

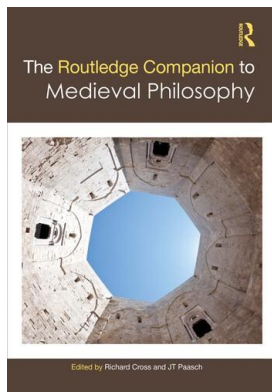
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### Cognitive Acts

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## 24

## COGNITIVE ACTS

*Giorgio Pini*

Seeing a color, hearing a sound, imagining a triangle, remembering a friend, thinking about apples: these are all instances of cognitive acts. In the later Middle Ages, the notion of cognitive act was an object of sustained scrutiny. In what follows, I first present the main assumptions that thirteenth- and fourteenth-century thinkers shared on this subject. Then, I consider five controversial issues. Many more issues and different ones might have been chosen, but I hope that the few I am going to mention will give some taste of the richness of the medieval debate about this topic.

**The Common Ground**

It is a characteristic Aristotelian claim that things have powers: a stone has a power to fall, a plant has a power to grow, a horse has a power to run. Those powers are not necessarily exercised: a stone may be lying on my table, a plant may stop growing in winter, a horse may be resting in its stable. Accordingly, powers may be described as dispositions that a certain thing possesses even when it does not exercise them. An *act* is the exercise of one of those powers (e.g. a stone's falling, a plant's growing, a horse's running). Unlike powers, acts are occurrent and episodic events: even though horses always have an ability to run, sometimes they run and sometimes they do not. Now, a certain class of things (including non-human animals, human beings, and super-human beings such as angels, if there are any) have the power to cognize their environment (and sometimes themselves). That power is typically connected with what makes that thing alive, i.e. its soul. A cognitive act is simply the exercise of a cognitive power. As cognitive powers come in different varieties, so do the corresponding cognitive acts. So animals and human beings have the power to cognize some features of the material world such as colors, smells, etc. (the so-called "sensible qualities"). Correspondingly, they can carry out sensory acts such as seeing, smelling, etc. Some animals and all human beings also have the power to remember and to imagine (the so-called powers of the internal sense). Correspondingly, they can carry out acts of remembering and imagining. Finally, human and super-human beings have the so-called "intellectual powers," i.e. the power to think. Correspondingly, they can carry out acts of thinking. As opposed to sensory acts, acts of thinking are supposed to involve the use of no organ. In the case of human beings, acts of thinking are, in turn, divided into acts of simple apprehension (such as my understanding what an apple is), acts of composition and division (such as my forming the thought "apples are sweet"), and acts of reasoning (such as my forming the argument "what is sweet contains sugar, apples are sweet, therefore apples contain sugar"). Around the third quarter of the thirteenth century, a few Latin thinkers engaged with the view (ultimately attributed to the Arab thinker, Averroes) that

acts of thinking are primarily carried out by an intellect separated from all human individual intellects, which, in turn, think only to the extent that they are conjoined in some special way to that separated intellect (de Libera 2014). By the end of the thirteenth century, however, that view had been rejected as both philosophically unsound and incompatible with some central tenets of Christianity. Accordingly, in what follows, I will only consider the views of those Latins who hold that cognitive acts, and more specifically acts of thinking, are acts to be attributed to and only to individual human (or angelic) intellects.

Because cognitive acts are both *acts* and *cognitive*, they play two distinct roles at the same time. On the one hand, just like any other act, a cognitive act is the exercise or actualization of a power present in a subject. On the other hand, a cognitive act makes its subject cognizant of something, which is described as the “object” of that act. Let us briefly consider each of these two roles separately.

