Disputation and Logic in the Medieval Treatises “De Modo Opponendi et Respondendi”
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Abstract: In 1980 L. M. de Rijk edited some texts connected with medieval disputation (Die mittelalterlichen Traktate De modo opponendi et respondendi), towards which he showed a strikingly contemptuous attitude. The reason for his contempt was that the treatises did not fit the obligationes and sophismata tradition. In this article I focus on the original version, the Thesaurus Philosophorum, to highlight the distinction of this family of treatises with respect to the “modern” tradition. First, I study the features of the disputation that can be recognised through the collection of fallacious arguments contained in the Thesaurus. Second, I briefly examine the contents of the treatise and their arrangement, showing that they are closely related to the kind of disputation in question. I hope to support the idea that neither the technique of disputation nor the contents and their arrangement deserve a straightforward rejection.

Keywords: late-medieval disputation, obligationes, sophisms, Aristotelian logic, logica modernorum

In 1980 Professor de Rijk presented a careful edition of four related texts, under the title Die mittelalterlichen Traktate De modo opponendi et respondendi.¹ The edited treatises included a Thesaurus philosophorum of unknown date and author;² a version of this work which was found in a fifteenth century manuscript; the famous treatise De modo opponendi et respondendi which had been falsely attributed to Albert the Great, and which now appears to be a re-elaboration of the Thesaurus; and another version of the same “model” which could have been compiled around 1300 by a certain Magister Gentilis, and which is entitled De arte et modo disputandi.³ Although the connection with the art of disputation might sound promising, the texts have hardly interested historians of logic. Prior to de Rijk’s edition, Grabmann had devoted some pages to the only text that was known at the time, the Pseudo-Albertian treatise De modo opponendi et respondendi, which he presented as belonging to

¹ L. M. de Rijk, Die mittelalterlichen Traktate De modo opponendi et respondendi. Einleitung und Ausgabe der einschlägigen Texte (Münster, 1980).
² De Rijk is inclined to rely on the Prologus, where the author calls himself “Aganafat” and claims to be an Egyptian, thus conjecturing that the text could had been translated into Latin before 1200; see de Rijk, Die mittelalterlichen Traktate, 20-25, and also ‘A note on Aganafat(?)’s Thesaurus Philosophorum’, Vivarium 11 (1973), 105-107. Ebbesen, in contrast, has no doubt that the author was a thirteenth century Western European: S. Ebbesen, Commentators and Commentaries on Aristotle’s Sophistici Elenchi vol. III (Leiden, 1981), 124.
³ The identity of this Gentilis is equally uncertain: de Rijk, Die mittelalterlichen Traktate, 36-41.
sophismata literature. But after de Rijk’s edition no one has undertaken a detailed study of the treatises.

In all probability, de Rijk’s attitude towards the edited works has contributed to this lack of interest. His poor opinion of these treatises, evidenced in the introductory study, is striking. In contrast with Grabmann’s description of the Pseudo-Albertian treatise as “a proper and thorough theory and technique of the sophismata as exercises of disputation in the Arts Faculty”, de Rijk neither considers the Thesaurus family as containing a theory of sophisms nor sees the treatises as representative of the practice of disputation. In this article I will advance a hypothesis that might explain this negative assessment, and that hopefully will make room for a more constructive view of this family of treatises.

1. Logical Seriousness and Technique of Disputation

As usual, de Rijk’s work aroused the interest of scholars, and four reviews of the book appeared in subsequent years. Two of them did not question de Rijk’s appraisal of the treatises (those by Bos and Muñoz Delgado), but the other two were reluctant to accept it (those by Stump and Angelelli). Each one of the latter focused on one of the main points of criticism in the introductory study: first, de Rijk was worried about the “non-serious” nature of the treatises’ aim and contents; second, he complained about the absence in them of a real technique of disputation.

Eleonore Stump’s review focuses on de Rijk’s evaluation of the treatises as a collection of “unsophisticated manuals” with no place in the development of medieval logic: their only aim was supposedly that of teaching a disputant how to deceive his rival, but the sophistical arguments they contained could have deceived only “the very ignorant”. If this assessment is correct, Stump finds it “more than a little puzzling” that the original treatise was copied and reworked for three centuries. In particular, she judges it very unlikely that the purpose of the fallacious arguments was to “deceive”, mainly because the conclusions were patently false. I cannot but agree with her: actually, what can be understood from the Preface of the Thesaurus is rather that the purpose of the arguments and tricks is just to allow the Opponent to “win” in

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7 De Rijk, *Die mittelalterlichen Traktate*, 54. De Rijk explains Grabmann’s appraisal by the fact that an added section on *distintiones sophismatum* was thought to belong to the work.


10 De Rijk, *Die mittelalterlichen Traktate*, 60, 68.

11 Ibid., 77.

12 Ibid., 68.

a disputation, by forcing the Respondent to concede any *propositum* (not to believe it true, if it is patently false!), even when the Opponent lacks specific arguments for it.\(^{14}\)

This family of treatises can therefore be seen as reflecting the development of the medieval *disputatio* in a playful direction, where the “external” and cooperative aim (that is, the search for truth) is put aside, and the “internal” and self-interested goal (that is, victory over the rival) becomes central.\(^{15}\) In this kind of disputation, to force the Respondent to concede a false thesis is not the same as to “deceive” him, it just means to “defeat” him.\(^{16}\)

This playful disputation has been called the “dialectical disputation”, as it was practiced in the schools of dialecticians in the Early Middle Ages.\(^{17}\) When it merged with the tradition of the *logica modernorum* it gave rise, in the context of the universities, to the *ars obligatoria*, which is considered to be the final stage in the evolution of this branch of the medieval disputation.\(^{18}\) The only “external” aim of this kind of debate would be the development of argumentative skills. Thus, a pedagogical purpose accompanies the practice of the game, and this is what makes the game of obligation a “serious” one, and what also makes the literature related to it serious as well. This pedagogical purpose can also be recognised in the literature connected with *sophismata*.

