Is Ockham off the hook?

In his admirably clear, beautifully argued study, Claude Panaccio has provided an able defense of Ockham's position in response to an argument I presented against Ockham in a discussion with Peter King eight years ago at a meeting in Pittsburgh.[1] But after eight years, and even after Claude's book, I still stand by that argument. So, in these comments I will attempt to explain why I think Ockham may still not be off the hook.

Suppose one beautiful morning you turn on the radio and you hear the voice of George W. Bush announcing his resignation on live broadcast. (Well, I guess, this is what masters of rhetoric would call *captatio benevolentiae*.)

Since you hear on the radio what the president is actually saying, you can be said to have an act of intuitive cognition of the man talking. Obviously, this cognition is mediated by the entire apparatus of radio broadcast, from microphone to transmitter to relay stations to your receiver. Still, you hear the president's voice as he speaks, just as you would hear him by the mediation of the air if he were standing in front of you. It does not really matter what physical medium and how exactly conveys the information about the perceived object as long as we can say that the act of cognition is actually generated by the object through this medium. Indeed, it is precisely this actual causal link that renders the act of cognition an actual representation (or rather the actual *presentation*) of that single object to the perceiver. As Claude has carefully pointed out, what renders an act of cognition an actual representation or "likeness" of its object is *not* (necessarily) some qualitative similarity in the ordinary sense of a shared quality, or even the essential similarity connecting members of the same species; it is rather the "similarity" in an extended sense that is the result of *receiving information* from the object on account of the *action* of the object *on* an appropriately disposed *recipient*. But in *this sense* of similarity even the radio waves encoding the president's voice are certainly a similarity and a representation of that voice: their amplitude or frequency modulation encodes precisely the modulation of air vibrations generated by the president's speech organs. This is the reason why those modulations of radio waves provide a "blueprint"—to use Elizabeth Karger's happy phrase—for the generation of an exact copy of the represented object, as is clear from the fact that this is precisely what happens in a radio receiver. It receives the radio waves and decodes them into sound waves that are the exact copies of the sound waves generated by the president's speech organs. So, the radio waves are similitudes and representations of the president's voice in the requisite sense, but certainly not on account of the sort of *ordinary* qualitative similarity that would exist between the president's voice and the voice of another man, whose voice may be accidentally so similar to the president's that upon hearing him no-one would be able to tell that it is not the president speaking. Still, that mere qualitative similarity would not render that man's voice a representation of the president's voice any more than one egg

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[1] Panaccio, C. *Ockham on Concepts*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, see esp. pp. 133-136. Cf. <u>Comments</u> on Peter King: "<u>The Failure of Ockham's Nominalism</u>".

or one billiard ball is a representation of another, just because they are similar. In general, as this example shows, qualitative similarity is certainly not sufficient for representation.

So, what are the relationships between Bush's voice, the accidentally Bush-voice-like voice, and the radio waves representing Bush's voice?

The accidentally similar voice is certainly *not* a representation of Bush's voice. And the radio waves certainly *are* representations of Bush's voice, because they are actually encoding Bush's voice. They represent Bush's voice precisely because they actually transfer information about the object represented by them, and so in the appropriate receiver they can even produce an exact copy of the represented object, qualitatively similar to it.

So, the relevant notion of similarity, let me call it "representational similarity", is the *similarity resulting from the transfer of information from object to recipient*, which in an appropriately equipped recipient may even result in its ability to generate a copy, qualitatively or essentially similar to the original object. But *this sort of similarity* can only yield a *singular* representation, given that the action that yields the transfer of information has to be the particular action of a particular agent on a particular recipient. So, how can we possibly get *universal* representations, as intellectual concepts are supposed to be, in such a process?

At this point, Ockham and Claude assure us that universality is not a problem; indeed, it is rather the *singularity* of a representation that is problematic. After all, the same representation that is representationally similar to the singular object that caused it is indifferently and equally similar to all other, qualitatively or essentially similar objects. To quote Claude's formulation: "… the posture of a hand [holding a ball, or just remaining in this posture after holding it] is a similitude, in the required sense, of every (possible) singular object which is relevantly equivalent with the one that originally caused it. This is, I believe, Ockham's basic intuition on the matter." (p. 125.)

But this move seems unjustified on both authors' part. For the crucial question here is whether this indifference or non-distinctiveness of a representation is sufficient to make it a genuinely universal representation of all "relevantly equivalent" singulars.

