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## LATE MEDIEVAL NOMINALISM AND NONVERIDICAL CONCEPTS

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Content externalism, as promoted by Hilary Putnam, Tyler Burge and many other prominent analytic philosophers in the last three or four decades, is the thesis that the content of our thoughts at a given moment is not uniquely determined by our internal states at that moment. In its causal versions, it has often been presented as a deep revolution in philosophy of mind. Yet a number of medievalists (e.g. Peter King, Calvin Normore, Gyula Klima, and myself) have recently stressed the presence of significant externalist tendencies in fourteenth century nominalism, especially in William of Ockham and John Buridan. I have tried to round up the case for this interpretation of Ockham in a forthcoming paper entitled “Ockham’s externalism”. Let me simply mention here, to give the most salient example, that Ockham insists, in Book II of his *Commentary on the Sentences*, that an intuitive cognition, whether intellectual or sensitive, always has a determinate singular thing as its object, although taken in itself it resembles a plurality of singular things, and that what fixes which singular object it is that a given intuitive cognition is a cognition of, is not the internal shape of this cognition, but which determinate thing caused it [*Reportatio* II, quest. 12-13, *Op. Theol.* V, 287-288]. Two intuitive cognitions, then, could be maximally similar to each other to the point of being indistinguishable by an observing angel ; yet, they would have different singular objects if they were caused by different singular things. Which, I take it, is a typical case of causal content externalism, at least for intuitive cognitions. Admittedly, the case for the externalist interpretation of Ockham’s — or Buridan’s for that matter — theory of *general* concepts is more indirect, but still quite strong, as it seems to me, insofar as the causal connection with external objects also plays a decisive role in fixing the objects of such general concepts, the internal shapes — or features — of the concepts being insufficient to the task.

I am well aware that this externalist interpretation has been — very cleverly — challenged in the case of Ockham by Susan Brower-Toland in a recent paper [“ Intuition, Externalism, and Direct Reference in Ockham ”, *Hist. of Philos. Quarterly* 2007], but I will nevertheless assume it to be correct without further defence. I have discussed in some details Susan Brower’s arguments in a recent conference held in Parma on “ Intentionality in Medieval Philosophy ” (the acts of which should be published in 2010, I guess), and I concluded that clever and important as they are, they can be answered.

My goal here, instead, will be to discuss a recent criticism, not of the externalist interpretation of late-medieval nominalism but of late-medieval nominalism itself, interpreted as externalist, that has been proposed by Gyula Klima towards the end of his remarkable 2009 book on John Buridan [*John Buridan*, Oxford : Oxford U. P.].

Klima’s point is that the medieval nominalist variety of content externalism, about natural kind concepts in particular, makes it vulnerable to Demon skepticism, which another variety of medieval content externalism — that of Aquinas, namely — is able to avoid. And Klima further argues that the nominalist variety of content externalism commits its proponents, even more damagingly, to accepting a certain notion which, he claims, can be shown to be contradictory. If successful, Klima’s argumentation, then, purports to be a refutation of a central aspect of late-medieval nominalism, not only in Buridan — who is, of course, his main target in the book —, but in Ockham as well and, presumably, in all of their followers. My own point here will be that Klima’s argumentation is *not* successful. The whole discussion, I hope, will help us reach a deeper understanding of some important aspects of Ockham’s and Buridan’s nominalist philosophy of mind.

## 1. Klima’s criticism

I’ll come back later on to Klima’s detailed arguments. But let me first sketch his general criticism. It can be broken down into three theses, which I will call theses (A), (B), and (C).

(A) Nominalist externalism opens the door to Demon skepticism.

Demon skepticism, as Klima understands it, is the idea that for all we know, we might be entirely mistaken about everything. We might be what Klima calls a ‘BIV’ (a technical

appellation he forms after Putnam's brains in vats). A BIV in Klima's parlance is "a thinking subject having no veridical concepts" [Klima 2009, 254]. And a veridical concept is defined by him as a concept "that represents what it appears to represent", while a nonveridical concept "is one that represents something different from what it appears to represent" [*ibid.*]. Demon skepticism, then, is the idea that BIVs are possible, and that they are possible in such a way, that, for all I know, I myself — or you yourself — might be a BIV.

