Mental Representations and Concepts in Medieval Philosophy

Introduction

Talking about ‘Mental Representations and Concepts in Medieval Philosophy’, one should probably start with clarifying these terms in the way medieval philosophers used and understood them. However, the phrase ‘repraesentatio mentalis’ is rarely, if ever, used by medieval philosophers: ‘mental representation’ is rather a term of art of modern philosophy of mind. Furthermore, although the term ‘conceptus’ is widely used by medieval philosophers, its meaning and reference seem to vary widely among them, depending on their particular theories. Indeed, to complicate matters, many authors would use other terms, such as ‘intentio’, ‘intellectus’, ‘notitia’, or even ‘ratio’ or ‘verbum mentis’, let alone ‘fictum’ or ‘idolum mentis’ on the one hand, or ‘intellectio’, on the other, to designate what we would want to name ‘concept’ and what other (or even the same) medieval authors would also be willing to call ‘conceptus’.

So, having in this way successfully muddied the terminological waters, I should probably first clarify what I will mean by the English terms in the proposed title, and explain my understanding of the relevant Latin phrases as used by various medieval authors in relation to this meaning.

By talking about a ‘mental representation’ in contemporary philosophy, we usually want to refer to something that represents something to a human cognitive subject as an integral part of the cognitive process of this subject. However, in the first place, using this phrase in relation to medieval philosophy, it will be useful to restrict its usage, in accordance with the medieval understanding of what constitutes mental phenomena, to intellectual, as opposed to sensory, representations. So, throughout this paper, when I am talking about mental representations, I will mean representations that present something to us through our understanding, to the exclusion of sensory representations. In the second place, it should be noted that in the foregoing description of a mental representation as something that represents something to a human cognitive subject as an integral part of the cognitive process of this subject, the addition of this qualification is necessitated by the fact that, for example, a book I am reading is something that represents something to my understanding, but still we would not call the book, the physical object in my hand, a mental representation. By contrast, whatever I am intellectually conceiving of on account of reading the book, insofar as I am conceiving it, is an integral part of my cognitive process.

And since I have just mentioned the act of conceiving, I can at once describe what I will mean by the term ‘concept’ in this paper: a concept is either that which we can intellectually conceive, insofar as it is conceived, or that by which we conceive whatever it is we conceive. The significance of this disjunctive characterization is that both medieval and contemporary authors tend to use the term ‘concept’ either as referring to the direct object of the verb ‘conceive’, i.e., as referring to that which is conceived, or to an indirect object that is somehow instrumental in conceiving the direct object, as that by which the direct object is conceived.

Obviously, these are not strict definitions, but rather somewhat vague characterizations of how I am going to use these terms in this paper. Still, from these characterizations it might at once appear that concepts are just some sort of mental representations and mental representations are just some sort of concepts. At any rate, I hope these characterizations are clear enough to answer an important question concerning the relationship between concepts and mental representations,
which will immediately take us to some intriguing medieval distinctions concerning both: Are all concepts mental representations and, vice versa, are all mental representations concepts?

The answer, perhaps, somewhat surprisingly, is ‘no’ on both counts. In the first place, those medieval philosophers or theologians who contrasted intelligible species with concepts, most notably, but not exclusively, Aquinas and his followers, would take intelligible species to be mental representations in the sense described above, but still, they would sharply distinguish them from concepts. In the second place, Ockhamist nominalist philosophers would characterize certain concepts in a way that would not allow them to be regarded as mental representations in the sense described: in particular, syncategorematic concepts according to these philosophers would be non-representative in themselves, but rather merely co-representative with other, categorematic concepts.¹

Now, whatever we may think of these answers at this point, they clearly demand a clarification of how one should identify and distinguish the items referred to here, such as intelligible species, concepts, and their various kinds. Thus, first of all, we need to delve a little bit into the ontology of mental representations and concepts: just what sorts of entities are they; well, if they are any sort of entities in the strict sense at all?