First, with regard to cognitive acts as actualizations of powers, cognitive acts are thought to belong to a special class of actualizations called “activities” (*operationes*, which translates Aristotle’s *energeiai*) to distinguish them from a different class of actualizations called “changes” (*motus*, which translates Aristotle’s *kineseis*). Medieval thinkers would typically consider the distinction between activities and changes (which Aristotle most famously drew in *Met.* 9.6, only part of which, however, was accessible to medieval authors: see Burnyeat 2008) as equivalent to the distinction between immanent and transitive actions (Aristotle, *DA* 2.5, 417a16–17). Accordingly, they would describe an activity as the exercise of a power that requires no patient on which to be exercised and does not issue in a result that is external to the agent exercising that power. By contrast, a change, in this context, would be described as the exercise of a power that requires a patient and issues in a result that is external to the agent exercising that power (e.g. Thomas Aquinas, *SGC* III.2; Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.* XI.4, f. 451rT; Duns Scotus, *Quodl.* 13, n. 27: 575; Pickavé 2015: 61–62; Pini 2015: 84–87, 99–100). For example, both seeing and building are exercises of powers. But when I build, I need some material on which to exercise my activity—bricks and mortar—and I produce something external to me (e.g. a house): building is a change. By contrast, when I see something, I need no material on which to exercise my activity: admittedly, I do need an object to see, but seeing does not involve doing anything to that object. Also, when I see, I produce nothing external to me: seeing is an activity. The same holds for all other sensory acts and for acts of thinking.

Specifically with regard to acts of thinking, it is customary to introduce a further distinction. The state of somebody who is actually thinking about something is described as a state not just of actuality, but of *second* actuality. Aristotle introduced the distinction between first and second actuality to account for the exercise of some highly sophisticated powers, such as the ability to carry out mathematical calculations (Aristotle, *DA* 2.5, 417a21–30; Burnyeat 2002). In order to be able to carry out mathematical calculations, I must first have learned some mathematics. At birth, no human being is endowed with the power to carry out mathematical calculations, but every human being of normal intellectual abilities can acquire that power by practice and learning. The relationship between first and second actuality is similar to that holding between a power and its exercise in simpler cases such as sensory acts: just as somebody maintains the ability to see when she does not exercise that ability (e.g. when she is asleep or keeps her eyes closed), so somebody maintains her mathematical abilities when she does not exercise those abilities. Now, medieval authors customarily apply the distinction between first and second actuality to any act of thinking. Specifically, human beings are considered to be in a state of second actuality when they actually think about something (say, apples), whereas they are considered to be in a state of first actuality when they know what something is but do not actually think about it. So the distinction between first and second actuality is thought to account for the commonly experienced fact that we do not always think about all the things we know.

Let us now turn to the second aspect I have mentioned earlier. By carrying out a cognitive act, a subject becomes related to a certain thing in a special way. The thing that is cognized by way of a cognitive act is variously described as its object or term—it is what a certain cognitive act is directed at, say the color red in my act of seeing red and an apple in my thinking about an apple. The link between a cognitive act and its object is usually expressed by saying that cognitive acts are *likenesses* (*similitudines*) or representations (*repraesentationes*) of what is cognized by way of them. It would be unwise to read too much in this talk about likeness and representation, as medieval authors fleshed it out in very different ways. So it seems more prudent to assume that the claim that a cognitive act is a likeness or a representation of its object only indicates that a cognitive act is that by which a certain thing becomes an object of cognition for a cognizer. Another way of making the same point is to say that a cognitive act is that by which the thing cognized becomes present *to* the cognizer or *in* the cognizer, in a special sense of “presence” that was the object of much debate (Biard 2007). The idea behind that claim is the Aristotelian view that cognition is a union between cognizer and thing cognized. Accordingly, cognition can occur only if the things cognized are united in some way to the cognizer. Being present to or in the cognizer is supposed to describe the way a thing cognized is united to the cognizer. A cognitive act is the device by which things become united to a cognizer in that way.

### Disagreement

So much agreement about the general characterization of cognitive acts left considerable room to develop widely different accounts of their nature and function. Among many controversial issues, the following five may be selected as particularly significant in the light of recent scholarship.