But the *Thesaurus* does not seem to deserve the same appraisal. Disappointed by the boastful tone of the Preface, de Rijk is strongly inclined to accept that the author is neither interested in logic nor in any real technique of disputation, and he therefore infers that nothing of theoretical value can be drawn from this work. The problem, in my opinion, is that the logic de Rijk is seeking and the technique of disputation he has in mind are exclusively these reflected in the *sophismata* and *obligationes* literature. Since the treatises *De modo opponendi et respondendi* do not fit into this tradition, they are considered to have no interesting content, either about logic or about disputation.

In connection with this last point, Ignacio Angelelli’s review reproaches de Rijk for having assumed that the medieval art of disputation is only represented by the *ars obligatoria*. According to Angelelli, what de Rijk “has failed to see” is that there is a disputation technique which is different from that shown in the treatises *De obligationibus*.\(^{19}\) A broad outline of this technique was given by Angelelli in his 1970 article ‘The Techniques of Disputation in the History of Logic’, where it was named “the argument method” (in contrast with “the question method”, developed in the *ars obligatoria*, where the Opponent asks and the Respondent asserts).\(^{20}\) In an “argumentative” disputation, the role of the Respondent is basically that of

\(^{14}\) “Per quas quilibet poterit probare propositum quod sibi placuerit, cum defecerint argumenta ad propositum.” De Rijk, *Die mittelalterlichen Traktate*, 110.

\(^{15}\) On this playful character of the medieval disputation, see A. de Libera, ‘La logique de la discussion dans l’université médiévale’, in *Figures et conflits rhétoriques*, eds. M. Meyer and A. Lemperre (Bruxelles, 1990), 59-81.

\(^{16}\) I beg the reader’s permission not to be politically correct: for the sake of simplicity, I will use “he” as gender-neutral, and “man” as a translation for the Latin “homo”.


\(^{19}\) Angelelli, ‘Review’, 249.

conceding, distinguishing or rejecting the Opponent’s assertions. The Opponent’s task is on the contrary an active one, as he must construct arguments in order to refute some proposition accepted by the Respondent.\(^21\)

This non-obligational technique of disputation was used and studied during the Second Scholastic, where an actual “theory of disputation” was developed.\(^22\) In addition, what Ashworth calls the “doctrinal disputation” in her study of Jodocus Clichtoveus is a Renaissance example of the presence of a non-obligational disputation in logical treatises (although she leaves open the question of whether it corresponds to the “argument method” described by Angelelli).\(^23\) In any case, it seemed that in the late-medieval period the only technique of disputation known and studied in logical treatises was the obligational technique. The edition of William Heytesbury’s *Sophismata Asinina* has offered historians a late-medieval example of a different kind of disputation (and, according to Pironet, the treatise is the record of a real disputation).\(^24\) In my opinion, the treatises in the *opponendi et respondendi* family have also the interest of being a set of logical treatises based on a non-obligational kind of disputation (although in this case the texts are by no means the record of any actual disputation). Nevertheless, the *sophismata asinina* are still closely related to the *obligationes* tradition, even if they record a different kind of disputation. The reason is that the logical theory which underlies the discussion is the same, whereas the *opponendi et respondendi* treatises seem to belong to a different logical tradition.

In the following pages I would like to highlight the distinctiveness of this family of treatises with respect to the obligational and sophistic tradition. For the sake of simplicity, I will focus on the text that seems to be the original one, the *Thesaurus Philosophorum*. First, I will study the features of the disputation that can be recognised through the pages of the *Thesaurus*, in order to show that the paragraphs that seemed to be no more than a silly set of deceitful arguments do in fact correspond to a real technique of disputation. Second, I will briefly deal with the contents of the treatise, in order to reveal its uniqueness with respect to the *obligationes* and *sophismata* tradition. Perhaps both aspects might serve to restore at least some logical value to this neglected family of treatises.

### 2. Disputation in the *Thesaurus Philosophorum*

The *Thesaurus* opens with a short Preface, where the alleged intention of the treatise is declared: it is offered as an introduction to the technique of opposing and responding for those who want to obtain the glory of being the winner of a debate. Disputation is explicitly understood as a game with two combined goals: victory is the internal goal, and the exercising of argumentative skills is the external goal that is achieved in addition.\(^25\) With these two goals

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\(^{22}\) This has been studied by Donald Felipe in his doctoral dissertation: D. L. Felipe, *The Post-Medieval ‘Ars Disputandi’* (University of Texas, 1991). In Chapter 3: ‘Outline of the Modern Method’ (pages 41 to 45) a more detailed outline of the “argument method” can be found.

\(^{23}\) E. J. Ashworth, ‘Renaissance Man as Logician: Josse Clichtove (1472-1543) on Disputations’, *History and Philosophy of Logic* 7/1 (1986), 16.


\(^{25}\) “Si igitur aliqui doctores volunt sequi gloriam, indigent arte opponendi et respondendi. Ergo ars opponendi non solum pretat scientiam apparentem per quam aliquis victoriam acquirit opponendo sive disputando, sed intellectum subtilit et in aliis dat modum loquendi copiosum et modum exc<erc>itandi intellectum. Ars autem respondendi, ut habetur in libro [...] Elencorum, utilis est ad cognitionem Phylosophy et ad gloriam acquirendam et circa omnia faciet exercitatum videri respondentem et in nullo inscie se habere.” De Rijk, *Die mittelalterlichen Traktate*, 109.
in mind, the author intends to offer the readers the invaluable help of providing them with many ways of proving and disproving any proposition.26

Unlike the Second Scholastic treatises on argumentative disputation, the Thesaurus Philosophorum does not provide us with an “argumentation theory”, but just with an alleged “guide” to help the disputants to succeed. Nevertheless, through this “guide to success”, the main features of the disputation involved can be easily reconstructed: the participants and their roles, the general structure, moves and strategies, and the end of the game.

2.1. Participants and roles

Since the Thesaurus was conceived of as a “guide to success”, only the two main participants are mentioned, the Opponent and the Respondent, with no reference to any master guiding the discussion. As has been said, the first contrast with the obligational style of disputation (and the corresponding parallel with the Second Scholastic type of disputation) has to do with the relative prominence of the two main participants involved: if in an obligational disputation the Respondent is the main actor, here it is clear that the burden of the discussion falls on the Opponent, who plays a “creative” role, while the Respondent plays a merely “assessive” role.27 Not surprisingly (although de Rijk was also worried about this), the bulk of the treatise is devoted to the Opponent’s more difficult task.28 The Thesaurus offers the Opponent four types of success-oriented devices: five chapters aim to provide him with ways of proving any proposition; one chapter offers some logical rules that can be used to justify the validity of arguments; three chapters offer the Opponent several ways of invalidating any response, however good, that the Respondent might have given; and a final chapter offers some cautelae that could help the Opponent to win. Only a few pages are devoted to the role of the Respondent: a brief chapter with some suggestions for responding, and another short chapter with some cautelae specifically suited to this role.

