

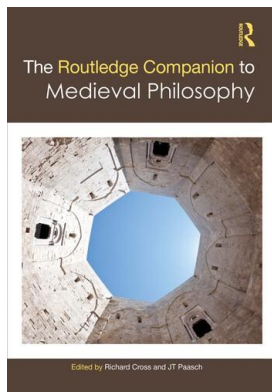
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1

PROPOSITIONS

Nathaniel E. Bulthuis

When philosophers in the twenty-first century speak about propositions, they typically intend to refer to a kind of entity that (ideally, at least) fulfills certain alethic, cognitive, and semantic roles. In particular, by “proposition,” contemporary philosophers mean to talk about a kind of entity which is:

- 1 the primary bearer of alethic properties,
- 2 the object of one’s propositional attitudes, such as belief,
- 3 the meaning, or sense, of (one’s utterances of) declarative sentences, and
- 4 the referent of that-clauses.¹

For most contemporary philosophers, then, propositions are defined by their functional roles. Contemporary debates about the proposition typically focus on the nature and status of the proposition itself: is it plausible that one entity can fulfill all of these various roles? Assuming that one entity could fulfill all (or even most) of those roles, is that entity mind-independent? abstract? structured? If structured, what is it composed of, and what unifies it? In virtue of what does it play the functional role(s) that it does? And so on.

When medieval philosophers speak of propositions (*propositiones*; sing., *propositio*), in contrast, they do not necessarily mean to refer to entities of this sort. Rather, they intend to refer to utterances—typically tokens, but sometimes types—of declarative sentences.² For philosophers in the medieval period, then, the central task with respect to the proposition needn’t be to explain how it can fulfill the alethic, cognitive, and semantic roles mentioned above. Yet this does not mean that the proposition (as they understood it) was not a source of intense philosophical interest throughout the medieval period. Rather, medieval philosophical reflection on the proposition typically focuses on what one does in uttering a declarative sentence, namely, that one says (means) something.³ The medieval interest in propositions is motivated by considerations of the nature of saying (meaning) itself, and in particular by what sort of thing, if any, one says (means) in saying something—a concern typically expressed in the medieval tradition by an interest in what a proposition signifies. Moreover, as many medieval philosophers accepted—to varying degrees—that cognition is linguistic in nature, so that to have a belief, for example, is (at least in part) to form a declarative sentence in mental language, medieval interest in the proposition likewise concerned what sort of thing, if any, one believes in believing something. Consequently, though many medieval philosophers mean something very different by “proposition” than do most contemporary philosophers, the medieval philosophical concern about the proposition anticipates many of the

motivations for contemporary theories of the proposition, in the sense that philosophers understand the term today.

The goal of this chapter is to provide an introduction to the main positions that arise within medieval philosophical reflection upon propositions, as they understood them. I will begin (in the section “Language and Cognition”) with some brief remarks on the relationship between propositions in natural language and thought. After that, I will focus on medieval views about the nature of thought itself, and in particular on the development of the claim that thought is propositional in structure—that is, that thinking occurs within a mental language, populated by mental propositions. I will first consider (in the section “Mental Propositions”) the mental proposition itself: the sort of philosophical antecedents we find in the medieval period to the full-fledged accounts of mental propositions and mental language developed in the fourteenth century, and the various accounts of the metaphysics of the thought developed during that century and the one that preceded it. I will then (in the section “The Signification of the Mental Proposition”) focus on a central semantic debate in medieval philosophy about the mental proposition, namely, whether—and what—it signifies. I will conclude (in the section “Conclusion”) with a short discussion of the secondary literature on medieval theories of the proposition.

Language and Cognition

The term “*propositio*,” in the broad sense that medieval philosophers typically used it, appears to first enter Latin philosophical discourse in a second-century treatise on logic called the *Peri Hermeneias*.⁴ The author of that treatise, Apuleius (d. 170), argues that a proposition is a certain kind of *oratio* (speech). An *oratio* is an utterance of some sort: for example, a command or an inquiry.⁵ Of the various kinds of *orationes*, however, Apuleius identifies the proposition as particularly important, for only a proposition expresses a “complete thought” (i.e., a judgment of some sort, such as a belief), such that it is the only kind of *oratio* capable of bearing truth or falsity.⁶ In other words, the proposition is the only sort of *oratio* that is a statement-making utterance.

Through Apuleius’s treatise, “*propositio*” and “*oratio*” come to constitute part of the standard Latin logical terminology in the late antique period. Especially important for our purposes are the uses to which Boethius (d. 524) puts that terminology. Following Aristotle’s division of *logos* in the first chapter of the *De Interpretatione*, Boethius argues that *orationes* can be divided into those which are incomplete and those which are complete. Incomplete *orationes* are those utterances that are composite (that is, they are constituted by uttered expressions, *voces*, which are themselves meaningful, such as in “pale Socrates”) but which do not constitute the utterance of a sentence. Complete *orationes*, in contrast, are utterances of sentences: questions and commands, for example.⁷ Complete *orationes* also include propositions, the kind of *oratio* of chief interest to the logician.⁸ Propositions garner that interest because they are the only sorts of *orationes*—complete or incomplete—that are bearers of alethic value, and so can figure in a demonstration.

