A Short History of Impossible *Positio*

In the game of obligations, the question arose whether to accept an impossible *positum*. Originally, the answer was 'Yes', provided that it was not formally (i.e. explicitly) contradictory. This last could not be accepted, since the respondent was deemed to have answered badly when granting (explicitly) contradictory propositions. But the game could proceed with an impossible *positum* which was not formally contradictory, provided the rule of the Adamites was not used, that anything follows from an impossible proposition. Nor should any rule be used which infers a negative proposition from an affirmative one. Nonetheless, in the early 14th century, , impossible *positio* was rejected, for example by Roger Swyneshed. This was not long after the distinct study of the criteria for a valid consequence, and distinct treatises on consequence, arose. (Burley's *Consequentiae* is the earliest known, dating from 1302, the same year as his *Obligationes*).

References:

Anon, 'The Emmeran treatise on impossible *positio*', tr. in M. Yrjönsuuri, *Medieval Formal Logic*, pp. 217-23.

P. Spade and E. Stump, 'Walter Burley and the *Obligations* attributed to William of Sherwood', *History and Philosophy of Logic* 4, 1983, 9-26: §3, pp. 17-19.

Walter Burley, *Obligations*

(Green, p. 83) Impossible *Positio*

3.179   Now we come to impossible *positio*. Impossible *positio* is when an impossible proposition is posited. So, in this type of *positio*, only something impossible may be posited. But not just anything impossible may be posited, for something impossible formally containing opposites may not be posited here. For if something inconsistent with the *positum* were then posited, it would have to be granted, since something inconsistent with the *positum* would be a consequence of the *positum*. So only what is impossible but does not formally contain opposites may be posited here. Indeed, some say that only conceivable impossibility may be posited here.

3.180   It must be realised that in this type of *positio* the rules 'from the impossible anything follows' and 'the necessary follows from anything' may not be employed. Nor may one in this type of *positio* employ an infinite consequence, because if an infinite consequence were used with an impossible *positum*, anything whatever would have to be granted because it is a consequence, and anything whatever would have to be denied because it is inconsistent, for if everything follows, everything is inconsistent, and so it would be both granted and denied. Moreover, nothing would be irrelevant to

the *positum*. So here only natural consequence should be used, and not just any, but only that which is so obvious that its opposite cannot be believed. For example: if this is a whole, it has parts; or if this is a whole, it is greater than its part.

3.181   A rule: if a conceivable impossibility has been posited, an inconceivable impossibility should not be granted, just as if a possibility has been posited, an impossibility should not be (p. 84) granted.

3.182   But it seems that if something conceivable has been posited, something inconceivable must be granted. For 'A man is not an animal' is conceivable, so it may be posited. Then let 'An animal is not an animal' be proposed. If you grant it, you grant something inconceivable, something conceivable having been proposed. If you deny it, let the time be up, you deny what follows, because this follows in a natural consequence: a man is not an animal, so an animal is not an animal, as is manifest from its opposite.

3.183   Solution: 'An animal is not an animal' should be denied because, when something impossible has been posited, something more impossible should not be granted. Nor is it valid to infer: you deny what follows, so you respond badly. For not every natural consequence should be employed here, but only that which is obvious to anyone, and this consequence: a man is not an animal, so an animal is not an animal, is not of this sort.

3.184   Another rule is: if something impossible *per accidens* has been posited, something impossible *per se* should not be granted, nor should anything necessary *per se* be denied.

3.185   But on the contrary, suppose it is posited that Caesar was not a man, and then 'Caesar was an animal' is proposed. This should be granted because it is true and irrelevant. Then: 'Caesar was an irrational animal'. This should be granted because it is a consequence, but it is impossible *per se*. That it is a consequence is manifest, for it follows: Caesar was an animal, and he was not a man, so he was an irrational animal.

3.186   The solution: 'Caesar was an animal' should be denied, because it is impossible that Caesar was an animal and was not a man.

William Ockham, *Summa Logicae*

Part III-3, ch. 42: What is Impossible *Positio*?

