

The Essentialist Nominalism of John Buridan¹

Introduction: the problem of “essentialist nominalism”

To many contemporary philosophers, the phrase “essentialist nominalism” may appear to be an oxymoron. After all, essentialism is the doctrine that things come in natural kinds characterized by their essential properties, on account of some common nature or essence they share. But nominalism is precisely the denial of the existence, indeed, the very possibility of such shared essences. Nevertheless, despite the intuitions of such contemporary philosophers,² John Buridan was not only a thoroughgoing nominalist, as is well-known, but also a staunch defender of a strong essentialist doctrine against certain skeptics of his time. But then the question inevitably arises: could he consistently maintain such a doctrine?

In the following discussion I will first examine Buridan’s essentialism to show why he could reasonably think that he can both adhere to his nominalist metaphysics and endorse a version of essentialism that can serve as the foundation of genuine scientific knowledge in the strong Aristotelian sense.

In the subsequent section I will argue that on the basis of his logical theory of essential predication Buridan is definitely able to maintain a version of essentialism that is sufficient to provide the required foundation of valid scientific generalizations, and to refute skeptical doubts against the possibility of such a foundation.

Next, I will examine the question whether Buridan’s solution is consistent with the broader context of his logic and epistemology. In this section I will argue that although Buridan’s logical theory is consistent with his nominalist essentialist position, his cognitive psychology is not. In particular, I will argue that Buridan’s abstractionist

¹ This paper develops the argument of an earlier paper of mine: “John Buridan on the Acquisition of Simple Substantial Concepts”, to be published in Ebbesen, S. – Friedman, R.: *John Buridan and Beyond*, Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 2004. I am grateful to the editors for their permission to draw on the material of that paper in the present paper in order to make the latter self-contained. Earlier drafts of this paper were presented in the Philosophy Colloquia of UCLA, Boise State, and Fordham Universities. I am grateful to the audiences for interesting discussions and perceptive comments. Research for this paper was supported by an ACLS Fellowship and a Fordham Faculty Fellowship exempting me from teaching duties during the academic year 2002/2003.

² Cf. “... Buridan was a committed Nominalist. He was, in other words, on the philosophically wrong side of the major metaphysical controversy of the Middle Ages. Like Ockham, he believed there were no universals: strictly speaking, no colours, only coloured things; no virtue, only virtuous people; no circularity, only individual circles. The rest was all just hot air (*flatus vocis*). The Nominalists ended up poisoning the well of sound philosophy with scepticism, relativism, agnosticism and even atheism. Fortunately, Realism was not sent to rout and has many exponents in present-day analytic philosophy.” David S. Oderberg, “Review of John Buridan: *Summulae de Dialectica*”, *Times Literary Supplement*, June 6, 2003, p. 9.

account of how we acquire our simple substantial concepts is incompatible with his account of the semantic function of absolute terms subordinated to these concepts.

Finally, I will draw some general conclusions from this discussion concerning the relationships between metaphysical essentialism and the philosophy of mind and language.

“Predicate-essentialism” without “realist essentialism”

If we want to maintain that Buridan was both an essentialist and a nominalist, as we certainly should, then we have to do what we normally do when ascribe two apparently incompatible attributes to the same thing. We have to provide such explanations of the intended meanings of the attributes in question that show them to be in fact compatible, but, at the same time, we should also be able to show that these intended meanings are not just *ad hoc*, twisted interpretations, but are genuinely in line with common, proper usage.

So what do we mean, precisely, when we say that Buridan was an essentialist? When we call someone an essentialist, we usually mean at least one of two things: 1. the person we call an essentialist is committed to attributing *essential predicates* to things, or 2. the person is committed to attributing some common, *shared essences* to things. Let me call the first version of essentialism *predicate essentialism*, and the second *realist essentialism*. Clearly, with this distinction at hand we should be able to provide a coherent interpretation of calling someone a “nominalist essentialist” in the sense that the person in question is a *predicate essentialist*, while not a *realist essentialist*, since his nominalism consists in the denial of there being shared essences, but not in the denial of there being essential predicates.

