Ockham on the Role of Concepts*

Ockham holds that concepts play a dual role. On the one hand, concepts are the fundamental units of a certain kind of mental act, namely acts of *thinking*, as we would say, rather than (say) acts of choosing, hating, or hearing. Concepts are above all paradigmatic instances of intellectual cognition: to think about φ is just a matter of having an occurrent concept-of-φ. Hence concepts are mental acts that are 'about' whatever they may be about: cabbages, kings, pigs with wings. Some concepts are about individual substances, such as Socrates; others are about classes or kinds of substances, such as human beings. Concepts are acquired, at least initially, through experience, and in the economy of the mind they are also the primary building-blocks of thought itself. In other words, acts of intellectual cognition – thinking, judging, reasoning – are composed of concepts in various (possibly complex) combinations; Ockham endorses a principle of compositionality in the philosophy of mind.

On the other hand, concepts are the fundamental units of semantics: they are natural *signs*, endowed with signification (roughly correlative to 'meaning'), much as conventional signs in French or English do, and like them are the elements of language, a non-conventional Mental Language common to all thinking beings (God excepted as always). Hence a concept is literally a Mental 'word', and, like any word, can be combined with other words to create complex meaningful phrases, sentences, or arguments. Ockham uses 'term' to refer to such a basic linguistic unit, no matter whether it is spoken or thought. When used in a sentence, terms have in addition to signification the semantic property of supposition (roughly correlative to 'reference'), which enters into the explanation of how a given sentence is true or false. Here again there is a principle of compositionality at work: words make up sentences, which in turn make up arguments. Concepts are the vocabulary of Mental Language, which, like any language, has its own syntax and formation-rules.

Ockham holds that these two roles played by concepts, one psychological and the other linguistic, are coordinated. The psychological process of compounding acts of thought mirrors the linguistic process of stringing words together. Phrases are sequential acts of thinking, sentences judgments, arguments literally instances of reasoning. Each discipline thereby benefits from

---

the other: psychology can adopt the relatively sophisticated account of semantics to talk about thought in an articulated and detailed manner, semantics can flesh out the common intuition that words get their meanings from the ideas with which they are associated, so that spoken or written language is a matter of encoding our thoughts. This 'coordination thesis' is the modern feature of the *via moderni* of the fourteenth century.

So much is relatively uncontroversial. There are reasons to be sceptical about the project itself, to be sure; getting the descriptive aims of psychology to square with the normative goals of grammar and logic is not easy. Even if we accept the project for the sake of discussion, we might wonder how well concepts can function simultaneously as units of meaning and units of thought, how each role can be given its due. The scholarly consensus of the past several decades is that Ockham is a kind of 'ideal language theorist' in the mould of the early Bertrand Russell. On this score Mental Language functions as a stripped-down canonical language, the atomic elements of which are simple absolute concepts (gained through experience) whose psychological combination was identified with syntactic rules for generating well-formed formulae. The result is an expressively complete "language of thought" whose logical perspicuity and rigour made it suitable for exposing bloated ontological commitments. The philosophical appeal of this interpretation of Ockham is clear and powerful, which is why it has had such a grip on contemporary scholars: Spade, Adams, Normore, and others.

In *Ockham on Concepts*, Panaccio wants to dethrone this contemporary "reductivistic" (*a k. a.* "standard") reading of Ockham. He argues instead that Ockham's theory of concepts, while central to his thought, was deployed "not to construe human thought as a logically ideal and semantically translucent system" but rather "to clean up the ontology" (186: the concluding sentences of the book). Rather than Bertrand Russell we should think of Jerry Fodor:[1] Ockham is a committed nominalist who is also attracted by what Fodor calls "the language-of-thought hypothesis," and it is his philosophy of psychology underlying Mental Language, not the well-formed formulae of Mental Language itself, that explains how unwelcome ontological committments can be avoided. On this reading Ockham has more in common with contemporary cognitive science than with the logical atomism of a century ago, and shares many of its substantive theses.

Panaccio's case against the Standard Reading of Ockham is lucid and com

---

[1]   Panaccio introduces the comparison in his Introduction: "Many striking similarities with recent ideas in analytic philosophy of mind and language will become more and more apparent, as we go on, to those who are familiar with the writings of people like Saul Kripke, Hilary Putnam, or – most of all – Jerry Fodor…" (3).

pelling. Furthermore, his insistence that philosophical psychology is central to Ockham's philosophy is well-founded, and a useful corrective to the near-exclusive focus on logic and philosophy of language dominating the past several decades of scholarship.