The deep reason why late-medieval nominalism, according to Klima, opens the door to Demon skepticism is that it conceives of the relation between natural kind concepts and their objects as being a contingent relation. This is what the late-medieval nominalists' specific brand of content externalism ultimately amounts to. If the relation between a concept and its objects is contingent, then it is possible — at some level of possibility — that the same concept should have different objects from those it does have in the natural order of things. In other words, two concepts could be essentially indistinguishable from one another, while one of them has certain objects while the other has other objects. And then we could be irremediably confused about the objects of our own concepts. In accepting the contingency of the relation between concepts and their objects, late-medieval nominalism commits itself to the idea that BIVs are possible, and that I — or you for that matter — might be one of them. Late-medieval nominalism thus leads to Demon skepticism.

#### (B) Demon skepticism rests upon a contradictory notion.

Klima thinks he has an argument to show that BIVs in his sense are impossible. This argument is inspired by Putnam's well-known criticism of the brain in a vat hypothesis, but it is actually quite original, and a bit complex. The gist of it, however, is straightforward : it is that the acceptance of the mere possibility of BIVs leads to a contradiction, a certain proposition turning out to be both true and not true on that hypothesis. I'll discuss that argument later on. Let me just stress at this point that it is the main piece of Klima's attack on late-medieval nominalism. As we will see, both Ockham and Buridan do admit the possibility of radical divine deception — which is a version of Demon skepticism — and they are indeed committed up to a point to the theoretical possibility of what Klima calls a BIV. If successful, then, Klima's

argument in support of thesis (B) yields a *reductio ad absurdum* of one central tenet of late-medieval nominalism.

(C) There is in medieval philosophy another variety of content externalism that does avoid Demon skepticism, that of Aquinas namely.

The central notion here is what Peter King has aptly dubbed ‘conformality’. The conformality account of cognition is the idea that at the basic level of simple cognitive units — such as concepts —, the very *form* of the cognized objects is present within the cognizer, although with a different mode of being. On this account, as Klima writes, “a simple cognitive act is the form of the object received in the cognitive subject according to the nature and capacity of the subject, in a mode of being different from the mode of being of the object” [Klima 2009, 247]. According to this approach, the connection between a concept and its objects is one of identity, not real identity of course, but *formal* identity. And this is enough, Klima claims, to exorcise Demon skepticism, since formal identity, whatever it is, is not a contingent relation : “those that are formally the same”, he says, “are essentially related, by essential similarity. *If* these things exist, *then* they necessarily are of the same kind, by *logical necessity*” [*ibid.* ; with Klima’s italics]. This conformality account of conceptual cognition was inspired by certain passages from Aristotle, and also by Avicenna. Klima, somewhat controversially, attributes it — with several other commentators, I must say — to Thomas Aquinas, and concludes that Aquinas’s conformalist epistemology avoids the pitfall of late-medieval nominalism, since, in contrast with late-medieval nominalism, it is not committed to even the mere theoretical possibility of the existence of BIVs endowed with only nonveridical concepts.

In Klima’s view, though, the conformalist epistemology does not amount to the rejection of content externalism, since it is itself a variety of content externalism. It can even be labelled, according to Klima, as “a sort of strong externalism about mental acts”, being “characterized by the idea that the *reality* of the objects of our simple cognitive acts along with their *genealogy* is part and parcel of their identity conditions” [Klima 2009, 248 ; with Klima’s italics]. We thus have, in this view, two varieties of content externalism in late-medieval philosophy, one of which — the nominalist one — is claimed to have slipped into inconsistent commitments because it regarded the relation between concepts and their objects as contingent, while the other

one — the Thomistic one — avoids this pitfall by resorting to a conformalist account of cognition which takes the cognitive relation to be an essential and necessary relation.

## 2. Nonveridical concepts

Before I turn to a critical discussion of Klima's arguments, let me pause a bit in order to reflect on the intriguing idea of a nonveridical concept, which is so crucial to Klima's line of reasoning. The main issue in the whole discussion, according to Klima, is whether BIVs *in his sense* are possible or not ; and what he defines as a BIV, as we saw, is a thinking subject having *only* nonveridical concepts, concepts, that is, that do not represent what they appear to represent. This idea, however, is not crystal-clear — at least not to me — and requires a few more explanations.

A first thing to note about it is that it is somewhat surprising that Klima should thus make Demon skepticism rest on the nonveridicality of concepts, taken as simple cognitive units, rather than on the nonveridicality of beliefs. Most versions of Demon skepticism that I am familiar with require only the possibility that most or many of our beliefs should be false. If this is a possibility indeed, and if we can't securely exclude that such a possibility is actualized in our own case, then we cannot be said to *know* any of these propositions that could be false, however strongly we believe them. This, I take it, is the gist of Demon skepticism as usually understood. But the possibility that all, or most, or many, of our beliefs should be false do not require in turn that all the concepts that occur in such possibly false beliefs should themselves be nonveridical in Klima's sense.