Concerning the role of the Opponent, it becomes apparent from the very beginning that, as is the case in the Second Scholastic ars disputandi, his task consists in proving propositions: he must construct arguments for some propositum.29 On the role of the Respondent, although less evident, we can assume that it is similar to that assigned in the theoretical treatises devoted to the post-medieval ars disputandi: on the one hand, we get to know indirectly (through the strategies offered to the Opponent so that he could react to the Respondent’s moves) that the Respondent must indicate the flaws in the Opponent’s arguments (for example, to detect equivocities and fallacies);30 on the other hand, the cautelae

26 “Ut quicumque voluerit exercitatus esse in arte opponendi et respondendi facilem et compendiosam introductionem habeat et <per> subscripta diversas vias cuiuslibet propositionis probande et improbane invenire valeat multiformes.” Ibid., 109-110.

27 The same distribution of roles has been highlighted by Pironet in her introduction to the sophismata asinina: W. Heytesbury, Sophismata asinina, 29-30.

28 In fact, de Rijk has reasons to suspect that the original version of the Thesaurus only contained the chapters devoted to the Opponent’s task: de Rijk, Die mittelalterlichen Traktate, 66.


30 These are the pages devoted to teach the Opponent to prove quod nulla oratio sit distinguenda (ibid., 142-145), and quod nulla fallacia possit fieri (ibid., 145-151).
that the Respondent can use to resist the Opponent’s attacks are mainly directed towards accusing the Opponent’s arguments of lacking justification in different ways. \(^{31}\)

### 2.2. Structure of the disputation

As for the general structure of the disputation, again the Second Scholastic model can be recognised, at least in outline. All indicates that the game starts with a *propositum* put into play, and that the first move corresponds to the Opponent, who must try to prove it by means of an argument. Accordingly, the aim of the treatise is to provide the Opponent with a set of strategies by means of which any proposition whatsoever can (supposedly) be proved. \(^{32}\) We do not know who is in charge of proposing the *propositum*: either the Opponent has proposed the proposition he wants to prove, or the Respondent has proposed the opposed proposition, or perhaps a Master has proposed something for the purpose of discussion; the texts do not give any indication in this respect. \(^{33}\) What we can infer, on the other hand, is that the *propositum* must be a false proposition: otherwise, the game would lose its interest, as the thesis would be proved by the Opponent, the argument would be accepted by the Respondent, and the dialogue would end at that point. What is more, sometimes we get the impression that the aim of the Opponent can be to appear to prove some impossible proposition: \(^{34}\) interestingly, a whole chapter is devoted to a set of arguments that seem to prove that one of two divergent things is the other (*quod unum disparatum sit alterum*), for example, that a man is a donkey, where the resemblance to the *sophismata asinina* is patent. \(^{35}\)

### 2.3. Opponent’s goal and moves

Given that his task is that of arguing for a false *propositum*, the Opponent’s goal is to mislead the Respondent, forcing him to concede the false proposition. Thus, his moves consist in putting forward arguments that seem to prove the *propositum*. From the examples given in the text we know that any kind of argument is allowed as long as it seems to be correct: the Opponent is not restricted to arguments in syllogistic form, as will be the rule in Second

\(^{31}\) “Prima est quod respondens dicat opponenti quod probet quacumcumque propositionem accipiat nec dimittat pretermittere propositionem donec venerit ad certam probationem per textum vel auctoritatem.” Ibid., 156. “Septima est ut probatis omnibus propositionibus assumptis per certum textum vel auctoritatem, incipiat respondens invenire aliquam viam respondendi, dicens quod talis propositio, vel talis, est distinguenda, quacunque sit illa [...]” Ibid., 157. “Nona est ut respondens quando nullo istorum modorum potest se iuvare, scilicet petendo probationem vel distinguendo, dicat quod premisse sunt vere in se, sed dicat quod probet quod conclusio sequatur ex premissis, quia non videtur sequi [...] Tertia decima est ut respondens dicat opponenti quod eius propositiones non sunt ad propositum et quod probet quod sint ad propositum.” Ibid., 158.

\(^{32}\) “Circa primum modum sex sunt facienda sive necessaria ad propositum probandum quod alicui placuerit probare.” Ibid., 110.

\(^{33}\) In the Second Scholastic disputation, the Respondent has previously circulated a set of “theses”, from which the Opponent will select one and start to argue against it. Felipe, *The Post-Medieval*, 42-43.

\(^{34}\) An example given in the Prologus is a clue in this direction: “Sequitur enim quod si unum contrariorum sit alterum, ergo pari ratione, vel maiori, tu es capra. Et sic de alius impossibilius.” De Rijk, *Die mittelalterlichen Traktate*, 110. Also, the explicit mention of an impossible *propositum* is added in at least two places in the Pseudo-Albertian version: “Et per illas regulas possunt probari plura impossibilia.” Ibid., 246; “Per quas poterit quilibet plura impossibili probare.” Ibid., 248.

Scholastic disputations. We can even find some long series of chained consequences, and the Opponent is advised to make them as long and complicated as possible.

In addition to this wide range of possibilities, there is a pragmatically interesting feature of the game of disputation which seems to expand even further the Opponent’s field of action. When disputation is not aimed at debating any substantial thesis, but only at exercising one’s own ability to defeat the rival, what could be called a “meta-discursive” move can be put into practice. Instead of arguing directly for the propositum, the Opponent is advised to argue indirectly, not for the proposition itself, but for a meta-proposition such as “every proposition is true” or “two contradictory propositions are true at the same time”. Should the Respondent concede any such proposition, he will be obliged to concede the propositum.