Dressing Ockham in the contemporary clothing of cognitive science, however, for all the valuable insights such a shift in our interpretive paradigm may provide, doesn't go far enough in rejecting the reductivistic tendencies of the Standard Reading, or in appreciating how deep Ockham's rejection of mental representation runs. Instead, Ockham's mature philosophy seems to me to be centered on an eliminativist psychology that is both anti-reductionist and non-mentalist. This wide divergence between Panaccio's view of Ockham and my view can be seen even in the narrowest context, where Panaccio begins his investigation: Ockham's view of concepts. Given their dual role, how are semantics and psychology related? Panaccio's answer, on Ockham's behalf, is that for a concept *qua* word to mean something (to have a given signification) just is for the concept *qua* act of thinking to be about that thing, so that mental intentionality and semantic meaning converge.

Matters are not quite as symmetrical as all that, however. For a concept to signify something is for it to be a *natural* sign of what it signifies.[2] Ockham explains this in terms of intentionality: the concept is a sign of φ if it is ('naturally') about φ. Now intentionality in the case of contentful first-order concepts, such as |weasel| or |Socrates|, is usually cashed out as a matter of *representing* its content. Hence a mental term 'φ' signifies φ in virtue of being a concept-of-φ, that is, a concept representing φ. Semantics depends on psychology in the end, it seems. We can now pose the crucial question on which Panaccio and I ultimately differ, with repercussions for our overall interpretive views of Ockham. What is it for a given concept to have a particular representational content? What does the representationality of mental representation consist in?

The general mediæval answer, derived from Aristotle's *De interpretatione*, was that the mental act (the concept) is somehow a *likeness* of the thing it is about. Concepts represent what they do in virtue of being (natural) likenesses of those things, and are thereby signs of them as well. Ockham accepts this traditional answer, at least initially. But it just postpones the question rather than answering it. Recast it: When is a concept a likeness of something?

[2] Panaccio correctly argues that it must further be capable of making distinctively linguistic contributions, such as appearing in sentences; this distinguishes terms of Mental Language from other natural signs in the mind (if there be any such). The proviso is important for the theory but not for this discussion, and henceforth I'll ignore it.

The particular mediæval answer, derived from Aristotle's *De anima*, was that a concept is a likeness of something when it has the very same form as it – Socrates's concept of a weasel is *of* the weasel in virtue of Socrates's having the weasel's form (minus its matter) in his intellective soul. Supplemented with a causal account of the transmission of forms, this 'conformality' approach to mental representation relies on the identity of form to ground thought and thereby meaning. Ockham, however, clearly and emphatically rejects this traditional approach, for reasons we need not go into here.[3] Suffice it to say that he thought the underlying causal relations did not literally involve the transmission of form, whether externally (the *species in medio*) or internally (the *species intelligibilis*). Indeed, as he declares apropos of cognition, "Given a sufficient agent and patient in proximity to each other the effect can be postulated without anything further."[4] The ontology of mind that seemed to go with conformality – certainly in Scotus's version, which Ockham knew well – was at best dubious, and at worst plain incoherent: the form-in-the-mind as a conceptual content, a *fictum*, was a view Ockham came to discard and plays no role in his mature philosophy, which, as Panaccio reminds us, should be the theory we are concerned with in the end. What then is Ockham's account of representationality?

Panaccio takes Ockham to hang on to the general answer, namely to construe representationality as a version of likeness. (The title of his Chapter 7 is "Concepts as Similitudes.") This, Panaccio thinks, is Ockham's considered view: "the notion of conceptual similitude is still importantly present in this [mature] phase of his thought, with significant philosophical roles to play" (119). I think Panaccio is wrong here. Let's look at what Ockham says about the nature of representation in *Ordinatio* 1 d.3 q.9, where he takes up the question whether creatures somehow indicate their Creator. He begins by distinguishing images (*imagines*) and impressions (*vestigia*). The paradigm of the former kind is a statue of Hercules, of the latter an animal's hoofprint, but Ockham is clear that these categories are much wider; an 'image' can be any univocal effect at all, even if not intended as such.[5] When discussing im-

---

[3]   See King [2005], where the reasons are gone into at length. Ockham does occasionally speak of the form inhering in the mind, even in late works, but when he does the context makes it clear that he is either (*a*) referring to the mental act itself *qua* accident inhering in the mind, or (*b*) describing the mental act trivially in terms of what it is about, without relying on any shared metaphysical entity.

