Chapter 5

LOGIC WITHOUT TRUTH

Buridan on the Liar

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Abstract  Stephen Read’s criticism of Buridan’s solution of the Liar Paradox is based on the charge that while this solution may avoid inconsistency, it does so at the expense of failing to provide a theory of truth. This paper argues that this is one luxury Buridan’s logical theory actually can afford: since Buridan does not define formal consequence in terms of truth (and with good reason), his logic simply does not need it. Therefore, Buridan’s treatment of the paradox should be regarded as an attempt to eliminate a problem concerning the possibility of the consistent use of semantic predicates under the conditions of semantic closure, rather than as an attempted solution of a problem for a theory of truth. Nevertheless, the concluding section of the paper argues that Buridan’s solution fails, because it renders his logical theory inconsistent. A postscript, however, briefly considers an interpretation that may quite plausibly save the consistency of Buridan’s theory.

Keywords:  Nominalism, Insolubilia, Truth, Correspondence, Validity, Virtual implication, Consequences, Signification, Supposition, Syncategoremata, Complexe significabilia, Token-sentence, Bradwardine, Buridan, Albert of Saxony.

5.1  Read, Bradwardine and Buridan

In a couple of recent, extremely intriguing papers [1, 2], Stephen Read has successfully revived Thomas Bradwardine’s ingenious treatment of the Liar Paradox, along with his theory of truth and propositional signi-
fication, after being nearly completely forgotten and generally unappreciated for almost seven centuries. In the course of this resuscitation process, Read has also argued against contemporary “infatuation” with another, already quite successfully resuscitated medieval treatment of the Liar, namely, John Buridan’s, and for the superiority of Bradwardine’s solution, which (or rather, a significantly modified version of which) Buridan had abandoned.

Despite possible (and even actual) appearances to the contrary, I am not one of those who are “infatuated” with Buridan in general or his treatment of the Liar in particular. Nevertheless, I believe fairness demands that we acknowledge Buridan’s genuinely good reasons for abandoning his own earlier solution within its own theoretical framework. Indeed, we should realize that the charges leveled against Buridan’s solution coming from the demands of a different theoretical framework are not quite justified, if we consider the role of his final solution within its own theoretical context.

Therefore, given the importance of the different theoretical contexts in which these solutions are proposed, I believe I should begin by clarifying some points concerning the relationships between Bradwardine’s and Buridan’s positions within their respective theoretical contexts. As Stephen Read has carefully pointed out, there is a significant difference between Bradwardine’s solution and Buridan’s early solution, despite the fact that they are both framed with reference to the signification of propositions, as opposed to Buridan’s final solution, which is framed with reference to the “co-supposition” of the terms of a “virtually implied” proposition.

The fundamental difference between the two solutions provided in terms of propositional signification is that whereas Buridan’s early solution involves the thesis that all propositions signify their own truth, Bradwardine’s solution restricts this claim to propositions signifying that they are false, i.e., according to Bradwardine, it is only such propositions that signify their own truth (and so, signifying both their own falsity and truth, they must be false). But the difference between their solutions is not restricted to the different scopes of these two theses: the authors provide radically different reasons for these theses. Bradwardine’s thesis is based on an elaborate argument, specifically designed to deal with propositions signifying themselves not to be true or to be false (see [1], p. 192). Buridan’s, on the other hand, is based on what he considers to be the general feature of the signification of all propositions based on their

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1 In fact, I consider Buridan my worthiest philosophical opponent on some fundamental issues in metaphysics. This is precisely the reason why I spend considerable time and effort on reconstructing his genuine positions.