REDUCTIO-AD-ABSURDUM:
A FAMILY FEUD BETWEEN COPI AND SCHERER

LYMAN C. D. KULATHUNGAM

Scherer's verdict, in his article, "The form of reductio-ad-absurdum" (*Mind*, April 1971), that Copi's account of reductio[1] is confusing, is based on the contention that Copi's form of reductio fails to manifest the essential basis upon which a reductio is conceived to rest, and that it is given a form which is less than intuitive and, in fact, is both epistemologically and formally impossible.[2] Scherer develops an alternative formulation* which, he claims, is an adequate manifestation of reductio, free from Copi's epistemological errors and formal fallacies. It would be too ambitious on my part to claim that I have understood Copi perfectly, but, it is my plea, that his formulation of reductio may lend itself to an interpretation whereby his formulation appears more true to the spirit and form of reductio than that of Scherer.

Both Scherer and Copi agree that the contradiction is central to their formulations of reductio, i.e., both accept $r.-r$ as a valid derivation from $-q$, the negation of the original conclusion and p, the original premiss, which means that they regard $r.-r$ as being meaningful. Scherer's use of $-(r.-r)$ as a premiss in his formulation means that he considers its negation $r.-r$ well formed and thus, meaningful. That the contradiction is false, also receives emphasis in both the formulations. Then, why this family feud?

Scherer's grievance seems to be that Copi's form fails to manifest the essential basis of reductio, the logical falsehood of the contradiction,

---

*For the sake of avoiding confusion, I have adopted Scherer's symbolic notations in all the formulations.

1. Irving M. Copi, *Symbolic Logic*, Macmillan Company, New York, Second Edition (1965), pp. 61–66.

2. Donald Scherer, "The form of reductio-ad-absurdum," *Mind*, Vol. LXXX, No. 318 (1971), p. 247.