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Presupposition and discourse commitments

This paper surveys the historical roots of the notion of presupposition developed in the medieval dialectical tradition, drawing from the ancient treatises some crucial insights for analyzing how presuppositions are evaluated and why a proposition is presupposed. The history of the problems or dilemma of presupposition can be traced back to the Greek sophists, which provided the background of the theories on reference and inference in the Middle Ages. While the term “presupposition” was not mentioned in the dialectical tradition until Thomas Aquinas (Baxter, Johnson, and Abrahams 1934, 328), the problems of verification (or dialectical acceptance) of propositions with non-existent subjects or false categorical “presuppositions” were thoroughly discussed by medieval philosophers (Seuren 2005). In particular, they addressed these dilemmas by advancing two types of solutions, a “logical” one, rooted in the notion of extensive negation (vs. the ordinary separative one), and a dialogical one, based on the idea of an violation of the order of discourse. Building on the ancient ideas, this paper proposes an approach to presupposition rooted in the concept of commitment, a dialectical notion weaker than truth and belief.