you initially accept.
I am now going to give two skeptical reconstructions. And then there will turn out to be a third. One will involve an ad hominem deployment of the liar argument and the other will construct an explicitly skeptical argument to a skeptical conclusion. And the third we’ll get to later. By an ad hominem argument I mean of course, not the more familiar kind of fallacy - or supposed fallacy - but an argument which is presented not as acceptable to the presenter but with the idea that the hearer ought to find it compelling.

For this reconstruction, I suppose that in my official philosophical view, I have no opinions. I neither accept nor reject anything. In a sense then I cannot give an argument, in my own voice, so to speak. I accept no premises and am unwilling to accept any conclusions. Or, the other way, I reject no conclusions and am unwilling to reject any premises. But I can propose an argument in an ad hominem way, hoping that it will be effective for you. So I propose excluded middle, expecting you to initially accept it, and I propose the correspondence theory in the same way. I propose therefore the contradiction, expecting you to both feel compelled to accept it and compelled to reject it.

Now you may react to my argument in various ways. You may take it as a direct proof and accept the contradiction. You may take it as a reductio and reject a premise. But, of course, these reactions are not what I’m hoping for, since I neither accept nor reject anything. I am neutral about everything and want you to be more like me. My intention is that you will be so appalled at all the possible acceptings and rejectings that you will recoil from them all and refuse to accept or reject any of the propositions involved in the argument. Therefore, you will be more like me.

So the argument as I intend it isn’t either a direct proof or reductio. It is something else, which we may label a “stunning” argument, since its purpose is to stun the hearer or paralyze him, so to speak, into a lack of belief. If we ask: is it a refutation?, the answer will be, No and Yes. It doesn’t conclude to a rejection of a proposition or to the accepting of a negation. It does however aim to lead to your giving up your initial beliefs in favor of neutrality.

My fifth reconstruction involves a different sort of skeptic. In this version, I have beliefs and believe and disbelieve many things. And perhaps when I believe something, I believe it is true and not false. But one of my beliefs is that there is no knowledge. So I never believe that any of my beliefs are knowledge. As far as Aristotle’s three propositions are concerned, it turns out not to matter to this reconstruction whether I believe them, disbelieve them, or am neutral. Let’s suppose I am neutral.

This reconstruction is suggested by Schwed’s remarks about Cicero. Like Cicero, I believe that the senses are not a source of knowledge and I wish to argue that reason isn’t either. Now since I have beliefs, I can give arguments in my own voice and not just ad hominem. However, I don’t believe that any argument proves anything or disproves anything, since the idea of proof and disproof involve the idea of knowledge. But I do think that some arguments are
convincing. I, or someone else, may believe the premises and be convinced to believe the conclusion.

Now, I am going to give my argument. I give it as one I believe in and hope you too will be convinced by. My argument isn’t the Liar itself but a skeptical argument about the Liar and about reason. Here goes:

Reason accepts excluded middle. Reason accepts the correspondence theory. So reason feels compelled to accept the contradiction. But reason doesn’t want to accept the contradiction. So reason is wrong somewhere. Now it doesn’t matter where reason is wrong. Maybe it is wrong about the three Aristotle propositions. Maybe it is right about all of them but is wrong in being taken in by the Liar argument. It doesn’t matter. It is wrong somewhere. And, as Descartes will say in his day, a source of knowledge which is sometimes wrong is never completely reliable, and is not a real source of knowledge. But we could only claim to know any of Aristotle’s three principles on the basis of reason. Therefore we do not know any of these principles.

So in this fifth reconstruction, I do not actually attack Aristotle’s truth theory itself but only the further claim that that theory is known. So the question whether there is a refutation or reductio of that theory is moot. Well at this point, having given my five reconstructions, I intended to say that Schwed’s statement that the Liar is a reductio is an unclear statement about a complicated situation and to go on to another topic. But as I get here, I have some second thoughts.

My reconstructions are not very attentive to the actual history. Maybe a reconstruction based more on Schwed’s more attentive interpretation would be better. And in some of my versions, an argument which is in one way not a refutation is in another way a refutation after all. Maybe this happens also with reductio. Perhaps I can find some way clear to even myself in which Schwed is right in calling the Liar a reductio.

