

Gyula Klima: Buridan on Substantial Unity and Substantial Concepts

Comments on Henrik Lagerlund: “John Buridan’s Empiricism and the Knowledge of Substances”

Henrik Lagerlund’s intriguing paper raises two major problems for Buridan: an epistemological one and an ontological one, the former of which is claimed by Henrik to be based on the latter. The *ontological problem* is whether on Buridan’s conception there can be *any* genuine identity over time of material substances (other than humans, who form a special case on account of their immaterial intellectual soul). The *epistemological problem* is whether the “toned down” identity assigned by Buridan to such material substances can serve as an ontological ground for the formation of absolute concepts about them, which on Buridan’s conception are required for us to be able to form essential predications, that is to say, universal, necessary propositions, providing us with scientific knowledge of these substances.

In these comments, I will first clarify these problems and offer some tentative solutions on Buridan’s behalf. But then I will also point out some other, perhaps, even tougher problems in Buridan’s account that Henrik only touched on.

Concerning the ontological problem of identity of material substances over time, we should keep in mind in the first place that contrary to our contemporary, Frege-Russell-informed intuitions, for medieval authors in general, and also for Buridan in particular, the concept of identity is derivative with regard to the more fundamental, transcendental concept of unity, which is convertible with the notion being, connoting indivision, that is, the lack of division.¹ On this approach, therefore, identity is but the unity of the things referred to by the terms flanking an identity claim. Since on Buridan’s “identity theory of predication” *all* our categorical claims are identity-claims, we should really appreciate the importance of being clear on the notion of unity, which on this conception grounds the truth of *all* our predications.

For Buridan, the notion of unity is primarily explicated by the Aristotelian formula: *unum est ens indivisum* – what is *one* thing is an undivided being. But then, since division comes in degrees, and so its lack comes in degrees, too, it is no wonder that unity and the derivative notion of identity come in degrees as well. In the passages quoted by Henrik, Buridan distinguishes three main types of identity, namely, *total*, *partial*, and *successive* identity.

When we are wondering about identity over time, as when we are wondering whether the thing that was Brunellus yesterday is the same as the thing that is Brunellus today, the question is whether the referents of the terms of such an identity claim are one and the same thing. In terms of Buridan’s distinction, those referents of the terms of such claims can be said to be *totally* identical that have no parts not in common (i.e., that have all parts in common, if they have parts

¹ Hoc nomen “unum” ab indivisione sumitur, ut patet quinto Metaphysicae, propter quod ibidem dicitur, quod quaecumque non habent divisionem in quantum non habent divisionem, ut sic “unum” dicuntur. Ideo hoc nomen “unum” est nomen privativum privative oppositum huic nomini “multa”, ut apparet decimo Metaphysicae. Modo nomen 'privativum' claudit in sua ratione nomen habitus sibi oppositum, cum negatione; ideo: aliquo modo significat vel connotat illud quod nomen habitus significat, et illud est extraneum ei de quo verificatur nomen privativum.' [...] Sed de isto termino „idem” ego dico, quod adhuc est magis connotativus quam iste terminus „unum”; et ideo “idem” dicitur passio „unius” et „unum” dicitur tamquam subiectum et fundamentum ipsius. Nam significatio huius termini “idem” praesupponit significationem „unius” et connotat ultra illam respectum, scilicet quod aliquid sit ad quod sit idem, et hoc est illudmet quod est idem ... QiPI, q. 11, pp. 171-172.

at all), those are *partially* identical that have only some parts (especially the greater and/or principal parts) in common, and those are *successively* identical that have no parts in common, but are related to each other by a continuous succession of parts.

But then, the question inevitably emerges: how can the last type of identity even be called identity at all, if the extremes of the corresponding identity claim refer to two totally distinct things, such as two totally distinct bodies of water, one of which is the body of water that was the Seine ten years ago, and the other is the body of water that is the Seine now?

