

Ockham On Mental Propositions¹

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It is well known that for William Ockham, and for many other mediaeval authors, there are three levels of language: written, spoken, and mental. Among the three, mental language is *natural*, while written and spoken languages are *conventional*. In other words, while written or spoken signs vary from one community to another, mental signs are at least ideally the same for all human beings. Written or spoken language is nothing other than a conventional medium for communicating to others the inner thought, the mental speech, that takes place in the speaker's mind. And the significations (meanings) of written and spoken signs are ultimately derived from those of the corresponding parts in mental language. Thus, according to Ockham and his contemporaries, it is of capital importance to study the structures of mental language, if one cares to know the *essential* features of any language at all. However, in this paper I will not offer a sketchy overview of all important features of Ockham's mental language; rather, I want to focus on only one feature of mental language, namely, the metaphysical structure of mental propositions. The question that I'd like to address is this: in Ockham's mental language do mental propositions have constitutive parts?

During the late mediaeval period, the issue concerning the metaphysical structure of mental propositions was a controversial one. One common view, held by John Buridan (and commonly attributed to Ockham), is that a mental proposition has constitutive parts and is composed of mental terms (concepts) in a way similar to a written or spoken proposition. Take, for example, the corresponding mental counterpart of the written proposition "Every man is (an)² animal." According to Buridan, the mental proposition is literally composed of the universal quantifier "every," the concept "man," the mental copula "is," and the concept "animal." The alternative view, as held by Gregory of Rimini and Peter of Ailly,³ is that all mental propositions are structureless mental acts which do not contain constitutive parts.⁴

The current prevailing interpretation of Ockham on this issue is that Ockham holds the former view, that mental propositions have constitutive parts.⁵ There seems to be some textual evidence to support this interpretation; e.g., in *Summa Logicae*, Part I, §1, Ockham says that "The conceptual term is an intention or impression of the soul which signifies or consignifies something naturally and is capable of being a part of a mental proposition ...,"⁶ and that "Thus, these conceptual terms and the propositions composed of them are the mental words which, according to St. Augustine in Chapter 15 of *De Trinitate*, belong to no language,"⁷

and again in *Quodlibet V*, q. 8, he says that "... for every spoken expression, true or false, there corresponds some mental proposition put together out of concepts."⁸ Nevertheless, in at least two places of his *Commentary on Aristotle's De interpretatione I*, Prologue, §6, Ockham seems to espouse the opposite view, where he says:

And if it is said that an act of apprehending or knowing one proposition is not some one simple act, but rather is an act [made up] of many acts, which acts all [together] make up one proposition, [I argue] against this [as follows]: In that case, the propositions 'Every man is an animal' and 'Every animal is a man' would not be distinguished in the mind. For if the latter proposition in the mind is only an act of understanding made up of these particular intellections, [then] since here there cannot be any particular act in the one proposition unless it is in the other one [too], and the difference of word-order does not block [the conclusion] as it blocks it in speech, there doesn't seem to be any way [for the latter proposition] to be distinguished [from the former] in the mind.⁹

And later in the same section, he says:

To the second [argument] many things can be said. One is that a proposition in the mind is one [thing] composed of many acts of understanding ... Alternatively, it can be said that this proposition is one act equivalent to three such acts existing simultaneously in the intellect. In that case, according to this way of talking, a proposition is not something *really* composite, but only by an equivalence – that is, it is equivalent to such a composite.¹⁰

It might be thought that the evidence that we find in the above passages is not very strong, because (1) the above passages are from a commentary, and we should be cautious about taking what Ockham says in a commentary as his own views, where he might be constrained by the views of the text he is commenting on, and (2) even in those two passages it is not clear whether Ockham commits himself to the view (that mental propositions have no constitutive parts) or he just considers it seriously. However, although (1) is a good strategy in general, Ockham probably does mean what he says in the *Commentary*, since he generally makes Aristotle fit his own views anyway. (2) is no doubt true; however, what I try to argue here is not that Ockham does finally commit himself to the view that mental propositions are metaphysically simple, but that he is not resolute all along in holding the view that mental propositions have constitutive parts, and at least in those two passages in

the *Commentary* he shows a salient interest and sympathy toward the "simplicity" view. The long and the short of it is, given those two passages in the *Commentary*, and given the fact that the issue concerning the metaphysical structure of mental propositions was a controversial one at that time, it seems reasonable to extrapolate that Ockham oscillates between the two opposing views.