Looking over Schwed’s interpretation of the positive content of the skeptic’s view with my own five reconstructions in mind, I see that I can get pretty close to Schwed’s interpretation by combining aspects of my fifth and fourth reconstructions. From the fifth, I adopt the idea that I as a skeptic may nonetheless have all kinds of beliefs. From the fourth, I borrow the idea of applying the liar in an ad hominem and stunning manner. Then I will also examine the stunning version of the liar more closely to find after all a sort of reductio aspect to it.

I am a skeptic. I believe things, I believe all three of Aristotle’s propositions about truth - except when I look at the liar: Then I am stunned into neutrality about them. The only thing I disagree with Aristotle about is that I believe we don’t know Aristotle’s three principles. I believe usually all of Aristotle’s propositions and usually I have Aristotle’s whole stance. I believe the propositions, I reject their opposites. I reject contradictions.
I never reject Aristotle's view. Usually I accept it. When stunned, I am neutral.

Now Schwed is right in reporting that some of my more cockamamie skeptical colleagues reject Aristotle's theory and have an alternative theory of truth. But I find their thinking incoherent and some aspects of it tend to stun me, like the liar does. I shall report on their views a bit later, but I cannot follow them in their beliefs. Now, as I say, I do not believe I know Aristotle’s propositions. If I have beliefs different from Aristotle's, they are not beliefs about the nature or existence of truth but only about the knowability of truth and about in what sense we can have justified true belief. We cannot have justified true beliefs in the sense of knowledge, but I think I have beliefs which are true and satisfy me in their coherence and agreeableness. That is the only kind of justification we mortals can have, I think.

The reason I don't think we know Aristotle’s three principles is because of the liar. Plato says in the Meno (98a) that true belief is not knowledge unless it is so well grounded and stabilized that it cannot be upset by objections. But my beliefs in Aristotle are upset every time I contemplate the liar argument. So those beliefs aren’t knowledge. That is my whole view.

Let me now describe some of my more cockamamie colleagues. They start like me. They argue that we don’t know the truth of Aristotle’s view. Thus they feel free to reject Aristotle’s view and to concoct some or other cockamamie alternative view, more or less arbitrarily. I see no real reason for any particular alternative view.

Still the most popular alternative seems to arise from the desire not, in a sense, to be skeptics, after all. My colleagues reason, incoherently it seems to me, that if it is impossible to know any Aristotelean truth, perhaps it is possible to know some other kind of truth. Perhaps I can’t know that P is true, but I can know that P is true for me. Thus if truth-for-me is the only kind of truth there is, I can know the only kind of truth there is and thus escape skepticism, in a sense. Now this view seems incoherent to me. If I know that P is true for me, it seems to follow that I know that it is true that (P is true for me), and this last truth seems after all to be an Aristotelean kind of truth! So to me their view is incoherent. Of course, I don't know it's incoherent. But I think it's incoherent. Or is it that I think its incoherent? Or is it that....? Well, here I feel I am about to be stunned. So let’s talk about something else!

(Parenthetical Note: I am pretending to be a certain skeptic. This skeptic shies away from his “cockamamie colleagues” view. But what he is really shying away from is the suggestion that I know what I think. He is trying not to think about a Cartesian style refutation of his own skepticism, according to which I can think that P without knowing that P but I cannot think that P without knowing that I think P. I now return you to the skeptic.)

Well, now I have expounded my view and it is time to analyze the
stunning impact of the liar upon me and to look for its *reductio* aspect. Paradoxically, the stunning impact of the liar on my Aristotelean and logical views depends on the fact that though I give up all those views, I retain throughout the argument some aspects of my *stance*. I have to in a sense react to the liar argument as *valid* for me. That is, I have to find for instance, that I cannot accept the premises without accepting the conclusion. Otherwise I would accept the Aristotelean premises and have no problem.

Also, I find that I cannot reject the conclusion without rejecting or at least neutralizing the conjunction of the premises. Otherwise, I could reject the contradictory conclusion and have no problem. Also, though I can under pressure bring myself to suspend belief in the premises of the argument, I cannot bring myself to reject those premises. Otherwise I would be subject to a full fledged *reductio* in which I reject the conclusion and thus reject the premises. Also, though I can under press suspend disbelief of the conclusion, I cannot bring myself to accept the conclusion. Otherwise I would be subject to an out and out direct derivation in which I accepted the premises and therefore accepted the contradictory conclusion.