I believe Buridan's answer may lie in the continuity of succession. For even if those two bodies of water are completely distinct, so that (calling the first A and the second B) no part of A is a part of B and *vice versa*, there is a *continuous succession of partially identical bodies of water* connecting A and B. So, even if A and B, considered synchronically, are discontinuous, the same bodies of water are *diachronically continuous* in the sense that between the time of A and the time of B there are times (quantifying over time intervals and not time-points, true to the spirit of Buridan's temporal logic) at which there is a body of water A' that is partially identical with A and a body of water B' that is partially identical with B, such that A' is partially identical with B'. However, in this or a similar way, the notion of successive identity may be reduced to the notion of a continuous succession of partial identities, and so, whoever is prepared to accept true predications of partial identity, should also be prepared to accept true predications of successive identity. To be sure, there is still an important difference between successive and partial identity as distinguished by Buridan: for successive identity is diachronic continuity *without the permanence of any single part*, whereas partial identity, as Buridan described it, is diachronic continuity *with the permanence of the greater or some principal part*.

But all this just goes to show that the three main types of identity distinguished by Buridan may admit even finer distinctions, as is testified by his use of comparatives all over the relevant passages, as for instance in his claim that *in the successive identity sense* we are able to say *even more* that Brunellus is numerically the same horse from his birth to his death than that the Seine has been the same river for a 1000 years. Consequently, I believe that it should make perfectly good sense for Buridan to claim that corresponding to, or rather grounding, these identity claims of different strengths, there are different degrees of unity exhibited by things of different natures: there is the absolutely absolute unity of God incompatible with any real division whatsoever, followed by the unity of angels, in which there is the division of substance and accident, as testified by their mutable will (see the fall of the Devil), followed by the unity of humans, having an immortal, permanent part, followed by synchronically continuous bodies, which, however, can have diachronically distinct stages, connected only through diachronically continuous parts, followed by processes (*res successivae*) which have *only* diachronically continuous parts, followed, finally, by synchronically discontinuous and also diachronically disconnected bodies, which are properly speaking not numerically one, but many, but can still be considered as forming a unit on account of their order, contiguity, or position (say, as an army, or a heap), or just on account of the mere consideration of the intellect, lumping these things together under some nominal conjunction or on a mere list, as we can do in set theory.

Now, given this conception of "the gradation of unity" (to give it a catchy name), it will make perfectly good sense to claim that even if Brunellus is not as strongly numerically one as a human being is, Brunellus is still more numerically one than is a river, and both are more numerically one than is a heap.

Well, then, so much for Henrik's *ontological problem*: on the basis of these considerations, I do not think he managed to establish that on Buridan's conception Brunellus can have no greater numerical unity than a heap.

The *epistemological problem* (whether we can have scientific knowledge of material objects), *immediately* based as it is on the *cognitive psychological problem* of whether we can form absolute concepts of material objects, may actually be quite independent from the *ontological problem*, despite Henrik's claim to the contrary. For although it is true that according to Buridan essential predications require absolute concepts and that his absolute concepts are supposed to be "rigid designators", nevertheless, is it also true that we cannot form such rigid designators of things that only have successive identity over time?

A rigid designator is one that designates the same individual in any possible situation in which the individual exists. But then, if we can truly say that numerically the same river has existed for a thousand years, even if it is not the same body of water, we can certainly give a name to that same entity that picks it out in any possible situation in which it exists, with no matter how weak unity and identity. For although the conditions of unity of a certain thing are *a matter of ontology*, nevertheless, if that one thing is identified on the basis of its ontologically appropriate conditions of unity, its rigid designation is merely *a matter of semantics*, namely, the matter of designating it without the connotation of any extrinsic, variable entity on account of the variation of which a connotative term would cease to designate it, even if that same entity (no matter *how weakly* the same entity) does not cease to exist. Therefore, as long as there is an entity with continued existence and unity, no matter how weak (which is a matter of ontology), we just need to designate it without some extrinsic connotation and then we have its rigid designation.