This said, let's look at the theoretical implications of these two views. And our goal is to find out the view that has less theoretical difficulties and is more compatible with Ockham's general theory, that is, the view to which Ockham *should* commit himself. In what follows I will offer three arguments to support the claim that Ockham *should* commit himself to the view that mental propositions are metaphysically simple, insofar as that view is more compatible with Ockham's overall theory.

The first argument is a brief theological one. Notice that for Ockham mental language is the one in¹ which God thinks. And if mental signs are acts of thinking, they had better be simple. For otherwise if they were not simple, God's thoughts would have to be metaphysically complex – an unwelcome result!

The second argument appeals to the word-order problem and the problem concerning the unity of mental propositions. The word-order problem, mentioned by Ockham and discussed at length by Gregory of Rimini and Peter of Ailly,¹¹ is basically this: if a mental proposition is a complex, i.e., it is composed of simple parts as a written or spoken proposition is and is distinguished *only* by its constituents, then the two spoken (or written) propositions "a cat is on the mat" and "a mat is on the cat" should be subordinate to the same mental proposition, insofar as the two spoken propositions have the same constitutive parts. Yet the two spoken propositions have different truth conditions, and hence, the mental proposition to which they are subordinate cannot be the same.¹² To fix the problem, we need to find the mental counterpart of the word-order that appears in written or spoken language. But the mental word-order cannot be spatial (as the word-order in written language), since the mind is not spatial; and neither can it be temporal (as the word-order in spoken language), since the mind can produce a mental proposition instantaneously, by a "flash of light," according to Gregory and Peter.¹³ But if it is neither spatial nor temporal, what on earth can it be?

Paul Spade, following an anonymous author around the third quarter of the fourteenth century, proposes an interesting account of the mental word-order.¹⁴ In general, Spade's strategy is to reduce the mental word-order to the characteristics of the constituents of the mental proposition, that is, to let the constituents of the mental proposition themselves take care of the mental word-order. His account goes in this way: we register the syntactic information of the word-order (in written or spoken language) in every mental term; e.g., we register the syntactic information of being the subject or predicate in every categorematic mental term, etc..

Thus, to every categorematic term (e.g., “cat”) in the old mental language, there correspond at least two distinct concepts in the new mental language, the subject-concept (“subject-cat”) and the object-concept (“object-cat”). Under this account, to find out the mental word-order of a proposition, we only need to look at the constitutive mental terms in the proposition, which bear the syntactic information on the face of it. Accordingly, the two spoken propositions “a cat is on the mat” and “a mat is on the cat” are subordinate to two *different* mental propositions, since the mental proposition to which the former is subordinate contains the concepts “subject-cat” and “object-mat” (actually it is “object-of-a-proposition-on-the-side-of-the-predicate-mat”), which are different from the concepts “object-cat” and “subject-mat” in the mental proposition to which the latter is subordinate.

It is true that Spade’s suggestion does get around the word-order problem. Nevertheless, his account has some problematic implications. Most salient of all, it follows from his account that *every categorematic term in written or spoken language is necessarily equivocal*, since a spoken categorematic term is subordinate to one concept when it is in the subject position, and subordinate to another when it is in the predicate position. Besides that, in his account it seems that there is no determinate way to construct a theory of synonymy in written or spoken language, since Ockham’s criterion that two spoken terms are synonymous if and only if they are subordinate to the same concept does not work here without qualification. Of course, there are various ways to fix the latter problem; e.g., we can stipulate that two spoken terms be synonymous if the two groups of concepts to which they are subordinate are extensionally the same. However, whatever way we choose to go, it seems that we have to go beyond Ockham. In sum, while these consequences do not disprove Spade’s suggestion, they are bizarre enough to make it unattractive to pursue.