The Ontology of Concepts

Based on the foregoing, the answer depends on what sorts of concepts and mental representations we are referring to. For if we are referring to any sort of inherent mental representations, whether intelligible species or concepts, and whether per se representing (categorematic) concepts or per se non-representing (syncategorematic) concepts, as those features of individual human minds by which these minds come to have some intellectual cognition of some things somehow, then we can say that they are regarded by medieval philosophers as individualized accidents (or modes) of these minds. On the other hand, if we are talking about concepts as the immediate objects represented by such features of the minds, then they are taken by some medievals to be mere beings of reason, not entities in any real category. However, if we are talking about the ultimate objects of these mental acts insofar as they are denominated ‘concepts’ from their being represented by these inherent features of the human mind, then these ultimate objects may be real entities to be classified in their respective real categories, whether as substances or as accidents.

To illustrate this somewhat strange scenario, we may first turn to a rather late description of what sorts of concepts we need to distinguish in this regard, coming from Francisco Suarez (1548-1617):

We must first of all assume the common distinction between a formal and an objective concept. A formal concept is said to be the act itself, or (which is the same) the word [verbum] whereby the intellect conceives some thing or common definition [ratio], which is called a concept because it is, as it were, the offspring of the mind. It is called “formal” either because it is the ultimate form of the mind, or because it represents formally to the mind the thing that is known, or because it really is the intrinsic and formal term of the mental conception, thus differing from an objective concept, as I shall now explain. An objective concept is said to be the thing, or notion [ratio] which is strictly and immediately known or represented by means of the formal concept. For example,
when we conceive of man, that act which we perform in the mind in order to conceive of man is called a formal concept; but the man thus known and represented by that act is called the objective concept. As a concept, it is so called through a denomination that is extrinsic to the formal concept through which its object is said to be conceived; and hence it is rightly called "objective." For it is not a concept in the sense of a form intrinsically determining a conception, but in the sense of the object and subject matter round which the formal concept is deployed, and to which the mind's eye directly moves; in view of which it is called by some, following Averroes, the intention formed by the intellect, and by others the objective relation. From this we may gather the difference between the formal and objective concept, namely that the formal concept is always a true and positive thing, and a quality in created things inhering in the mind; but an objective concept is not always a true positive thing. For we conceive from time to time of privations and other items which are called "entities of reason," which have being only objectively in the intellect. Again, the formal concept is always a singular and individual thing, since it is a thing produced through the intellect and inhering in it; but an objective concept can indeed sometimes be a singular and individual thing, insofar as it can be presented to the mind and conceived by a formal act, but often it is something universal, or confused and common, such as "man," "substance," and so on.²

Somewhat earlier, Aquinas' famous commentator, Thomas de Vio Cajetan (1469-1534), made the same distinction, being quite aware of the fact that that the way his authorities talk about concepts necessitates this distinction:

For an understanding of the terms, note that there are two sorts of concepts: formal and objective. A formal concept is some likeness which the possible intellect forms in itself and is objectively representative of the thing. Philosophers call it an intention or a concept and theologians call it a word. An objective concept, however, is that which, represented by the formal concept, terminates the act of knowing. For example, the formal concept of lion is that representation which the possible intellect forms of a leonine quiddity when we want to know it; the objective concept of the same thing is the leonine nature itself, represented and known. Nor should we think that when a term is said to signify a concept, that it signifies only one of the two, for the term lion signifies both concepts, although in diverse ways. It is the sign of the formal concept as a means or that-by-which [it signifies], and it is the sign of the objective concept as of the end or that-which [it signifies].³

But lest we think this distinction is a late-medieval invention, we might quote here Aquinas' student, Armandus de Bellovisu (d. ca. 1334), who discusses a distinction concerning the term ratio⁴ that is quite the same, if not in terminology, at least in spirit, and which is, in fact, just a further elaboration of what we can find in Aquinas' own Responsio ad fr. Joannem Vercellensem.⁵ And of course one might dig even further for precursors of this distinction under different terminologies in the early medieval or even the late ancient period. However, even without doing so here, one can quite confidently say that even if the terminology of the distinction between formal and objective concepts seems to have solidified in late-medieval philosophy, it was merely the acknowledgement and further elaboration of a distinction.