For Boethius, then, a proposition is a kind of utterance in natural language that has alethic properties. But why, exactly, do propositions have alethic properties? Boethius argues that a proposition is truth-apt—indeed, that it has the truth value that it does—because it is related to one’s thought that something is or is not the case, “in which truth and falsity are primarily engendered” (1877: 49.27–32). On the view of Boethius—a view informed by Aristotle and one which becomes standard during the medieval period—a proposition expresses the thought of the speaker that something is or is not the case.⁹ It is the thought that something is or is not the case that Boethius (following Aristotle) claims is primarily true or false; propositions are true or false in a secondary, or derivative, sense.¹⁰

How do propositions express the thoughts of the speaker? Boethius argues that “a proposition is an *oratio* signifying something true or something false.”¹¹ According to Boethius, then, a proposition expresses a thought via signification. And to signify (*significare*), according to Boethius’s

translation of Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*, is to "establish an understanding," that is, to bring about a thought in the mind of one's audience.¹² Nouns and verbs, by themselves, bring about a thought of something in the world; "Socrates" brings about a thought of Socrates, for example, and "runs" a thought of running. When nouns and verbs are joined together to form a statement-making utterance, then, we might expect that utterance itself to itself bring about a certain thought, namely, the thought that something is or is not the case.¹³ Consequently, a speaker expresses her thoughts to her audience by using a proposition to signify—that is, to bring about—her thought that something is or is not the case within the minds of her audience members.

Whatever its origins and motivations, Boethius's position—that a proposition signifies a thought that something is or is not the case—becomes the received view in the medieval period. In the twelfth century, for example, Peter Abelard (d. 1142) argues that propositions signify thoughts in that they generate those thoughts. Likewise, the fourteenth-century philosopher John Buridan (d. 1358) argues that propositions in natural language signify propositions in mental language. And one finds similar views defended in the generations between those two philosophers: for example, by Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) and John Duns Scotus (d. 1308) in the thirteenth century.

One notable exception to this position is William Ockham (d. 1347). Ockham denies that any proposition—whether in natural or mental language—is significative. Our discussion of part of Ockham's reasoning for holding this view will need to wait until the section "The Signification of the Mental Proposition", when we examine the signification of mental propositions. But Ockham's position is also due to his more general view about the relationship between natural and mental language. According to Ockham, simple categorematic expressions in natural language—nouns and verbs—directly signify things in the world. "Socrates," for example, signifies Socrates himself, rather than some thought, or concept, of him. In contrast, many philosophers throughout the medieval period held that such simple expressions in natural language immediately signify concepts, and signify things only mediately, in virtue of the fact that the concepts which those expressions signify, themselves represent those things. Ockham does not deny that concepts play a crucial role in signification; simple expressions in natural language acquire their significative function only in virtue of being linked in a certain way to the concepts possessed by the individual who imposes those expressions onto those things. Yet he argues that the relationship between expressions in natural language and mental language is rather one of subordination—simple expressions in natural language signify things by being subordinated to concepts which signify those things naturally—rather than of signification.¹⁴ If, then, propositions in natural language were to signify something, they would need to signify that which their mental counterparts signify. Consequently, if Ockham were to deny that mental propositions signify anything at all (and, as we will see shortly, he does), then we should expect that, on his account, propositions in natural language will not signify anything as well—which is in fact his view.

Mental Propositions

For many philosophers in the medieval period, then, a proposition in natural language signifies a thought of a certain sort, namely, the thought that something is or is not the case. This view is Boethius's first major contribution to medieval theorizing about propositions. His second view concerns the nature of thought itself. In the same work in which he argues that propositions signify thoughts, Boethius suggests that those thoughts are themselves linguistic in nature. Boethius writes, for example, that there are in fact three kinds of speech: written, spoken, and mental.¹⁵ The former two are forms of "outer" speech, while the last constitutes "inner" speech, that is, "the speech of the mind and the intellect" (1877: 24.24). Indeed, Boethius argues in at least one text that, just as natural language is partly constituted by nouns and verbs, so too one finds nominal and verbal elements in cognition itself (1877: 30.6–10).

The suggestion by Boethius (among others¹⁶) that cognition is in some sense linguistic has a profound impact on the development of medieval philosophy of mind. One finds repeated use of the notion of a mental word, for example, playing a prominent role in theories of cognition throughout the medieval period—initially as a theologically loaded notion, a reflection in understanding of the divine word spoken by God the Father, and then slowly transitioning into a key notion in the theories of mental language developed in the fourteenth century. Just as important, there is a long medieval tradition of regarding thought as combinatorial in nature.¹⁷ In the twelfth century, for example, Abelard argues that propositions in natural language signify a certain complex thought, composed of three simple *intellectus*—intellectual acts corresponding to the subject, the predicate, and the copula of the proposition in natural language—conjoined into a unit by the mind, where that unit is the thought that something is or is not the case.¹⁸ Likewise, for Aquinas in the thirteenth century, cognition is a matter of the mind’s predicating one “species,” or concept, of another, thereby representing the inherence of a form in matter or an accident in a subject. The combinatoriality of thought was the received view in the fourteenth century as well. In fact, that view only comes to be challenged in the fourteenth century on worries about the unity of the mental proposition.¹⁹