However, obviously, this simple “word magic” can do the job only if we are able to show that what I call here *predicate essentialism* is compatible with the denial of *realist essentialism*. In any case, my first contention is that this is precisely what Buridan is trying to pull off: one of the basic aims of his philosophy of language and metaphysics is to show that he can be a staunch nominalist in denying real essences to things in the way realists conceive of them,³ yet, at the same time he can attribute scientifically knowable essential predicates to things.

³ Note that Buridan’s opposition to what I call “realism” here also covers various forms of what might more properly be called “moderate realism”, i.e., the view endorsing individualized essences, inherent in, yet distinct from, particular substances. For a more detailed account of this issue in connection with Buridan see Klima, G. “Buridan’s Logic and the Ontology of Modes”, in: Ebbesen, S. – Friedman, R. L. (eds.): *Medieval Analyses in Language and Cognition*, The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters: Copenhagen, 1999, pp. 473-495. For my general take on the issue of the medieval problem of universals, contrasting “realism” and “nominalism” in terms of semantics rather than ontology, see Klima, G. “The Medieval Problem of Universals”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2001 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2001/entries/universals-medieval/>. For an excellent discussion of Buridan’s rejection of universal entities see King, P., “John Buridan’s Solution to the Problem of Universals”, in: J.M.M.H. Thijssen and J. Zupko (eds.): *The Metaphysics and Natural Philosophy of John Buridan*, Brill Publishers: Leiden, 2001, pp. 1-27.

To see exactly how Buridan attempts to achieve this, we have to take a closer look at his semantic conception, in particular, his theory of predication.

Buridan does not feel the need to argue for a distinction between essential and non-essential predicates. As he sees it, that distinction is part and parcel of Porphyry's traditional distinctions of the five predicables. As Buridan writes:

... since something is called a predicate because it is apt to be predicated of many things, it is reasonable to distinguish the species or modes contained under the term 'predicable' according to the different modes of predication. Therefore, everything that is predicated of something is either predicated essentially, so that neither term adds some extraneous connotation to the signification of the other; or it is predicated denominatively, so that one term does add some extrinsic connotation to the signification of the other. This division is clearly exhaustive, for it is given in terms of opposites.⁴

Obviously, the important thing here is not that Buridan draws the distinction at all, but *how* he draws it. To understand his characterization of essential predication as that in which the terms do not add extraneous connotation over the signification of each other, we should take a quick look at Buridan's semantics of terms and propositions.

For Buridan, the simplest form of proposition is a categorical proposition, consisting of a subject and a predicate joined by a copula. To be sure, this need not mean that the terms of such a proposition should be simple; indeed, they may be of any complexity, as long as they can suitably flank the copula to form a proposition. Accordingly, in the Buridianian "canonical form" of a categorical proposition, both terms are regarded as noun phrases, and so verbal predicates are always to be analyzed into a copula and the corresponding participle. For example, 'Socrates walks on the beach with Plato' is to be analyzed as 'Socrates is walking on the beach with Plato'; or, indeed, to bring out the nominal character of the predicate term, it should even be analyzed as 'Socrates is someone walking on the beach with Plato'.

As this example may already suggest, for Buridan the copula is a sign of identity: for him, an affirmative categorical proposition is true if and only if its terms refer to the same thing or things at the time connotated by its copula, as required by the quantity of the proposition.

There are a number of things we should clarify in connection with this apparently simple claim, which expresses what historians of medieval logic dubbed *the identity theory of predication*.

⁴ Buridan, J., *Summulae de Dialectica* (henceforth: SD), an annotated translation with a philosophical introduction by Gyula Klima, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, 2.1.3, p. 106. Cf. "We call the predication of a term of another 'essential' if neither of these two terms adds some extrinsic connotation to the things they supposit for. Therefore, although the term 'animal' signifies more [things] than the term 'man', nevertheless, it does not appellate over and above the signification of the term 'man' anything having to do with man, i.e., as something pertaining to man [*per modum adiacentis homini*—cf. SD. 4.5.]. A predication is called 'non-essential', or 'denominative', if one term of it adds some extrinsic connotation over the signification of the other, as for example 'white' supposits for a man and appellates whiteness as pertaining to him." SD 2.5.2, pp. 126-128.