Whether or not a satisfactory account of mental word-order can be worked out, there remains another and even worse problem, the problem concerning the unity of mental propositions. It is this: We know that there is a clear difference between a mere collection of concepts and those concepts *binding together in a certain order* (as a mental proposition). But in Ockham’s mental language, how do we account for this difference, the difference between having a bunch of concepts and having a mental proposition that is *put together* out of those concepts, or in other words, how do we account for the unity of a mental proposition?¹⁵

A natural way to answer these questions is to view a mental proposition as a structure $\langle D, \mathfrak{R} \rangle$, where D is a set of the constitutive concepts in the proposition, and \mathfrak{R} is an ordered sequence of those concepts in D . Under this account \mathfrak{R} takes care of the mental word-order, since \mathfrak{R} contains the information about the positions of those concepts in the composed mental proposition. However, the difficulty is that there seems to be no room for \mathfrak{R} in Ockham’s mental language. For

what kind of entity will \mathfrak{R} be, if it is neither a concept nor a mere collection of concepts?

Another way to answer the above questions is to adopt a Fregean or Russellian approach. The general idea is this: to account for the unity of a mental proposition, we need not posit a \mathfrak{R} as a relating relation which is itself different from each of the constituents in the proposition; we can simply let some constituent in the mental proposition (e.g., the mental copula) play the role of conjoining terms. Let’s check if this idea works for Ockham. If we adopt a Fregean approach, we must view the mental copula as analogous to the Fregean unsaturated concepts (functions from objects to truth values). However, for Frege an unsaturated concept is not only ontologically different from an object, but also different from an object in its manifestation, i.e., a concept cannot be understood and grasped in the same way as an object. Now, the problem is that it is not clear how we can accommodate this “manifestation” difference in Ockham’s mental language, that is, it is not clear how we can make sense of the claim that the mental copula must be understood and grasped in a radically different way from other mental terms. Let’s then consider whether we can adopt a Russellian approach (i.e., Russell’s approach in *Principles of Mathematics*). Unlike Frege, Russell in *Principles of Mathematics* rejects the idea that concepts are unsaturated entities, by grouping concepts and objects under the same genus of being. For Russell, there is neither an ontological difference nor a “manifestation” difference between a concept and an object. To account for the unity of a proposition, Russell suggests that all we need is a distinction between two uses of concepts: concepts occurring as such (being activated) and concepts occurring as terms (being deactivated), and when a concept (a relation) occurs in a proposition as the major verb (excuse me here for the use/mention confusion), it is activated as a relating relation which conjoins other terms in the proposition; and when the same concept occurs either isolatedly or in a proposition not as the major verb, it is then deactivated as a nominalized relation, playing no role of conjoining terms. Following Russell, we might say that when the mental copula occurs in the context of a mental proposition, it is activated to conjoin other mental terms, and when it occurs isolatedly, it is simply deactivated. Now, this might seem to work at first sight. But the problem appears when we consider whether the mental copula is a distinctive type of mental entity or not. If it is, then it seems that the semantic role that it plays is entirely context-dependent, which seems to be at odds with Ockham’s view that the semantical roles of mental terms are fixed, independent from any context. If it isn’t, then the mental copula is at best understood as a *cognitive capacity*, a power that can be activated or exercised when the context is filled in. But in that case I don’t see how Ockham can talk about the mental copula on a par with other mental terms, as if it were a distinctive type of mental entity – a type of acts of knowing.