This general commitment to the combinatoriality of thought laid the groundwork for a more specifically compositional approach to cognition in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In particular, philosophers in the late medieval period came to regard thought as having a syntactic and semantic structure that mirrored in all relevant respects that of natural language. Accounts of this sort were fully developed in the fourteenth century by philosophers such as Walter Burley (died c. 1345), William Ockham, and John Buridan, where the pertinent syntactic and semantic divisions of natural language—as well as the relationship of syntax to semantics—were mapped onto the mental.²⁰ The key move for these individuals was the application to mental propositions of the theory of supposition, a semantic theory originally used to (among other things) specify the truth conditions of a proposition in natural language in terms of the things for which its subject and predicate terms stand, relative to a linguistic context. By applying the theory of supposition to mental language, Ockham and others were able to explain the supposition of the terms of propositions in natural language by appeal to the supposition of the terms of mental propositions to which those propositions were subordinated. And the supposition of the terms of mental propositions could themselves be explained by appeal to the natural relations of signification that those concepts bear to their significates, and to various rules that determine the supposition of a concept relative to a given context in *mentalese*.²¹ The result is a sophisticated theory of linguistic meaning, applicable both to natural and mental language, which constituted a powerful tool of analysis not just in logic, language, and mind, but also in epistemology, theology, and the sciences.

Even as there was general agreement in the medieval period that cognition was combinatorial—even compositional—in nature, there were however significant disagreements about the metaphysics of cognition itself. The dominant view during the medieval period was that the mind formed a thought that something is or is not the case out of accidents inhering in it—for example, its qualities, relations, or acts. These accidents were seen to be representational, so that what the mind combines are mental representations of things in the world. Accounts of this sort are developed in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries—though in different ways, and for different reasons. Perhaps the best representative of this view is Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas argues that thought (or “judgment”) is a matter of the mind’s predicating one “species” of another. A species is, in this context, a certain form that inheres in the mind “as in a subject,” that is, it bears the same relationship to the mind as paleness, for example, does to a pale individual. One acquires species ultimately from her interaction with the world; Aquinas is thus an empiricist about concept acquisition. The end result of one’s cognitive processing is understanding, in which the mind predicates one species of another in such a way that it knows something to be the case. The

product of this act of understanding is a mental word, reflecting the production of truth—the divine word—from God the Father.

In Aquinas's account, species represent due to conformality: a species inhering in the mind represents a thing because it is a form of the same sort as a form inhering in the thing it represents. One potential difficulty for Aquinas's account of mind generally, however, is to explain how the same sort of form that inheres in a thing and makes it what it is, could also be said to inhere in the mind without the mind itself becoming that sort of thing. How can the form of being ten feet tall, for example, inhere in the mind without the mind itself being ten feet tall?

Partly in response to these difficulties, Scotus proposes a slightly but significantly different account of conformality. Scotus suggests that there is not one but rather two forms essential to cognition: one form that inheres in the mind "as in a subject," and another form that exists in the mind only objectively, such that the latter form is "contained" in the former.²² Scotus's suggestion, in other words, is that we separate content from its representational vehicle. The form which inheres in the mind, which Scotus calls a concept (*conceptus*), is the vehicle, representing things outside of the mind. The form that exists merely objectively in the mind—the same form possessed by various individuals outside of the mind—is that vehicle's content, in virtue of which a concept represents. Indeed, insofar as we consider a thing irrespective of its matter, that is, only in virtue of its form, we can even call that content a "thing," *res*.

Scotus's account of mental representation is fascinating in its own right, but it is significant for our purposes because, in his commentaries on the *De Interpretatione*, Scotus proposes that, beyond a proposition composed of concepts, the mind is able to produce a "composition of things," that is, something composed of the contents of its concepts. He writes, for example, that

this composition [i.e. this mental proposition] is not out of species but out of things—not, however, as they exist but as they are understood. And therefore truth and falsity are said to concern composition and division of the understanding, because that composition is caused by an act of understanding.²³

Consequently, the product of a thought that something is or is not the case—what we can call that thought's content—is a certain composition containing conceptual contents as its parts. And it is this composition, rather than a proposition composed of the concepts themselves, that propositions in natural language signify (Scotus 2014: 35, para. 33).

Crucially for Scotus, conceptual content, though a "thing," still has merely objective existence within the mind, not subjective existence outside of it. A half-generation after Scotus, however, another philosopher—Walter Burley—argues that the content of a concept needn't have a mere objective existence in the mind. Rather, it can be—and often is—something that exists wholly outside of the mind. Like Scotus, moreover, Burley argues that the mind can fashion the contents of concepts into mental propositions. And so, on Burley's view, mental propositions turn out to be themselves composed of things that exist outside the mind (*res extra animam*).²⁴ On Burley's account, for example, the mental proposition that Socrates is human is composed of Socrates—the man in Athens himself—and humanity, a universal existing outside the mind which Socrates might possess.

Burley's account represents the farthest that the pendulum swings in favor of a strongly realist account of the constituents of mental propositions. The evolution of the thought of his contemporary, William Ockham, represents a swing back to a strongly mentalist account. The account of mental propositions that Ockham defends very early in his career reflects to some degree elements of the accounts developed by Scotus and Burley. At that time, Ockham argued that mental propositions are typically constituted by *ficta*. These *ficta* differ from Scotus's "things as they are understood," in that they are not the same as certain forms that exist in reality; rather, they are products

of intellectual activity.²⁵ Like Scotus’s “things as they are understood,” however, Ockham’s *ficta* have merely objective existence in the mind. Even more significant, on Ockham’s early account, some mental propositions—namely, singular mental propositions—appear to be composed (at least partly) of things outside the mind (Karger 1996: 210–229). On this account, for example, the mental proposition that Socrates is human is composed not only of a certain *fictum*—the product of an act of thinking about humans, which represents individual humans—but also, as on Burley’s view, of Socrates himself.

