Comments on Gyula Klima’s
“Mental Representations and Concepts in Medieval Philosophy”
(Leuven, February 2010)

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It is a great pleasure to have been asked to comment on Gyula’s paper, which, as usual, is magisterial in its understanding of its material, and richly complex in its ideas. The pleasure is somewhat adulterated, admittedly, by a certain difficulty in knowing how to proceed. Gyula’s mastery of this terrain is so incontestable that it leaves little room for a commentator. Still, as you will expect, I have tried.

We might begin by distinguishing three kinds of questions about mental representation:

(a) what are mental representations – that is, what is their ontological status? Gyula briefly answers this question, in saying that they are accidents, or perhaps modes, in the category of Quality. As Gyula knows well, there is a great deal more that might be said. Suárez, for instance, in the passage that Gyula quotes, seems to want to treat the verbum as the sort of quality of mind that is the act of thought itself, whereas Cajetan, in the next quoted passage, describes it as “some likeness that the possible intellect forms in itself,” which suggests it is a quality somehow distinct from the act of thought. This is, of course, quite an important disagreement. Since this is not Gyula’s focus, I will not belabor the issue, but just briefly remark that debates over sensible species, intelligible species, the verbum, etc., – the sorts of things I focused on in my book on Theories of Cognition – would do well to take more seriously the broader ontological context regarding the status of real qualities and the like. The scholastics have a great deal to say about what qualities are, for instance, and this is an important path into thinking about their theories of mental representation.

(b) How do such qualities represent – what are, as it were, their mechanisms?
Somewhat surprisingly, this is a question that Gyula, so far as I can see, does not even address. In a recent paper in the *Philosophical Review*, the Brower-Tolands discuss this issue at great length in the case of Aquinas, considering likeness and formal resemblance as possible explanations. Eventually, they despair of finding any substantive theory, a despair they try to color with a tinge of optimism by saying that Aquinas treats mental representation as primitive and sui generis. Again, since this is not Gyula’s concern, I will not belabor it, but only suggest that perhaps Gyula similarly thinks that scholastic theories just do not have very much to teach us about how mental representation works. That wouldn’t be very surprising, since these issues remain largely intractable to this day.

(c) What does the mind represent? This is Gyula’s principal interest. The question would be less interesting if Gyula were focused on the sensory case, since there it is clear enough what the scholastics think – they think that color represents sight, sound hearing, and so on. To be sure, even at the sensory level, there are more interesting questions to ask about common and *per accidens* sense objects. But Gyula sets all of this aside right at the start, in order to focus on the really hard case of what the mind represents.

The reason the case of the mind is hard is that the mind grasps universals. In the sensory case, there are particular sensible qualities, exercising a causal influence on the body’s organs at a certain time and place, and actualizing within the sensory powers a certain sensory state that represents that particular quality. We can ask *what* that sensory state is, the first of my questions above. Or we can ask *how* it represents, the second of my questions. But the third question, the question of *what it represents*, is relatively straightforward. Not so in the intellectual case. Here we have sensory data giving rise to abstract intellectual thoughts about the world – the mind’s entering into a state that represents lions, to use Cajetan’s example. Whether the intellect can represent a particular lion was a contentious question, but
let me follow Gyula in setting it aside and focusing on the abstract case that all parties agreed on as the intellect’s raison d’être – the intellect’s somehow representing lions in general. In this case again we can ask either of the first two questions, and feel even more baffled as to their answer. But now the third question becomes especially vexing, because it is not even clear what the intellect is representing, when it thinks of lions. It was in the context of this vexing question that Berkeley famously mocked the idea of a man who was neither white, nor black, nor tawny, and consequently denied that the mind can have any abstract ideas at all.¹