There might be some other ways, compatible with Ockham's theory, to account for the unity of mental propositions. However, unless a satisfactory solution is found, the problem concerning the unity of mental propositions, together with the word-order problem, remain as severe challenges to the view that mental propositions have constitutive parts.

My third and last argument is based upon Ockham's principle of parsimony. Let's start by looking at a passage where Ockham discusses the issue concerning the metaphysical nature of mental concepts in *Summa Logicae*, Part I, §12:

But with what items in the soul are we to identify such signs? There are a variety of opinions here. Some say a concept is something made or fashioned by the soul. Others say it is a certain quality distinct from the act of the understanding which exists in the soul as in a subject. Others say that it is simply the act of understanding. This last view gains support from the principle that one ought not postulate many items when he can get by with fewer. Moreover, all the theoretical advantages that derive from postulating entities distinct from acts of understanding can be had without making such a distinction, for an act of understanding can signify something and can supposit for something just as well as any sign. Therefore, there is no point in postulating anything over and above the act of understanding.¹⁶

What prompts Ockham to choose the so-called *intellectio theory*,¹⁷ among various options? According to the above passage, the reason seems to be that the *intellectio* theory posits the fewest entities, while it works just as well as the other two, and "one ought not postulate many items when he can get by with fewer." But if these considerations from the aspect of parsimony guide Ockham to settle the dispute among the various opinions of the metaphysical nature of mental concepts, it is quite natural to expect that Ockham would adopt similar considerations to determine the metaphysical structure of mental propositions. Bearing this in mind, let's consider a passage where Peter of Ailly criticizes the view that mental propositions are metaphysically complex in his *Concepts and Insolubles* (par. 128):

Then too [it is not inconsistent with the notion of a simple act of knowing], because God's act of knowing, which is most simple [and] represents every man to be an animal and in general any truth whatever, is equivalent in signifying to several acts of knowing. For it signifies as much as the sentence 'Every man is an animal' does – indeed, in general, as much as any act of knowing does, whether complex or incomplete. That is clear. Therefore, it is [also] clear that it is not inconsistent for

some simple act of knowing, equivalent to a sentence in signifying, to be produced by God. And yet it is certain that if there were such [an act of knowing], it would be a sentence. For it would be a true or a false act of knowing (*notitia*). Neither does there appear [to be] any reason why it should not be called a sentence. Therefore, [it is not inconsistent for a single act of knowing to be equivalent to a sentence in signifying].¹⁸

Taken at the face value, Peter's point seems to be a red herring, since what he argues in the above passage is that regardless of what kind of structure mental propositions (sentences in Peter's terminology) have, it is *possible* for us to have a metaphysically simple mental proposition, such that it is equivalent in signifying to a complex proposition (if there is any complex proposition), and clearly this does not imply that all of our mental propositions are metaphysically simple. However, if we add Ockham's principle of parsimony to the context of Peter's argument, Peter's point immediately becomes relevant. Now, the reconstructed Ockham-Peter argument works in this way: (1) Peter shows us that under theological considerations a metaphysically simple proposition could work just as well as a complex one (i.e., a metaphysically simple proposition could be equivalent in signifying to a complex one), and we could have metaphysically simple propositions; and (2) it should be clear that we posit fewer entities in the case of simple propositions than in the case of complex propositions (this is because in the case of a simple proposition we just posit the proposition itself – a simple act of knowing, while in the case of a complex proposition we have to posit the constitutive parts of the proposition – several acts of knowing), therefore, by Ockham's principle of parsimony, it follows that the metaphysically simple propositions are theoretically more favorable than the complex ones, and hence, that every mental proposition is metaphysically simple.

It might be objected that (2) is not true, since in the mental language where mental propositions are simple, as a totality we have *more* different kinds of acts of knowing than those in the mental language where propositions are complex, insofar as in the former mental language every distinct proposition (distinct in type) is a new kind of acts of knowing, while in the latter a proposition is not, and the two languages could have the same amount of different kinds of acts of knowing which are mental terms. However, in spite of its initial appearance, this objection fails to work, because it overlooks the fact that although the former language contains more *types* of acts of knowing than the latter, it has many fewer *tokens* of acts of knowing, and it is in fact a *token* of an act of knowing that is treated by Ockham as an entity in mental language.