At some point in the 1320s, however, Ockham comes to hold that *ficta* are not required for a compelling theory of mind. Rather, all that is required are mental acts themselves—acts which have no products.²⁶ That change in his theory of mind has implications for his theory of mental propositions, for he now maintains that mental propositions—whether singular or general—are composed entirely of mental acts, that is, accidents really inhering in the mind, representing particular substances, qualities, or relations outside of it. In other words, Ockham’s mature view involves a reversion back to an account of the metaphysics of the mental proposition similar to the sort defended by Aquinas in the thirteenth century—though, it must be noted, differing from Aquinas’s account in how and why accidents of the mind represent.

From roughly 1250 to 1350, then, accounts of the metaphysics of mental propositions swing from mentalist accounts of the constituents of those propositions, to strongly realist accounts, and then back to a strong commitment to mentalism. The development of these different accounts of the metaphysics of mental propositions reflects an intense interest at that time in the nature of mental representation generally, and the mental proposition in particular. But that interest was not limited merely to the metaphysics of the mental proposition. Rather, there was just as intense an interest in the semantics of the mental proposition, and in particular in whether mental propositions are signs of something else.

The Signification of the Mental Proposition

Throughout medieval history, there was a strong theological interest in the nature of the objects of religious belief. That interest comes to the fore in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, where two opposing camps develop.²⁷ The first, which we will call the *complexum* camp, argues that the object of faith is an *enuntiabile* or *complexum*—a proposition-like object that is, for example, expressed when one says the creed. The second, which we will call the *reist* camp, argues that the object of faith is something (*aliqua res*)—for example, Christ—or some collection of things in the world. These theological debates anticipate (and then are subsumed by) a broader philosophical debate that occurs in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries about the signification of the mental proposition. Within that debate, four positions emerge: nihilism, reism, sui generism, and modism. I will take each of these positions in turn.

Nihilism. Nihilists deny that mental propositions as such signify anything. Some nihilists (e.g., Scotus, Burley,²⁸ and Ockham) deny that mental propositions signify anything at all.²⁹ Others (e.g., Buridan) allow that there is some loose sense in which a mental proposition signifies something, but argue that its signification is reducible to the signification of one or both of its terms.³⁰

Nihilism has its roots in the *complexum* camp mentioned above. For the *complexum* theorist, the object of faith is a certain complex thing, a bearer of truth value. Many philosophers in the fourteenth century readily identified that *complexum* as a mental proposition. On this view, the object of faith—and, more generally, the object of judgment—is a mental proposition. Prominent defenders of this view include Scotus, the early Ockham, and Buridan. On Scotus’s account, for example, belief and similar attitudes are mental acts of judgment, which take as their objects mental propositions.³¹

Yet not all nihilists regarded mental propositions as objects of judgment. Rather, some denied that belief and similar attitudes have any objects at all, or at least over and above the things that are or are represented by the terms of a mental proposition. Views of this sort distinguish between what we can call the content object and referential objects of an act of judgment (Brower-Toland 2007: 98–100). On this kind of view, a judgment can have referential objects—that is, it can be about the things that are or are represented by the terms of a certain mental proposition—but it has no content object because judgment is not a relation directed at a mental proposition but rather a certain contentful activity of the mind, namely, the activity of constructing the mental proposition itself. The two most prominent defenders of this sort of account are Burley and (excepting cases of demonstrative judgment) the later Ockham. I will briefly discuss Burley’s account here.³² Unlike most philosophers in the fourteenth century, Burley does not recognize a distinction between force and content. For him, the mind’s formation of a mental proposition itself involves some attitude or other.³³ On this view, for example, judgment is not a relation to a mental proposition, but rather an activity of predicating one thing in the world of another, both of which things are objects of cognition. Consequently, the mental proposition is not what is believed, but rather is (at least partly constituted by) the act of believing itself. A belief can be said to be about things in the world—Socrates and the property of humanity, for example—but it is not, on Burley’s account, a relation to some proposition. Rather, it is a certain activity that the mind undertakes: the predication of one thing of another.

Reism. Whereas nihilism can be seen as a descendant of the *complexum* position, reism is—unsurprisingly—a descendant of the reist camp. Unlike nihilists, who deny that, strictly speaking, a mental proposition itself signifies anything, reists hold that a proposition does in fact signify something, in just the way that its terms signify things. Reist accounts can be regarded as either simple or complex.