[4]   *Rep.* 2 qq. 12–13: *Posito activo sufficienti et passivo in ipsis approximatis, potest poni effectus sine omni alio* (OTh 5 268.7–9).

[5]   Ockham gives three senses of 'impression' in *Ordinatio* 1 d.3 q.9 (OTh 2 548.8– 549.2) and of 'image' in q.10 (553.2–25), the strictest of which is the statue of Her-

ages, it's clear that Ockham is thinking of 'similitude' or likeness as a case of
pictorial representation, much as a painting or a photograph might exhibit.[6]
Yet acts of intellective cognition cannot represent things by being 'images' of
them, by being likenesses of them. Even if we put aside the obscurity involved
in the claim that a mental act resembles an object, Ockham thinks there is a
conceptual problem in the very notion of likeness itself. For impressions and
images, by their very nature, represent no one individual any more than an-
other individual extremely similar to it (*simillimum*: 546.6–8). A moment's
reflection on pictures illustrates why his contention is correct. A photograph
by itself will not determine whether it is a picture of Socrates or a picture of
Socrates's twin brother. Whether Socrates has a twin brother is a fact about
the world, not about the photograph, and so is not settled by the intrinsic
features of the photograph. Ockham returns to this claim in *Reportatio* 2
qq.12–13, pointing out that the intellect couldn't distinguish which of two ex-
tremely similar whitenesses might be the individual quality a pictorial mental
representation was trying to represent (OTh 5 281.24–282.12). Nothing turns
on the particular example; Ockham repeats it in a more detailed version us-
ing two equal amounts of heat (287.19–289.7), and once again with two men
(304.6–20).[7] The problem isn't due to indiscernibility, in the sense that we
inspect the image and can't then determine what it is an image of; we needn't
be consciously aware of acts of thinking as likenesses. Ockham's point is that
likenesses, conscious or not, are by their nature applicable to many – that
the correspondence-rules according to which they depict what they do aren't
guaranteed to have unique inverses (*i. e.* the rules don't in general yield one-
to-one mappings). But since we can and do think about individuals – that is
the whole point of the doctrine of intuitive cognition after all – mental repre-
sentation must *not* be a matter of likeness. This, in the end, is what Ockham
declares to be his considered view on the matter when the very question is on
the table: "Likeness is not the precise reason why we understand one thing

cules and the broadest of which is "anything univocally produced by another."

[6] Or not exhibit. Ockham does hold that an image can be completely dissimilar to
that of which it is an image. In *Ordinatio* 1 d.2 q.8 (OTh 2 277.3–278.12), Ockham
approvingly cites Augustine, who emphasizes the lack of similarity between the pic-
ture and what it is said to depict – indeed, Augustine emphasizes the arbitrariness
of the picture. For example, Augustine describes imagining the city of Alexandria,
which he had never seen, and notes that it would be miraculous if it were anything
like Alexandria; equally, when reading the Bible, one can fashion mental images of
the Apostles and of Christ which are probably quite unlike their actual appearance.
Aquinas would call it a lack of natural, not representational, likeness.

[7] Ockham makes the same claim, in the same context, with regard to intuitive cog-
nition in *Quodl.* 1.13 (OTh 9 76.89-98): see §3 below.

rather than another" (*similitudo non est causa praecisa quare intelligit unum et non aliud*: 287.17–19). By "precise reason" (*causa praecisa*) Ockham means the correct and exact explanation of something, what we should say when being most careful and fussy. It isn't that likeness explains representation in all but a few cases. Instead, strictly speaking, representation isn't a matter of likeness at all. Hence Ockham's mature philosophy dispenses with likeness or 'similitude', contrary to Panaccio's claim.