Impossible *positio* is when some impossible proposition is posited. It must be realised that it is important to posit an impossible proposition and to accept an

inference in which an impossible proposition is inferred from another impossible one. For example, it is important to posit this proposition, 'A man is capable of braying' and to make this inference: 'If a man is an ass, a man is capable of braying'. Similarly, it is important to posit this proposition, 'God is not God' and to make this inference: 'If there is no God, God is not God'. Accordingly, this conditional or inference should be granted and the *positio* should not be accepted, and sometimes *positio* should be accepted as if impossible and should be employed in impossible *positio*. But the inference or conditional is good; just as this inference is good: 'God is not three persons, so God is not God'. But the premise can be accepted in impossible *positio* and the conclusion ought to be denied. Similarly, this inference is good: 'The Holy Spirit does not proceed from the Son, so the Holy Spirit is not distinct from the Son', but in impossible *positio* the premise should be accepted and the conclusion denied. From which it is clear that there are many inferences or true conditionals where both premise and conclusion are impossible, but the premise can be accepted and maintained and the conclusion denied.

However, it must be realised concerning impossible *positio* that not every impossible proposition can be admitted, because any impossible proposition which clearly on any consideration implies contradictories should not be admitted. So only an impossible proposition from which it is not possible, by self-evident rules and propositions, to infer contradictories should be accepted in impossible *positio*. Thus such propositions as 'God is not God', 'God is not wise', 'A man is not capable of laughter' and the like can be accepted in impossible *positio*.

From this it is clear that the rules given for possible *positio*, namely, that every consequence should be granted and everything inconsistent should be denied, are not in general useable in impossible *positio*, but must be more restricted.

Then this rule can be given: every consequence of the *positum* in natural and simple inference, holding by virtue of a self-evident proposition or rule, should be granted. From this it follows that in impossible *positio* what follows syllogistically from the *positum* or from what has been granted should be granted. Similarly, what follows in virtue of such rules of transposition as: 'From a universal to an exclusive with the terms transposed is a good inference', 'From an affirmative with an infinite predicate to a negative with a finite predicate is a good inference', and suchlike, should be granted. For if such inferences were denied, there could be no disputation. But what follows by inference ut nunc or by material inference or other inferences than these can be denied, despite their truly following from the *positum*. And similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, for the denial of what is inconsistent.

From this it is clear, as touched on before,[1] that sometimes an inference or conditional should be granted even though its premise can be sustained without its conclusion, when its premise contains a contradiction. So if one is asked whether the Holy Spirit is not distinct from the Son if it does not proceed from him, one should respond that it is so, because this question is only asking about the truth of the conditional: 'If the Holy Spirit does not proceed from the Son, the Holy Spirit is not distinct from the Son', which is true, even though it is not self-evidently true. Thus there are many good inferences and many true conditionals, even though they are not self-evident to us.

Similarly, if one is asked whether if there is a God, God is three and one, one should respond that it is so, even though the errant infidel would respond otherwise, because that conditional is true, even though it is not self-evident.

But if one is asked whether, positing such an impossibility as that the Holy Spirit does not proceed from the Son, one should grant the consequence that the Holy Spirit is not distinct from the Son, it must be said that not. For this conditional is not self-evident and one cannot self-evidently know that if the Holy Spirit does not proceed from the Son it is not distinct from the Son, so even though such an impossibility as that the Holy Spirit does not proceed from the Son is posited, it should not be granted that the Holy Spirit is not distinct from the Son.

From all this it is clear that many propositions containing a contradiction, that is, implying contradictories, can be posited in impossible *positio*, nor on that account should contradictories be granted, because in such *positio* not every consequence of the *positum* should be granted, but many consequences should be denied or not granted. For everything which does not follow self-evidently, so that such inference cannot be made self-evidently and naturally, should not be granted on account of the positum, whether the positum is a simple proposition or a conjunction of them. For sometimes, one impossible proposition having been posited and not another, some proposition should be denied, although if the other had been posited with the first, it should have been granted.

But is such impossible positio useful? It must be said that sometimes such positio is useful. For by such positio one opens the way to recognising which inferences are good and self-evident and which are not self-evident, from which we can come to see the differences between terms and their relations, and sometimes through such a way of investigating the differences among things themselves.

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[1] At the end of the first paragraph.