We can also infer that, as occurs in the Second Scholastic argumentative disputation, the construction of arguments is the only move allowed to the Opponent. Not only all the examples put forward in ‘De modo opponendi in generali’ are in fact arguments, but also all the strategies suggested for the Respondent to hamper the Opponent’s activity involve the idea of asking the Opponent for a proof or of invalidating the proofs presented.

In addition, the examination of the arguments collected in the Thesaurus shows an interesting parallel with the treatises on obligationes, which reveals a general feature of late-medieval disputation: the technical details of each kind of disputation can themselves become the dialogue’s subject matter. For example, in the De obligationibus treatises, we can see propositions of the form “p has to be conceded” or “p has been posited” being examined. This kind of reflection upon themselves allows the treatises to consider sophismatic situations, such as the posito of “no proposition has been posited to you” or “every proposition has to be conceded by you”. Here we can see a similar reflection upon themselves in the treatises on argumentative disputation, with the effect that some proofs are examined that concern propositions about the very development and conditions of the debate, such as “it is true that I have said something”, “nothing said by the Respondent can be true”, etc. This allows the author to widen the field of logical difficulties that are examined.

2.4. Respondent’s goal and moves

Being his task that of assessing the Opponent’s arguments, the Respondent’s goal is to avoid being misled by the Opponent, so that he is not forced to concede a false proposition. In the Second Scholastic disputation, the main moves for the Respondent are, on the one hand, the evaluation of the argument’s validity, and on the other hand, the evaluation of the premises, by means of concession (“concedo”), rejection (“nego”) and distinction (“distinguo”). The rules for these moves are simple: a true proposition has to be conceded, a false proposition has to be negated, a multiplex proposition has to be distinguished.

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38 “Ex quibus omnibus semper sequetur <quod> quodlibet esse verum quod vis probare. Sequitur enim si unum contrarium est alterum, ergo pari ratione, vel maior, tu es capra. Et sic de alius impossibilitibus. Similiter hoc sequitur: si contradictoria sunt simul vera, cum id quod tu vis probare est altera pars contradictionis, ergo id quod vis probare est verum.” Ibid., 110.
39 In fact, a whole section is devoted to teaching the Opponent how to corner the Respondent by arguing that his responses are not good. “Restat igitur nunc de secunda parte aliquid dicere. Per quam quilibet poterit improbabre quolibet bonam responsionem datam ab ipso respondente.” Ibid., 137.
40 For other, secondary, moves in the Second Scholastic disputation, see Felipe, *The Post-Medieval*, 119-133.
The simplicity of the rules arises from the fact that in an argumentative disputation a unique criterion of response is needed. In an obligational disputation, in contrast, two different criteria must be appropriately combined: logical relations in the case of relevant propositions, and truth or falsity in the case of irrelevant propositions. In an argumentative disputation the only criterion is that of truth or falsity: the Respondent always evaluates the premises of the Opponent’s argument in themselves.

The clearest information about the Respondent’s moves in the opponendi et respondendi family comes from the Pseudo-Albertian treatise. It contains a very brief final section, added to the Thesaurus Philosophorum and entitled “De modo respondendi secundum veritatem” (as opposed to the ways of responding sophisticate included in the Thesaurus), where the Respondent’s main moves are summarised. Although the Respondent can simply concede the acceptable propositions of the Opponent, his main moves are directed towards “solving” the Opponent’s misleading arguments. Following Aristotle in the Sophistici Elenchi, the ways available for the Respondent to solve a sophistical argument are to negate and to distinguish.

As for the ways of responding “sophistice” which are offered in the Thesaurus, they are of a peculiar nature, as they do not fit any of the real Respondent’s moves. At first sight they might seem to be intended to allow the Respondent to escape the Opponent’s trap without either negating or distinguishing any of the Opponent’s actual propositions. But in my opinion, they might be revealing the existence of a kind of “meta-dialogue” about the original dialogue, which would show another interesting parallel with the obligationes treatises, and therefore another general feature of late-medieval disputation. In the De obligationibus treatises, on some occasions a dialogue between the Opponent and the Respondent can be discovered which does not obey the rules of the obligations: this can be considered as a meta-dialogue intended to determine if the Respondent has answered correctly or not. Similarly, a meta-dialogue can be discerned in the Thesaurus, in which an assessment of the Opponent’s performance is made. According to the pedagogical intention of this treatise, the author takes

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41 A. d’Ors has noted that the setting of two criteria of response is “the essential feature of the Art of Obligations”: A. d’Ors and M. García-Clavel, ‘Sobre las Obligationes de Robert Fland’, 72.

42 We know this indirectly, through the counsels intended for a cunning Opponent to hamper the Respondent moves, and vice-versa. “… tunc enim libentius concedet respondens ipsas propositiones, quia non credet quod valeant ad conclusionem principalem.” De Rijk, Die mittelalterlichen Traktate, 276; “… sic enim opponens credet quod respondens concesserit, et quando credet taliter habere argumentum suum completum, dicat respondens: proba talem vel talem.” Ibid., 285.

43 “Ad habendum solutionem veram sciendo est, ut vult Aristotiles libro Elencorum, quod omnis solutio aut per interemptionem aut per distinctionem.” Ibid., 285. These two main moves can also be recognised in the Thesaurus, when some strategies are offered to the Opponent in order to invalidate the Respondent’s move: “Sed quia omnis responsio, ut vult Aristotiles in Libro Elencorum, aut est per interemptionem, dicendo quoniam falsum est, aut per distinctionem, ideo circa istam partem tria sunt facienda. Primum erit ostendere quod nichil sit verum quod dicat respondens. Secundum erit quod nichil sit distinguendum quod ipse distinguat. Tertium erit ostendere in generali quod nulla responsio sit bona.” Ibid., 137.


45 “Alio modo contingit respondere per distinctionem […]” Ibid., 286.

46 “Quando igitur respondens vult sophistice evadere argumenta ipsius opponentis […]” Ibid., 155.

47 The existence of this meta-dialogue in the treatises on obligations has been brought to light by Angel d’Ors in several places. For example: A. d’Ors, ‘On Stump’s Interpretation of Burley’s De obligationibus’, in Knowledge and the Sciences in Medieval Philosophy, eds. S. Knauttina et al. (Helsinki, 1990), 468-478; A. d’Ors and M. Garcia-Clavel, ‘Sobre las Obligationes de Robert Fland. Antiqua et nova responsio’, Revista de Filosofía 7/1 (1994), 51-88.