It was a common place of Aristotelian and medieval semantics that truth and falsehood in the strict sense occur only where there is a composition of different concepts within a propositional structure, whether affirmative or negative [see e.g. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* E, 4, 1027b18-22]. Mistakes, then, are possible only at the level of propositional contents, and not at the mere level of simple conceptual contents. And this holds for late-medieval nominalism as well as for more traditional approaches such as Aquinas's or Scotus's. Ockham, in addition, clearly distinguishes between a judgement and the mere apprehension of a propositional content [e.g. *Ordinatio*, Prol., quest. 1, art. 1, *Op. Theol.* I, 16], a judgement in his terminology being the *assent* which a cognitive agent gives to a proposition. Yet the same proposition, as Ockham

acknowledges, could be thought — or apprehended — by the same cognitive subject without assent or dissent. In such cases no mistake could occur. A mistake is possible only where there are judgements — or beliefs, if you prefer.

Now, it could be the case in this view that all or most of one's beliefs should be mistaken, even if the cognitive agent is perfectly capable of thinking — or apprehending — true propositions and, a fortiori, non misleading concepts. Actually, the very possibility of having a mistaken belief does require, within the compositional framework of medieval semantics, that the mistaken cognitive subject should at least be capable of thinking — or apprehending — certain true propositions, as many true propositions, indeed, as he has false beliefs, since, given the systematicity of mental language, the agent should, for any false proposition that he believes, be capable of thinking the negation of this proposition, even if he doesn't believe this negation to be true.

And nothing in the late-medieval nominalists's explicit acceptance of certain forms of Demon skepticism directly prevents the mistakenly believed propositions or their (thinkable) negations to be made up out of perfectly good concepts. Consider, for instance, the most famous passage where Ockham admits of the possibility of divine deception even in the simplest sort of perceptual judgement such as 'there is a man here' or 'there is something white in front of me' [Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions* V, 5]. What happens in such cases of divine deception, according to Ockham, is that God *directly* causes within the cognitive agent an 'act of believing', a judgemental act, which is an assent to the false proposition. But this in no way requires that the false proposition which is thus assented to be constituted of misleading concepts, since the constitutive concepts in such a case play no causal role whatsoever in the production of the assent. The assent being directly produced by God, nothing is required from the constitutive concepts. They could indeed be as good, as concepts go, as any other old concepts !

So it is a bit surprising that Klima should so strongly link Demon skepticism with the nonveridicality of concepts, let alone with the possibility that *all* of our concepts should be nonveridical. This is not how Demon skepticism usually goes, and it is not required in particular by the way medieval — especially nominalist — hypotheses about radical divine deception were formulated.

However relevant it is for clarifying the whole issue, this observation, nevertheless, must not be taken to jeopardize Klima's main point. Klima's point is that whether they're explicit about it or not, late-medieval nominalists were *committed* to the possibility of thinking subjects endowed only with nonveridical concepts, while such thinking subjects are logically impossible. So keeping in mind the important distinctions just mentioned between concepts and mental propositions on the one hand, and between judgements — or beliefs — and the mere uncommitted entertaining of thoughts on the other hand, we still have to scrutinize a bit further the very idea of a nonveridical concept.

In his book, Klima remains laconic about it. But one thing that is clearly implied by his definitions of a veridical concept as a concept which represents what it appears to represent, and of a nonveridical concept as one that does not represent what it appears to represent, is that natural kind concepts at least, whether veridical or not, normally have two aspects to them : they represent, and they appear to represent. How this distinction is to be cashed out has been further explained by Klima in a paper he gave last May at a conference on skepticism and externalism held in Montreal [= the IV<sup>th</sup> Montreal Workshop on Nominalism]. Klima then resorted to a distinction I had myself held Ockham to be committed to in my book *Ockham on Concepts* and, more explicitly, in my forthcoming paper “Ockham's Externalism”. I insisted there that Ockham, like most medieval philosophers, remained committed across all of his philosophical works to the idea that a categorematic concept — or even an intuitive act for that matter — is normally a *similitude* of a number of external things. But I also insisted that this similitude does not uniquely determine the extension of the concept for Ockham. In the case of a simple natural kind concept in particular, the extension of this concept in a given mind, from an Ockhamistic point of view, is determined by which singular thing — or things — originally caused its formation in this mind, and this extension includes this singular original cause or causes plus everything that is essentially equivalent to this cause, everything, in other words, that is cospecific — or cogeneric, according to the case at hand — with this original singular cause. So there is, on the one hand, what the concept is a similitude of, and on the other hand, what it has in its extension. And those two groups need not necessarily coincide. In “Ockham's Externalism”, I further surmised that the similitude aspect of a natural kind concept should best be understood within an Ockhamistic framework — and although Ockham is far from explicit about it — as a recognition schema, the function of which being to help the cognitive agent to