#### *What Is the Efficient Cause of a Cognitive Act?*

Most medieval thinkers are willing to concede that God plays some causal role in the production of cognitive acts for the simple reason that God is usually supposed to play a causal role in the production of everything. But no Latin medieval thinker seems to adopt the view that God is—in ordinary circumstances—the *sole* cause of cognitive acts. Occasionalism and its application to cognition were familiar enough through Arabic sources, but none in the Latin West seems to consider them as serious options. James of Viterbo may be an exception, as he claims that God is the efficient cause of our cognitive acts. But he also adds that our intellect plays the role of formal cause, so that cognitive acts actually result from a concourse of causes (divine and human) rather than exclusively from God’s action (James of Viterbo, *Quodl.* I.12: 167.365–168.370, 175.616–617; Côté 2014).

Consequently, there remain three possible candidates for the role of efficient cause of cognitive acts: (a) the object; (b) the cognizer; (c) both.

- a Some hold that the object plays the role of agent and the cognizer the role of patient in the production of a cognitive act. Accordingly, a cognitive act should be considered as an object’s action over a cognizer or, equivalently, a cognizer’s passion from an object. Strictly speaking, the cognizer does nothing; rather, it is the object that does everything (Godfrey of Fontaines, *Quodl.* VI.6: 171–172; Guy Terreni, *Quodl.* III.6: ll. 275–299; Hartman 2014: 235–244). The details might vary, but the general idea is that a cognitive act is just the reception of a quality produced by an object and impressed in a cognizer. This view is held on the strength of three main considerations. First, some cognitive acts are such that we seem to have little or no control over their occurrence. This is particularly obvious in the case of sensory acts. For example, my hearing of an ambulance siren howling in the street is an event that occurs out

of my control. It is admittedly more difficult to defend the claim that the cognizer is completely passive with regard to intellectual acts. But the idea is that, once the intellect is given some information, a certain intellectual act is automatically triggered. So even though I may be under the impression that I am active with regard to my thoughts, this is just because I am unaware of the complex mechanisms by which they are produced (e.g. an apple is presented to my senses, the senses act on my intellect, and the intellect consequently thinks about apples). Second, there seems to be no reason why the causal explanation of cognitive acts should not follow the same pattern as the explanation of other events. Now, the standard Aristotelian way to analyze causation is in terms of an agent's impression of a form in a patient, say, fire's impressing the form *heat* in a kettle. Similarly, a cognitive act (for example, my seeing the color red) might be explained as an agent's impression of a form in a patient (say, a red object's impressing the form *red* in my eye). Third, this account fits well with many of Aristotle's claims and specifically with what contemporary interpreters sometimes describe as the hylomorphic account of cognition, according to which to cognize is for a subject to receive a form (Shields 2007: 140, 145–150).

- b Other thinkers regard the cognizer as the sole efficient cause of cognitive acts. This view is articulated in different ways (e.g. Olivi, *In Sent.* II.58, II.72; Durand of Saint-Pourçain, *QDC*: 13; see Pasnau 1997: 168; Solère 2013: 191–202; Hartman 2014). Unlike the first view, this approach successfully backs up our intuition that we carry out some activity when we are engaged in cognitive acts, whether sensory or intellectual. But this view faces an obvious difficulty. The objects of cognitive acts do seem to play some role in cognition. This is particularly evident in sensory cognitive acts: I cannot see anything I would like to see; rather, what I see and what I do not see largely depend on my environment and not merely on my cognitive abilities. Accordingly, the supporters of this view acknowledge that objects are a necessary component of cognitive acts even though they do not play a genuinely causal role, or, even if they do, their role in cognition cannot be straightforwardly identified with any of the four Aristotelian causes, and it is most emphatically not the role of an efficient cause. Rather, objects are variously regarded as pertaining to a special sort of cause, sometimes thought to be akin to final causality and called “terminative cause” (Olivi, *In Sent.* II.72: 36–37), other times described as a *sine qua non* cause of cognitive acts (Durand, *QDC*: 12; Solère 2013: 202–205; Hartman 2014: 244–254). Similarly, James of Viterbo claims that objects “excite” the cognitive powers, which, however, can move themselves once they have been excited, even though not as an efficient, but as a formal cause (James of Viterbo, *Quodl.* I.12: 167. 335–336, 171.501–174.595; Solère 2018: 178–186). Three main considerations are commonly brought in support of this view. First, it seems to be an essential aspect of cognition that it is an activity of a *living* subject, and an important element of being alive is to interact with one's environment in a way that is not completely passive. Second, medieval thinkers regard it as an obvious fact that the world is hierarchically organized as a ladder where material things are on the lower steps and immaterial/spiritual beings are on the higher steps. It is also commonly assumed that causation can be exercised only by what is higher on what is lower. Now, bodies, which are the objects of sensory acts and, as everybody agreed, at the very minimum an important part of what we can think about, are regarded as ontologically inferior to souls. So bodies cannot act on souls (this has been called “the Asymmetry Principle,” Solère 2013: 192). So cognition—at least, cognition of bodies—cannot be accounted for as an action exercised by an object on a cognizer (Olivi, *In Sent.* II.72; Durand, *QDC*: 12; Solère 2013: 192–193). Third, this view fits well with many claims made by Augustine, whose prestige in the Middle Ages (at least in theological circles) is even greater than Aristotle's.
- c Finally, some thinkers adopt a mixed solution in order to avoid the problems and keep the advantages of each of the other two positions. They hold that both the cognizer and the object