48 D’Ors, ‘On Stump’s Interpretation’, 470.
this possibility of a meta-dialogue as an opportunity to examine the very notions of ‘disputation’ and of ‘argument’, although again with a sophistical flavour: the supposed Respondent’s meta-assessment consists in discrediting, by means of tricky arguments, the whole disputation as a disputation (thus allowing a look at the four kinds of Aristotelian disputation: doctrinal, dialectical, tentative, and sophistical), or the Opponent’s arguments as arguments (thus permitting a revisiting of the four kinds of Aristotelian argument: syllogism, enthymeme, induction, example).

2.5. Disputants’ extra skills

When disputation is not understood as a cooperative search for truth, but as a fight that must result in the victory of one of the disputants over the other, some practical skills are required that go beyond purely logical knowledge and abilities. In the Thesaurus Philosophorum both Opponent and Respondent are provided with some cautelae, which are nothing but certain tricks that can be used to hamper the rival’s activity.

In the case of the Opponent, these tricks are intended to hinder the Respondent in his assessment, regardless of the correctness of the arguments put forward. On the one hand, the Opponent can try to prevent the Respondent from becoming aware of the argument’s invalidity (for example, he can propose the conclusion very quickly after the premises, so that the Respondent does not have time to think the argument through; or he can construct very long propositions and arguments, making it difficult for the Respondent to assess them). On the other hand, the Opponent can try to prevent the Respondent from becoming aware of the falsity of propositions (for example, he can mix in a lot of irrelevant propositions, so that the Respondent concedes the whole package without noticing; or he can pretend that his premises are intended to uphold a different conclusion, so that the Respondent concedes them because he does not think them to be dangerous). He can also hamper in a general way the progress of the debate (for example, by using difficult terms to confuse the Respondent).

In the case of the Respondent, the tricks are intended to hinder the Opponent in the construction of arguments. In keeping with the Respondent’s passive role in the disputation, these moves are conceived as a defensive strategy. For example, the Respondent can “resist

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50 “Secundus modus respondendi sophistice est ut respondens querat ab opponente in qua specie argumentationis sibi vult secum arguere.” Ibid., 155.

51 De Rijk suggests that the sections containing cautelae might be an addition to the original version of the Thesaurus: ibid., 66.


53 “Tertia est quod non debes continuer proferre premissas per quas vis probare aliquam conclusionem, sed debes permiscere aliquas propositiones nichil facientes ad conclusionem. Sic libetibus concedet respondens ipsas, quia non credet quod valeant ad conclusionem.” Ibid., 151. “Quarta est: quando tu proponis premissas ad conclusionem aliquam, tu debes dicere quod istic non sunt ad conclusionem. Sic enim cius rei concedet respondens ipsas.” Ibid., 152.

54 “Ultima est: quando opponens <non> habet aliquam viam concluendi respondenti, debet accipere tales terminos, sicut de geometria et astrologia, quos non intelligat respondens; et cum talibus deducet respondentem ad confusionem.” Ibid., 153.
the Opponent throughout the time of the disputation” (*resistere tempore disputationis*)²⁵ by asking for a proof of everything (not only of the propositions put into play, but also whether a text or authority counts as a proof, or even whether the premises are relevant for the conclusion).²⁶ Surprisingly, together with the set of extra-logical counsels several semantic questions are introduced (concerning the possible ambiguity of univocal names) under the guise of providing the Respondent with some grounds for distinguishing any proposition.²⁷ This betrays again the pedagogical intention of the treatise (but the fallacious strategy is not accompanied by any solution, therefore the reader is supposed to know how to avoid the fallacy).

2.6. End of the disputation

Presumably, although this is not explicitly stated, the game of arguments and responses will follow until the Opponent is unable to construct further arguments, or the time of the disputation is over. We can infer that an Opponent who runs out of arguments loses, because the bulk of the treatise is devoted, as has been said, to train the Opponent in producing arguments at any cost, even if he lacks *argumenta ad propositum*. On the other hand, the existence of the Respondent’s resisting strategy is the clue that allows us to infer that there is a time limit for each disputation, and also that time plays against the Opponent. We can assume that, if the Respondent is able to resist until time is up, he will win, since the Opponent will have been unable to force him to concede the false thesis.²⁸

3. Logic in the Thesaurus Philosophorum

Nonetheless, the *Thesaurus Philosophorum* is not a treatise on disputation. Although it is a nice testimony of the existence of a non-obligational disputation, the work is not about disputation itself, but the disputational framework serves to provide some interesting materials for composing a logical textbook.²⁹ An imaginary dialogue between the Opponent and the Respondent is taken as an excuse to examine some semantic notions, inferential rules, and logical difficulties that are particularly connected with the practice of this kind of disputation.

Now, the point is to decide whether or not the *Thesaurus* can be quickly dismissed as an “unsophisticated manual”. My hypothesis is that the sophistication that de Rijk is looking for

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²⁵ “Et ponuntur cautelae respondentis per quas poterit resistere opponenti tempore disputationis.” Ibid., 156.

²⁶ “Tertia est: quando opponens invenit textum petitum ad probationem sue propositionis et respondens non potest aliter evadere, tunc dicit ei quod ille textus ponitur causa exempli; et dicit Aristotiles in *Libro Priorum* quod exemplum ponitur non ut ita sit, sed ut sentiat qui addiscat.” Ibid., 156-157. “Tertia decima est ut respondens dicat oppponenti quod eius propositiones non sunt ad propositum et quod probet quod sint ad propositum.” Ibid., 158.

²⁷ “Septima es ut probatis omnibus propositionibus assumptis per certum textum vel auctoritatem, incipiat respondens invenire aliquam viam respondendi, dicens quod talis propositio, vel talis, est distinguenda, quecumque sit illa, ex eo quod termini ibi positi possunt sumi materialiter vel significative. Ut si dicam ‘homo est animal’, hec est distinguenda eoquod ‘homo’ potest sumi materialiter vel significative […] Octava est ut respondens dicat quod ‘homo’ et quodlibet tale nomen est equivocum, eoquod tale nomen potest significare hominem verum et hominem pictum. Si verum, hec est vera: ‘homo est animal’; si pictum, hec est falsa: ‘homo est animal’, sicut vult Boetius in *Libro Divisionum*.” Ibid., 157.