In the first place, when I used the phrase ‘refer to’ in the previous formulation, it was a somewhat loose rendering of Buridan’s technical phrase ‘*supponit pro*’, which indicates what a term does in the context of a proposition in its semantic function, namely standing for the things the proposition is about. Still we nowadays tend to transcribe, rather than translate, this phrase in the historical literature as ‘supposit for’, to avoid confusion with contemporary notions of reference. For in contrast to most modern conceptions of reference, supposition is an essentially context-dependent property of all simple and complex terms that can grammatically flank the copula, whether they are singular or common. Accordingly, one and the same term may supposit for very different things or for nothing at all, and in very different ways, on different occasions of its use. It is precisely these different ways in which a term may stand for some thing or things or for nothing in a proposition that the medieval theory of supposition is designed to describe.

The easiest way to explain the idea is by using some examples. If I say, “‘Man’ is a noun”, then this proposition is true, according to Buridan, insofar as its subject term is used non-significatively, that is, not to supposit for what it was imposed to signify, but to supposit for itself or for any other token term of the same type; and the reason why the proposition is true is that at least one of these token terms is indeed identical with a noun. This is a case that Buridan would classify as an instance of a term’s having *material supposition*. On the other hand, if I say ‘Every man is an animal’, then the subject term of this proposition stands for individual humans, the things this term is imposed to signify, and the proposition is true because every human is identical with some animal. In this case, Buridan would say the term has *personal supposition*.

Accordingly, Buridan’s notion of personal supposition, required for understanding his conception of true predication, presupposes his notion of signification, insofar as a term in personal supposition supposits for things it signifies. Now, with respect to their signification, Buridan classifies terms into two kinds: *absolute* or *connotative*.⁵ An absolute term is one that signifies whatever it signifies absolutely, that is, not in relation to anything. A connotative term is one that signifies something in relation to something or some things, called the *connotatum* or *connotata* of the term. Accordingly, the *personal supposita* of an absolute term in the context of a proposition are those of its *significata* that are actual with respect to the time connoted by the copula. The *supposita* of a connotative term, on the other hand, are those of its *significata* that are actual with respect to the time connoted by the copula and are also actually related to the *connotata* of the term in the way the term signifies them to be related.⁶

⁵ The distinction drawn in these terms was introduced by Ockham. Buridan usually makes the distinction in terms of talking about absolute vs. appellative terms. But in Buridan’s interpretation appellation is just oblique reference to a term’s connotation; so, his distinction amounts to the same as Ockham’s. Cf. SD, pp. xlix-l, 291-294, 880, 890. Furthermore, Buridan is also talking about connotative terms, contrasting them with absolute terms in the same way as Ockham did. Cf. SD, pp. 147, 639, 642, 644-646, 729, 735.

⁶ To be more precise, I should add that the proposition should not provide an ampliative context for its terms, but such considerations are irrelevant here. Cf., however, Klima, G. “Existence and Reference in Medieval Logic”, in: A. Hieke – E. Morscher (eds.): *New Essays in Free Logic*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001, pp. 197-226.