Simple reism is the view that a proposition signifies something in the world—that is, some entity falling within one of the ten Aristotelian categories. Perhaps the most well-known defender of this form of reism is Walter Chatton (d. 1343), a close colleague and oft philosophical critic of William Ockham. In contrast to what he takes to be Ockham’s account of judgment—that the object of judgment is a mental proposition—Chatton (2002: d. 39, a. 2) argues that the object of judgment is not a mental proposition but rather something, or things, in the world. Take, for example, the belief that God is three and one. The object of that belief, Chatton argues, is not the mental proposition that God is three and one; rather, it is God himself. On this view, it is God, and not a mental proposition, that one “assents” to. None of this is to suggest that Chatton does not regard thinking to be linguistic in nature. On the contrary, Chatton readily accepts Ockham’s thesis that thinking occurs within a language of thought, such that belief requires (in part) the formation of a mental proposition. But he denies that it is the mental proposition itself which is what one believes. On the contrary, what one believes is what is signified by that proposition: God, for example.

Critics of simple reism typically argue that the view cannot sufficiently distinguish between simple and complex mental activity: between a thought of God, for example, and the thought that God is three and one. But there must be a difference, those critics argue because the latter but not the former is truth-evaluable. Complex reism can be seen as one sort of response to that criticism. Complex reism is the view that the significate of a mental proposition is in some way distinct from the significate of any of its terms. Proponents of this approach include William Crathorn (fl. 1330s), Richard Brinkley (died c. 1379), and John Wyclif (d. 1384). Broadly speaking, on this view, a mental proposition signifies some structured whole composed of the significates of its terms. On Brinkley’s approach, for example, a mental proposition signifies an *n*-tuple of the significates of its terms (1988: 34–51, esp. 34–35).

Sui Generism. Whereas reists attempts to locate the significate of the proposition in some way within one or more of the Aristotelian categories, sui generists argue that the significate of a mental proposition falls completely outside of that schema. Sui generism in fact first arises not out of theological debates in the thirteenth century but rather develops in the twelfth century, in the philosophy of Peter Abelard and his immediate successors.³⁴ Abelard argues that a proposition in natural language, in addition to signifying a thought, also signifies a *dictum propositionis*, that is, what is said by the proposition. *Dicta* are, on Abelard's view, the primary bearers of truth and falsity, as well as the fundamental bearers of modality. A *dictum*, Abelard is keen to emphasize, is not a thing (*res*), nor is it an essence (*essentia*) or even a something (*aliquid*). A *dictum* is none of these things because the semantic role of a proposition is not (like a noun) in naming a thing (*res*) but rather in saying (*dicendo*) that something is or is not the case (1919: 327.18–329.28; 365.13–370.22). The use of any of those expressions to describe what a proposition signifies is thus a kind of category mistake: applying at the level of propositions what is only proper at the level of nouns and verbs.

Abelard's notion of a *dictum* is taken up by his immediate successors, whose interest in it concerns especially its metaphysical status. One of the more prominent discussions of the *dictum* occurs in the anonymous *Ars Burana*, whose author argues that the *dictum* (or, equivalently, the *enuntiabile*) is neither a substance nor an accident, but belongs to a category outside of the Aristotelian categorical schema, which that author calls the *praedicamentum enuntiabilium*, that is, the category of the *enuntiabile* (de Rijk 1967: 208–209, f. 113v–f, 114r).

Sui generism seems to have fallen out of fashion for much of the thirteenth century, but it is revived in the fourteenth century, first by Ockham's student, Adam Wodeham (d. 1358), and subsequently by Gregory Rimini (d. 1358) —who was clearly influenced by Wodeham's work—and others in Paris.³⁵ Reflecting Abelard's distinction between naming and saying, Wodeham argues (1990: d. 1, q. 1) that asking what (*quid*) is signified by a proposition is ill-formed, for the significate of a proposition is not a “something” (*quid*) but rather a “being something” (*esse quid*). This “being something” is what Wodeham calls the total significate of the proposition. Wodeham's insights are adopted by Rimini, who calls the total significate of the proposition a *complexe significabile*, or something signifiable in a merely complex way. Unlike Wodeham, however, Rimini suggests that the question “what is the significate of a proposition?” is perfectly apt, for that significate is indeed something (*aliquid*), at least in a certain sense. If, as Wodeham seems to suggest, we were to restrict the sense of “something” to substances and accidents, then it is right to say that a proposition signifies nothing, or not something. Restricting that notion in this way limits its scope to existing things. But, Rimini argues, the sense of “something” can be more general, so as to include not just existing things but also whatever can be signified, whether complexly or incompletely, truly or falsely. In that more general sense of “something,” then, a *complexe significabile* is itself something—even though it cannot be reduced to any of the standard Aristotelian categories (1979: pro., q. 1, a. 1–2).

Modism. Like sui generists, modists argue that the significate of a proposition is not some thing or collection of things falling with the Aristotelian categories. Unlike sui generists, however, who argue that the significate of a proposition is entirely distinct from things within the categories, modists maintain that a proposition signifies a mode of a thing (*modus rei*), where a mode of a thing is not really distinct from that thing which it modifies. Notable modists include Richard Billingham (fl. 1350s), Nicole Oresme (d. 1382), and Albert of Saxony (d. 1390).

Modists emphasize that propositions always contain a syncategorematic element, namely, the copula. Traditionally, syncategoremata were said to be consignificative, that is, significative only when paired with some categorematic expression(s). Moreover, when paired with categorematic expressions, syncategoremata were said to signify not a thing but rather a disposition (*dispositio*) of a thing.³⁶ Modists draw from this tradition, arguing that propositions signify not things (or at least, not just things) but rather a certain mode of them.