Klima gives us Suárez and Cajetan as examples of one approach to the problem, which he labels the realist approach. This approach begins by distinguishing between two kinds of concepts, formal concepts and objective concepts. Formal concepts are simply the mental state itself, whether that be the act of thought itself or a quality distinct from the act. This is quite analogous to what we find at the sensory level, where we have a sensible quality giving rise within a sense power to a sensory state that represents that quality. (Of course, one does not ordinarily speak of concepts at the sensory level.) Where the intellectual case takes on its distinctively difficult aspect is with the introduction of a second kind of concept, which both Cajetan and Suárez agree on calling an objective concept, and which they describe in very similar ways. For Cajetan, the objective concept is “the leonine nature itself, represented and known” For Suárez, it is “the man thus known and represented by that act.” So the picture is that the formal concept is that in the intellect which represents, and the objective concept is the object, the thing “represented and known.”

It seems to me a good way into the territory of Gyula’s paper is to consider why both Cajetan and Suárez feel the need to postulate an objective concept, as something over and above the formal concept. Two things seem clear enough, for both authors. First, the

¹ Principles intro §10.
objective concept is introduced to play the role of the object of thought, which is to say that it is the answer to the third of my initial questions: the question of what the intellect represents. Their answer: the intellect represents objective concepts. Second, the objective concept is introduced to play this role because nothing else will do. But why is this? One might suppose the reason is that both Cajetan and Suárez feel a certain pull toward thinking of concepts as the things we think about, rather than simply as the representational vehicles for thinking about the world. But this, it seems to me, gets the cart before the horse. The reason concepts are made to serve as objects is because nothing else will do. Clearly, the formal concept will not do, because it is merely the representational vehicle, the that by which the intellect thinks. What Cajetan and Suárez both also seem to think, however, is that ordinary substances out in the world will not serve as the objects of thought – or, at any rate, not as the immediate objects, as Gyula sometimes puts it. Now it is obvious enough that no particular material substance will do here, because we have already said that our focus is on abstract, general thought, which obviously does not take as its object any particular substance. By the same token, no part of an ordinary substance – such as the substantial form of this particular lion – can be the (immediate) object of thought, because again our focus is on generalized thoughts. One possibility that still remains is that a formal concept of lion in general might represent not any one particular lion, but all lions. This, of course, is roughly the nominalist solution to the problem, and it is a way of avoiding the need to postulate anything like an objective concept as the object of thought. The various responses of the Thomists, Scotists, Wycliffites, etc. against this nominalist approach would of course take a long time to set out. For now it will have to suffice to say only that the realists do not accept this nominalist approach. If we follow Gyula’s general account of how this debate goes, we can say that, instead, the realists postulate as the objects of thought an objective
concept, or something like it, because nothing else will do.

These introductory remarks lead into the heart of Gyula’s paper. A first question that looms here concerns what exactly an objective concept is. Gyula has long argued that we should think of realists from Aquinas forward as committed to an ontology, as he puts it in this paper, 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” (p. 4). I used to bridle at this way of talking, but Gyula has beat me into submission on this point. If the objects of thought are not what Cajetan and Suárez call the formal object, and if they are not concrete particulars, or any part of a concrete particular, or any set of concrete particulars, then some sort of platonizing move seems inescapable. ‘Platonizing’ is perhaps not a word Gyula will like here, but it seems appropriate insofar as this tradition finds itself forced to introduce abstract objects, rather than concrete particulars in the mind or outside the mind, as the objects of thought. If this is not what Cajetan and Suárez mean by an objective concept, then I am at a loss to understand what they are saying. Perhaps it is less clear that such a doctrine can be found in Aquinas. After all, Aquinas sometimes treats the verbum as the object of thought, and the verbum – as the passage from Suárez explicitly says – would seem to be a formal concept, and so a concrete particular in the mind. Even in Aquinas’s case, however, there are tendencies pushing him toward the sort of view that his great commentator Cajetan makes explicit. And since I have even less time than Gyula for going into the specifics of one or another author, let me simply grant Gyula’s general picture so far, and move on.