play the role of efficient causes in the production of cognitive acts. Again, this view comes in different varieties. Specifically, some hold that sensory acts are entirely caused by their objects (Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I.78.3; Giles of Rome, *QDCA* 1 and *Quodl.* III.13; Thomas Sutton, *QO* 34, ll. 721–2; see Cross 2014: 24; Pini 2016); by contrast, in the production of acts of thinking, even though the object still seems to play the main causal role, the intellect exercises a necessary function by carrying out both an act of abstraction, which makes it possible for the object to be present to the intellect, and an act of production of a concept (Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I.84.4 and I.84.6; Giles of Rome, *QDCA* 1). Other thinkers hold that both cognizer and object collaborate in bringing about both sensory and intellectual acts. More specifically, Henry of Ghent holds that both sensory acts and intellectual acts consist of two actions, one proceeding from the object and the other proceeding from the cognizer (Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.* II.6: 30–33). By contrast, Duns Scotus holds that sensory acts are caused by two causal events (one proceeding from the object, the other proceeding from the cognizer), whereas intellectual acts are produced by way of one causal event in which cognizer and object collaborate as singly necessary and jointly sufficient agents (Duns Scotus, *Ord.* I.3.3.2 and 3: 245–338; Cross 2014: 24–27, 122–137).

### ***Are Sensory Acts Just Modifications of an Organ?***

Those thinkers who hold that objects contribute in some way to the causation of sensory acts agree that a sensory act involves the reception of a quality or form in an organ. For example, when I see a color, a quality (called the “sensible species”) is present in my eye. That quality can be variously described as either sharing a form with the color I see or being linked by some relation to the color I see such that the quality can be called a “likeness” or “representation” of the color. But granted that the reception and presence of a quality in an organ is necessary for a sensory act to occur, is it also sufficient? For example, is my seeing a color nothing over and above my receiving the sensible species of that color in my eye? Or is something more required to trigger the occurrence of my act of sight? This question is linked to the previous one concerning the cause of cognitive acts. Those who think that sensory acts are caused *entirely* by their objects have no difficulty in describing those acts as just modifications of an organ. So they hold that a sensory act is just the reception of a form (e.g. Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I.78.3; Giles of Rome, *QDCA* 1; Thomas Sutton, *QO* 34: ll. 721–722). By contrast, those who grant the cognizer an active role even in sensation introduce a further act or component over and above the modification of the organ to account for the occurrence of a sensory act (e.g. Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.* II.6: 31–32; *Quodl.* XI.15: f. 451rV; see Pickavé 2015: 51–58; Duns Scotus, *Ord.* I.3.3.2, nn. 471–474 and *Ord.* II.9.1–2, n. 74; see Cross 2014: 24–27). The position of the thinkers belonging to the latter group is backed by two main considerations. First, if a sensory act is nothing over and above the modification of an organ, there is no easy way to distinguish between sensory acts, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, modifications of media such as air and water, for it is commonly admitted that such media receive some species or quality from objects (the so-called *species in medio*), which, in turn, act on organs such as eyes and ears. But then, why is it not the case that air sees when it receives a species of a color or exercises an act of smelling when an odor is diffused through it? If the reception of a species is regarded as a necessary but not a sufficient condition in order for a sensory act to occur, this problem can be answered by stressing that the reception of a sensible form, such as a color or a smell, is not sufficient for sensation to occur; a further act—which can be exercised only by a vital power—is required. The second consideration in support of the claim that a sensory act is not just the reception of a species in an organ is that there seem to be situations in which an organ is modified but no sensation occurs. The stock examples are that of a sleeping or unconscious person whose eyes still receive impressions from the environment (as is clear from the fact that when the