²⁸ Curiously, the Second Scholastic treatises on disputation “rarely mention conditions determining when a disputation is won or lost”: Felipe, *The Post-Medieval*, 45.

²⁹ Nevertheless, as de Rijk indicates, the *Thesaurus* does not seem to belong to the official *curriculum*. De Rijk, *Die mittelalterlichen Traktate*, 68-83.
(and the Thesaurus indeed lacks) is just a certain kind of complexity, that which is found in the treatises De obligationibus. This complexity arises when language is analysed in terms of compound propositions. What we mainly find in the obligationes game is either an analysis of compound propositions (copulative, disjunctive) or an analysis of the truth conditions of simple propositions (which are reduced to a conjunction or disjunction of singular propositions, by using the tools of supposition theory). The modes of composition become focal, in virtue of the existence of the two criteria of response already mentioned.

In the Thesaurus family, the modes of composition are not given the same importance, surely because of the features of the disputation that has inspired these treatises. As the only criterion of response is the truth or falsity of the propositions involved, there is no place for the clash of criteria which makes playing with compound propositions acquire a technical interest. What interests the author of the Thesaurus are mostly the criteria for the assignment of truth to a simple proposition, not in terms of the analysis of truth conditions, but in terms of a direct analysis of predication. In this context, equivocation plays a central role in the Opponent strategy, and distinctions accordingly become a basic tool for the Respondent.

The move “distinguo” is typical of the argumentative kind of disputation.60 In the assessment of arguments, the Respondent should be alert to the possibility that a single proposition has a plurality of possible senses, as this will affect the assignment of truth value, which is the only criterion available for the Respondent to choose between the “concedo” and “nego” responses. This is the reason why a specific third move of the Respondent is the response “distinguo”. On the other hand, distinctions have been considered to be “the cardinal point of all kinds of medieval disputations”, and they are usually associated with the sophismata and syncategoremata literature.61 In the Thesaurus Philosophorum, although the presence of distinctions is pervasive, the specific link with syncategoremata is missing.

The fact is that the term “distinctio” can itself be distinguished. It exhibits three different senses throughout the treatise, and not all of them are related to syncategoremata. On some occasions the distinction simply splits a notion into two species (for example, proximate cause / remote cause, or true as complex / true as non-complex). On other occasions the distinction is made between two senses of an equivocal term, either categorematic or syncategorematic (“res”, “necessario”, “alterum”, “quod”). Finally, a distinction can also be made between two senses of an ambiguous proposition (by composition and division, or by the double use of a sign of negation). Distinctions of the first kind are less interesting from the point of view of formal logic, but they are the more prevalent in the treatise. This is, in addition, the kind of distinction that has survived in the Second Scholastic treatises on the ars disputandi.62

The fact that syncategorems do not have pre-eminence in this family of treatises might explain de Rijk’s reluctance to consider the Thesaurus family as containing a proper theory of sophisms: again, the fact is that the treatises do not belong to a particular tradition. This tradition can be recognised in the several literary genres that the logica modernorum has produced in connection with sophisms and syncategorems. To have a clear look at them, I will stick to the classification tentatively proposed by d’Ors.63 He distinguishes two mainly

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60 It rarely occurs in the obligational kind. In contrast, it has been described as “the heart of the post-reformation disputation”: A. Kenny and J. Pinborg, ‘Medieval Philosophical Literature’, in The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy, eds. N. Kretzmann et al. (Cambridge, 1982), 27. See, nevertheless, Felipe’s questioning of this characterization: Felipe, The Post-Medieval, 105-106.


“theoretical” genres and two mainly “practical” genres. The “theoretical” genres would study, on the one hand, the meaning and function of the syncategorems (the Syncategoremata treatises would belong to this genre); and on the other hand, the inference rules connected with them (the Abstractiones treatises would belong to this genre). The “practical” genres would focus, on the one hand, on the arguments that seem to prove both the truth and the falsity of a proposition in which a given syncategorem occurs (the Sophismata treatises would belong to this genre); on the other hand, on the solutions to the sophisms that the different syncategorems can originate (several treatises could be included in this genre, among them the Distinctiones treatises).

Certainly, the Thesaurus Philosophorum does not contain a “theory of sophisms” in the way that the “theoretical” genres of the logica modernorum do: there is in it neither a theoretical analysis of the meaning of the syncategorems, nor a collection of the inference rules connected with them. What the Thesaurus indeed contains is something like a collection of “sophisms” (in a broad sense of the word) and their respective solutions, being thus closer to the “practical” genres related to sophisms. But two features distinguish the Thesaurus from the Sophismata or Distinctiones treatises to which the scholars of medieval logic are accustomed. Not only the comparatively little attention given to the syncategorems is unusual, but also the arrangement of the material sounds unfamiliar.

Concerning the presence of syncategorems, very often the treatise resembles rather a collection of quaestiones (where the arguments supposedly put forward by the Opponent seem to belong to the critical examination of a subject which is typical of this genre, although only the arguments “pro” and the solutions are present), and only sometimes does it resemble a collection of sophismata (where the arguments put forward involve the kind of “difficult” propositions which are typical of this genre, although again only the arguments “pro” and the solutions are present). In the quaestio-like cases, the Opponent’s misleading arguments serve as an occasion to analyse some “theoretical” notions (of an ontological and epistemological nature), whereas in the sophisma-like cases the Opponent’s misleading arguments serve to analyse certain “technical” difficulties (of a more logico-linguistic nature).