From these facts there arises a halfway, though not a full-fledged, direct derivation aspect to the argument. I cannot bring myself to reject the premises so therefore I cannot reject the conclusion, lest I be subjected to full-fledged *reductio* of the premises. This is a direct derivation aspect in the following way. A full direct derivation would be to accept the premises and therefore accept the conclusion. The halfway direct derivation is to be unable to reject the premises and therefore to be unable to reject the conclusion.

The *reductio* aspect, again in a halfway sense, is the converse of this. Since I cannot accept the conclusion, therefore I cannot accept the conjunction of the premises. So putting both aspects together, I have to be neutral about both the conclusion and at least the conjunction of the premises. I could continue to accept one of the two premises and be neutral only about the other, but presumably see no way to choose and am neutral about both. As for Non-contradiction, my neutrality about the contradictory conclusion forces me to be neutral about Non-contradiction, since acceptance of Non-contradiction would force rejection of that contradiction. And that concludes my reconstruction.

But while I am having second thoughts, let me reconsider also my reconstruction three, the vegetable reconstruction where I could find no *reductio*. My inability to find a *reductio* there, where we ended up accepting all relevant propositions, rested on the thought that a *reductio* involves adopting some negative attitude, if not rejection than at least refusal to accept, towards a conclusion and therefore adopting a negative attitude also to the premises. But there is clearly no *reductio* of that sort in reconstruction three where the conclusion and the premises are all accepted.

However, I feel that Schwed will find my argument confusing and unconvincing. He will say, “Look, Powers himself admits that in reconstruction
three there is in a sense a *refutation*. The original *stance*, if not the view, is given up. And the argument which forces that change uses only premises from and aspects of that stance itself and does not employ outside considerations. But surely, in the broadest sense of *reductio*, a *reductio* is just the refutation of something, even if it is a stance rather than a view, as Powers says, using only materials from that something, or stance itself. Therefore there is *reductio* after all in that broadest sense. And in all Powers’ reconstructions, the liar is a *reductio* in this sense.” And if Schwed objects in this way, which I feel sure he will, I agree with him.

My point all along has been that we are considering logically pathological views and when we consider such bizarre views, our ordinary concepts of ‘*reductio*’ and ‘*refutation*’ develop some surprising ambiguities and become problematic. But in the end Schwed is right in feeling that the Liar is in some sense clearly a *reductio*. I now turn briefly to a different topic. At the beginning of his paper, Schwed says that ‘the liar is not an anomaly in need of a solution but rather a part of a refutation move’ or ‘an undesirable consequence of ....realism.’

I have, to an extent, already agreed with Schwed here. I have agreed at least that the Liar is an attempted refutation of what Schwed calls realism and that at that time it was a live argument about live issues. And I can agree that today, when it has been reduced to a leftover problem, about settled issues there is at least the possibility of observing that if the leftover problem does not actually get solved, perhaps the settled issues are not really settled.

Still what Schwed says, taken literally, does not seem to be true. Does he mean that the liar is a refutation of realism and therefore *not* an anomaly to be solved? But, I for one am not willing to give up realism. Shall I give up Non-contradiction? Excluded Middle? The Correspondence Theory? Not likely! I *have* to regard the liar as an anomaly to be solved, precisely because it *appears* to be a refutation of these propositions. Nor can I really accept Schwed’s argument that because the argument is really a metaphysical and epistemological argument, therefore it is not a ‘*semantic paradox*’ and is not ‘*a sophism*’.

Surely I as a realist must regard the argument as an argument that only appears to refute my view, therefore as a sophism, however deep. And I must regard it as an argument that appears to prove an impossibility, and so a paradox. And I must regard it as some sort of logical and semantic anomaly and this in two ways. First because by my metaphilosophical lights, *any* philosophical argument which appears to prove something false *must* be regarded somehow as involving misunderstandings of relevant meanings and logic, and so a semantic and logical misunderstanding.

Second, because the liar argument attacks realism, which consists of two logical principles and a semantic principle, so the liar argument is logical and semantic in its own content. True, while acceptance of logical principles
tells us little of metaphysical interest, the rejection of basic logical principles
would be metaphysically and in every other way momentous, if only because
contradictions imply everything. So I as a realist have to regard the liar as a
semantically and logical anomaly to be solved.