categorize things as falling or not under the said concept. Now this is the distinction Klima said in Montreal he wanted to use. Considered as a mental unit, a natural kind concept, on this account, has an extension on the one hand — which is what, in Klima’s parlance, it ‘represents’ — and it incorporates on the other hand a recognition schema which inclines the cognitive agent to judgemental acts applying the concept to whatever it is that fits this schema — those things that fit the schema being, in Klima’s vocabulary, what the concept ‘appears to represent’.

A nonveridical concept, then, is a concept with a recognition schema that does not suit the things that belong to its extension (if any).

As I understand the distinction between the extension of the concept and the recognition schema it incorporates, it would be normal, though, for any substance concept at least, that its recognition schema should not perfectly suit its extension. Insofar as the recognition schema has to do with perceptible, and mostly accidental features of the objects, while their belonging or not to the extension of the natural kind concept depends on their internal essential nature, there is bound to be in most normal cases a discrepancy to some degree between the extension of the concept and the set of things that fit its recognition schema. And it is to be presumed indeed, in such an account, that extensionally equivalent concepts are associated with different — and non equivalent — recognition schemata in different singular minds. From a late-medieval nominalist perspective, a concept always is a singular thing in a singular mind : a singular quality actually. And for both Ockham and Buridan, the meaning of a natural kind concept is nothing but its extension : the concept ‘horse’ signifies horses, and nothing else. Two cognitive subjects, then, are said to have the ‘same’ natural kind concept, not when they literally share a given single mental quality, but when the two of them have, each in his own mind, extensionally equivalent mental concepts. Nothing prevents, however, each of these concepts to incorporate a different recognition schema, with one of these schemata being more efficient than the other : a seasonal birdwatcher, after all, is more efficient than a beginner in correctly categorizing a given bird as a warbler, say, or as a nuthatch. Which is to say that the seasoned birdwatcher’s recognition schema for warblers or nuthatches better suits the extension of these concepts than the beginners’s recognition schema.

Yet even the seasoned birdwatcher might be misled in some cases — by very well imitated robots, for instance. The presumption is that the recognition schema associated with a concept within a particular mind very rarely suits exactly the extension of this concept, and most human mental concepts thus end up being nonveridical up to a point. I take it that what Klima wants his BIVs to be equipped with are nonveridical concepts of a worst kind than this, concepts, that is, with associated recognition schemata that would mislead the cognitive agent in *most* cases, or maybe in *all* cases. As we can see, there is room here for further precisions to be brought, but I'll settle for concluding at this point that a nonveridical concept in Klima's sense is a mental unit endowed with a (possibly null) extension and incorporating — or associated with — a *systematically* misleading recognition schema, a recognition schema, that is, that systematically inclines the cognitive agent towards false categorization judgements. And a BIV in Klima's sense will be a thinking subject having *only* such misleading concepts in his mind.

### **3. Conformality and Demon skepticism**

This being clarified, we can now come back to Klima's three theses. I'll take them in the reverse order, as this will prove more illuminating. Let us start, then, with thesis (C), according to which the conformality approach to cognitive content efficiently eschews Demon skepticism. There is a number of things to be said here.

First, I have very strong doubts about the attribution of the conformality account of cognition to Aquinas. It is true that Aquinas sometimes says things such as “cognition takes place insofar as what is cognized is within the cognizer” [S. *theol.* I, 6, 1]. But when he gets serious about explaining what it means for the cognized thing to be within the cognizer, he is usually very explicit that this means nothing but that the cognized thing is represented within the cognizer by some similitude of it : “what is intellected”, he says — and by this he means essential forms — “is not in the intellect by itself, but through its similitude” [S. *theol.* I, 76, 2, *ad 4*]. Or again : “something is cognized insofar as it is *represented* in the cognizer, and not insofar as it is existing in the cognizer” [De *Verit.* II, 5]. Note that he does not merely say in this passage that the cognized thing is not cognized insofar as it *really* exists in the cognizer, but that it is not cognized insofar as it exists in the cognizer, period. No relevant distinctions among modes of

existence are suggested here. What ultimately accounts for cognition in Aquinas is not some sort of identity, but representational similitude.