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⁴ Armandi de Bellovisu, Explicationes Terminorum, Theologicorum, Philosophicorum et Logicorum, Wittebergae, Typis Johannis Haken, 1623, cc. 208-209, pp. 386-390.
⁵ Responsio ad fr. Joannem Vercellensem, Generalem Magistrum Ordinis Praedicatorum, de articulis CVIII ex opere Petri de Tarentasia
entrenched much earlier in medieval thought about concepts. And the reason for this seems to be that, in general, any theory of concepts that characterizes concepts not only as inherent mental qualities, but also as what we may call the information content carried by these mental qualities, has to introduce this distinction, namely, the distinction between formal concepts, the inherent mental qualities by which this information is represented, and objective concepts, the immediate, direct objects of these formal concepts, the information content precisely as conceived and represented by these concepts about their ultimate objects.

Note, for instance, in Cajetan’s example above that the objective concept signified by the term ‘lion’ is not any individual lion (although, of course Cajetan holds that the term, on account of signifying this concept, applies to individual lions), but rather leonine nature in general, conceived in abstraction from any individuating conditions, which is precisely the reason why ultimately it represents all possible lions. So, the objective concept of lions is just whatever we conceive by means of our formal concepts about leonine nature in general, which, however, is still not any individual lion, but rather the information the formal concept carries about lions in general, expressing the universal condition for something’s qualifying as a lion (whether this information actually provides operative distinguishing criteria or not, which is a further issue). But just because we can conceive of leonine nature in general in an abstract universal manner, it does not mean that there is an abstract, universal leonine nature in general that we can conceive of; in the same way as just because we can talk about a person in particular, using his proper name, or in general, providing a general description, it does not mean that we are talking once about a particular person, once about a general person; for there is no such a thing as a general person. So, if the objective concept is just the nature of individuals falling under this concept conceived in general, and what is thus conceived is neither the formal concept by which it is conceived, nor the individualized natures of the individuals that this objective concept is some general information about, nor any other really existing individual thing, then it has to be placed in a separate category of its own.

Accordingly, objective concepts, especially, objective, universal categorematic concepts, were found by authors providing this sort of analysis of their function to be lingering in a separate ontological realm of beings of reason, i.e., a realm of some “quasi-entities”, whose esse may consist in nothing but their being conceived or represented by the formal concepts, being the immediate, direct objects of formal concepts in mere esse obiectivo, although, perhaps, not lacking some “foundation in reality”, namely, the individualized natures of individuals that the formal concept carries this general information about.

To be sure, the immediate objects of our formal concepts were also accorded some mind-independent form of unity, namely, some less-than-numerical unity, by thinkers such as Scotus or Burleigh and their ilk. However, from our present perspective, this is just a further complication of the ontological picture (introducing certain further, perhaps “weird” modes of unity and being), leaving the relations of formal concepts and their immediate and ultimate objects basically unchanged.6

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6 See Cajetan’s excellent discussion of the issue of formal unity on pp. 148-150, preparing the detailed criticism of Scotus’ conception of universals in q. 8, pp. 164-173, of his commentary on DEE. For an earlier Thomistic reaction to Scotus, it is very instructive to check Thomas Sutton. For the finer details of Burleigh, see Conti, Alessandro, “Walter Burley”, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/burley/>
Given the ontological worries such conceptions naturally raise, no wonder there were several attempts to eliminate these quasi-entities. These ontological worries were most famously raised and resolved by William Ockham and the nominalist tradition engendered by his work. However, since the “nominalist resolution” of these ontological issues was done in terms of logical analysis, this consideration takes us from the issue of the ontology of concepts to their logic, or more specifically, their logical semantics.

The Semantics of Concepts

As is well-known, originally even Ockham subscribed to a theory of concepts involving entities in mere objective being, namely, the so-called ficta, only to be rejected by him later, partly persuaded by his confrere, Walter Chatton. However, despite this apparent ontological agreement, even already in his “fictum-period”, Ockham seems to have had a conception of the semantics of concepts rather different from what we see in the writings of the authors mentioned earlier who endorsed concepts in mere objective being.