The precise reason why a given concept represents one thing rather than another, Ockham tells us, is that it was *caused* by the one rather than by the other. The horse's hoofprint represents the horse, as the impression in the sealing-wax represents the seal, because they are caused by the horse and the seal respectively. The hoofprint or impression is a sure sign that the appropriate causal agent has been at work in the vicinity. Now obviously this net is cast too widely; we might balk at saying that a sunburn represents the Sun, that smoke represents fire, that the child represents the parent. We can loosely speak of the result of any causal activity as an 'impression,' but more strictly an impression is only something left behind as the consequence of some proper causal activity (and better yet left through the causal activity of only part of the agent such as the hoof), as Ockham tells us in *Ordinatio* 1 d.3 q.9; we shouldn't count ordinary univocal causality as representational (OTh 2 548.20–549.2). A mental act that occurs as the result of an object's causal activity counts as an impression in this restricted sense, so that Socrates's intuitive cognition of the weasel, as an impression, *represents* the weasel – at least, so long as it 'co-varies' with the weasel (present in the weasel's presence and absent in its absence). Ockham's view, then, is that the thoughts we have when we look at sheep are thoughts *of* the sheep in virtue of the fact that they are the thoughts sheep naturally and regularly cause us to have. There is a trivial sense of 'likeness' that applies here, in that any effect can be described as 'like' its cause, and Ockham takes full advantage of it to retain and explain traditional mediæval usage: he can speak of 'likeness' and mean no more than 'effect', a way to preserve the letter of Aristotle's text at the expense of its spirit. Covariance is the precise reason why a mental act represents one thing rather than another.

Panaccio knows these texts, of course. But he draws the moral that mental representation works via likeness for most cases, appealing to covariance only for the exceptional cases of singular thought. He is even willing to call the very causal connection distinctive of impressions a type of likeness: "a foot track in this sense is a similitude of the foot, but not conversely" (124–125). It is perhaps what mathematicians would call a 'degenerate case' of similitude. Furthermore, Panaccio argues, Ockham elsewhere makes essential use of the

notion of similarity when he speaks of things being "maximally similar" to each other (*simillimae*), which is what permits natural kinds to be singled out by language without any need for metaphysically shared entities. If he needs the notion of maximal similarity to explain the relationship among things of the same kind, why not use it to explain the relation between an act of thinking and what the act is about?[8] Pure theoretical economy – always a consideration for Ockham – suggests this move, if nothing else. Besides, Panaccio might well wonder, what's in the word? Call it 'representational content' if 'likeness' is too suggestively misleading; from the discussion above Ockham does seem willing to talk about representation even when eschewing 'likeness' in a narrow sense, so why not go along with his doctrine and not quibble over terminology?

These three points are all well-taken, but I think there are good replies to each. Take the first, that likeness serves as the explanation of mental representation in all but the exceptional cases of singular cognition. Apart from the disunity of a disjunctive criterion for representation (either likeness or covariance), Panaccio's view does not take seriously Ockham's explicit declaration that likeness is not the "precise reason" why we understand one thing rather than another. He clearly repudiates likeness as the explanation of representation in a question devoted to the subject; we should take him at his word if at all possible.[9]

A proper reply to the second point, namely that Ockham might as well have recourse to similarity in explaining mental representation since he is theoretically committed to 'maximal similarity' anyhow, requires a lot of careful work; here I'll just sketch how the reply should go. Panaccio holds that Ockham has a notion of maximal similarity, developed in the first instance to reply to the problem of universals, that comes in primitive grades, so that two humans are more maximally similar than a human and a weasel, the latter more maximally similar than a human and a rock, and so on. Such maximal similarities are also 'global' in the sense that they are not to be explained

---

[8] Panaccio specifically excludes maximal similarity as an explanation of representation (123), and rightly so, since mental acts do not belong to the same kind as what they are about (with a few trivial exceptions such as the kind *mental act*. But that does not mean the notion cannot be extended to serve as an explanation once the mistaken view that the act and its object are of the same kind is put aside. After all, it does seem right to say that the mental act representing x is more like x than a different mental act representing y.

[9] This argument is a bit of a *tu quoque*: Panaccio effectively argues against the Standard Reading of Ockham that it requires us to set aside several of his explicit assertions. By the same token...

