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OCKHAM ON SELF-REFERENCE

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It seems now to be the accepted view that Ockham's reply to the Liar paradox consisted of a rejection of self-reference across the board.¹ I think that accepted view is wrong. On the contrary, Ockham allowed self-reference in all but exceptional cases.

The accepted view is based on two passages. The first is from Ockham's Summa logicae III, 3, 45,² the second from his commentary on Aristotle's Sophistici elenchi.³ In both texts, we have a situation in which Socrates says only 'Socrates utters a falsehood' (Sortes dicit falsum). Ockham disarms the paradox by holding that the term 'falsehood' in Socrates' utterance cannot refer to (supponit pro) that very utterance itself. In the first text he goes on to observe that what Socrates' proposition then amounts to is 'Socrates utters a falsehood other than this *proposition.*' Since by hypothesis that is not so, the proposition is false. Earlier in the same text Ockham gives an analogous account of the situation in which Socrates says only 'Socrates does not speak a truth' (Sortes non *dicit verum*). The term 'truth' in that proposition cannot refer to (supponit pro) that very proposition, and so the whole utterance amounts to 'Socrates does not utter a truth other than this proposition.' Since that is so by hypothesis, the proposition is true. It is clear from this that Ockham's reply is indeed a denial of self-reference. The question is whether that denial extends across the board to innocuous cases as well as to vicious ones. Ockham never says that a part cannot refer to (supponit pro) the whole of which it is a part-the usual mediaeval way of formulating a general rejection of self-reference. What he does say is this:⁴

In the proposition *Sortes non dicit verum*, the predicate cannot supposit for this entire proposition of which it is a part, yet not precisely because it is a part.

In fact, *whenever* Ockham denies the possibility of self-reference, it is always qualified, as here, by a phrase such as "in this proposition." This is negative evidence. More positive is the clause "yet not precisely because it is a part." This certainly suggests that some parts of at least some propositions can refer to their wholes.

298