Perhaps the most interesting account of modism was developed by Richard Billingham. Known to us only through Richard Brinkley's criticisms of the view, Billingham's view is that the significate of a proposition is not a thing but rather a mode of a thing. He draws an analogy to adverbs, which he argues do not signify things but rather "ways" of things (Brinkley 1988: 52–73). Billingham suggests there are a number of benefits to his view. First, unlike a thing, which exists at a particular place, the mode of a thing exists not in one place but rather in every place, all at once. But the truth or falsity of a proposition is not restricted to one place; a true proposition is true wherever it is formed. And so modes, which are everywhere, accommodate spatial concerns about truth. Second, the significates of certain propositions—such as the proposition that a chimera does not exist—cannot be things, since, for example, there are no chimeras. But since propositions must signify something, what they signify must thus be a mode of a thing (a mode, presumably, possessed by some or all the things that do exist).

Modism was likely never a popular position in medieval philosophy, as evidenced by the fact that some of the most prominent accounts are known to us only via their critics.³⁷ But it represents an interesting attempt to reconcile, in a way, the *reist* and *sui generis* approaches to the problem of the signification of the proposition. On the one hand, it accepts with the *sui generis* that the Aristotelian categories cannot handle the kind of complexity required of the significate of a proposition. On the other hand, it attempts to link discussions of propositional significates to the categories, by suggesting that, while not reducible to things in the categories, the significates of propositions are supervenient upon them.

I will end with a brief mention of what seems to me to be at stake, philosophically, in disputes about the signification of the mental proposition. One must always be cautious in making generalizations about debates in medieval philosophy; disagreements and categories of response in the medieval period rarely match up with conceptual frameworks prevalent today, at least not perfectly. But it does seem that, at least broadly speaking, the debate about the significate of the mental proposition concerns the role of states of affairs in the semantics of the proposition (Cesalli 2012). Nihilists, on the whole, deny that states of affairs are necessary to the semantics of propositions, whereas proponents of the other camps see them as essential. But even among those who regard states of affairs as essential to an articulation of the semantics of propositions, there is still significant disagreement about how to express the metaphysics of states of affairs relative to the Aristotelian background within which those figures were all working.³⁸

Conclusion

It is my hope that this essay has provided a brief introduction to the main issues that arise from medieval philosophical reflection on the proposition. But it has been brief, and the scholarship on this topic is vast. The *locus classicus* for (ancient and) medieval treatments of the proposition—at least in the English-speaking world—is Nuchelmans (1973). This work presents an incredibly thorough treatment of the topics I have covered here, and also nicely articulates how medieval reflection on the proposition is rooted in ancient philosophical traditions—in particular, in Stoicism and Aristotelianism. A sort of summary version of the medieval portion of that work can be found in Nuchelmans (1982).³⁹ A central deficiency of Nuchelmans's works is that it largely ignores thirteenth-century philosophical treatments of the proposition. One can go at least part-ways in rectifying that oversight by consulting Bos (1987). In addition to these works, there is Kretzmann (1970). In this seminal article, Kretzmann argues that the twin notions of signification and supposition provided medieval philosophers with the tools to articulate the sense and reference, respectively, of a proposition—in other words, a complete theory of meaning.⁴⁰

The main drawback to the works just mentioned is simply their age. Scholarship on medieval approaches to the proposition has advanced significantly since the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in

important expansions upon, corrections to, and disagreements with some of the claims developed in those earlier works. One important debate in the last decade, for example, concerns the extent to which Peter Abelard endorses a language of thought. King (2007a) argues that Abelard was the first in the Middle Ages to defend a language of thought. Panaccio (2010) argues that King overstates his case and that it is only with Ockham that we have a clearly compositional approach to mind. Beyond Abelard in the twelfth century, the bulk of recent scholarly attention on our topic has focused on the fourteenth century, and especially on what Susan Brower-Toland calls the “in-house debate” about the objects of judgment that occurred among Ockham, Robert Holcot (d. 1349), Chatton, and Wodeham. An excellent article on the development of Ockham’s theory of judgment is Brower-Toland (2007). In addition to her work on Ockham, Brower-Toland (2006) also provides an important reexamination of Wodeham’s account of the “total significante of the proposition,” arguing that that significante is a fact, or concrete state of affairs, rather than (as some have argued) something like propositional content. For a good account of Parisian developments of Wodeham’s account, and also reactions to those developments, see Conti (2004) and Zupko (1994). And, while it is hard to pinpoint just one important article on Buridan’s approach to the issues covered in this article, Klima (2008) does a wonderful job of laying out the nominalist semantic program in the fourteenth century generally, and of detailing the specifics of Buridan’s program (including his semantics of propositions) in particular.

