Chapter 14

RESTRICTIONISM: A MEDIEVAL APPROACH REVISITED

Claude Panaccio

University of Quebec at Montreal, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3C 3P8

Abstract Restrictionism is the doctrine that self-reference is to be banned somehow, at least in some sort of cases. As a solution to the Liar paradox, restrictionism has been popular in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century, and then rapidly lost ground to rival theories such as Bradwardine's. The aim of this paper is twofold: (1) to explain what medieval restrictionism amounted to as a matter of historical fact and why it came to be abandoned; (2) to provide a modern reformulation of the approach that still seems promising as a solution to the Liar and related paradoxes.

Keywords: Adhocness, Restriction (restrictio), Restrictionism, Supposition (suppositio), Ungroundedness.

Restrictionism is the doctrine that self-reference is to be banned somehow, either in all cases (strong restrictionism) or in some cases only (weak restrictionism). As a solution to the Liar paradox, the strong version was popular in the thirteenth century and the weak one was adopted by several authors in the first quarter of the fourteenth century. Restrictionism, both weak and strong, then came under heavy attack and rapidly lost ground to rival approaches, until finally nobody was interested in the problem anymore, as happened in the early modern period. The twentieth century, of course, spectacularly revived the discussion on the Liar, and the last two or three decades, in particular, have even intensified it.
Yet, restrictionism has been nearly forgotten in the recent debates. My aim here is twofold. First, I will explain what medieval restrictionism amounted to as a matter of historical fact, both in its strong and weak versions, and why it came to be abandoned by most logicians in the fourteenth century. And second, I will sketch a modern reformulation for a (weak) form of restrictionism that still seems promising to me insofar as it avoids altogether, at a reasonable price, the well-known threatening contradictions, the improbable Tarskian hierarchy of languages, and the Kripkean truth-value gaps, while requiring – in a nominalistic spirit – only token utterances as the bearers of truth-values.

14.1 Historical Survey

Paul Vincent Spade, who provided the best available examination of the medieval ‘insolubilia’ literature, distinguished three periods: (1) from the beginnings of the medieval debate in the middle or late twelfth century to ca. 1320; (2) from ca. 1320 to ca. 1350 – the most creative period; and (3) from ca. 1350 to the end of the Middle Ages, as logicians discussed and refined the ideas of their predecessors without introducing much novelty [47, p. 246]. Restrictionism emerged very early in the first period as one of the favourite solutions. Many texts have been lost unfortunately, but the position is already discussed as a current one around 1225 in an anonymous Parisian Insolubilia treatise (see [14, Sect. 3, pp. 93–98]); it is positively defended by the mid-thirteenth in at least three of the rare treatments of the question that we still have from that period; it is also found in a revised version at the end of the century in such renowned authors as Simon of Faversham and (probably) John Duns Scotus; and two of the most prominent logicians of the early fourteenth century, Walter Burley and Richard Campsall, resolutely subscribed to weak restrictionism.

---

1One noteworthy exception is the work of Keith Simmons, whose “Singularity Theory of Truth” is partly inspired by what he calls the “Ockham–Burley–Pseudo-Sherwood solution” to the Liar. See in particular [40].

2Former attempts of mine to discuss various aspects of the matter are to be found in Panaccio [28–30]. With respect to these, the present paper is intended to be both more embracing and more systematic.

3Most of these papers are reprinted in [49]. See also [47, 48], and Spade’s very useful ‘Catalogue’ on the medieval Liar literature [45].

4Those are to be found in: (1) the anonymous Insolubilia edited by Braakhuis [5]; (2) the Insolubilia of the Pseudo-Sherwood [57] edited by Roure [38]; and (3) the Summulae logicales of Lambert of Auxerre [23] edited by Alessio [1].

5See Simon of Faversham [41], quest. 25, ed. by Ebbesen et al. [16, pp. 165–167]; and John Duns Scotus [39], quest. 52–53, ed. by Wadding [55, vol. 2, pp. 73–76] (the authenticity of this text, however, has been questioned by some commentators; see [45, pp. 65–66]).

6See Walter Burley [9], Insolubilia, ed. by Roure [38, pp. 262–284]; and Richard Campsall [10], quest. 10, ed. by Synan [50, pp. 162–177].