And he is very explicit, in addition, that representational similitude does not require in any way the sharing of a nature, as the conformality account wants it. See *In Sent.* IV, 49, 2, 1, *ad 7* : “ Between the cognizer and the cognized thing is not required a similitude by concordance in a nature, but by representation only : for it is clear that the form of the stone within the soul is of an entirely different nature than the form of the stone in the matter, but it is insofar as it represents it that it is the principle leading to its cognition ”.

Admittedly, this is a controversial issue in the interpretation of Aquinas. I have myself given my own reading in a 2001 paper [“ Aquinas on Intellectual Representation ”, in D. Perler (ed.). *Ancient and Medieval Theories of Intentionality*, Leiden : Brill, 185-201]. See also for a more recent nonconformalist reading of Aquinas : Jeffrey Brower and Susan Brower-Toland, “ Aquinas on Mental Representation : Concepts and Intentionality ” [in *The Philosophical Review* 2008, 193-243].

On the other hand, however, it seems to be the case that the conformalist account of cognition has been defended indeed by some other late-medieval authors, albeit less important ones. In his paper at the Parma conference of last June, the French scholar Aurélien Robert has quoted little known texts, especially by the Italian Averroist Angelo of Arezzo, that do seem to be quite clear about that [an edition of the most relevant texts in Angelo of Arezzo by Aurélien Robert is forthcoming in *Mediaevalia Philosophica Polonorum*]. So whether Aquinas’s or not, the conformalist account of cognition was voiced in medieval philosophy ; and although most probably not genuinely Thomistic, it might be worth discussing it, especially if it has the virtues Klima claims it has.

A second thing I want to say about Klima’s thesis (C) is that I also have strong reservations about classifying the conformality account of cognition as a variety of content externalism, let alone as a form of *strong* content externalism, as Klima does. Klima’s point is that in the conformality account, the “ *reality* of the objects of our simple cognitive acts along with their *genealogy* [their causal genealogy, that is] as part and parcel of their identity conditions ” [Klima 2009, 248]. This would be unproblematically externalist if it simply meant that for any mental

unit to be an instance of the concept of *rabbit*, say, it needs to have been caused by real rabbits, just as for anybody to be the son of Noah, he needs to have been engendered by a really existing Noah. But Klima needs more than that. In order for the relation between what is in the cognizer and the cognized thing to be *logically* necessary, as he insists, or metaphysically necessary — as opposed to mere natural necessity or linguistic necessity —, it must be essential for whatever is in the mind to be the very thing that it is, that it should have this very object. But this is a form of strong *internalism* rather than externalism. For a doctrine of cognitive content to be a brand of externalism, as I understand it, it must allow for the possibility that two different cognitive subjects be in maximally similar internal states while entertaining different cognitive contents. But if the connection between the internal states of the cognitive agent and their objects is logically or metaphysically necessary, as the conformalist account claims it to be, then it would seem to be impossible that two different cognitive subjects should be in the same internal states while entertaining different cognitive contents. The conformity account, therefore, is not a form of content externalism, as I think the label is usually employed. This, of course, might be a mere question of terminology, but in the context of a symposium on varieties of externalism, it seems to have some relevance.

A third point I would like to make about thesis (C) is that *even if* the conformity account should succeed in eschewing Demon skepticism in Klima's very strong sense, as he claims — and we'll come back to that in a moment —, it is doubtful that it can counter the most usual forms of Demon skepticism that we meet with in the literature, especially when the conformity account is coupled with a theology of God's omnipotency. Let us not forget that medieval authors — Aquinas included — would standardly distinguish between having or producing a concept as a simple cognitive unit, and judging or believing that something is or is not the case. So even if a given cognitive subject should have only veridical concepts inclining him to true judgements, the judgements of that cognitive subject could still end up being mostly false — or even being all of them false — if some intervening cause should occur that would prevent the subject to give his assent to the propositions that his concepts would incline him to accept, and that would cause him to give his assent instead to some other — false — propositions. Especially in a context where God's omnipotency is taken to be a dogma, I don't see how the possibility of being radically deceived could be neutralized, even for a subject having veridical concepts in Klima's sense, concepts, that is, that represent exactly what they appear to represent.

