

WILLIAM OF SHERWOOD ON PROPOSITIONS
 AND THEIR PARTS

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In chapter XIV of William of Sherwood's *Treatise on Syncategorematic Words*,¹ we find the author arguing that 'not' is a syncategorematic word. Syncategorematic words are defined as words which are "determinations of principal parts (of statements) insofar as they (the principal parts) are subjects and predicates."² They do not of themselves signify anything, strictly speaking. Rather, they consignify. That is, they combine with other expressions which are subjects or predicates of statements (enun-tiations) to form composite expressions whose significations are not determined by finding the intersection of the significations of their parts. William of Sherwood surely does not mean that syncategorematic words in isolation are meaningless in the way that, for example, the syllable 'ba' is, for they are part of the vocabulary of the language under discussion. He does mean that an interpretation which assigned referents to the names and predicates of the language would assign no referents to syncategorematic words in isolation, although it would include a procedure for determining the reference of composite expressions and the truth values of sentences in which they occurred. The expressions with which he concerns himself are for the most part the ones we should expect, i.e., quantifiers, propositional connectives, exceptives, etc.

It is curious that William of Sherwood feels that he has to give an argument that 'not' is a syncategorematic word. But he has a reason for doing so. He takes it to be a general principle that expressions are categorical or syncategorematical if their opposites are categorematical or syncategorematical, respectively.³ In the chapter immediately preceding

1. William of Sherwood, *Treatise on Syncategorematic Words*, edited and translated by Norman Kretzmann, Minneapolis (1966).

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

3. The question of opposites does arise, even for syncategorematic expressions. Such expressions, presumably, do not have contraries or contraries, since these notions are usually restricted to categorematic expressions. But such pairs of expressions as 'begins' and 'ceases' and 'whole' and 'nothing' are commonly taken as syncategorematic and are opposites in some broad sense.

this one, he has shown that 'is' is not a syncategorematic word, at least not in those statements where it is a "third element," or copula, which functions to joint subject and predicate expressions. And he is aware that the "composition" denoted by 'is' and the "division" denoted by 'not' will seem to many of his readers to be opposites. The point of his argument is to show that they are not the kind of opposites to which the general principle applies. His argument is as follows:

Second, also because the composition denoted or consigned by means of the verb 'is' is not opposed to 'not' because the composition is a mode of signifying dependently, by reason of which it requires the nominative for itself, and this is the reason the proposition is one of its parts (*et hoc est illud quo propositio est unum ex suis partibus*).⁴

The thrust of the argument is clear enough. Negation of a proposition presupposes that there is already a complete proposition there to be negated. But there can be no proposition whatsoever without the composition denoted by an (explicit or implicit) occurrence of 'is'. Far from opposing the composition denoted by 'is', the significant use of 'not' to negate a proposition *presupposes* it. (He might have made his point more strongly by pointing out that if they were opposites of the kind in question, then any negation of an atomic proposition would presumably have to be regarded as internally inconsistent, for such a proposition would say that two things were related by composition and division simultaneously and in the same sense.)

But one particular part of the argument is not at all clear. In the last line of the translated text, William seems to be claiming that the proposition is itself one of its parts. On the most obvious reading, this claim is downright bizarre. It says that the whole proposition is identical with one of its parts. Moreover, its oddity would have been recognized by William of Sherwood and his contemporaries. It is hard to think of any view William held that would explain his making this claim. And presumably the previous clause, "because the composition is a mode of signifying dependently, by reason of which it requires the nominative for itself," is supposed to supply a reason for whatever he means by "*et hoc est illud quo propositio est unum ex suis partibus*." There is, however, no such relationship between the claim that a proposition is one of its parts and the text immediately preceding it.

Something is wrong. Kretzmann's suggestion that "apparently a considerable amount of theory is being presupposed in this passage"⁵ and his reference to Peter of Spain's theory of propositions do not seem to help. We are left wondering what William of Sherwood means and suspicious that he does not mean what the translation has him meaning.

One possible explanation is that William of Sherwood has a peculiar theory of propositions. It is certainly true that his treatment of propositions

4. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

is often unclear. In his *Introduction to Logic*, at least, he announces his intention to restrict 'propositio' to statements (enuntiatioes) which occur as conclusions of syllogisms.⁶ (Very likely, he means to include also other related uses of statements, e.g., as premisses of syllogisms, and even as statements assumed to be true for the sake of argument.) He indicates that he will use 'enuntiatio' when no such special context is involved. The passage presently under discussion is one of the instances of his failure to observe his own distinction. And from a present-day point of view, there is also a good deal of unclarity surrounding his notion of a statement (enuntiatio). But none of these considerations help at all in explaining the odd claim that the proposition is one of its parts.

There is, I think, a simple answer: Kretzmann's translation does not render correctly the perfectly simple claim that William of Sherwood did mean to make. He meant, not that a proposition is (identical with) one of its parts, but rather that the proposition is a unity (arising out) of its parts. This seems a natural reading of the Latin text. In fact, given that William is using 'compositio' in a broader sense, Latin offers no other natural way to express this claim. ('Compositio suarum partium' is unhelpful here, and is awkward besides.) Moreover, it is a claim that one would not hesitate to ascribe to William of Sherwood; it is coherent, and is consonant with other parts of his theory.⁷ Finally, unlike the claim that a proposition is *one of* its parts, the claim that a proposition is *a unity arising out of* its parts does follow from the immediately preceding observation that the predicate of a proposition is structurally incomplete and demands a substantive as subject to form a complete proposition. This subject-predicate composition is the composite which is presupposed by the proposition-forming operator 'non'.

This suggested revision is, I think, not a trivial matter. Questions about the internal structure of propositions and about the role played by the structural parts of a proposition in determining the meaning and the truth value of the whole are central to William of Sherwood's logic. The list of differences between the various medieval theories of propositions and present-day views is already quite lengthy. There is no need to add the claim that a proposition is one of its parts to the list.⁸

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6. William of Sherwood, *Introduction to Logic*, edited and translated by Norman Kretzmann, Minneapolis (1966), pp. 21-22.

7. It seems to me that de Rijk, *Logica Modernorum*, II, pt. 1, pp. 566-72, is probably right in maintaining that William of Sherwood held an "inherence theory" of the function of the copula, rather than the "identity theory." On the inherence theory, it is the function of the copula in a sentence, say '*a* is (an) *F*', to copulate the quality of "being (an) *F*" with the referent of '*a*'. It would be natural for a proponent of this view to claim that a proposition is the result of the composition of two parts which are syntactically and semantically asymmetric.

8. I am indebted to Gareth Matthews and Ivan Boh for their help and suggestions.