Therefore, since the role of Ockham’s mature conception of concepts in his ontological program has been analyzed in great detail in the contemporary literature, especially by Claude Panaccio in his excellent monograph devoted to the topic, and I have done the same concerning Buridan in my monograph published last year, instead of going into those details here, I would rather make a brief, general contrast between the role of concepts in logical semantics according to the nominalists and that according to their realist counterparts.

The point of the contrast is that the decisive issue between nominalists and realists in this regard is not so much ontology as the semantic function they would attribute to concepts in their respective theories. This is a contrast anybody who ever compared nominalist and realist authors writing on these issues feels there is, but which is rather hard to articulate without conflating it with the different, but I would argue merely coincidental contrast between their ontologies. So, first, by way of a preliminary, rough indication, I would say that what I take to be the main contrast here is that realists would endorse a view of concepts according to which they feature in logical semantics with their intensions, whereas nominalists would endorse a view according to which it is sufficient to take them into account in logical theory with their extensions.

Obviously, the terminology of “extension” and “intension” is borrowed from modern logical theory, and so ought to be used and understood with caution, indeed, with implicit quotation marks throughout the subsequent discussion. However, I think the transposition of this terminology from modern theories to medieval theories to characterize the distinction I am trying to make is not entirely unjustified, if we understand by the intension of a formal concept nothing but the corresponding objective concept, in line with the characterization of objective concepts I provided above in connection with Cajetan, and by the extension of a formal concept we understand all entities that the formal concept carries the information expressed by the objective concept about. For in the foregoing characterization of objective concepts, I said that they express some universal condition of applicability of the formal concept (and so of the linguistic

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7 Ordinatio, d. 2, q. 8, pp. 271-4.
expression signifying it) to their ultimate objects, which squares quite neatly with the contemporary intuitive understanding of the *intension of a term*. And of course it is customary to understand by the *extension* of a term all things that satisfy its intension.

Perhaps, a further justification for this usage may be taken from the following, rather difficult passage from Cajetan, in which he discusses Aquinas’ remark that the concepts of the species and definition are somehow composed of the concepts of genus and difference:

> What we have said here, that the formal concept, namely, of species and definition, is composed from the formal concepts of genus and difference, can be understood in two ways: in one way, as concerning the mental concept; in another way, as concerning the objective concept taken formally. If taken in the first way, it can again be understood in two ways. In one way of the subjective being (esse) of the mental concept, or as what it is; in another way of its representative being (esse). The mental concept of species, according to what it is, is not composed from the mental concepts of genus and difference according to what they are, because they are all simple qualities, and cannot be distinguished into many constituent parts. For we must not imagine that when the intellect forms the concept of the definition of man, namely, of rational animal, that it forms many concepts; it forms only one, which is a kind of simple quality, and distinctly represents the singular parts, just as in things outside the mind, the thing defined has [what is signified in it by] the genus and the difference without a real composition. Thus, understood in this first way our statement is not true. Now the mental concept of species taken formally according to its representative being (esse) is composed of the mental concepts of genus and difference taken formally according to their representative being (esse), like an image which represents the whole by images of the parts. For man, existing in the mind, represents an aggregate of sensitive and intellectual perfections; while animal, existing in the mind, formally represents only the perfection of sense, and rational only the perfection of intellect. Then in this way our statement is verified. However, the objective concept of the species, since taken formally it is nothing but the formal significate of its mental concept, is of its very nature composed from the objective concepts of genus and difference taken formally; just as the formal significate of the species is of its very nature composed from the formal signifiata of genus and difference, as was shown above.¹⁰ Thus when man is taken as the object of its specific mental concept, man is neither animal nor rational, but is composed from animal and rational, taking also animal and rational as the objects of their mental concepts. This is shown by the falsity of the proposition: *the specific formal object is the generic or differentiating formal object*. For man as such means something which is an aggregate of sensitive and intellectual perfection; animal as such means only one part of the aggregate, namely, the sensitive nature; rational as such means only the other part, namely, the intellectual perfection. But it is clear that the aggregate is not one of the aggregating elements. Thus, understood in this way, our statement contains truth and is perfectly to the point.¹¹