impression is sufficiently forceful, say a loud sound or intense light, that person is awakened) and of somebody who does not pay attention to her environment because she is engaged in another activity (e.g. somebody who does not hear a sound because she is thinking very hard about a difficult problem). In both cases, the organ is modified but no sensory act follows.

### ***What Is the Ontological Status of Acts of Thinking?***

Granted that cognitive acts are activities, what kind of things are they? Specifically, if the Aristotelian categories (or at least some of them) are taken as the standard list of the sort of things that there are, where in that list do acts of thinking belong?

In the late 1310s, Peter Auriol gave an account (and criticism) of some of the most common options (Peter Auriol, *In Sent.* I.25.1). Some hold that acts of thinking are passions, i.e. the intellect's being acted on by an object. Not surprisingly, the typical proponent of this view is Godfrey of Fontaines, who thinks that the intellect is passive and the object active in the production of cognitive acts (Godfrey of Fontaines, *Quodl.* VIII.2, X.12, and XIV.15). Others hold the view that acts of thinking are actions, i.e. something the intellect does or carries out. This group includes thinkers who hold widely different views on cognition in general, such as Thomas Aquinas (*ST* I.14.2; *SCG* I.53) and Peter John Olivi (*In Sent.* II.58). Aquinas arguably gives the most articulated presentation of the view that intellectual acts are actions. Even though Aquinas's position remains the same in this respect, he seems to have changed his mind about an important aspect. In his earlier writings, he holds that intellectual acts are a special sort of actions that do not produce anything. In his later writings, he comes to think that intellectual acts are actions that do produce something, but their product (a concept or "inner word") remains within the intellect (Pini 2015: 83–93). Still others hold that intellectual acts are relations (that position is presented and criticized by Scotus in *Quodl.* 13, n. 3–4 and *Rep.* I-A.3.6, n. 169; see Cross 2014: 111–117; Pini 2015: 97–98; Durand adopted a version of it, *QNC*: 38–39; see Solère 2013: 190; Hartman 2019). But the view that was destined to encounter more success is that intellectual acts are qualities—neither something the intellect undergoes (i.e. a passion) nor something the intellect does (i.e. an action), but something the intellect bears or by which the intellect is modified. This view clearly emerges with Scotus, who may well be the first to articulate and defend it in some detail (Scotus *Quodl.* 13, n. 25 and *Rep.* I-A.3.6, nn. 169–175; see Cross 2014: 171–121; Pini 2015: 96–100). Very soon, however, the view that acts of thinking (and cognitive acts in general) are qualities becomes dominant, to the point that it ends up being shared by thinkers who hold otherwise very different positions on cognition. It is the view Ockham adopts (*Rep.* III.12: 197–199; Panaccio 2004: 22–23). And it is symptomatic that Aquinas's late followers reformulate their master's position in order to attribute it to him (Owens 1963: 194–195, n. 5). Scotus's characteristic claim that acts of thinking are non-relative items, and more specifically qualities, is closely linked to his view that acts of thinking should be distinguished from two other kinds of cognitive events. On the one hand, an act of thinking (say, my thinking about apples) is to be distinguished from an act of abstraction, by which a quality (the so-called "intelligible species," which is ordinarily held to precede the act of thinking) is produced. On the other hand, an act of thinking is to be distinguished from the process by which that act is produced. The process by which an act is produced is a causal event, i.e. an action carried out by the intellect and the intelligible species acting together (Scotus, *Ord.* I.3.3.2, nn. 486–503: 289–298; Cross 2014: 128–134). By contrast, the act of thinking is the product of that process. Remarkably, however, even those who reject Scotus's own account of the way acts of thinking are produced (such as Ockham) come to embrace his view that acts of thinking are qualities. As will be shown later, that view makes the necessity to account for the relationship between a thought and its object particularly pressing. Since qualities are non-relative items, it is not immediately clear how they can be directed at something: unlike relations or relative items such

