Five Early Theories in the Mediaeval Insolubilia-Literature

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Mediaeval logicians, from at least the second half of the twelfth century, devoted much time and effort to semantic paradoxes of the Liar type ("This sentence is false" or "This sentence is not true"). Such paradoxes were called "insolubilia"—"insolubles". Despite the term most authors were convinced that it was in fact possible to "solve" such paradoxes; the solution was just very difficult to find. It is not surprising, therefore, that we see a wide variety of suggested solutions in the mediaeval literature on this problem. It is purpose of this paper to examine and survey such solutions during the early history of that mediaeval literature.

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The earliest known mediaeval discussions of paradoxes like the Liar took place in the middle or late twelfth century. In his Ars disserendi, for

1 This claim needs some qualification. In fact few authors attempted to give a rigorous definition of an insoluble, and those who did try gave definitions that were either too broad or too narrow to fit their intentions or even their practice. Some authors considered under the heading of "insolubilia" various paradoxes or puzzles that bear little relation to the Liar. See, for example, John Buridan's Sophismata, Ca. 8, sophisms 1-6, in John Buridan On Self-Reference: Chapter Eight of Buridan's 'Sophismata', with a Translation, an Introduction, and a philosophical Commentary, G. E. Hughes, ed. & tr., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 38-61, with a commentary on pp. 141-161. In the paperback edition, which includes the translation and commentary but omits the Latin text, the corresponding pages are pp. 34-45 and pp. 80-100. For an edition of the entire Sophismata, see Johannes Buridanus, Sophismata, T. K. Scott, ed., (Grammatica Speculativa, vol. 1, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1977), translated by T. K. Scott in John Buridan: Sophisms on Meaning and Truth, (Century Philosophy Sourcebooks, New York 1966). But notwithstanding these other kinds of paradoxes, it was variations on the Liar paradox that appear to have been the central concern of the insolubilia-literature.

2 See the discussion of this attitude in my introduction to William Heytesbury, On "Insoluble" Sentences: Chapter One of His Rules for Solving Sophisms, Paul Vincent Spade, tr., (Mediaeval Sources in Translation, vol. 21, Toronto 1979), pp. 7-11. Heytesbury himself is the only mediaeval author I know who did not share this optimistic view, and even he was not altogether consistent about the matter. See ibid.

instance, written in 1132, Adam of Balsham asks “Whether he lies who says nothing but that he lies,” and also “Whether he says the truth who says nothing but that he lies”. These are the earliest known mediaeval formulations of the Liar-sentence. But Adam presents them as examples of an altogether different point. He says nothing whatever to indicate that he was aware of the very special problems they pose, that they were current topics of philosophical discussion in his day, or how one might go about trying to answer those questions.

Nevertheless, there is other evidence to indicate that the special problems associated with such sentences were realized and discussed by the second half of the twelfth century if not before. The anonymous Dialectica Monacensis, for instance, includes the following remark in its account of the Aristotelian fallacy secundum quid et simpliciter: “But how this fallacy arises in uttering the insoluble ‘I am saying a falsehood’, that is a matter discussed in the treatise on insolubles.” This passage, from some time in the second half of the twelfth century, contains the first known occurrence of the word ‘in-