Finally, while most of the philosophical scholarship on fourteenth-century theories of the proposition in the last three decades has focused on the nominalist tradition, there is a growing community of scholars interested in fourteenth-century realist approaches to the proposition. I’ll conclude by briefly mentioning the scholarship on Walter Burley’s account of the mental proposition. There are, broadly, two current interpretations of Burley’s account: either that Burley takes a nihilistic approach (the interpretation I have articulated above), or that he adopts something like a proto-modistic approach, where the proposition signifies an “aspect” of a thing, which (these scholars argue) he calls a “real proposition.” For a reading of the first sort, see Karger (1996) and Bulthuis (2016).⁴¹ For a reading of the second, see Conti (1992).⁴²

Notes

- 1 For a good introduction to theories of the proposition live today, including the development of the contemporary notion of the proposition from the early analytic tradition onwards, see McGrath (2014).
- 2 More precisely, they mean to discuss *utterances and/or inscriptions* of declarative sentences. That said, utterances receive the most attention in the medieval period, the written language having been seen as derivative upon spoken language. Indeed, many philosophers in the medieval period held that written language signifies spoken language, with only spoken language signifying one’s thoughts.
- 3 Kretzmann (1970) argues that a central confusion in medieval philosophy of language was between what a proposition says and what a proposition means, a confusion encouraged by the synonymous use of the Latin verbs “*dicere*,” to say, and “*significare*,” to signify (or mean), in various medieval debates about the proposition.
- 4 On the origins of “*propositio*,” see Nuchelmans (1973: 118–122).
- 5 Nuchelmans (1973: 118) notes that Apuleius’s list of the types of *orationes* is quite long, including, for example, “vowing, showing anger, hatred or envy, favouring, pitying, admiring, despising, objurgating, [and] repenting.”
- 6 Note that propositions are, in this context, assertoric utterances.
- 7 Boethius’s (1877: 95ff) division of *orationes* is derived from the Peripatetic division of speech (*sermones*) into the *oratio imperativa* (an imperative utterance), the *oratio optativa/deprecativa* (an optative utterance), the *oratio interrogativa* (an interrogative utterance), the *oratio vocativa* (a vocative utterance) and the *oratio enunciativa* (an indicative, or statement-making, utterance).

- 8 Broadly speaking, Boethius uses “*oratio enuntiativa*” and “*enuntiatio*” synonymously with “*propositio*.” On the precise sense of each expression, see Nuchelmans (1973: 131–132).
- 9 Note that this thought is an act of judgment. There are no merely entertained propositional contents on this view. Indeed, in the medieval period, the distinction between force and content will not be introduced until the late thirteenth century, by John Duns Scotus. See n. 35.
- 10 On the Aristotelian context of this view, see Nuchelmans (1973: 134).
- 11 “*Propositio est oratio verum falsumve significans*” (Boethius 1891: 1174B, 1177C).
- 12 “[C]onstituere . . . intellectum” (16b20–22), substituting “*constituere*” for “*constituit*” (Aristotle 1965: 7).
- 13 It should be noted that this is hardly a mere restatement of Aristotle’s position. Aristotle himself only hints that propositions (προτάσεις) are themselves significative when he writes that “‘goatstag’ signifies something, but not, as yet, anything true or false—unless ‘is’ or ‘is not’ is added” (*De Interp.* 16a16–18). However, as Nuchelmans notes, one can find historical antecedents for Boethius’s claim. In particular, Ammonius “makes rather frequent use of it [i.e. the signification of the proposition] in his commentary on *De interpretatione*” (1973: 133).
- 14 Interestingly, Walter Burley—often a vociferous critic of Ockham—has a similar view about the relationship between categorematic expressions in natural language and concepts. Yet he accepts that propositions in natural language signify mental propositions, precisely because he holds that mental propositions are composed of things. On Burley’s theory of the relationship between natural and mental language generally, see Spade (2007: 142–145). For his theory of the relationship between propositions in natural and in mental language, see Karger (1996).
- 15 For an analysis of whether Boethius’s view constitutes a commitment to a language of thought, see Suto (2012: 77–113).
- 16 Just as—if not more—influential in the development of medieval philosophy of mind was Augustine. For example, the notion of a mental word that is introduced into the medieval theological and philosophical discussion seems to be due especially to the influence of Augustine’s *De Trinitate*.
- 17 The combinatorial approach to thought can be traced back to the Aristotelian claim that “truth and falsity concern combination and separation. So names and verbs by themselves—for instance, ‘man’ or ‘white’ when nothing is added—are like the thoughts that are without combination and separation” (*De Interp.* 16a11–16; see also *DA* 430a26).
- 18 On Abelard’s account of thinking, see Nuchelmans (1973: 142–143).
- 19 For example, John Buridan argues that mental propositions are simple qualities of the mind, lacking syntactic structure. But Buridan makes a distinction between the metaphysical (or syntactic) complexity of a mental proposition and its semantic complexity. On that division, and Buridan’s account of the semantic complexity of simple mental qualities, see Klima (2004: 423–426).
- 20 The notion of a mental proposition (“*propositio mentalis*” or “*propositio in mente*”) also emerges at this time.
- 21 There is a considerable disagreement in the scholarship over the nature of Ockham’s semantics of mental language—in particular, whether it is atomistic or holistic. For an atomistic reading, see Panaccio (2004: 53–55). For holistic interpretations, see Dutilh Novaes (2008) and Vaughan (2013: 131–176).
- 22 For an excellent overview of Scotus’s account of mental representation—for that matter, for an excellent overview of medieval approaches to mental representation generally—see King (2007b).
- 23 *Super librum I Perihermeneias*, q. 2, n. 9:
 [C]ompositio est illarum rerum, non tamen ut existentium, sed ut intelliguntur, et ideo dicitur veritas, et falsitas circa compositionem et divisionem intellectus, quia illa compositio ab intellectu causatur, et est in intellectu, ut cognitum in cognoscente, non autem ut accidens in subiecto.
 (Scotus 1891: 543)
- 24 Burley writes, for example, that
 whatever the intellect can put together, or divide from one another, can be parts of speech [*oratio*], and consequently can be a subject or a predicate. But the intellect can put together things [*res*] by asserting that they are the same, and can divide things from another by asserting that they are not the same . . . Therefore, some proposition can be composed of things outside the soul [*res extra animam*].
 (Burley 1967: c3rb)
- 25 These differences are likely due to Ockham’s account of natures: for Ockham, there are no common natures *in re* for those *ficta* to be conformal to. On the notion of *ficta* as a nominalist take on Scotus’s account of mental content, see Karger (1996: 218).