There are a number of important lessons to be drawn from this passage (and from several related passages that cannot be quoted here). In the first place, we should observe that although working out the details of a conception of mental language as constituting a compositional representational system of the human mind was the primary concern of nominalists (obviously motivated by the demands of their ontological program), the “realist” Cajetan here also addresses the issue of conceptual composition, which is one of the main requisites (indeed, I’d say, the chief requisite) for a conception of mental language. In the second place, in discussing conceptual composition, he rejects the idea that it would consist in forming some sort of aggregates of simple formal concepts: conceptual composition is not some process of putting together simple entities into a complex entity having the former as its integral parts. The formal concept expressing the quidditative definition of man is ontologically just as simple, a simple quality of the human mind, as are its “components”. So, composition is rather a “functional composition”, in the sense that the representational content of the complex concept is a

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¹⁰ Here I had to change the translation significantly, changing the punctuation of the Latin text on which the translation is based, to make sense of this sentence: the comma after ‘formale’ has to be moved after ‘eiusdem’.

¹¹ Cajetan, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-123. (significantly revised)
function of the representational contents of the simple concepts, without those concepts entering into its ontological make-up. That is to say, conceptual composition is done on the level of objective concepts considered formally, insofar as they are the expressed information contents of the formal concepts. Finally, and perhaps this is the most important from our present point of view, both the simple objective concepts and the complex objective concept specify the conditions of the applicability of the term signifying them, as it were, “making” these terms ultimately signify the “truth-makers” of their true predication of any individual (just as intensions in modern logic do).

In the logical-semantic tradition represented by Cajetan, what applies in this passage to complex mental terms, such as the quidditative definitions considered here, also applies to mental propositions resulting from the composition of mental terms by means of syncategorematic concepts, especially, the copula.12 The resulting mental propositions, i.e., simple qualities of the mind functionally dependent for their representational content on the representational contents of their “components”, have as their direct objects some propositional states of affairs, variously referred to as dicta, enuntiabilia, complexe significabilia, or real propositions. To be sure, the actual presence of such a propositional state affairs, being the actual, immediate truth-maker of the entire proposition, is ultimately conditioned on the ways things ultimately signified by its terms are. But what specifies which state of affairs must obtain for this proposition to be true and, in turn, what ultimate extramental conditions are required for this state of affairs to obtain is the composition of the simple concepts signified by the parts of the proposition in question.

For Burley, for instance, the extramental condition for the existence of a real proposition signified by an affirmative spoken proposition is the co-supposition of the terms of the latter. But this co-supposition is secured by the coincidence of the forms ultimately signified by its subject and predicate in their supposita. However, the forms signified by subject and predicate coinciding in these supposita are nothing but the direct objects of the mental concepts of the mind forming the mental proposition that has the real proposition as its direct and immediate object.13 So, in the end, the truth-conditions of a proposition are determined by the intensions of the predicates, determining, in turn, the intension of the proposition. But less elaborate remarks indicate the presence of the same idea already in Aquinas, for instance, in passages where he explains the identity of the supposita of terms required for the truth of an affirmative proposition by the coincidence of the forms signified by its terms in the same supposita, which grounds the actuality of the enuntiabile signified by the whole proposition, identified on the basis of the composition of the concepts having these forms as their direct objects.14 Therefore, if the task of a logical semantics is to provide a compositional specification of the truth-conditions of propositions in order to be able to provide a semantic definition of validity, then we may say that Cajetan’s remarks here indicate that in the logical-semantic tradition represented by him, formal concepts were supposed to exercise their semantic functions by combining their intensions in determining the conditions of their true applicability to items of reality.

By contrast, the information content or intension of mental concepts does not have this logical role for Ockham and the nominalist tradition he initiated. Indeed, one may surmise that the reason why he had no qualms over giving up his ficta was precisely that he had no use for them in his logic. As is well-known, what determines the truth-conditions of assertoric categorical propositions for Ockham is the co-supposition of their terms, which in turn is determined by the emptiness or non-emptiness of the intersection of the sets of their ultimate significata (relative to the time connoted by the copula). And the ultimate significata of these terms are nothing but the individuals represented by the concepts to which these terms are subordinated.