As far as the arrangement of the material is concerned, it is the imaginary disputation between Opponent and Respondent which serves as a criterion. On the surface, the Thesaurus appears to be a mere collection of (sophistical) proofs that an Opponent might offer for an arbitrary list of patently false proposita. Looking more carefully we can discover that the questions and sophisms are gathered in a way that reflects three specific features of the argumentative kind of disputation: the direct concern of this disputation with truth and falsity, the Opponent’s task of pretending to prove an impossible proposition, and the use of distinctions as a principal resource available to the Respondent. First, the conditions for the assignment of truth to a proposition are examined in the chapter ‘Quod quodlibet sit verum’, but also a set of possible obstacles to the assignment of truth are dealt with in the chapter ‘Quod nichil sit verum quod dicit respondens’, and finally the assignment of truth values to a pair of contradictory propositions is studied in the chapter ‘Quod duo contradictoria sint simul vera’. Second, some different sets of impossible propositions are examined, in the chapters

64 This merging of questions and sophisms, on the other hand, is not an isolated phenomenon in the thirteenth century. Cfr., for example, some of the Parisian treatises on distinctions and sophisms edited in A. de Libera, César et le Phénix. Dictinctiones et sophismata parisiens du XIIIe siècle (Pisa, 1991).

65 Cfr. A. Maierù, University Training, 134, where he proposes the hypothesis that, in the period of the universities, the separation of two kinds of disputation, those concerning questions and those concerning sophisms, might correspond to two different stages of the teaching tradition (the technical sophisms being mainly intended to the beginners, and the ontological and epistemological questions being mainly intended to the advanced students).
‘Quod unum contrariorum sit alterum’, ‘Quod unum contradictoriorum sit alterum’ and ‘Quod unum disparatum sit alterum’. Third, the possibility of linguistic ambiguity is examined in the chapter ‘Quod nulla oratio sit distinguenda’. As regards the chapter ‘Quod nulla responsio sit bona’ (which includes the subchapters ‘Quod nulla fallacia possit fieri’ and ‘Quod nulla responsio sit bona’), it has a certain independent character, seeming to be a collection of quaestiones on Aristotle’s Sophistici Elenchi, although again under the guise of arguments that an imaginary Opponent could use to counterattack the Respondent’s responses.

In the rest of this section I will focus on the chapters which deal with the above-mentioned features of the argumentative disputation, and will give a (non-exhaustive) survey of their contents.

3.1. Conditions for the assignment of truth

A large set of arguments supposedly proving that anything is true serves as an occasion to examine the notions of ‘true’ and ‘truth’. As is the rule throughout the treatise, the analysis of “technical” difficulties gets mixed up with the study of “theoretical” notions (such as the connection between truth and knowledge, the notion of ‘true’ which is convertible with ‘something’ or with ‘being’, the particular status of vocal signs, the notion of ‘truth’ as adequacy and its different formulations, or the connection between truth and composition).

Among the technical difficulties, the more interesting arguments deal with the problems which involve some kind of linguistic reflexivity: the assignment of truth to a proposition can itself be expressed by means of a proposition, whose truth or falsity can in its turn be evaluated. Thus, the problem of applying logical rules to indirect discourse is examined, where a truth value is predicated of the infinitive-plus-accusative construction which expresses what is said by a proposition. For example, the sophism “every proposition is true” is proven from the premise “if some proposition is true, then that-some-proposition-is-true is true” (aliquam propositionem esse veram est verum). The focus is put on the problem of applying the topical rule concerning contraries, given that the infinitive-plus-accusative construction introduces a new notion of ‘contrary’.

The fact that on some occasions the imaginary dialogue deals with the very conditions of the dialogue itself allows the introduction of some more complicated examples of indirect discourse. For example, the Opponent and the Respondent are in fact saying something when they are disputing, so one can examine the assignment of a truth value to propositions of the

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66 In fact, de Rijk thinks that the section ‘Quod nulla fallacia possit fieri’ does not belong to the original version: ibid., 19-20.
67 “[...] Ergo tu cognoscis illud quod dico, sive scis. [...] Igitur illud est verum quod dico.” Ibid., 111-112.
69 “[...] Sed voces primo et per se significant similitudines rerum que sunt in anima. [...] Ergo nulla vox significat falsum.” Ibid., 114-115.
72 “Septimum argumentum est quod si aliqua propositioni est vera, aliqua propositionem esse veram est verum. Et si hoc est, nullam propositionem esse veram est falsum, per legem contradictoriarum.” Ibid., 115-116.
kind “the Opponent says something” or “the Respondent says something”. In this way, the sophism “when I say some proposition, I say something true” is proven by means of the premise “that-I-say-something is true” (me dicere aliquid est verum). The focus is put on the correct way of making inferences when the infinitive-plus-accusative construction is involved.73

3.2. Obstacles for the assignment of truth

One of the chapters is supposedly devoted to providing the Opponent with some tools he can use to invalidate any response given by the Respondent. This offers an opportunity to consider some “theoretical” questions related with the possibility that nothing can be assigned the value ‘true’ (such as the ephemeral character of words,74 the relationship between truth and the soul,75 or the problem raised by the simplicity of the intellect).76 Furthermore some “technical” problems of different nature are considered, some of them connected with the use of syncategorem, other connected with the infinitive-plus-accusative construction.

On the one hand, a pair of sophismatic propositions involving the syncategorem “vel” (and the distinctions that should be applied to solve the sophisms) are examined: “everything said by the Respondent is true or false”77 and “if the Respondent says something, he says the true or the false”.78 The first argument focuses on the distinction between the composed and divided senses; the second argument is subtler, as it involves the use of “vel” in a conditional proposition, so the focus is put on the distinction between two species of ‘consequence’ (‘indeterminately’ following and ‘determinately’ following).

On the other hand, again a problem is examined that arises when language reflects upon itself in the particular context of disputation. The proposition “if the Respondent says something, that-he-says-something is true” (ipsum dicere aliquid est verum) is used in an argument, where the focus is put on the correct way of applying the rules of equipollence when the infinitive-plus-accusative construction is involved.79

3.3. Assignment of truth values to contradictory propositions

A rather “technical” chapter is devoted to a particular question related to the assignment of truth and falsity: the possibility that two contradictory propositions are assigned the same truth value. This allows the author to analyse several difficulties related with the use of

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73 “Quartum argumentum est tale. Cum dico aliquam propositionem, dico verum. [...] Sed me dicere aliquid est verum. Ergo non dico me aliquid dicere. Et si non dico me aliquid dicere, non dico propositionem, per locum a genere.” Ibid., 114.

74 “Nullum dictum a respondente potest permanere. Sed natura veri est permanere. Ergo nullum dictum a respondente potest esse verum.” Ibid., 139-140.

75 “Ergo cum veritas intelligatur ab anima, erit eadem cum anima. [...] Sed anima non est in dicto a respondente. Ergo neque veritas.” Ibid., 140.