as passions and actions, a quality is not directed at anything. Indeed, it may well be the case that the view that intellectual acts (and cognitive acts in general) are qualities contributed to putting the issue of the relationship between thought and object at the center of philosophical attention in the later Middle Ages and beyond.

***Should the Union between Cognizer and Object Cognized  
be Accounted for by a Third Item?***

Reacting in particular against the view that cognitive acts are qualities, some thinkers come to suspect that any attempt to map cognitive acts against the Aristotelian list of categories might be fundamentally misguided, for the nature of cognitive events is such that any account in terms of the traditional ingredients of ontology misses the point. Their idea is that, in order to account for the occurrence of a cognitive act, it might be necessary to posit nothing else than a cognizer and an object of cognition. A cognitive act is nothing over and above the coming together of these two elements. Any attempt to account for the occurrence of this “coming together” in terms of the traditional ingredients of ontology is doomed to fail, because the *cognitive* nature of cognitive events sets them apart from any other kind of events. A decisive role in singling out cognitive events as *sui generis* seems to have been played by Henry of Ghent. In the course of his debate with Giles of Rome, Henry makes the point that what characterizes a cognitive event as cognitive is not the presence of a real feature in a cognizer (such as an action, a passion, or a quality). Rather, cognition occurs if and only if the object is present in the cognizer in a sense of “being in” which must be distinguished from the traditional Aristotelian way an accident is present in its subject, i.e. as inhering in and modifying its subject. That special way of being in a cognizer came to be called “objective” as opposed to the way an accident is present in its subject (Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.* IV.21: 339.107–108; Pini 2004; Rombeiro 2011). Interestingly, even those who reject Henry of Ghent’s account of cognition accept his point about the special character of cognitive events and the necessity of positing a special way of being in order to explain how objects of thought are in the intellect. So, an apple is red because a quality, redness, is present in the apple as one of its real modifications or accidents. But even those who (like Giles of Rome and Duns Scotus) argue against Henry of Ghent that the occurrence of a cognitive act does require the presence of some accident in the cognizer are willing to grant that this is not all that there is to cognition. Rather, what is essential to cognition is that the object is present in the cognizer “as an object of cognition.” A quality is required in the intellect only because an object cannot be present in the intellect *by itself* and so must be there by a proxy (Giles of Rome, *Quodl.* III.14: 172; *QDCA* I, f. 78ra; Duns Scotus, *Ord.* I.3.3.2, n. 500: 296–297). This way of singling out cognitive events from among other events makes it possible to distinguish what a cognitive act is (which essentially involves the objective presence of the object in the cognizer) from the way that act is implemented (which may indeed involve the presence of real qualities in the cognizer). Furthermore, this way of approaching cognition as a unique sort of event makes it possible to defend the somewhat extreme view that no real feature is required to account for the occurrence of a cognitive act in addition to a cognizer and an object (Durand, *QNC*: 18–19; Solère 2013: 188–189; Friedman forthcoming). So in the first decades of the fourteenth century, two views about the nature of cognitive acts confront each other. On the one hand, some hold that a cognitive act is something over and above a cognizer and its object. Take, for example, an intellectual act such as my act of thinking about apples. The idea is that in order to account for the occurrence of my act of thinking about apples, i.e. the cognitive union between my intellect and apples, a real item must be present in my intellect. That item is a cognitive act, which, by the time that debate develops, is usually identified with a quality. So the occurrence of a cognitive act is taken to involve two parallel stories: a real story concerning real qualities present in the cognizer as accidents are present in a subject and an intentional story