To be sure, this still leaves us with the cognitive psychological problem of how, if at all, we can get rid of these extrinsic connotations in forming our mental representations of material objects, given that all our mental contents derive from sensory experience, presenting to us substances only through their sensible accidents. In my paper Henrik referred to, I analyzed in detail Buridan's account of how the intellect is capable of forming absolute concepts in a process of abstraction, sorting out the confused, content rich information "streaming in" through the senses. Without going into further details, a crucial element of that account relevant here was Buridan's insistence that the senses do carry information about the substance itself bearing the sensible accidents that directly affect the senses. This is most telling in the following passage:

... The senses first perceive both substance and accident in a confused manner, and afterwards the intellect, which is a superior power, differentiates between substance and accident. Therefore, if I see someone now to be white and later I see him to be black, and *at the same time I perceive that he remains the same*, I arrive at the cognition by which I notice that this is other than whiteness and likewise other than blackness. And thus, although at first substance and accident are apprehended by means of the senses in a confused manner, the intellect, which is a superior power, can arrive at the cognition of substance itself.²

I believe the emphasized phrase is the key to Buridan's idea. As in my recent Buridan monograph I analyzed in more detail, *the sameness of the things undergoing change* in our perceptual field is part of the information we receive through the external senses and cognized

² QDA, lb. 1, q. 5 (prima lectura); cf. QiP, lb. 1, q. 4; QiP, lb. 1, q. 7, ff. 7vb-10ra; QDA, lb. 3, q. 8; QiPI, pp. 111-195, esp. pp. 172-173; and QM, lb. 7, qq. 15-20, ff. 50rb-54va.

already on the level of *common sense*.³ It is this information, abstracted from its confusion with information about the extrinsic sensible accidents of the thing, that is retained by the intellect forming its absolute concept of the thing that is perceived as permanent throughout its accidental change. As in a parallel passage Buridan remarks:

... I see not only whiteness, but something that is white, and then if I perceive *the same thing* to move and change from white to black, then I judge [by a sensory “judgment” of the common sense – GK] that this is something distinct from whiteness, and then the intellect naturally has the power to analyze that confusion, and to understand substance in abstraction from accident, and accident in abstraction from substance, and it can form a simple concept of each ...⁴

To be sure, the sameness or identity that is perceived by the common sense in this accidental change may be only *partial* or even merely *successive* identity, as when looking at the same river I perceive its changing patterns of ripples and colors as it reflects the changing color of the sky; but throughout all these changes I perceive it as *the same river* undergoing all these accidental changes. So, again, given this permanence of *the same substance*, no matter how weak its permanence is, I may be able to form a mental representation of it that abstracts from all its external features, and which therefore represents it absolutely and thus rigidly, without the connotation of these variable extrinsic features.

Well, at least, perhaps, this is what Buridan might say in response to the two main problems raised by Henrik. But he may still have a tough time responding to some other problems Henrik only touched on (and the problem of the aspectuality of abstracted concepts I raised in my book).

In closing, here I only want to reflect briefly on one problem Henrik only touched on, but of which I think Buridan would have a tough time ridding himself. The problem is that although we are able to form an absolute concept of, say, a horse, we apparently have another, connotative concept of it as well, namely, the one that connotes the integrity of the whole horse, which is what we utilize when are unwilling to say that the leg of a horse is a horse.

In the difficult argumentation of question seven of the second book of Buridan’s *Questions on the Soul*, however, he argues that using the proper, absolute concept of horse, we *have to* swallow the counterintuitive conclusion that the ear or the leg of a horse is a horse. But then, he raises the question: how come we are so reluctant to accept this conclusion? His answer is that, as a rule, we tend to use the term ‘horse’ as subordinated not to the proper absolute concept of a horse, but rather to a connotative concept, connoting the integrity of the whole horse. In fact, perhaps, we might properly express that concept by using this hyphenated term: ‘whole-horse’. Thus, when we say that the leg of a horse is not a horse, what we *really* mean is that the leg of a horse is not a whole-horse. Fine, this answers the question, but raises a whole lot of further questions, such as the following: if the absolute concept equally applies to horses and horse parts, could we acquire it from experiencing, say, horse legs only? Again, if we normally use the term ‘horse’ as subordinated to the concept of ‘whole-horse’, then how can we regard the term ‘horse’ as a species, representing a natural kind? On the other hand, if it does represent a natural kind, then what are the individuals of this natural kind, horses and horse-parts as well? At this point, I do not have Buridan’s answers to these questions.

³ Klima, *John Buridan*, Oxford, 2009, pp. 99-103.

⁴ QiP, lb. 1, q. 4