13 See again Conti, esp. sect. 5.

However, and this is the crucial point here, the information content of these concepts has no role in determining the sets of these ultimate significata, in particular, it has no role in specifying the conditions for the true applicability of these concepts and the terms subordinated to them to individuals; and so, if the set of the ultimate significata of these terms can be called their extension, it has no role in determining the extension of these concepts. Indeed, for Ockham, the information content of a mental concept, whether it is “reified” by positing a fictum expressed by this concept or not, has nothing to do with the determination of its extension, which is determined simply by the natural causal mechanism of concept formation. In short, for Ockham, the intensions of mental concepts do not determine their extensions, and so they do not figure in specifying the truth conditions of the mental propositions resulting from their composition.

Thus, we may say that while the realist logical-semantic tradition, despite all the differences among individual authors in finer, metaphysical details, is rather unanimous in endorsing a characterization of concepts that grounds an intensional logical semantics, the nominalist tradition stemming from Ockham’s work abandons this characterization, endorsing a conception of concepts that grounds an extensionalist logical semantics.  

But then the question naturally arises: what is the role the information content of concepts for Ockham, if any? The answer to this question, however, leads us from the issue of the logic of concepts to the issue of their psychology and epistemology.

The Psychology and Epistemology of Concepts

In a recent, very soon to be published paper, Claude Panaccio has argued that for Ockham this information content is but “a perceptual schema”, helping the cognitive subject in recognizing members of the extension of a concept, but this perceptual schema does in no way determine this extension.  

In fact, if we take a careful look at how Ockham characterizes his ficta, we can say that even those may be just some “quasi-reified” items somehow embodying the descriptive content of a categorematic concept in the form of a non-distinctive mental image, which is therefore capable of indifferently representing a number of sufficiently similar individuals to the cognitive subject. So, for Ockham, a fictum seems to be just a sort of psychological factor explaining (1) why our universal terms can apply to several individuals, or (2) what the quasi-objects of our awareness are when we are not considering any really existing object. However, once he realized that (1) he could attribute this indifferent mode of representation to the mental acts themselves and (2) that he could explain away nonexistent objects with reference to the representational features of complex mental acts without having to bother about spelling out their descriptive content for the purposes of his logic, he happily cut them out from his ontology.

In any case, if ficta are just the “quasi-reified perceptual recognition schemata” of our universal mental concepts accounting for their indifferent representation, then, despite being posited in

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16 Panaccio, C. “Ockham’s Externalism”, in Intentionality, Cognition and Mental Representation in Medieval Philosophy, Fordham University Press

17 Besides universal representation, the other main motivation for acknowledging objects in mere objective being was the problem of accounting for non-existent objects of thought (which for “moderate realists” such as Aquinas also included universals). But I simply do not have the space to pursue this line of thought here.

18 Note that this is a radically different interpretation of ficta from that provided by Stephen Read, assimilating ficta to Frege’s (objective) concepts. See Read, S. L., 1977, “The Objective Being of Ockham's Ficta”, The Philosophical Quarterly, 27, pp. 14-31.
the same realm, they have nothing to do with the objective concepts we encountered in Cajetan and the “realist” tradition he represents. For on this interpretation, ficta would be just these psychological factors, with no role in logic, whereas the objective concepts of the “realists” are the par excellence subject matter of logic. But whatever may be the case with ficta, the “perceptual schemata” of Ockham’s intellective mental acts have certainly no role in his logic.

So, in conclusion, I would like to argue that with Ockham and his followers, there really is a big, “paradigmatic” shift in the conception of concepts, but perhaps not quite the kind commentators usually recognize. If I may be allowed to introduce one more piece of barbaric terminology, I would say that that this “big shift” consists in the separation of what I would call the phenomenal and semantic contents of concepts, leading to a reinterpretation of their conditions of identity, which would then yield some serious epistemological implications.