as similarity in some respect or another; "x is maximally similar to y" is a complete context – otherwise the appeal to maximal similarity wouldn't succeed in undercutting the problem of universals, as Panaccio argues at length in Chapter 7.4.1 against an objection raised by Gyula Klima.[10] But to take as metaphysically primitive, and thus inexplicable, an uncountable number of relations of graded global maximal similarity, is not very satisfactory as a response to the problem of universals. (It certainly flunks the parsimony test.) It is also noteworthy that Panaccio constructs much of the account of maximal similarity not from the texts up but from the top down, in responding to Klima, and indeed taking much of the view from the Standard Reading. All of this should make us sceptical. And of course, as Panaccio notes, Ockham does not directly apply his account of maximal similarity to the case of mental representation. Ockham does refer to greater and lesser degrees of similarity between objects in the work, but, I would maintain, he does not do so as an *explanation* of anything. His lack of interest in explaining maximal similarity, and the indifference with which he presents four possible solutions to the problem of universals in *Ord.* 1 d. 2 q. 8, suggests that he had no real interest in maximal similarity as an account of universals. From his presentation in the *Ordinatio* we might wonder whether Ockham was interested in the problem of universals at all.[11] Quite so; hold on to that thought for a moment.

As for the third point, that the controversy is merely verbal, I reply that Ockham not only gives up likeness as an explanation of mental representation, he actually gives up mental representation altogether. That is, he no longer finds it useful to talk about objects as being 'present' in the mind in any but a Pickwickian sense. In default of exhaustively examining texts, consider the following example. Imagine that you had a Psychoscope, a device that would allow you to inspect souls and their contents, and train it on an Ockhamist thinker; you can detect two acts of thinking (call them A and B for convenience). Now: How can you tell what A and B are about?

The short answer is that for Ockham, you cannot. No amount of inspection of the acts themselves will determine what they are about. They have no internal content (*ficta*) to distinguish them; Ockham has long rejected such mental content. Well, if not in terms of content, we might think they can be distinct 'styles' of mental acts, one an A-style act of thinking, the other a B-

[10] In the interests of full disclosure, I should note that the objection is raised in Klima [1997], which is a reply to King [1997].

[11] Panaccio writes: "Why exactly should such [universal] concepts signify individuals that are essentially similar to each other rather than any other arbitrarily chosen bunch, is something Ockham does not explain in any detail" (182). Indeed.

style act of thinking. This seems to be Panaccio's view of Ockham's theory.
He says (124):

> Suppose I grasp a ball, or a pen, and let the grasped object be removed without
> any change in the position of my hand. What is left is a likeness of the ball or
> pen. In Ockham's vocabulary, the remaining act of my hand – its actualized state
> or position – is a similitude of the object it previously grasped. It is, admittedly,
> a rough similitude in this case, but a similitude nevertheless... In short, to say,
> in Ockham's vocabulary, that an act resembles a thing raises no special difficulty.
> The act of apprehension by which the mind grasps something must be a similitude
> of this particular thing and of all the other ones that are sufficiently similar to it,
> exactly like the act of apprehension by which my hand grasps a ball must be a
> similitude of this particular ball and of all the other objects that are relevantly like
> it.

Grasping a ball and grasping a pen are both instances of (physical) acts, acts
in which the hand is disposed in different ways in each grasp. The difference
is not a matter of the ball or the pen, but of the hand's grasp. If we take
Panaccio's example seriously, then, the difference between the two cases lies
on the side of the grasping, the act, not on the object grasped. Furthermore,
this difference can legitimately be called a likeness or similitude of the object
grasped, since the object lends its 'flavour', so to speak, to the different acts.
The grasp of a ball is unlike the grasp of a pen, in no small measure due to
the difference between the ball and the pen, though the difference is not a
difference of objects but of graspings – or as I would put it, between styles of
grasping. Panaccio thus holds that for Ockham, distinct mental acts differ by
the 'style' each exemplifies, a style inherited from and indebted to the object
it is about, though the object is not part of that act (or indeed necessarily
'mental' at all).

Yet this account of Ockham, which Panaccio constructs on Ockham's be-
half,[12] will not do. If acts of thinking differed systematically *qua* acts, not with
regard to content, Ockham would have something like an 'adverbial' theory
of thought, such that A-style acts took place in the presence of an x and B-
style in the presence of a y, much as balls and pens engender different styles of
grasping. But that is the same as saying that each act of thinking exemplifies a
distinct form. Whatever makes one act A-style rather than B-style will be the
'form' of that act, determining the kind of act it is; it is a 'ball-ish' or 'pen-ish'
grasp, an 'x-ish' (or A-style) way of thinking. If such acts are correlated with
xs, then that just *is* for the thing in the world and the mental act to have the
same form, and, as noted above, Ockham rejects conformality in clear and

---

[12] Panaccio declares: "the task that is incumbent on us at this point is to try to figure
out what [Ockham] means by '*similitudo*' in such contexts, even though he does not
bother to explain it much himself" (122). As we'll see, I think he doesn't bother to
explain it because he gets rid of it, except as a convenient *façon de parler*.

unambiguous terms. Yet if there is no difference *qua* act between *A* and *B*, there is no internal difference between them.[13] What *A* and *B* are 'about' is a purely external matter. Hence there is no ground for thinking they have representative content at all, and, I submit, Ockham does not think that they do.