But now the main thing to be said about thesis (C) is that, as far as I can see, the conformality account will not succeed anyway in eschewing even Klima's very strong form of Demon skepticism. It cannot neutralize, that is, the possibility of a cognitive agent having only — or mostly — nonveridical concepts. Here is why. A concept, as we saw, is nonveridical when it is associated somehow with a misleading recognition schema that inclines the thinking subject to give his assent to false judgements, especially false categorization judgements. Now, however you think of it, not even a conformalist can reasonably claim that a natural kind concept should *necessarily* be associated in human beings with a non misleading recognition schema. Recognition schemata can vary from one person to the other, and some of them can be more misleading than others. This suggests that the connection between the extension of a given natural kind concept in a human mind and the recognition schema that this person uses for identifying things as falling or not under the said concept, is *contingent*. And the contingency of this link is decisively confirmed in the case of natural kind concepts for external material things by the fact that categorization judgements in such cases are normally based on perception, and human perception is normally sensitive to *accidental* features of the perceived objects, such as their colour, their size, their way of moving, and so on. Being perceptual, such recognition schemata do not directly reach the essential features of the objects. This is something that medieval philosophers standardly acknowledged. And even a conformalist has to admit that the link is contingent in human beings between what a concept represents — its extension — and what it appears to represent. The conformalist, of course, might say that the recognition schema is not normally part of the concept itself in human beings, but that it is externally associated with it. But he can't reasonably deny that the recognition schema, whether internal or external to the concept itself, is but contingently connected with what the concept represents. And if *this* link is contingent, then the conformalist is no better off than the nominalist in eschewing the very possibility of systematic discrepancies in any human mind between what a given concept represents and the categorization judgements that its associated recognition schema inclines the thinking subject to. Especially with an omnipotent God around...

#### **4. Autopsy of an alleged contradiction**

Let us now turn to Klima's thesis (B), according to which the very idea of a BIV is conceptually unacceptable since it leads to a contradiction. This, as we saw, is the mainpiece of

Klma's attack on late-medieval nominalism. It rests on a complex argument in eight steps. Here is this argument (as given by Klma 2009, 255-256) :

- (1) A thought meant to express an actual state of affairs, whoever forms it, can be true only if it contains no nonveridical concepts (this is taken by Klma to be ‘self-evident’ ; we’ll come back to this claim in a minute).
- (2) A thought meant to express an actual state of affairs, whoever forms it, is true if and only if it expresses an actual state of affairs (also taken to be self-evident).
- (3) A BIV has no veridical concepts (by Klma’s own definition of what a BIV is).
- (4)  $s$  is a BIV (this is precisely the hypothesis the possibility of which is to be tested).
- (5) Then, the thought that  $s$  is a BIV, whoever forms it, is true (by 2 and 4).
- (6) So, the thought that  $s$  is a BIV, formed by  $s$ , is true (by universal instantiation from 5).
- (7) But the thought that  $s$  is a BIV, formed by  $s$ , contains no veridical concepts (by 3 and 4).
- (8) So the thought that  $s$  is a BIV, formed by  $s$ , is not true (by 1 and 7).

And now we have reached a contradiction, between (6) and (8) namely. Since (1) and (2) are taken to be self-evident, and (3) is true by definition, and (5) to (8) follow from the rest by noncontroversial logical inferences, the problem must be with (4), according to Klma, namely with the hypothesis that there exists a BIV.

What are we to think of this argument ? Well first and foremost, I see no reason to accept premiss (1), which Klma takes to be self-evident. The truth of most elementary propositions in medieval semantics — and in any good semantics for that matter — depends on the relation between the extension of the subject and the extension of the predicate. This is what medieval logicians such as Ockham and Buridan worked out in terms of the so-called ‘supposition-theory’ (theory of *suppositio*). A proposition such as ‘all As are Bs’, for example, was said to be true if and only if all the supposita of the subject are among the supposita of the predicate, if and only if, in other words, the extension of the subject is included in the extension of the predicate. This

is a matter of what the subject and the predicate represent. The truth of a proposition in no way depends on what the subject and predicate appear to represent. But nonveridical concepts, in Klima's sense, are deficient only in that they do not represent what they appear to represent. Which is simply irrelevant for the truth or falsehood of the propositions in which they occur.

Of course, it might be relevant as to whether the thinking subject endowed with such nonveridical concepts will *believe* a certain proposition or not. But premiss (1) is not about believing, it is about the very possibility of the truth of certain propositions. Premiss (1), then, not only is not self-evident, but it is straightforwardly false. Since it is crucial for the derivation of (8), the whole argument as it is collapses.

One problem with the argument as Klima formulates it, is that it has to do only with the possibility of forming certain propositions and with their truth or falsehood, and never with the matter of believing these propositions or not. But given the systematicity of human thought, whoever can form a false proposition can also form a true one, simply by negating the former proposition (whether he believes any of them or not). If a BIV was unable to form any true proposition, he would be unable to form any false ones as well, and he could barely be said to be a thinking subject at all.