The same road that leads toward objective concepts as beings of reason leads onward to propositions not as sentence tokens (propositiones) but as abstract states of affairs (complexe significabilia and the like). Whether Aquinas envisioned this outcome is unclear to
me, but the idea is quite explicit in Walter Burley, Gregory of Rimini, and many others. Given the story as Gyula tells it, this further stage seems well-nigh irresistible. For if we embrace the platonizing move at the level of individual concepts, there seems no reason not to embrace it at the level of complex thoughts. Indeed, an abstract proposition might just be a complex of objective concepts. The nominalist, naturally, will feel less pressure to take this path.

One of the most interesting suggestions in Gyula’s paper is that we think of the realistic strategy as intensional, in contrast to the extensional approach of the nominalists. Here too I am sympathetic. It certainly seems appropriate to apply the jargon of ‘extensional’ to the nominalists, given their strategy of letting the mind represent particulars directly—simply letting thought and language refer to all of the particulars that fall under the extension of a given concept. One can in contrast, then, see the point of thinking of the realist strategy as intensionalist, inasmuch as the realists put in between mind and object the “quasi entities” that Cajetan and Suárez describe as objective concepts. So let us think of such objective concepts as intensions.

At this point, however, I want to make a criticism of Gyula’s way of handling this material. For it seems to me that once Gyula begins thinking of objective concepts as intensions, he begins to allow them to do too much work, and so distorts the realist position. Objective concepts are the objects of thought; they are represented by formal objects. It is not misleading, I think, to think of them also as the contents of thought, inasmuch as they are the things we think of—we think of objective concepts. As the contents of thought, we might also describe objective concepts as fixing the extension of our thoughts. This is how Gyula puts it,² and this is of course what the terminology of intension and extension suggests. So far, I

² E.g., p. 6: “And of course it is customary to understand by the extension of a term all things that satisfy its
have no complaint. But Gyula also, sometimes, describes objective concepts as themselves having a representational function, as if the way such objective concepts function as intensions is by serving as a second level of mental representations. Thus he says on the last page that “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.” He goes on to allow that this is indeed a kind of “representationalism” that introduces “intermediary representations.” The impression he gives here is that we acquire not only a formal concept, in virtue of which we think, but also an objective concept, which determines the extension of our thoughts by representing concrete particulars out in the world. Indeed, as the passage just quoted intimates, Gyula seems to think that objective concepts perform two separate representational functions, giving us both semantic (that is, extensional) information and phenomenal information. This seems to me a dubious and unnecessary doubling of thought, in effect recreating a second time over the very problem of mental representation that we are, after all, trying to mitigate rather than propagate. I do not think that a theory of how we think about lions in the abstract requires two distinct acts of thought, or two distinct representations of a lion. On the realist theory as I understand it, sensory exposure to lions (or to depictions of them) gives rise to the formal concept of a lion, which then has as its content the objective concept of lion. The objective concept – that mere quasi-entity – plays no role within our cognitive system; it does not serve to represent anything else, such as lions in the flesh. Inasmuch as we want to tell a further story about how our thoughts manage to be about real lions, rather than about an abstract, quasi lion, that has to be a story that comes from the resources of our formal concept, which intension.”
is all we have in the mind to do any representational work.

It seems to me, however, that anyone who would go down this intensionalist, rather
inaptly named “realist” path, ought to be quite hesitant in aspiring to a story about how our
thoughts are about real, concrete lions. The very point of introducing intensions, as I
understand it, is to insist that thought (and so, with it, language) does not have as its object
particular things in the world. What we are thinking about, when we think that lions are
animals, is some kind of connection between abstract, platonic entities – Gyula’s quasi-
existing beings of reason. To be sure, for such a theory to have any plausibility, it will have to
be supplemented by a story about how the material world ultimately matters to such
thoughts. My point is only that we should not think of this level of intensional entities – the
objective concepts – as mental representations of a special sort through which we grasp
particular objects. Rather, the story Gyula is sketching should best be thought of as a story in
which language and thought are not about particular things at all, but about abstracta. Put
most simply, my point is that we need to hold firmly onto the idea that objective concepts
are not the vehicles of representation, but are the objects of thought, the things we think
about.