A quick example may again be helpful here. If I say ‘Socrates is wealthy’, then this proposition is true according to Buridan, if and only if its terms both supposit for the same thing, namely Socrates. However, the term ‘wealthy’ is obviously a connotative term, because it signifies human beings in relation to their wealth, namely, as the possessors of wealth. So this term only supposits for human beings who possess wealth. Therefore, this term will supposit for Socrates only if he actually possesses wealth at the time connoted by the copula.⁷

In fact, this example also illustrates two further important points. The first is that even if all explicitly relative terms are connotative, not all connotative terms are explicitly relative, although they do have to involve some relative concept in their definition.⁸ The second point is that a connotative term can become false of something that it actually supposits for while the thing continues to exist, simply on account of the term’s connotata ceasing to be related to its *supposita* in the way required by the signification of the term. If Socrates loses his wealth, he ceases to be supposited for by the term ‘wealthy’. Perhaps, I should note here that this holds for every connotative term, unless it connotes something intrinsic to its *supposita* without which these *supposita* cannot exist (an example might be the term ‘animate’), or if the term’s *connotata* are the same as its *supposita*, as is the case with terms expressing self-identity, such as the term ‘identical with itself’. But in all other cases, namely, when their *connotata* are extrinsic to their *significata*, connotative terms can cease to supposit for their actual *significata*, that is, they may become false of their actual *significata* without the destruction of these *significata*, which is precisely the idea expressed in the Porphyrian definition of accident. For example, if Socrates actually has wealth, then he is one of the actual *significata* of the term ‘wealthy’. Accordingly, in the proposition ‘Socrates is wealthy’ the term supposits for Socrates, whence the proposition is true. But if he loses his wealth, he ceases to be one of the actual *significata* of this term, whence it will no longer supposit for him, even if he stays in existence. Therefore, it is no wonder that for Buridan all such connotative terms are non-essential, accidental predicates of their *significata*.

By contrast, absolute terms are essential predicates of their *significata*. For example, if we take ‘man’ to be an absolute term, as Buridan certainly does, then the only way this term can cease to supposit for Socrates in the proposition ‘Socrates is a man’ is if

⁷ Cf. SD, p. 880.

⁸ Or at least they should involve an “unsaturated” syncategorematic concept with at least two “arguments”, as for example the concept to which the preposition ‘of’ is subordinated in the construction ‘a donkey of a man’. It is an open question whether we should assume such syncategorematic concepts, as this English construction suggests, or we should rather assume simple connotative concepts corresponding to the genitive form of a noun, as the Latin construction ‘asinus hominis’ would suggest. The first option would probably be favored by Ockham, and the second by Buridan. Actually, this may make *all* the difference between Ockham’s and Buridan’s respective approaches to connotative terms: where Buridan would allow simple connotative terms subordinated to simple connotative concepts, Ockham (*pace* Panaccio, C.: “Connotative Terms in Ockham’s Mental Language”, *Cahiers d’épistémologie*, Cahier no. 9016, Université du Québec à Montréal, Montréal, pp. 1-22) may be committed to complex connotative concepts, possibly allowing such “non-standard” syncategorematic concepts. For some discussion of this issue, see Klima, G. “The Changing Role of *Entia Rationis* in Medieval Philosophy: A Comparative Study with a Reconstruction”, *Synthese* 96(1993), pp. 25-59, esp. pp. 47-50.

Socrates ceases to exist. For the term signifies everything that the concept to which it is subordinated represents, that is, every past, present, future, and possible human being indifferently. But the actual *significata* of this term are only actual human beings, who are therefore also the supposita of the term ‘man’ in a present tense proposition. So, the only way the term ‘man’ in ‘Socrates is a man’ can cease to supposit for Socrates is if he ceases to be a human being, i.e., if he ceases to exist.⁹

In this way, therefore, it may seem that Buridan can maintain a credible essentialist stance without ever having even to mention shared essences, as long as he can establish that at least some of our common terms are in fact absolute terms, in particular, absolute terms that are essential predicates of things falling into the category of substance.

