

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.

The suggestion is confirmed by a passage from Ockham's treatise on *obligationes*.⁵ There he distinguishes six species of obligation. The first is "institution," which he defines thus: "Institution is a new convention for some word throughout the time of disputation, and is not meant to last any longer."⁶ What he has in mind is, for example, the geometrician's use of letters to signify certain points or lines for the duration of a proof. Ockham goes on:⁷

About this species some rules are given. One is that a part can never signify the whole of which it is a part. But this rule takes an exception. For in this proposition 'Every proposition is true', the subject signifies the whole proposition. Likewise, the same thing can signify itself; therefore, a part by the same reason can signify the whole. The antecedent is clear. For this noun 'utterance' signifies every utterance, and as a consequent itself. Likewise, this noun 'noun' signifies every noun, because the definition of a noun agrees with every noun. Therefore it is to be said that, although a part can signify the whole of which it is a part, nevertheless such an institution is not always to be admitted. For when through the institution of a part having the same institution, the signified whole would be changed from truth to falsehood and conversely, then such an institution is not to be admitted.

The last sentence is rather obscure; it is not clear what exceptions Ockham intends to make. Nevertheless, he certainly does want to say that, in all but exceptional cases, there is nothing wrong with a part signifying its whole. But signification is not reference (supposition). In order to pass from self-signification to self-reference, we need only observe that in personal supposition—the only kind of supposition at stake here—a term refers to just what it signifies.⁸ In short, Ockham allows self-reference in all but exceptional cases. The Liar and related paradoxes are such exceptional cases.

In fact, Ockham was not at all alone in adopting this attenuated denial of self-reference. Others in the same period were Roger Roseth, Walter Burley and Walter Sexgrave.⁹ Indeed, Burley adopts essentially the same position as Ockham, and explicitly rejects the view that self-reference is never licit.¹⁰ I know of only two mediaeval authors who adopted this latter view, both of them on the basis of shockingly bad arguments.¹¹

Ockham's view then seems to be that self-reference is to be allowed except where it would lead to paradox—in short, it is licit except where it is illicit. In the absence of any independent account of what makes certain cases illicit, such a position is not very revealing. And Ockham provides no independent account.

NOTES

1. Cf., e.g., Philotheus Boehner, "Ockham's theory of supposition and the notion of truth," in his *Collected Articles on Ockham*, Eligius M. Buytaert, ed., (St.

- Bonaventure, N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute, 1958), pp. 257ff.; James A. Weisheipl, "Developments in the arts curriculum at Oxford in the early fourteenth century," *Mediaeval Studies*, vol. 28 (1966), p. 166; E. J. Ashworth, "The treatment of semantic paradoxes from 1400 to 1700," *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, vol. XIII (1972), p. 38.
2. The chapter is edited on the basis of one incunabula and two MSS as an appendix to my "An Anonymous Fourteenth-Century Treatise on 'Insolubles': Text and Study," (M.S.L. dissertation: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1969). Part of it is translated in Boehner, *op. cit.*, pp. 258f.
 3. The relevant passage is printed *ibid.*, p. 259, n. 34.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 258.
 5. On *obligationes* in this sense, cf. Ignacio Angelelli, "The techniques of disputation in the history of logic," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 67 (1970), pp. 800-815.
 6. *Summa logicae* III, 3, 38. The passage is edited in Spade, *loc. cit.*
 7. *Ibid.*
 8. This statement needs qualification in view of the fact that Ockham gives no fewer than four senses of 'to signify' (*Summa logicae* I, 33), and in view of the complications raised by tense and modal contexts. These qualifications do not affect my point.
 9. Cf. my *The Mediaeval Liar: A Catalogue of the Insolubilia-Literature* (forthcoming as a volume in the series "Subsidia Mediaevalia," Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies), items LXII, LXVII and LXVIII, respectively.
 10. Cf. M. L. Roure, "La problématique des propositions insolubles au XIII^e siècle et au début du XIV^e, suivie de l'édition des traités de W. Shyreswood, W. Burleigh et Th. Bradwardine," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, 1970, pp. 269f.
 11. The first is the anonymous author of the text edited in my "An Anonymous Fourteenth-Century . . .". The second is also anonymous, and is edited by H. A. G. Braakhuis, "The Second Tract on *Insolubilia* Found in Paris, B. N. Lat. 16.617: An Edition of the Text with an Analysis of its Contents," *Vivarium*, vol. 5 (1967), pp. 111-145. Robert Holcot may also have held such a view. Cf. my *The Mediaeval Liar*, item LX.

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