On the Self-Refuting Statement "There is no Truth":
A Medieval Treatment

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It is commonly known that 14th and 15th century logicians were deeply interested in the properties of self-referring statements. Perhaps, however, it could be better known that medieval theologians were also interested in them. In this regard, one important discussion centered around the proposition "There is no truth" ("Nulla veritas est"). Construed as a universal negative about an entire class of items of which it itself is a member, it is partially self-referring. And just because it is self-referring it also seems to be self-refuting: if it is true, then it is false; if it is false, then something is true. Thus, its contradictory is necessarily true, namely "There is some truth".

The history here goes back many centuries through a line of theologians and ultimately to St. Augustine.\(^1\) Following him, St. Anselm, St. Bonaventure, and others claimed to have found in the self-refutation of the denial of truth a foundational premise adequate to support other claims about God and immortality. But this was not without opposition from theological colleagues and successors, including Aquinas, Scotus, and in the post medieval period, Cajetan, and Toletus. Criticism came at either of two points: the critics objected (a) that the self-referring character of the denial of truth does not entail the truth of what is claimed, or (b) that the truth which the

\(^{1}\) Interest in self-refutation is common among ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophers. Sextus Empiricus provides a notable statement of the alleged self-refutation of the proposition in which we are interested. Sextus Empiricus, Against the Logicians, I 398-9, II 55, ed. and tr. R.G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge 1935, II, 213, 265. "Now as to those who assert that all things are false, ... they are confuted. For if all things are false, the statement 'All things are false,' being one of the 'all things,' will be false. And if the statement 'All things are false' is false, its contradictory, 'Not all things are false,' will be true. Therefore, if all things are false, not all things are false.'" (p. 265) For the history of the notion of self-refutation, see M.F. Burnyeat, Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy, in: The Philosophical Review, 85 (1976), 44-69.
self-refutation is purported to establish is not itself sufficient to found the metaphysical constructions it is further claimed to found.

An unraveling of this ancient debate—beginning our story with Augustine in the 4th century and ending it with Toletus in the 16th—reveals the appreciation among these theologians of ever more powerful tools of logical analysis, tools that have proven to be of lasting use.

I. Self-Reference

As a preliminary, let us make a few comments about self-reference. Not every self-referring statement is logically problematic; for evidence, take the statement, "This sentence contains five words". However, some are problematic: they are either (i) self-refuting or (ii) paradoxical. Our sentence "There is no truth" can be either, depending upon assumptions about the context of its assertion.

(i) Consider first self-refutation. Self-referring statements that are merely self-refuting undermine only themselves and not the whole apparatus of thought, as do paradoxes. Several sorts of self-refutation have been distinguished. To locate ourselves, consider each sort briefly. Of concern to us is the absolutely self-refuting statement: a statement that is falsified by its own content. Assuming that the operator "it is true that" is prefixable to any statement, then the statement "There is no truth" is absolutely self-refuting: if there is no truth, then it is true that there is no truth; but this entails in turn that there is truth; so the original statement entails its own falsity, and its opposite, "There is some truth", is necessarily true. The reasoning here turns on the assumption of the necessary prefixability of the operator "it is true that." As we shall see, the prefixability assumption is a central point of dispute among the theologians. Modern logicians have identified several other sorts of self-refutation. A pragmatically self-refuting statement is one in which the way the statement is presented is inconsistent with the content of the statement, as when one writes "I am not writing". This sentence would not be self-refuting, of course, were the mode of its expression an utterance rather

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