Now, as we could see, whether a term is absolute or connotative depends on the term’s signification. But a term’s signification, according to Buridan, depends on the sort of concept it is associated with. For a term has signification only insofar as it is associated with some cognitive act of our minds, a concept. If I utter the articulate sound ‘biltrix’, then someone hearing me literally has no idea what I have just said. And this is how it should be, because this utterance was precisely one of the examples used by several medieval logicians to illustrate a meaningless utterance, that is, one that does not have signification, because it is not imposed to signify anything we can think of. However, as soon as this utterance is made to signify something we are aware of somehow, it will signify precisely what we are aware of and precisely in the way we are aware of it. The cognitive act on account of which we are aware of something is what Buridan calls a concept. And since terms have their significations by virtue of being subordinated to such concepts, the differences between the significations and types of signification of different terms are dependent on what types of concepts they are subordinated to. Therefore, the abovementioned difference between absolute and connotative terms, which grounds the difference between essential and non-essential predicates of substances, boils down to the difference between the kinds of concepts they are subordinated to. Absolute terms are those subordinated to absolute concepts, i.e., concepts whereby we conceive of things absolutely, not in relation to anything, whereas connotative terms are those subordinated

⁹ Note that miraculous transformations of Socrates, say, into a rock or some brute animal, while staying in existence, are excluded by the structure of the Porphyrian Tree as Buridan conceives of it. Since by that structure overlaps between non-subaltern species and genera are not allowed (cf. SD, 3.1.7, p. 150.), if Socrates is once among the *significata* of ‘man’, then he cannot be driven over into the range of *significata* of ‘pig’ even by Circe’s wand. Therefore, Socrates cannot cease to be one of the *significata* of ‘man’, although he can cease to be one of its *actual significata*, and hence one of its *supposita*, by ceasing to exist (since being a man, he is not a necessary being). It may also be interesting to note here that if we were to construct an artificial language with a modal or temporal semantics along these lines (as I did on a handout when I presented this material at UCLA), making it into a *Begriffsschrift* of a Buridian mental language, then all one-place predicates of that language would have to be “rigid designators” of the individuals within their extension, yielding an inherently essentialist logic without any shared essences. The simple technical trick needed for such a logic is assigning the extensions of predicates and the domains of possible situations from the powerset of the same basic domain of individuals, and treat the *actual* extension (*actual* “range of *significata*”) of a predicate in a given situation as the intersection of the extension of the predicate and the domain of that situation.

to connotative concepts, whereby we conceive of things in relation to something. Therefore, the distinction between essential and non-essential predicates of substances boils down to the distinction between absolute and connotative concepts, and thus Buridan's essentialism ultimately hinges on the claim that we are actually able to form such absolute concepts of substances.

Buridan's essentialism vs. skepticism

But this claim faces some serious challenges. In the first place, we have seen in the example of 'wealthy' that just because a term is grammatically a one-place predicate it does not follow that it is absolute. What determines whether a term is absolute or not is whether it is subordinated to an absolute or to a connotative concept, which can be found out by looking at the term's nominal definition. If the term is definable by a complex phrase which contains relative terms, then the term is certainly subordinated to a complex connotative concept, the "structure" of which is explicated by the syntactic structure of this complex phrase.¹⁰ But then it may seem that all simple terms in the category of substance should be definable in terms of such complex phrases. For how can we possibly form simple absolute concepts of substance, if we are supposed to form our concepts on the basis of the natural input of sensory experience (that is to say, we are not willing to subscribe to the mysteries of innate, prenatal, or divinely infused ideas), and all we are given in sense experience are the sensible qualities of things, which can only give rise to connotative concepts (of substances)?¹¹ After all, whatever we see, hear, touch, etc. is conceived as something having the relevant sensible qualities, that is, it is conceived in relation to these sensible qualities, by means of the corresponding connotative concepts. As Buridan himself (or someone reporting his views, if the text is not authentic) remarked:

... we do not perceive substances under substantial concepts, but we do perceive them¹² under accidental and connotative ones, and not under purely absolute ones.

¹⁰ For a discussion of how we can interpret the "structure" of a complex concept in terms of its mere semantic complexity, despite its ontological simplicity, see my *Introduction* to Buridan's *Summulae*, especially, SD, pp. xxxvii-xxxix.

¹¹ Of course, they can also give rise to absolute concepts of sensible qualities. But our present concern here is the origin of absolute concepts of substances.