- 26 The development of Ockham's account is largely the result of Walter Chatton's criticisms of the *fictum* view. See Chatton, *Sent., Prol.*, q.1, a.1 (1989: 1–8).
- 27 This history is complicated by the abundance of “mixed” theories in the tradition, which attempt to include elements of both. See Nuchelmans (1973: 177–185). Walter Chatton (see *infra*) might be seen as defending a mixed view of a certain sort.
- 28 For the most part, Burley defends a nihilist account. However, in his first literal commentary on the *De Interpretatione*, he does argue that true mental propositions signify what he then calls “real propositions,” which are complex, public entities, having merely objective existence in the mind, which serve as the truth-makers for propositions in mental and natural language. See Burley (1973: 61–62, para. 1.26–1.27). That account is wholly absent, however, in Burley's earlier and later works.
- 29 We might also include Aquinas in this camp, though in this section I focus (except in the case of sui generism) exclusively on philosophers active in the fourteenth century. Aquinas argues that the object of judgment can be considered in two ways: in terms of the object known, in which case it is a thing, or in terms of the way in which it is known (namely, in a complex way), and then the object is a mental proposition. See *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 1, a. 4 (Aquinas 1952).
- 30 See Buridan (2001: 10–14, tr. 1.1.6; 21–22, tr. 1.3.1). See also Perez-Illarbe (2004: 153–181).
- 31 See Scotus (1998: 68, bk. VI, q. 3, nn. 36–39). Giorgio Pini (2004) argues that Scotus is one of the first philosophers in the medieval period to recognize a distinction between force and content; Aquinas, for example, does not appear to recognize it. See *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 1, a. 2 (Aquinas 1952).
- 32 Ockham's endorsement of the view is more complicated, as he seems to allow, even in his later works, that mental propositions are the objects of demonstrative knowledge—but only because demonstrative knowledge, on his view, is a reflexive mental act, that is, a second-order mental act directed at a first-order mental act. See Brower-Toland (2007: 100–102).
- 33 See, for example, Burley (1974: 249–250, para. 3.553). It seems probable that Burley was aware of the distinction between force and content early in his career, and it certainly was a distinction with which he would have been familiar during the middle and later portions of his career. It is unclear why he rejects the distinction, but it may have been motivated by concerns that were traditional (it is not a distinction Aristotle would have recognized), psychological (he might regard acts of mere apprehension as simple rather than complex), or philosophical (he might find the relational analysis of belief unmotivated)—and perhaps it is a combination of some or all of these concerns.
- 34 In fact, Abelard seems to have established at least some of the conceptual framework within which that debate was waged.
- 35 Interestingly, Adam Wodeham and Gregory of Rimini—the two most prominent defenders of sui generism in the fourteenth century—seem oblivious to Abelard's view.
- 36 There was a significant debate in the thirteenth century about whether the copula is a syncategorematic term. See, for example, William of Sherwood (1968: 90–93). By the fourteenth century, there appears to be a general consensus that the copula is syncategorematic. See, for example, Burley (2000: 139–145).
- 37 There is always the possibility, of course, that the present scholarship simply does not accurately reflect the popularity of a given position, such as modism, in the debate.
- 38 Alternatively, we might borrow a suggestion from Susan Brower-Toland (2002: 29–32), who argues that the fourteenth-century debate about the “object” of judgment within Ockham's circle is to some extent a non-debate, since many of the relevant positions can be seen as responding to different questions about the nature of belief. Along those lines, we might see nihilistic accounts as centrally concerned with the content of a propositional attitude, reist accounts with what the attitude is about, and sui generist accounts with what the attitude is directed toward (assuming that there is some difference between the aboutness and directedness of a propositional attitude, though this is an assumption which Brower-Toland herself does not make).
- 39 Both Nuchelmans (1973, 1982) end with the fourteenth century, but Nuchelmans (1980) covers the remainder of the late medieval period, as well as the renaissance. See also Ashworth (1978).
- 40 But see Dutilh Novaes (2007: 17–46) on recent concerns over associating signification and supposition with sense and reference, respectively.
- 41 For a different account of Burley's nihilism, see Cesalli (2001). According to Cesalli, Burley's mental propositions are composed of “immanent, intentional objects,” rather than of things outside of the mind.
- 42 On Conti's view, Burley's mental propositions are composed of subjective features of the mind—concepts, or species—rather than of things outside of the mind. Complicating this issue is the fact that Burley seems to admit of two kinds of mental propositions: one kind composed of concepts, and another composed of things, where both are composed by the mind. For a discussion of the relationship of these two kinds of mental propositions to one another, see Bulthuis (2014: 219–242).

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