Now, we might try to reformulate the argument in terms of judgement or belief rather than in terms of the mere capacity to form propositions. Yet I don't think it would work any better. We could try for example to replace premiss (1) with something like :

(1') A thought meant to express an actual state of affairs can be believed by a thinking subject who forms it, only if it contains no nonveridical concept.

But that wouldn't work either. For one thing, we would have to introduce somewhere in the reasoning the assertion that *s* — the BIV — *believes* that he himself is a BIV. But that in no way follows from the mere hypothesis that *s* is a BIV. Certainly, most BIVs, if there are any, don't believe that they are BIVs (*we* certainly don't believe that we are BIVs, whether we are or not). And anyway, there is no reason whatsoever to accept the truth of premiss (1'). A thinking subject might be led to give his assent to any proposition, including propositions containing nonveridical concepts. He might, for example, be caused to do so by God !

My conclusion, then, is that Klima has not shown — and has no good prospect for showing — that the possibility of a BIV as he understands it leads to contradiction. Late-medieval nominalism, insofar as it is committed to this possibility, is thus left unshaken.

## 5. Late-medieval nominalism and BIVs

But now, is late-medieval nominalism really committed to the possibility of BIVs in this strong sense, as claimed by thesis (A). Actually, I think it is, up to a point. But this commitment, as far as I can see, ends up being philosophically allright.

First, as I mentioned earlier, there is a variety of Demon skepticism that the late-medieval nominalists would typically concede, and that does not require that the deceived subjects should be BIVs in Klima's sense. Ockham saliently insisted, as we saw, that God could directly produce in any created thinking subject an assent to any false proposition about what exists or does not exist in the immediate environment of the subject. As such, this is entirely compatible with the constitutive concepts of those false propositions being veridical in Klima's sense. Since these concepts would then play no causal role at all with respect to what the agent assents to in the situation, whatever it is that they incline the subject to is irrelevant.

Yet, this is not the end of the matter. Both Adam Wodeham — a pupil of Ockham who became one of the leading nominalist figures of his time — and John Buridan — who was tremendously influent — concede the possibility that we be radically deceived by God's supernatural intervention. But the way they describe such deceitful situations is a bit more complex than what we have in Ockham. Wodeham, for one, concedes that any created intellect “can be deceived about any contingent truth concerning external things”, because whatever belief is caused in the subject either by God *or by nature*, God can arrange or rearrange external things so that this belief turns out false [*Lectura secunda in primum librum Sententiarum*, Prol., quest. 6, 16, R. Wood ed., St. Bonaventure, 1990, 169]. It is true that this possibility is explicitly limited by Wodeham to contingent beliefs about external things ; he insists immediately after that some of our judgements about our own soul are infallible, such as ‘I am’ or ‘I live’. But the point I want to stress now is that the way the deceiving, when it occurs, is supposed to work in this Wodeham passage, is quite different from what we had in Ockham. God here does not simply cause a false belief in the victim. He rearranges some of the external things themselves so

that one or more of the beliefs of the agent, *however they were caused*, become false. And this brings us much closer to what Klima's BIVs are supposed to endure.

Buridan illustrates the same point in his development on knowledge in his *Summulae de Dialectica* (translated in English by Gyula Klima). Suppose, he says, that I have been naturally caused to give my assent to the true judgement that 'the sun is bright', and that as a consequence of such a non-misleading natural process I still believe at nine o'clock that 'the sun is bright'. But now suppose that unbeknown to be, God, in the meanwhile, has extinguished the sun. My belief, then, even if it was formed by a reliable natural process, now has become false, due to this supernatural intervention. God's intervention in this case, contrary to what we had in Ockham, does not consist in directly inducing in me the false belief, but in changing the external objects of the belief so that it becomes false.

Does *that* open the way to the possibility of BIVs as thesis (A) wants it ? Well, up to a point, yes. Let us suppose that I have acquired my concept of a rabbit in the usual natural way by meeting with real rabbits. I have thus been led to incorporate in — or associate with — this concept a reliable recognition schema. But now suppose God changes the world by removing all rabbits from it and replacing them by robots that strikingly look like rabbits. All my categorization judgements of the form 'this is a rabbit' would thus be false, and there would now be a systematic discrepancy between what my concept of rabbit represents, namely rabbits, and what it appears to represent in the modified world, namely robots. Which is to say that my concept of rabbit, even if it was naturally acquired in normal circumstances, has become a nonveridical concept. Suppose now that this situation is generalized to all my natural kind concepts : I will have become a BIV ! Late-medieval nominalists are indeed committed to such a possibility.