The upshot is that Ockham describes acts of thinking – at least some of them – in purely external terms, namely in light of the causes that give rise to them, with an associated discussion of how some acts are related to others. In mediæval terms, mental acts can be extrinsically denominated by their causal antecedents.[14] Intentionality and signification are therefore genetic rather than intrinsic features of concepts. This, of course, vitiates any claim that a concept 'naturally' signifies what it is about, other than the trivial sense in which sunburn signifies the sun. Ockham's psychology and semantics begins to look rather anæmic. If we combine this observation with the thought put on hold above, namely that Ockham seems uninterested in working out the details of a consistent and rigourous nominalism, we might suspect that neither the Standard Reading nor Panaccio have Ockham quite right yet. But once we give up mental representation, we can think about thought in a way that does not require it to be 'in the head'. Let me explain.

The other half of Ockham's philosophy of mind, in addition to (apparently contentless) mental acts of thinking, are the *habitus* such acts engender – themselves the causal product of occurrent acts of thinking. We should think of these not as behaviouristic dispositions to behave, or even as capacities to think certain thoughts, but as something more like expertise or acquired competencies.[15] Think of cases of knowhow: musicians, mechanics, touch typists, and so on. It is hard to deny that such people have knowledge, it is also hard to see their expertise in 'mentalistic' or reductive terms. People acquire competencies by interacting with the world, to be sure, but we do not profitably explain their expertise by reference to their mental states, much less by constructing it from isolated sense-impressions. The wrestler's ability to overcome his opponent is not best seen as something fundamentally in the head, and, while the mechanic has had more sense-impressions of cars than other people, only a philosopher in the grip of a theory would in-

---

[13] Contemporary philosophers of mind avoid this dilemma by endowing a given token with representational content in virtue of its place in the whole system of inputs and outputs to the cognitive structure – that is, they adopt a form of functionalism, in this case semantic holism, that was not open to Ockham.

[14] In contemporary terms Ockham would be counted as a radical externalist about mental content. But see the qualifications below.

[15] See King [2004] for more details about this way of reading Ockham.

sist that it is the sheer quantity, or remembered quantity, of such impressions that best explains his expertise. The last fifty years of research in the philosophy of language should have cured us of the idea that linguistic competence is a function of inner episodes of private meaning, a claim that generalizes to cover other competencies, which likewise do not depend on private inner episodes. Knowing *how* to do something does not depend on a prior mental grasp of knowing *that* various propositions are true. If anything, the opposite holds.

   Ockham, I think, appreciated this point, and that is why he threw out all previous 'mentalist' theories of mind as unhelpful. Instead, Ockham proposed an account of mental activity that used a bare minimum of internal machinery and introduced a new way of talking about our competence in interacting with the world, namely through forms of acquired expertise (*habitus*), a matter of complex interlocking abilities. Having dispensed with causal mechanisms, as noted above, Ockham can talk directly about our skills in getting around in the world without being tempted to give reductive explanations how this comes to pass. Furthermore, Ockham's talk of *habitus* (skills) is usually cashed out in terms of abilities to do things, including recognizing and identifying singular items or kinds of items. For this they don't have to be 'in the head' in any interesting way; they are competencies of the whole person as much as they are specifically mental. Take, for instance, Ockham's discussion of universals. What he says amounts to noting that human beings learn to get around in the world by dividing things up into groups in pretty much the same ways, depending on the kind of past experience each person has had. This is not *explained* by the grasp of some recondite primitive metaphysical maximal similarity at work in each of us. Rather, it is something most humans do at an early stage in cognitive development, in almost exactly the same ways. If we want to talk about such abilities, we can do so in linguistic terms; but Ockham's point is that having a concept is no more than being competent in getting around in the world in a certain regard. Our expertise in sorting things into kinds is remarkable, to be sure, but no more remarkable than many other things we do. If we are interested in the whole phenomenon of skilled competence, there is no particular reason to try to work out a reductive account of this particular skill, which explains why Ockham seems uninterested in doing so. For those who have thought Ockham's philosophy is ultimately based on a rigorous nominalism, and that his views about most subjects can be derived from his ontological parsimoniousness, his positive discussion of universals is at best an embarrassment, a non-account where an account is called for. However, if we begin from his competence-based psychology of habit, Ockham's lack of interest in the fine details of nominalism

