Possible Impossibilities in Medieval Logic

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Abstract
The idea of there being “real possibilities” implies that there must also be so-called “unreal possibilities”, for if there were no unreal possibilities then all possibilities would be real. In this talk we consider this issue from a novel perspective, by looking at the role of possible impossibilities: impossible situations or scenarios which are nevertheless in a certain sense possible, and in this particular sense—which must be made explicit—shed interesting light on questions in logic and metaphysics. Our particular focus is on a sub-type of the genre of medieval logic called obligatio, namely, the species positio impossibilis. Ordinary obligational disputations operate on the Aristotelian premise that the impossible does not follow from the possible, and hence if a disputant concedes and denies the same sentence, or concedes both a sentence and its denial, then either he has violated some disputational rule or norm or the original starting point of the disputation was impossible. But some authors writing on obligatio point out that it is possible to reason from seemingly impossible premises without falling prey to logical explosion, and they investigate this in impossible positio. We introduce the genre of obligatio and the particular subspecies of impossible positio, looking at rules for and examples of it from a number of different medieval authors, and consider how this type of disputation can be used to shed light on actual possibilities, metaphysical, theological, and logical.

1 Introduction
The idea of there being “real possibilities” implies that there must also be so-called “unreal possibilities”, for if there were no unreal possibilities then all possibilities would be real. In this talk we consider this issue from a novel perspective, by looking at the role of possible impossibilities: impossible situations or scenarios which are nevertheless in a certain sense possible, and in this particular sense—which must be made explicit—shed interesting light on questions in logic and metaphysics. Our particular focus is on a sub-type of the genre of

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A subtitle of this paper could be “What logic can tell us about metaphysics and epistemology”.

2 Obligational disputations and positio impossibilis

positio impossibilis—not real impossibilities, but naturally or physically impossible. Or, doctrinal [6, p. 283]. See note on [6, p. 283] about impossible vs. incompossible.

Being a subspecies of positio, impossible positio follows the same rules for its parent species, namely that whatever follows from the positum, together things previously conceded and the contradictory opposites of things previously denied, must be conceded; whatever is inconsistent with the positum or anything previously conceded or the contradictory opposite of anything previously denied, must be denied; and whatever neither follows nor is inconsistent (repugnans) must be conceded if it is true outside the disputation, denied if it is false, and doubted if it is not known whether it is true or false. Such sentences as fall under the latter category are called irrelevant or impertinent.

2.1 Motivations
look at what the texts say

2.2 Applications
look at what Martin and Knuutila say, reference Knoks

“In the chapter dedicated to positio impossibilis in William Ockham’s Summa logicae his emphasis is almost exclusively theological. Almost all of the examples concern divine trinity” [12, p. 65]—it would be interesting to look at the examples which don’t.

3 (In)compossibility and (im)possibility

What are these, outside of pos.imp.?
According to Yrjönsuuri, Henry of Ghent distinguishes between what is impossible and what is incoherent (incompossibile) [12, p. 61]. Same distinction/language in Godfrey of Fontainnes, cf. [12, p. 62].

I’m bothered by Yrjönsuuri’s translation of incompossibilitas by ‘incoherence’. There already is a Latin word for ‘incoherent’; incompossibility seems to be something different.

3.1 Simpliciter vs. per accidens

Manifest vs. latent necessity, cf. [12, p. 64].

Burley on impossible per accidens sentences, ref. p. 242.

“What is crucial in impossible positio, just as in possible positio, is that the respondent avoid conceding contradictories” [9, p. 257]. What is impossible need not be contradictory.

Some impossibilities entail contradictories only per accidens [9, p. 259].

Compare what Chatton does [12, p. 66] with the examples Knoks considers.

3.2 Syntactic or semantic

See underlined note on [9, p. 266]. This again stresses that incompossibility is a semantic, not syntactic, notion.

Yrjönsuuri distinguishes between semantic and syntactic possibility: “In the fourteenth century the syntactic interpretation of possibility became increasingly important and older semantic interpretations lost their attraction” [11, p. 235].

[11, p. 237]: But only if you think that inferences are characterized only syntactically. The quote from Albert (p. 238) talks about consequence; consequence is a semantic notion.

Another argument against this emphasis on syntacticism: The epistemic arguments in PoV are clearly on semantic consequence.

The example on p. 241 is similarly semantic, not syntactic.

4 Different types of consequence

The Adamites, explosion, consequence by inclusion of understanding, make a nod towards dialetheism.

Sherwood(?) goes for conceptual containment: [12, p. 64]. Burley blocks those posita which “formally contain opposites (impossible formaliter includens opposita)” [12, p. 64].

5 Notes and stuff

de Rijk quoting Boehner: “Precisely it is this last point—contradiction—which provides the key to the exercises in De Obligationibus. The aim of the opponens is to involve the respondens in contradiction, and the respondens has to avoid it” [3, pp. 94–95].

“My interpretation is that Boethius calls a set of sentences compossible if contradictions cannot be derived from it by acceptable inferential principles. In other words, a set of sentences is compossible if the opposite of none of the
members of the set follows from the other members” [11, p. 246]. But this
doesn’t work: if one of the sentences in the set is a contradiction, then it’s
opposite (a tautology) follows from every other member of the set, if we accept
a quolibet verum.

Hah, fn. 27 finally notes my complaint with the entire paper.

In positio impossibilis, it cannot be the case that “The opponens has the task
to make the respondens concede impossible statements which the repsondens
need not concede proper positum” [3, p. 95], though it is the case that “the
respondens’ fault is always contradiction” [3, p. 95].

The Emmeran treatise on false positio almost certainly pre-dates Sherwood’s
[3, pp. 100–01]. “That the Parvipontanian thesis still was in actual dispute at
the time our anonymous author wrote his tract, seems to point to the first
decades of the thirteenth century as the latest possible date of his work...both
tracts should be dated not later than about the 1220’s” [3, p. 102]. Also note-
worthy is that impossibilis positio which is made through a union, which is the
primary focus of the Emmeran treatise, does not appear in Sherwood at all [3,
p. 102]. Makes me wonder what Sherwood’s examples are like.

[3, 6, 9, 1, 2, 8, 5, 11, 12] are on desk, in bag, or in this folder.
[10] needs to be printed.
requested [4] from the library; I think the year in the reference is wrong, or
the title is wrong, or something. need to track [7] down.

References

[1] Anonymous. The Emmeran treatise on false Positio. In M. Yrjönsuuri, ed-


[5] Aleks Knoks. A commentary on Tractatus Emmeranus de Impossibili Pos-
sitione, 2012. working paper.


[7] Christopher J. Martin. Bradwardine and the use of positio as a test of pos-