Suppose the man whose voice is accidentally so similar to George Bush's voice that it is impossible to determine by just listening which one of them speaks is kidnapped by pranksters (or "terrorists"), and is made to read the text of the president's resignation at the radio-station, simultaneously with the president's speech, while the president's mike gets turned off. The radio-station will now broadcast radio waves that are indistinguishable from the radio waves that otherwise would be broadcasting the president's speech. So the radio waves are indifferent similitudes of both the president's voice and the voice of the "sound-alike". Yet, they obviously encode only the sound-alike's voice. Now suppose further that the same types of radio waves are generated electronically, without encoding *any* actual voice, because both speakers' mikes get turned off. In this case the same types of radio waves are indifferently similar to both voices in the same way as they would be if they were actually generated by either voice, although they are *not* actually generated by either. In each of these cases the same types of radio waves are broadcast, which are therefore indifferently similar to both the president's speech and to the sound-alike's. Still, I think it is clear that those radio waves

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are representations of the president's speech *only* when they are actually generated by the president's speech. If those radio waves were not encoding the president's actual speech, then *the broadcast would constitute fraud*, precisely because it would *not* represent the president's speech. It would be a representation of the speech of the "sound-alike" or it would be no representation of any speech at all, if it were generated electronically without encoding any actual human voice. But it would certainly *not* be a representation of the president's speech, even if it might be indistinguishable from the broadcast of the president's speech, if that speech were actually broadcast.

Furthermore, suppose the sound-alike's speech is recorded and broadcast later, after both the president and the sound-alike stopped speaking. I think it is clear that in this case the broadcast of the recording of the sound-alike's voice would not become a universal representation of the president's and the sound-alike's voice just because the sound-alike stopped speaking. Rather, it would still be a singular representation of the sound-alike's speech that took place in the past. So, despite what Ockham and Claude say about "the first abstractive cognition", the mere cutting off of the actual causal link between an otherwise indifferent representation and the object that generated it cannot render this representation a universal representation of all "relevantly equivalent" objects. To be sure, the resulting representation, be it an act of memory or a tape recording, may be "indifferent", and so it would not allow a listener to discern whose speech it represents. Nevertheless, it would still not be a universal representation of both speeches, but rather only of the speech that it actually recorded. This is precisely why the broadcast of a taped recording of the sound-alike's voice could not count as *evidence* for the fact that Bush resigned even if he *did* read the same speech, but in an isolated studio with his mike turned off.

Based on these considerations, I conclude that the mere *indifference* of some representation, along with the lack of an actual causal link to the object that generated it, is *not sufficient* for the *universality* of this representation. But then, what is?

I'm afraid Ockham does not really tell us (and the reason for this may well-be his "proto-pragmatism", recently characterized as such by Peter King).[2] But his fellow-nominalist John Buridan does, in the following passage:

> 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,

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[2] Peter King: Le rôle des concepts selon Ockham, forthcoming in *Philosophiques*. An English version is available here: http://individual.utoronto.ca/pking/presentations/Ockham_on_Concepts.pdf

namely, the concept from which the name 'man' is taken. And this is to understand universally.[3]

Buridan is apparently arguing here from the transitivity of similarity. Since a concept D of a thing A is similar to A and A is similar to things B and C; therefore, the concept D will be similar to, and hence equally representative of, things B and C. However, this otherwise valid scheme is vitiated by the equivocation of the notion of similarity. For whereas concept D is *representationally* similar to A; things A, B and C are *qualitatively* or *essentially* similar to one another. (In fact, to simplify things I may add here that qualitative similarity is reducible to essential similarity, for two things are qualitatively similar if and only if each has a quality such that those qualities are essentially similar. So, in what follows let me deal only with essential similarity.) The question then is why Buridan thinks that his reasoning works in this passage, given that he cannot appeal to the transitivity of similarity, because the representational similarity of D to A along with the essential similarity of A, B and C in and of itself does not directly imply the representational similarity of D to B and C, as was shown by the case of the radio waves that are representationally similar to the Bush-sound-alike-voice, but not to the qualitatively similar, un-broadcast Bush-voice. I think the reason Buridan thinks his reasoning works is his appeal to the idea of what might be termed the *aspectuality of abstraction*.