¹² "Unde substantias non percipimus mediante sensu sub conceptibus substantialibus, sed bene sub conceptibus accidentalibus et connotativis, et non mere absolutis." J. Buridan: *Le traité de l'âme de Jean Buridan (De Prima Lectura)*. Édition, Étude critique et doctrinale par B. Patar, Éditions de l'Institut Supérieur de Philosophie: Louvain-la-Neuve, 1991, *Quaestiones in De Anima*, lib. 1, q. 5, p. 207. Since the doctrine contained in the passage from which this quote derives is in perfect agreement with what we can find in parallel passages in Buridan's known authentic works, I take it to be a reliable report of Buridan's doctrine, despite the controversial authenticity of this work. Cf. Buridan, J., *Quaestiones super Octo Libros Physicorum Aristotelis*, Minerva: Frankfurt A.M., 1964, lib. I, q. 7, ff. 7vb-10ra; Buridan, J., *Questiones in De Anima* (tertia lectura), lib. III, q. 8, in: *John Buridan's Philosophy of Mind: An Edition and Translation of Book III of his 'Questions on Aristotle's De Anima' (Third Redaction)*, edited by J. A. Zupko. Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1989, 2 vols. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1990, pp. 64-89, esp. pp. 74-75, pp. 79-80; Buridan, J., *Quaestiones in Aristotelis Metaphysicam: Kommentar zur Aristotelischen Metaphysik*. Paris, 1518; reprint, Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1964, lib. VII, qq. 15-20, ff.

Therefore, it might seem that, despite appearances to the contrary, terms in the category of substance may in fact not be absolute terms, because they would have to be subordinated to some combinations of connotative concepts obtainable from sense experience. Indeed, if a couple of centuries later the British Empiricists were right, then the only way we can *make sense* of our substantial terms is to regard them as being associated with concepts or ideas of those relatively stable bundles of sensible qualities that make up what appear as substances in our experience, for these ideas constitute all the information we can gain by sense experience, and we certainly cannot signify or conceive that of which we literally have no idea.

In fact, similar concerns were already raised by some of Buridan's contemporaries, who claimed that we can have no cognition of substance, and whose arguments he systematically considered in his questions-commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*.¹³

As in an earlier paper¹⁴ I have pointed out, Buridan's response to the skeptical challenge in this discussion relies on his acceptance of a version of Aristotelian abstractionism. According to his argument, our sense perception carries information not only about the *per se* sensible qualities of substances, but also about the substances themselves to which these qualities belong, even if our senses are not able to extract this information on their own. But our agent intellect, using a multiplicity of experiences stored in sensory memory is able to extract this information by its natural activity of abstraction. This is what enables the intellect to form simple, genuine substantial concepts in a natural process, without forming any combination of simpler concepts of sensory qualities. But then these genuine substantial concepts will represent the substances indifferently and universally within their natural kinds. Therefore, the terms subordinated to these concepts will be genuine essential predicates of substances, which can then suitably serve as the basis for valid scientific generalizations. So, Buridan seems to have found a viable solution to the problem involved in constructing a philosophy of essentialist nominalism: he has a strictly nominalist ontology with no reference to shared essences (including individualized, inherent essences of a “less than numerical unity”), combined with an essentialist logic that is capable of providing the basis for valid scientific generalizations.

The conflict between Buridan's semantics and abstractionism

However, even if this solution may work, at this point one can still raise the question whether Buridan is really “entitled” to it, in the face of his semantic considerations concerning absolute terms. After all, the gist of Buridan's solution is that we are able to acquire genuine simple substantial concepts from experience by abstraction, and thus we can impose on them terms that will be truly essential, scientifically knowable predicates of things. But it is questionable whether this account of the acquisition of simple

50rb-54va; Buridan, J., *Quaestiones in Porphyrii Isagogen*, in: R. Tatarzynski, “Jan Buridan, Kommentarz do Isagogi Porfiriusza” *Przeglad Tomistyczny*, 2(1986), pp. 111-95, esp. pp. 172-73.

