

PROPOSITIONS AS PREMISES OF SYLLOGISMS  
 IN MEDIEVAL LOGIC

JORGE J. E. GRACIA

In a recent article on William of Sherwood, M. Sirridge criticizes his theory of propositions not only because he fails to carry out consistently the distinctions which he makes, but also because "his treatment of propositions is often unclear."<sup>1</sup> The example of unclarity given to substantiate this claim is that "in his *Introduction to Logic*, at least, he announces his intention to restrict 'propositio' to statements (*enuntiaciones*) which occur as conclusions of syllogisms." And then, Sirridge immediately adds in parenthesis: "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."<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, according to Sirridge, it is not clear whether William of Sherwood restricts the term 'propositio' to name conclusions of syllogisms or whether he extends it as well to cover premisses of syllogisms as well as other things. This ambiguity, however, although present in Sirridge's understanding of the text is not present in William's text which reads:<sup>3</sup>

It is clear from the very name 'proposition' that a proposition signifies in relation to something else, for a proposition is a *positing for* something, namely, the conclusion that is to be drawn.

What William means here is not that propositions are conclusions of syllogisms or posit for in the sense of 'standing for' conclusions of syllogisms. The point he is trying to make is that propositions are significant parts of syllogisms which are related to the conclusions of the latter. They are, as it were, pre-supposed by the conclusions of syllogisms. Indeed, it must be remembered that the whole aim of the paragraph in which this text appears is to stress the distinction between statements (*enuntiationes*) and propositions, for although they are the same in reality, according to William, they differ in their significative function: "a statement signifies something absolutely while a proposition signifies something in relation to something else."<sup>4</sup> This relational aspect of propositions is precisely what distinguishes them from statements. And it is only natural at this point

that William should specify the terms of the relation which give its particular character to propositions: the syllogistic context and specifically its conclusion. Consequently, it is clear that propositions are not and could not be conclusions of syllogisms, but that they must be the premisses of syllogisms.

This reading of the text is confirmed by N. Kretzmann in his translation of the sentence that follows the passage in question: "Thus, what is a statement considered in itself is a proposition considered as it is [a premiss] in a syllogism."<sup>5</sup> His addition of 'a premiss' to the text in translation although not strictly warranted by the Latin is perfectly compatible with the import of the sentence and the paragraph where it is found.

To this it should be added, moreover, that this technical use of the term 'propositio' is neither ideosyncratic to William nor new in the historical context in which it appears. It does in fact occur in other medieval logical works and can be documented as far back as Anselm's *De grammatico*, where 'propositio' is used to mean 'major premiss':<sup>6</sup>

Esset vero in illis communis terminus et necessariam conclusionem ingerent si aut manente propositione (major premiss) sicut posita est sic vera fieret assumptio (minor premiss): nullus homo dicitur grammaticus in eo quod quale. . .

This does not mean, of course, that 'propositio' is not used in other different ways even in logical contexts, but it does mean that it was used in this restricted sense of 'major premiss' or just 'premiss' by some medieval logicians in particular circumstances, and that this is the sense in which it is used by William of Sherwood in the text in question.<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

1. M. J. Sirridge, "William of Sherwood on propositions and their parts," *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, vol. XV (1974), pp. 463-464. The first criticism seems to be justified and had already been noted by the translator, N. Kretzmann, in *William of Sherwood's Introduction to Logic*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis (1966), p. 22, n. 5 and *William of Sherwood's Treatise on Syncategorematic Words*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis (1968), p. 13, n. 1.
2. Sirridge, p. 464.
3. *Intro. to Logic*, trans. cit., p. 22. The Latin text was edited by Martin Grabmann in "Die introductiones in logicam des Wilhelm von Shyreswood (+ nach 1267)," *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, Jahrgang 1937, Heft 10, p. 30: 23-25: "Ex nomine autem propositionis patet, quod significat in comparatione ad aliud. Est enim propositio positio pro alio scilicet pro conclusione concludenda."
4. *Intro. to Logic*, pp. 21-22; *ed. cit.*, p. 30: 18-22: "Quia ergo propositio et enuntiatio idem sunt secundum rem, licet differant in eo, quod enuntiatio significat aliquid absolute, propositio autem significat aliquid in comparatione ad aliud . . ."

5. *Ididem*: "Unde si in se consideratur, est enuntiatio. Si autem consideratur, ut est in sillogismo, sic est propositio."
6. Anselm, *De grammatico*, ch. 6, ed. F. S. Schmitt, in *Opera omnia*, B.A.C. reprint, vol. I, p. 450.
7. D. P. Henry has argued that this use of 'propositio' is rooted in Boethius; see his *Commentary on 'De Grammatico': The Historical-Logical Dimensions of a Dialogue of St. Anselm's*, D. Reidel, Dordrecht, Holland (1974), pp. 92-93, and 123. For a general study on medieval propositional theory see N. Kretzmann, "Medieval logicians on the meaning of the proposition," *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 67 (1970), pp. 767-787.

*State University of New York at Buffalo*  
*Buffalo, New York*