becomes explicable. For we find ourselves in the world with discriminative skills, so that we do (as a matter of fact) get around by carving the world up into natural kinds, but with no real explanation of how such habituation takes place. And this is exactly what Ockham says about universal 'concepts': they are no more than sets of competencies in classifying things together, which we do, and that's really all there is to say. In *Ordinatio* 1 d. 2 q. 7 *ad* 7 (OTh 2 261.13–20) Ockham tells us that universal cognition is produced in the soul naturally by interaction with singular items in the world, although how this happens is hidden from us (*occulte*); here too, I think, we should take him at his word and not try to devise causal mechanisms on his behalf. What we are led to as a result, a nonreductive psychological theory that dispenses with mental processes to an unprecedented extent, must have looked extraordinarily odd to Ockham's fourteenth-century contemporaries. It still looks odd today.

This oddness stems, at least in part, from Ockham's radically new approach to philosophy in general and to logic in particular. Ockham declares that logic – the very home of Mental Language – is, like the rest of the trivium, not theoretical but practical in nature: "I hold that grammar, logic, and rhetoric are genuinely practical sciences in exactly the way the mechanical arts are genuinely practical."[16] Just as architecture describes how to construct a building well (but not whether to do so), logic describes how to argue well (149.303–314). For logic is a tool, and, like any tool in the hands of a craftsman, its use provides the user with a fuller grasp (*notitia*) of it.[17] It is essentially practical rather than speculative since it regulates our actions (*Expositio* preface OPh 2 7.128–138), although the distinction really is a matter of degree rather than kind (*In De int.* preface OPh 2 137.53–64), since both practical and speculative sciences seek truth as their end (*Ordinatio* Prologue q. 11 OTh 323.12–14). Logic is a matter of devising arguments, drawing distinctions, and reasoning well in general; a grasp of truth-preserving patterns of inference comes from practising these activities – in a word, from experience. Once we take this pragmatic (or proto-pragmatic) stance with Ockham many of the otherwise perplexing things he does start to make sense.

It seems to me, therefore, that Ockham's rejection of mental representation gives us a way into his mature philosophy, which is more radically anti-reductionist than Panaccio's alternative to the Standard Reading, and indeed is anti-mentalist as well. Just as Panaccio departs from the Standard Reading

---

[16] *Summula philosophiae naturalis* Preamble (OPh 6 149.298–300): *Concedo quod grammatica, logica et rhetorica sunt vere scientiae practicae, ita vere sicut artes mechanicae sunt practicae.*

[17] As Ockham says in his prefatory letter to the *Summa logicae* (OPh 1 6.9–15).

over the (apparently) narrow question of the semantic eliminability of connotative terms in Mental Language, I depart from Panaccio over the apparently narrow question of the extent of mental representation. Of course, although I have been emphasizing the differences, my view has a good deal in common with Panaccio's, and not merely in our common rejection of the Standard Reading. If nothing else, we agree that to properly understand Ockham's mature philosophy, one must begin with his philosophy of mind – and that, in the end, means coming to terms with the dual role Ockham assigns to concepts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

King [1997]. Peter King, "The Failure of Ockham's Nominalism"; unpublished. Klima [1997] is a commentary on this paper.

King [2004]. Peter King, "Two Conceptions of Experience" in *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 11 (2004), 1–24.

King [2005]. Peter King, "Rethinking Representation in the Middle Ages" in Henrik Lagerlund (ed.), *Representation and Objects of Thought in Medieval Philosophy*. Ashgate Press 2005: 83–102.

Klima [1997]. Gyula Klima, "Comments on King" (see King [1997]), available at `http://www.fordham.edu/gsas/phil/klima/King.htm`.

Panaccio [2005]. Claude Panaccio, *Ockham on Concepts*. Ashgate Studies in Medieval Philosophy. Ashgate Press, 2005.

King's papers are available at `http://individual.utoronto.ca/pking/`.