¹³ Buridan, J., *Quaestiones super Octo Libros Physicorum Aristotelis*, Minerva: Frankfurt A.M., 1964, lb. I, q. 4.

¹⁴ Cf. n. 1 above.

substantial concepts is compatible with his semantic considerations concerning absolute concepts and terms.

For let us recall that an absolute term is one that signifies whatever it signifies not in relation to anything, because it is subordinated to an absolute concept, namely, one which represents things not in relation to, that is, *not in respect of*, anything.

But the point in abstraction is precisely that by means of an abstract concept several things are represented *in respect of* what they resemble each other, disregarding what distinguishes them. As Buridan himself writes:

Next, I again suppose that if there are any things similar to each other, whatever is similar to one of them, is, *in that respect in which the two are similar to each other*, similar to each of them. For example, if A, B, and C are similar with respect to whiteness because they are white, just as D is similar to A [in whiteness], it must also be similar to both B and C [in whiteness]. Therefore, it follows from the fact that representation occurs by means of likeness that that which was representative of one thing will be indifferently representative of others [...]. From this it is finally inferred that whenever the species (and likeness) of Socrates has existed in the intellect and has been abstracted from the species of extrinsic things, it will no more be a representation of Socrates than of Plato and other men; nor does the intellect understand Socrates by it any more than other men. On the contrary, the intellect understands all men by it indifferently, in a single concept, namely, the concept from which the name ‘man’ is taken. And this is to understand universally.¹⁵

Indeed, it is crucial for abstraction to work, i.e., to provide us with truly universal concepts, that the concepts acquired by abstraction represent the things observed in the process *in that respect* in which they do not differ from unobserved things of the same kind. For a concept acquired from the observed things can *only* represent the unobserved things because the latter do not differ from the former *in that respect* in which the concept represents them indifferently. However, Buridan’s absolute concepts are supposed to represent things absolutely, not in relation to something, that is, *not in any respect*. Therefore, it seems that they cannot really be obtained by abstraction in the way Buridan described, or if they *are* obtained in this way, then their representative function is not quite correctly described by him in his semantics.

¹⁵ “Postea ego iterum suppono quod si sint aliqua ad invicem similia, quidquid est simile uni illorum, in eo in quo sunt duo in invicem similia, ipsum est simile unicuique illorum. Verbi gratia, si A, B, et C sint similia secundum albedinem quia sunt alba, sicut D est simili ipsi A, oportet quod sit consimili ipsi B et C. Ideo consequitur ex quo repraesentatio fit per similitudinem quod illud quod erat repraesentativum unius erit indifferenter repraesentativum aliorum, nisi aliud concurrat quod obstet, sicut dicetur post. Ex hoc finaliter infertur quod cum species (et similitudo) Sortis fuerit apud intellectum et fuerit abstracta a speciebus extraneorum, illa non magis erit repraesentatio Sortis quam Platonis et aliorum hominum; nec intellectus per eam magis intelliget Sortem quam alios homines. Immo sic per eam omnes homines indifferenter intelliget uno conceptu, scilicet a quo sumitur hoc nomen ‘homo’. Et hoc est intelligere universaliter.” Buridan, J., *Questiones in De Anima* (tertia lectura), lb. 3, q. 8. in: *John Buridan’s Philosophy of Mind: An Edition and Translation of Book III of his ‘Questions on Aristotle’s De Anima’ (Third Redaction)*, edited by J. A. Zupko. Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1989, 2 vols. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1990.

Conclusion: empiricism, nominalism and essentialism in semantics, metaphysics and epistemology

All in all, it seems that Buridan is successful in providing a purely nominalist ontology combined with an essentialist logic on the basis of his doctrine of essential predicates of substances as being those common terms that are subordinated to absolute, substantial concepts. However, this combination seems to be in conflict with his account of how we acquire these substantial concepts. For although that account successfully meets skeptical challenges while still staying on a firm empiricist ground, it seems to go against the representative function Buridan ascribes to absolute concepts in his semantics.