It has to be noted, though, that the extent of my being deceived would not, even in this unfortunate situation, be as radical as Klima thinks it should be in the case of what he takes to be a BIV. For one thing, as I hinted at earlier, both Wodeham and Buridan limit the mistaken beliefs I would be led to have by my possession of such nonveridical concepts to contingent beliefs about external things. Wodeham excludes from such fallible beliefs my belief that I myself exist, or that I live. As to Buridan, he explicitly excludes from the threat of such deception beliefs

consisting of terms that supposit for God [*Summulae de dialectica* 8.4.4., transl. Klima (2001), 709], presumably because God cannot remove himself from existence as he can do with rabbits. And he also excludes (somewhat more tentatively) beliefs consisting of terms taken in what he calls ‘natural supposition’ [*ibid.*], such as the belief that rabbits are animals, which remains true independently of the actual existence of rabbits. When its terms are taken in natural supposition, a proposition such as ‘rabbits are animals’ comes down to ‘if something is a rabbit, then it’s an animal’ which remains true even if God annihilates all rabbits.

The sceptical hypotheses conceded to be theologically possible by Wodeham and Buridan are not as radical, then, as Klima’s Demon skepticism, since the deceived subjects would still have in these hypotheses *some* true beliefs — and even some knowledge —, as well as some *not entirely* misleading concepts, such as the concept of being or the concept of a living thing. Of course, God being omnipotent, he could simply suppress those true beliefs and those not entirely misleading concepts from the mental apparatus of his victims, who would then be true BIVs in Klima’s most radical sense : they would be thinking subjects endowed *only* with systematically misleading concepts and having only false beliefs. But they would also by the same tack be severely impoverished thinking subjects of a sort that we are not, and that we need not worry about.

Still, it is true that we cannot exclude, on the nominalists’s hypotheses, the possibility that we should be supernaturally deceived by God to a very large extent about contingent extramental matters, especially in our categorization judgements such as ‘this is a rabbit’, ‘this is a man’, ‘this is an animal’, and so on. But how philosophically damaging is this concession to Demon skepticism, if Klima’s thesis (B) — about the contradiction entailed by the admission of BIVs — is renounced, as I think it should be ?

After all, as Klima himself neatly explains in his Buridan book, Buridan has a clear answer to this sort of skepticism. It is that although we cannot entirely exclude the possibility of radical supernatural deception, we can disregard it in the course of doing natural sciences or metaphysics, as well as in the normal course of human affairs. Many propositions that we firmly believe, such as that the sun is bright, are such that they “cannot be falsified by any natural power or by any manner of natural operation” [*Summulae de dialectica* 8.4.4., 709], at least not

without our noticing it. And the sort of natural certainty that we can attain with respect to such propositions is all we need for having *knowledge* in natural sciences and in human affairs. In the relevant sense, therefore, scientific knowledge and moral knowledge are unproblematically within our reach despite the supernatural possibility of divine deception.

In the context, this seems to me to be a perfectly good answer, especially within an externalist framework. We can be attributed knowledge with respect to those of our firm beliefs that were acquired in ways which are *in fact* reliable in the current natural order, to the point that we can safely exclude all relevant natural alternatives. The remaining alternatives, then — those of a supernatural sort or those wild possibilities in favour of which we have no indication whatsoever — can simply be disregarded as irrelevant with respect to the sort of knowledge we're after, even though they are not logically or theologically impossible. Klima is dissatisfied with this answer because he thinks that it leads to a contradiction on the one hand, and that, on the other hand, we have another doctrine available, even in medieval philosophy, that can do better in countering skepticism, namely Thomism. Those are the theses I have labelled (B) and (C). But since we have found reasons to reject both these theses, we can settle, I guess, for the Buridianian externalist reply to Demon skepticism. The world being as it is, and our concepts having the causal genealogy that they do have, we can rest reassured that most of them are not *de facto* systematically nonveridical, even if they could be if God badly enough wanted it so. The recognition schema naturally associated with a given concept is usually quite reliable because it has been implemented by way of those very natural causal connections that determined the extension of the concept. Since the extension of my concept of rabbit was determined by my natural contacts with rabbits, and since rabbits usually look like rabbits, my concept of rabbit will most probably end up representing what it appears to represent. Philosophers cannot reasonably ask for much more.

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