

MR4622711 03-03 03A05

Conti, Alessandro D. (I-LAQL-HUM)

★Wyclif and Paul of Venice on the liar paradox: a comparison. (English. English summary)

*Theories of paradox in the middle ages, 187–203, Stud. Log. (Lond.), 99, Coll. Publ., [London], [2023],*

© 2023.

That there is some sort of baffling logical short circuit to be found within sentences like ‘I am lying’ or ‘this sentence is false’ has been noted frequently and discussed abundantly throughout the history of human thought, notably by the Megarian school of philosophy.

Late medieval authors were the first to consider the liar paradox as a veritable antinomy (in which the contradiction is deduced from reasoning which does not violate any logical principle and must therefore be judged valid) and to treat it accordingly.

In this paper, the author considers two different medieval solutions to the paradox: (1) the one proposed by English Catholic priest and scholastic philosopher John Wyclif (ca. 1330–1384) in Chapter Eight of the third treatise of his *Logicae Continuatio*; and (2) the one developed by Italian Augustinian philosopher and theologian Paul of Venice (1369–1429) in the fifteenth treatise of the second part of his *Logica Magna*.

These solutions are emblematic of two different ways of approaching the problem of paradoxes: Wyclif places his solution within a larger, semantic context, namely his theory of meaning and truth of propositions, while Paul, on the basis of English Benedictine natural philosopher Roger Swyneshed’s own theory, tries to come up with a technical solution. What’s more, Wyclif’s main thesis and Paul of Venice’s main thesis on the liar paradox are opposite. In short, according to Wyclif, the liar statement would not generate any antinomy if the levels of discourse were not confused by us; whereas according to Paul, the liar statement generates an antinomy, which to be resolved requires a set of ad hoc rules, on the basis of which the statement is to be considered false.

In order to better achieve the purpose of a balanced comparison between John Wyclif’s and Paul of Venice’s different approaches to the liar paradox, the paper has been divided into three parts followed by a short conclusion.

In the first part, the structure of the liar paradox is quickly presented.

In the second, more extensive part, Wyclif’s peculiar theory of insolubles is analyzed. It is shown that, although Wyclif’s solution to the liar paradox is obviously different from Tarski’s well-known solution, Wyclif appears to have been aware of the possibility of distinguishing between language and metalanguage. Indeed, his solution—tailored for natural languages—somehow implies a sort of distinction between different levels of language in so far as he distinguishes various levels of meaning and truth of propositions and corresponding levels of falsehood, and no insoluble is both true and false according to truth and falsehood of the same level.

In the third part, the most significant elements of Paul of Venice’s solution are outlined. The author points out that Paul appropriately defines what constitutes the falsehood of a proposition and what characterizes an insoluble proposition, in such a way as to make insoluble propositions false so that any attempt to show how an insoluble proposition is both true and false is doomed to failure. In the conclusion, in which Wyclif’s and Paul’s different logical attitudes are compared, the author shows that Paul’s strategy has a weak point within it, which unfortunately partially undermines its value.

*Frédéric Morneau-Guérin*