In fact, from this case-study of Buridan's essentialism, I think we can generalize the following conclusions. If one is trying to avoid the inconsistencies of naïve ontological realism,¹⁶ one has to deny the existence of universal entities. Yet, if one is unwilling to accept the apparent skeptical consequences of this denial, and wants to stay a scientific realist, he has to opt for some form of logical essentialism. But logical essentialism is predicated upon a plausible account of our ability to acquire substantial concepts grounding our semantics of essential predicates. However, this account, to avoid the epistemological mysticism of innate or infused ideas, has to show how these concepts can be acquired from our limited experience. But if the previous objection to Buridan's account is right, then it seems that this can only be done by recourse to some form of "moderate realism" in one's semantics, namely, one that accounts for our substantial common terms and concepts as representing particulars in respect of their essential similarities, while abstracting from their accidental dissimilarities.

In fact, rather similar considerations may have motivated the syncretic efforts of later medieval philosophers, such as Domingo Soto (1494-1560), who wholeheartedly embraced Buridan's nominalist ontology, and many elements of his astute nominalist logic, yet, who did not subscribe to his semantics of absolute terms, but described their semantic functions in a way that was characteristic of the older way of doing logic and metaphysics, the so-called *via antiqua*.

Soto, who most notably described himself as someone "born among nominalists and raised by realists"¹⁷, retained the nominalist distinction between absolute and connotative terms, but in a revised form, which does not exclude that absolute terms and concepts represent their possible *supposita*, or as he calls them, *material significata*, in respect of something, which he refers to as their *formal significata*.¹⁸ For Soto, the difference

¹⁶ By "naïve realism" I mean the version of Plato's theory of Forms found to be inconsistent already by Plato himself in his *Parmenides*, as well as the theory of universals found to be inconsistent by Boethius in his second commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*. For a more detailed analysis and references see my article on the medieval problem of universals in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* referred to in n. 3 above.

¹⁷ "inter nominales nati sumus, interque reales nutriti" -- Soto, D., *In Porphyrii Isagogen, Aristotelis Categorias, librosque de Demonstratione, Commentaria*, Venice, ex officina Dominici Guarraei, et Io. Baptistae, fratrum, 1587, reprint, Frankfurt: Minerva, 1967, p. 28H.

¹⁸ Domingo Soto, *Summulae, Svmmlarvm aeditio secunda* (Salmanticae: Excudebat Andreas a Portonariis, 1554, reprint: Hildesheim-New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1980), lb. 1, c. 7; lb. 2, c. 10; lb. 2, c. 14.

between absolute and connotative terms boils down to the question whether their *formal significata* are intrinsic, essential or extrinsic, accidental to their *material significata*. Furthermore, he insists that just because we have to make the logical distinction between a term's *formal* and *material significata*, it does not mean that these two sorts of *significata* have to be distinct in reality, for in some, indeed, in many cases they coincide. Therefore, Soto can have an ontology that is item by item the same as Buridan's, and an essentialist logic, which, however, is somewhat different in its semantics from Buridan's. By tweaking the distinction of absolute and connotative terms, Soto ends up with an account that is clearly compatible with Aristotelian abstractionism, which, however, even if not in its ontology, but in its semantics, namely, in the notion of *formal significata*, contains something strongly reminiscent of the real, inherent universals of the *moderate realism* of the *via antiqua*.

Whether this is the best compromise is open to further debate. In any case, living in an age when scholasticism was on its way to extinction, Soto's solution did not have a chance of receiving general acceptance or even sustained attention. The new, mostly ideological concerns of the new intelligentsia of a new era simply pushed it into oblivion along with most of the sophisticated scholastic academic output. But now that we have sufficient historical distance from those ideological concerns, and yet we have philosophical concerns that are sometimes strikingly similar to those of the scholastics, we may calmly reconsider the unduly forgotten, intriguing theoretical alternatives provided by the scholastic thinkers.

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