concerning the objects made present to a cognizer in a special way, i.e. as objects of cognition (e.g. Scotus, *Ord.* I.3.3.1, n. 382: 232–233). On the other hand, others claim that a cognitive act is nothing over and above the union of a cognizer and an object. No extra feature is required to account for their cognitive union, i.e. for the occurrence of a cognitive act: all there is to cognition is a subject able to cognize and an object able to be cognized. So take my intellect, on the one hand, and apples, on the other hand: my act of thinking about apples occurs just because my intellect is an intellect, i.e. a cognitive power, and apples are able to be thought about, i.e. intelligible objects. The latter view is put forward by Durand of Saint-Pourçain (see the references mentioned earlier). His claim that cognitive acts are relations between a cognizer and an object seems to be intended to capture the point that no extra feature is required to account for the occurrence of a cognitive act in addition to a cognitive power and its object. It appears that Durand's view had a remarkable influence even on thinkers who rejected the details of his position. Peter Auriol is a case in point. Auriol thinks that Durand is wrong in thinking that the object plays no causal role in the production of a cognitive act; Durand is also wrong in holding that it is not necessary to posit any real quality in the intellect in order to account for the occurrence of an act of thinking. So, from Auriol's point of view, Durand fails to give a persuasive account of the *production* of cognitive acts, i.e. how cognitive acts are brought about (Auriol, *In Sent.* I.35.1.1 in Friedman, forthcoming). But Auriol also thinks that an account of how cognitive acts are produced or brought about (which does involve a causal role played by the object and the presence of real qualities in the cognitive power) should be neatly distinguished from an account of what a cognitive act *is*. And with regard to the latter issue, Auriol seems to think that Durand gets it substantially right: a cognitive act is nothing over and above the presence of an object to a cognizer. That presence (which Auriol describes in terms of “apparent being,” i.e. something's appearing to a cognizer; Auriol, *In Sent.* I.28.1; Friedman 2015) is something characteristic of cognitive events, which cannot be accounted for in terms of real features modifying the cognizer. Accordingly, both Durand and Auriol stress the unique character of cognitive acts when compared to other kinds of events. What makes cognitive acts exceptional is that they are “vital” acts—a point already stressed by Henry of Ghent (Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.* XI.5: f. 451rT). A certain act's being “vital” sets it apart from other natural acts (Durand, *QNC*: 9–12; see also Olivi, *In Sent.* II.58: 479; James of Viterbo, *Quodl.* I.12: 166.302–309; Solère 2013: 195). This emphasis on vital powers as the carriers of cognition seems to have enjoyed a certain success (it can be found, for example, in Peter of Ailly, *In Sent.* I.2.1). This approach to cognitive acts has the undeniable appeal of simplifying the machinery required to account for the occurrence of cognitive acts: nothing in addition to a cognitive power (suitably disposed) and its object is required to explain cognition. Most or all of the “intermediary” devices that several thinkers posit to account for the presence of the object in the intellect can be eliminated, at least in principle. But this simplification comes at a cost. Cognitive acts now assume the character of something very special, which can be described but not really explained except by appealing to their being “vital,” i.e. an activity that comes from one of the agent's intrinsic principles (James of Viterbo, *Quodl.* I.12: 165; Solère 2013: 195). Why am I able to think about apples? On this view, it is ultimately because apples are present and because I am such that I am able to think. It is not clear whether this really says anything more than that I am able to think because I am able to think.

### ***What Links Cognitive Acts to Their Objects?***

A further controversial issue concerns the relationship between cognitive acts and their objects. It may be helpful to distinguish two questions. First, what accounts for a cognitive act's making an object cognized? In other words, how can cognitive acts be *directed at* or *about* anything at all? Second, what accounts for a cognitive act's making a *specific* object cognized? In other words, how can

a cognitive act be directed at or about a certain object rather than another, say apples rather than pears? (For the distinction between those two questions, see Brower and Brower-Toland 2008: 194.)