76 “Veritas est coequatio rei et intellectus. Sed nulla res potest coequari intellectui, cum intellectus sit simplicissimus et non habens quantitatem.” Ibid., 141.

77 “Omne dictum a respondente est verum vel falsum. Sed non omne dictum a respondentee est verum. Ergo omne dictum a respondentee est falsum.” Ibid., 141-142.

78 “Si respondens dicit aliquid, dicit verum vel falsum. Et si dicit verum vel falsum dicit falsum. Ergo a primo: si respondens dicit aliquid, dicit falsum.” Ibid., 142.

79 “Si respondens dicit aliquid, dicit falsum. Probatio. Quia si respondens dicit aliquid, ipsum dicer aliquid est verum. Et si ipsum dicere aliquid est verum, ipsum dicere nihil est falsum, per locum a contradictorie oppositis. [...] ergo ipsum dicere quodlibet est verum.” Ibid., 137.
syncategoremata of quantity, which are solved on some occasions by means of the corresponding distinctions. But some of the arguments considered are of interest insofar as they reveal a sort of mixture of traditions, as certain tools of the moderni are combined with the antiquorum notions and rules. For example, the inferential relations between a quantified proposition and its singulares are put into play either to generate or to solve difficulties, and the notion of sufficientia appellatorum is used to explain the anomalous behaviour of syncategoremata in some particular situations.

3.4. Three kinds of impossible proposition

As the aim of the Opponent is to prove something impossible, some chapters are devoted to examining different kinds of impossible proposition: propositions in which predication involves two contrary things (such as “every white is black”); propositions in which predication involves two contradictory things (such as “something that cannot be true can be true”); and a particular example of impossible proposition, one in which predication is about two divergent things (disparate), namely “a man is a donkey”. The arguments in these chapters provide an occasion to examine some “theoretical” questions (such as the notion of ‘contrary’, the notions of ‘true’ and ‘false’, and even the very notion of ‘impossible’), but also some “technical” difficulties (such as the rules of modal syllogistics, the inferential behaviour of an exceptive proposition, or the correct use of the rules of equipollence).

3.5. Ambiguity

80 “Secundum argumentum est tale: Si una contradictoriarum est vera, altera est vera. Et ita utraque erit vera.” Ibid., 124.
82 “Sicut scribitur in libro De generatione, communicantium in materia unum est in potentia ad alterum. Sed contrariorum eadem est materia, ut habetur ibidem.” Ibid., 119-120.
83 “Sequitur: si omne falsum est, ergo nullum verum est. Et si nullum verum est, ergo nullum ens est, per locum a convertibili.” Ibid., 120.
87 “Quintum argumentum est illud. Omnis homo est animal. Ergo omnis homo animal est, cum oppositum non possit stare. Sed sic sequitur: ‘si omnis homo animal est, nullus homo animal non est’, cum ‘omnis’ et ‘nullus non’ equipollent. Et sequitur: ‘nullus homo animal non est; ergo omnis homo non animal non est’, per eandem regulam equipollentiarum. Et ‘non animal non’ et [non] ‘omne animal’ equipollent. Ergo omnis homo est asinus, per locum a toto in quantitate.” Ibid. 128.
Given the significance of distinctions in this kind of disputation, it is not surprising that a whole chapter is devoted to the examination of several proofs of the proposition “no phrase has to be distinguished”. These proofs serve again to explore some “theoretical” questions (such as the problem of reconciling the simplicity of the intellect or of the soul with the plurality of things signified, the very nature of ‘esse distinguendam’ as a property of phrases, or the relationship between a vocal sign and its significatum). And, among the “technical” difficulties, linguistic reflexivity is again the source of some problems: the indirect discourse “that-every-phrase-has-to-be-distinguished is false” (omnem orationem esse distinguendum est falsum) raises again the problem that the infinitive-plus-accusative construction introduces a particular kind of ‘contrary’.

4. Conclusion

In sum, I have tried to defend the value of this family of treatises. This brief look at the Thesaurus is intended to emphasise the existence in late-medieval logic of a kind of disputation that seemed to be missing until the post-medieval period, and also of a kind of logical theory which in the thirteenth century coexisted with the ultimately triumphant terminist logic. If it is true that, from the point of view of the winning tradition, the Thesaurus and its versions did not play any role in “the development of medieval logic”, it is also true that, from a neutral point of view, this family of treatises represents a certain stage in the development of logical theory, and is in principle worthy of attention. In contrast with the terminist logical analysis, mainly concerned with supposition and truth conditions (and therefore based on a logic of compound propositions), what we find in the Thesaurus is an unexpected interest in signification and predication (together with a relative neglect of compound propositions). The trivial guide for dishonest disputants might in fact be a significant vestige of a different logical tradition, which I dare to describe as “Aristotelian”. It is a tradition that historians of logic might want to know and study, in spite of the fact that the medieval curriculum eventually gave priority to a different style of logical analysis.

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88 “Et ostenditur quod nulla oratio sit distinguenda, quoniam omne quod comparatur ad aliud, per aliquod medium comparatur ad illud secundum possibilitatem illius medii. Sed oratio comparatur ad significatum mediate intellectus et intellectus est simplex et indivisibilis.” Ibid., 142-143. “Omne receptum est in recipiente per modum recipientis, non rei recepte, secundum Commentatorem super Libro de causis. Cum igitur species cuiuslibet rei significate per vocem sit recepta in anima, recipietur in ipsa anima per naturam ipsius anime. Anima autem omnino est una et indivisibilis.” Ibid., 144.

89 “Sicut rectum et curvum sunt proprie passiones lineae, sic verum et falsum sunt proprie passiones orationis. Ergo sicut omnis linea est recta vel curva, et non est aliquod medium inter ipsa, sic omnis propositionis erit vera vel falsa, et non erit aliqua distinguenda.” Ibid., 144.

90 “Vox est sigum rei. Sed signum et significatum sunt relativa.” Ibid., 145.


92 Ibid., 68.

93 I owe thanks to Ignacio Angelelli and Donald Felipe, for kindly offering me some bibliographical guidance, and to Angel d’Ors, for patiently reading and commenting earlier versions of this article.