This leads to me to a further worry about Gyula’s paper. As noted, an objective
concept not only serves as the intension that gets us from abstract concept to particulars, but
also plays a phenomenal role. It is “that item on account of which we are aware of this
nature” (of a lion, say), which leads him to say that it serves as “the phenomenal content” of
a formal concept (p. 10). Here again I would reiterate my previous complaint. Objective
concepts are themselves the natures we think about; they are not the things “on account of
which” we think. So there is a confusion here, it seems to me, between the role of the formal
concept, as the that-by-which we think, and the role of the objective concept, as the object of
thought. But I think there is something more here, too. According to Gyula, “the phenomenal content of a concept is the content of our consciousness we have on account of entertaining that concept” (p. 9). When I try to apply this introspectively to my own case, I find myself at a loss. I am just not sure there is any phenomenal content to my abstract thoughts. I know what it is like to hear a lion roar, but I do not know what it is like to think about a lion.

Insofar as I can come up with any phenomenal content, that content is sensory. But if this is the phenomena in question, then we know what Aquinas, at least, would want to say. He would want to say that content of that sort is not a product of the intellect at all, but is a product of the inner senses, which we direct to generate phantasms as an aid in abstract thinking. This so-called *conversio ad phantasmata* is not something the immaterial intellect does; it is something the brain does, which helps the whole human being function as a cognitive agent. So inasmuch as we want a story about the phenomenology of thought, and inasmuch as we want to follow in the footsteps of the Angelic Doctor, we shouldn’t be looking at the level of concepts at all, but should instead be looking back at the sensory level that Gyula set to one side at the start of the paper.

This takes me, finally, to the very interesting suggestions that Gyula makes about the role of concepts for Ockham. Developing a suggestion from Claude Panaccio, Gyula remarks that “for Ockham, the information content of a mental concept … has nothing to do with the determination of its extension, which is determined simply by the natural causal mechanism of concept formation” (p. 8). Within the context of Gyula’s paper, this is an astonishing claim, because Gyula maintains, as we have seen, that Ockham has an extensionalist theory of thought: to think is to pick out a certain set of individuals in the world, and to consider the overlap between that set and another set. All lions are animals, then, if all the particular lions are contained in the set of all the particular animals. But if this
is what thinking is, and if concepts have nothing to do with this, then what are concepts for? Gyula’s answer is that they yield the phenomenal content of thought.

You know already what my complaint is – that I just do not know what the phenomenal character of abstract thought is supposed to be, beyond sensory experience. It may be that Gyula is himself thinking of sensory phenomenology here, inasmuch as he goes on to speak of the “sensible accidents” of particulars. But if that is what we are talking about, then I wonder why we should suppose that this is something the intellect does at all, rather than the senses. Adjudicating this issue would require getting into the details of Ockham’s theory. Does he think there is a distinctively intellectual phenomenology? Does he think sensory phenomenology can occur at the intellectual level? Does he, as Klima and evidently Panaccio hold, think that the extension of thought is fixed entirely by causal considerations, so that the concepts themselves play no role? If this last claim is right – if, as Gyula puts it, “the information content of a mental concept … has nothing to do with the determination of its extension” (p. 8) – then I would have to wonder whether we need mental concepts for anything at all. I might be tempted at this point to raise the possibility of their being merely epiphenomenal, but since I’ve questioned whether there is even any *phenomenology* to be explained here, the question instead ought to be whether mental concepts do anything. And if we do not need mental concepts, then perhaps we do not need a mind – just machinery responding causally to the environment, and thereby framing thoughts that range over certain individuals within that environment. Whether this would count as progress I will leave to others.