The idea is that D can represent B and C on the basis of representing A, because D represents A precisely insofar as A is essentially similar to B and C; in other words, D represents A precisely in that respect in which A is similar to B and C. For if D is a representation of A precisely *in that respect* in which A is essentially similar to B and C, then D is equally a representation of B and C *in the same respect* as well. Before moving on, however, two issues need to be clarified concerning this claim.

First, it has to be clear that claiming that A, B and C are similar in some respect, one does not have to commit oneself to some common "respects" over and above, and distinct from A, B and C. For example, a straight and a curved line of the same length are obviously similar with respect to their length, but not to their shape. Still, we can truly say this, even if we claim that a line is not distinct from its length, for a line just *is* a length without width or depth. In the same way, we certainly *can* say that Socrates is

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[3] "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.

similar to Plato with respect to what he is, namely, with respect to his essence, but not with respect to his accidents, even if we agree with Ockham that Socrates is not distinct from his essence, but he just *is* an individual human essence. But this is precisely what it means to say that Socrates is essentially similar to Plato, without thereby positing some essence or essences distinct from Socrates or Plato.

In the second place, it also has to be clarified how the "aspectuality of abstraction" differs from mere indifference of representation on account of which an abstracted concept, but not a mere indifferent "impression", is capable of truly universal representation of several, "relevantly equivalent" particulars (on the basis of exposure only to some of them). To see this, we need to contrast a merely "indifferent" representation with a truly universal one.

We have seen that a tape recording of the sound-alike's voice (or the radio waves it generates if it is replayed in a studio broadcast) is indifferent to Bush's voice and the sound-alike's voice, although it is *truly a representation only of the latter*. A *truly universal representation* of both voices, indeed, not only of those voices, but also the voices generated by the radio receivers receiving the broadcast of the replay, or even of the tape recording itself, would be expressed by a phrase like 'voice sample type A', where 'type A' would abbreviate a technical description of the modulations characteristic of this type of voice encoded by the recording as well as by the radio waves. The reason why I believe *this* representation would be *truly universal*, and not a merely *indifferent singular* representation, is that it represents any of these voice-samples whether in the past or in the future, whether physically existing in the air or encoded in various media, *precisely with respect to* what renders them voice-samples of the same type (whether it is the same as or distinct from what they are), abstracting from which caused which, when and where.

As the case of the broadcast of the Bush-sound-alike's voice shows, what "singularizes" a singular representation, no matter how indifferent it is, is precisely its causal link to the object that produced it and *not* its (non-distinctive) representational content. And it certainly does not matter here whether the sound-alike is actually speaking or only his recorded voice is broadcast, for the broadcast will *still* be a *singular representation* of *his* voice, and *not Bush's*. So, in general, it does not matter at all whether the causal link between a single object and its singular representation is occurring in the present, or it merely took place in the past. This is precisely one of the insights of the "causal theory" of singular reference, which was also endorsed by Buridan (as Jenny Ashworth has pointed out in a recent paper).[4] Therefore, if one is to produce a universal representation of a number of objects of the same type, then one must "de-singularize" the singular representations one has of objects of that type, which is precisely the process of abstraction. But abstraction can achieve this precisely on account of its *aspectuality*.

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[4] Ashworth, E. J. "Singular terms and singular concepts: from Buridan to the early sixteenth century", in *John Buridan and Beyond: Topics in the Language Sciences 1300-1700*, eds. R. L. Freidmann – S. Ebbesen, Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 2004, pp. 17-32.

However, as I have originally argued in my discussion with Peter, and more recently in *The Review of Metaphysics* in connection with Buridan,[5] this aspectuality is inconsistent with the representative function Ockham and Buridan attribute to absolute concepts.

So, in summary, if there is no universal representation without abstraction in the way Buridan describes it, and abstraction on this understanding is essentially aspectual, and this is indeed incompatible with the semantic function attributed by nominalists to absolute terms, then my argument points to a fundamental inconsistency in nominalist cognitive psychology and semantics in general, including the doctrine of Ockham. Therefore, Ockham can only get off the hook if he denies one of these assumptions, as in fact he does deny the first. But, as I have argued here, I don't think he can plausibly do so, and I don't think Claude's response showed that he can. *Ergo*, Claude still has to convince me that Ockham really is off the hook.

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[5] Klima, G. (2005) "The Essentialist Nominalism of John Buridan", *The Review of Metaphysics*, 58(2005), pp. 301-315.