These two questions are answered in a variety of ways. Let us first consider some of the answers to the first question. Those who hold that cognitive acts are actions or passions have no difficulty to account for their being directed at something, because it is in the nature of actions and passions to be grounded in something (a certain feature in the agent or in the patient, respectively) and directed at a term (a certain feature in the patient or in the agent, respectively). So, for example, Godfrey of Fontaines and Thomas Aquinas consider sensory acts, such as an act of seeing, as passions whose origin is in the object cognized and whose term is in the cognizer (see above, in the section “What Is the Ontological Status of Acts of Thinking?”). Godfrey of Fontaines extends this account to acts of thinking, whereas Aquinas (at least in his later writings) holds a more complex view, according to which the term of an act of thinking is a concept but the act of thinking is not about that concept (Aquinas *SCG* I.53; Pini 2015: 87–88). Similarly, Olivi considers an act of seeing as an action whose origin is in the one who sees and whose term is in the object seen (Olivi, *In Sent.* II.72: 36). By contrast, those who hold that cognitive acts are qualities must provide a special account of how cognitive acts can be directed at something, because qualities are non-relative items and so do not ordinarily have a term. Scotus resorts to positing a relational feature as necessarily accompanying cognitive acts, and in particular acts of thinking. He actually holds that there are two relations between thought and object: one, which he calls “measurability” and is common to all cognitive acts, is supposed to account for a cognitive act’s explanatory dependence on its object; the another relation, which he calls a “relation of touching,” is supposed to account for the special way the so-called intuitive acts are related to their objects (Scotus, *Quodl.* 13, nn. 11–12; Cross 2014: 151–169; Pini 2015: 101–102). Ockham, who also holds that cognitive acts are qualities, seems to think that a cognitive act’s making an object cognized is a primitive fact, which can be described in terms of that act’s being a similitude and its being able to work as a sign of an object (Panaccio 2004: 119–133). Finally, those who hold that a cognitive act is nothing over and above the appropriate coming together of a cognizer and an object think that a cognitive act is directed at an object simply because it is a cognitive event, namely a particular kind of vital activity (Durand, *QNC*: 9–12; see Solère 2013: 195). So they think that a cognitive act’s being about something requires no special explanation apart from its being the act of a subject that is capable of cognizing.

If we now turn to the second question, i.e. what links a certain cognitive act to a certain object rather than to another one, it seems that most later medieval thinkers hold that it is the causal link between an object and a certain act that explains at least in part why that act is directed specifically at that object (it has been argued that this view cannot be attributed to Thomas Aquinas: Brower and Brower-Toland 2008, but elements of the causal account of intentionality can be found in many other thinkers, including Godfrey of Fontaines, Henry of Ghent, Ockham; see Panaccio 2004: 136–137; Pini 2011). Duns Scotus explicitly rejects the view that causality plays a role in linking a cognitive act to an object. Scotus’s argument is that God could create a cognitive act in me about, say, apples, and that act would be about apples, not about God (Scotus, *Ord.* I.3.3.2, nn. 477–478; Pini 2011). So Scotus relies on the relations of measurability and touching in order to account for the link between a certain act and a certain object (as well as for accounting for intentionality in general, as I have just indicated). In this context, measurability seems to play the key role. For example, a thought about apples is about apples because it is apples rather than pears that “measure” that act, i.e. it is apples rather than pears on which that act’s explanation depends. Finally, thinkers such as Olivi, James of Viterbo, and Durand, who deny that an object plays any efficiently causal role in the production of a cognitive act, account for the link between a certain act and its object in terms of *sine qua non* or equivalent quasi-causality exercised by that object, whatever that means (Olivi, *In Sent.* II.72: 17–18; James of Viterbo, *Quodl.* I.12: 171.501–174.595; Durand, *QNC*: 21; Solère 2013: 202–205; Hartman 2014: 244–254).

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