Talking about the identity-conditions of concepts, more specifically, of formal, mental concepts or mental acts, we need to take into account that they are two-faced entities. Insofar as they are real entities inherent in real, individual human minds, they have their own ontological characteristics distinguishing them in kind and number, just as any other real entities do. But insofar as they are representations, they have representational characteristics, specifiable in terms of what they represent, how, and to whom. Exactly what and how they represent, whether their subject is actually aware of this or not, is what I would call their semantic content. (In case this is doubtful, of course, we can have all sorts of representations in our cognitive apparatus that objectively represent something, but of which we are actually unaware, ranging from unnoticed sights to suppressed memories to future singulæ our universal concepts represent without our being quite aware of them.) But what I would call the phenomenal content of our concepts is precisely what they make us aware of or what their represented objects appear to us as, on account of having these concepts; or, in short, the phenomenal content of a concept is the content of our consciousness we have on account of entertaining that concept.

Accepting Claude Panaccio’s intriguing suggestion about Ockham leads then to the conclusion that for Ockham, the phenomenal content of a simple catègorematic concept may on occasion radically mismatch its semantic content. Its semantic content is simply its extension: the set of its significata (and connotata, as the case may be, provided there are simple connotative concepts, as Panaccio also contends). But what these significata appear to the subject having these concepts as, i.e., what the subject becomes aware of on account of entertaining this concept, is but the “perceptual recognition schema” of this concept, the descriptive characteristics on the basis of which we would normally identify individuals as falling under this concept. However, since these characteristics are just sensible accidents of this kind of objects, and so objects of this kind may not exhibit them, whereas objects of another kind may, we can, and often do, misclassify objects on the basis of their appearances, i.e., we are deceived. To be sure, this need not lead to skepticism; after all, under normal circumstances we have sufficiently reliable procedures to correct mistakes of this sort. And this is not even the point here. The point rather is that the mere possibility of this mismatch radically distinguishes Ockham’s and his followers’ theory of concepts from the tradition represented here by Cajetan, quite independently from ontological considerations concerning the “mysterious” esse obiectivum of whether objective concepts or ficta.

For if we go back to Cajetan’s characterization of objective concepts, as the direct, immediate objects of our formal concepts, we can see that these are the essential natures of the individuals falling under these concepts conceived of in abstraction from their individuating conditions. The
phenomenal appearance of these individuals does not even figure into the specification of the objective concept. Thus, the objective concept, being at the same time the intension of the formal concept accounting for its objective applicability to the individuals that have the natures represented by it and that item on account of which we are aware of this nature, is both the semantic and the phenomenal content of the same formal concept. Therefore, on this conception, the semantic and phenomenal contents of a formal concept, being the same, are inseparable; indeed, so much so that the item in which they coincide, namely, the objective concept, is precisely the characteristic of a formal concept in terms of which it is identified and distinguished from others, rather than its ontological, real properties, whatever those are. So, to make the contrast even sharper, we may say that while for Ockham the phenomenal content of a concept is just a somewhat vague snapshot of the typical sensible characteristics of an individual of a certain kind (whether this snapshot is “projected” into a fictum or not), whereas its semantic content is the individual’s kind, for Cajetan and his ilk, both the phenomenal and the semantic contents of a formal concept are the objective concept, representing the information encoded by the formal concept about the nature of individuals falling under this concept, identifying this concept as opposed to any other.

Now, aside from usual ontological worries about objective being and universals, objective concepts and in general any “intermediaries” between cognitive acts and their ultimate objects tend to be rejected for the epistemological reason that the “representationalism” embodied in positing such intermediary representations has to lead to skepticism, as opposed to the “direct realism” that eliminates such intermediaries. In fact, already Walter Chatton used this sort of argument against Henry of Harclay and Peter Aureol, which then Ockham picked up in his later theory of concepts as a justification for abandoning his own ficta.19 However, as I have argued on numerous occasions,20 the kind of representationalism which posits intermediaries that are part and parcel of the identity conditions of formal concepts through specifying what is both their phenomenal and semantic content (i.e., their intension) is not susceptible to these skeptical worries, whereas quite paradoxically, the kind of direct realism which allows a merely contingent relationship between formal concepts (along with their phenomenal content, i.e., their intension) and their semantic content (i.e., their extension) is susceptible at least to the possibility of the kind of radical skepticism we find cropping up in late-medieval considerations about a possibly deceptive God, which would eventually turn into the starting point of an entirely new epistemological program in Descartes’ Demon.