To sum up, in the foregoing I have offered three arguments in support of the claim that Ockham *should* commit himself to the "simplicity" view, that mental

propositions are metaphysically simple. While none of them is conclusive, the three arguments taken together, I believe, are good enough to show that the "simplicity" view is more attractive and more compatible with Ockham's overall theory than its opposite, the view that mental propositions have constitutive parts. Along with the fact that Ockham seems to oscillate between the two views, I hope to have shown that the prevailing interpretation, that in Ockham's mental language propositions have constitutive parts, is flawed for serious reasons. A further question we might consider is this: can there still be a recursive semantics for mental propositions (i.e., an account of how the signification of mental propositions systematically depends on the signification of mental terms), if they are metaphysically simple (non-compositional)?¹⁹ My answer is 'yes', and one way to work that out is to appeal to the "semantical equivalence" relation alluded to by Ockham and Peter of Ailly. But it is the task of another paper to explore that in detail.²⁰

Notes

1. I am grateful to Hans Kim, Paul Spade, and Ian Wilks.
2. The 'an' is put in parenthesis since it is not there in Latin. Latin has no indefinite article.
3. While they both agree that categorical mental propositions are structureless acts, Peter (but not Gregory) holds that hypothetical mental propositions have constitutive parts.
4. For Peter a structureless mental proposition is nevertheless *semantically equivalent* to a composite of several mental acts. This notion of "semantical equivalence" is a very interesting one, which has not yet been fully studied. However, it is not my aim here to discuss Peter's "semantical equivalence," since it does not affect my thesis and arguments in this paper. For Peter's views on "semantical equivalence," see Peter of Ailly, *Concepts and Insolubles: An Annotated Translation* (par. 127, 128), tr. Paul Spade (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980), pp. 42-43.
5. For example, several of the best Ockham scholars, Marilyn Adams, Paul Spade, Calvin Normore, and Claude Panaccio, all to various degrees accept this interpretation. See Calvin Normore, "Ockham on Mental Language," in *Historical Foundations of Cognitive Science*, ed. J.-C. Smith (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990) pp. 53-70; Paul Spade, "Ockham's Distinctions between Absolute and Connotative Terms," *Vivarium* XIII (1975): pp. 55-76; Claude Panaccio, "Connotative Terms in Ockham's Mental Language," *Cahiers d'épistémologie*, n° 9016, Publication du Groupe de Recherche en Epistémologie Comparée, Directeur Robert Nadeau, Département de philosophie, Université du Québec à Montréal, 1990; and Marilyn Adams, *William Ockham*, 2 vols. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), chapter 11.
6. William of Ockham, *Ockham's Theory of Terms: Part I of the Summa Logicae*, tr. Michael J. Loux (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), p. 49.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 349.

8. Paul Spade, *Thoughts, Words and Things: An Introduction to Late Mediaeval Logic and Semantic Theory* (Unpublished manuscript, 1996), p. 356. This manuscript is available "on-line" in Adobe "PDF" format at Spade's Web page: <http://www.phil.indiana.edu/~spade/>. (Follow the links there.)
9. *Ibid.*, p. 349.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
11. Peter of Ailly, *Concepts and Insolubles* (par. 99-par. 111), pp. 37-40.
12. For a detailed discussion of that, see Spade, *Thoughts, Words and Things*, pp. 116-123.
13. Peter of Ailly, *Concepts and Insolubles* (par. 108), p. 39.
14. Spade, *Thoughts, Words and Things*, pp. 128-132.
15. With respect to this problem, Peter says that "Second, it does not appear that [there is] any possible way for such a composition [to take place]. For if someone affirming or denying nothing should have some simple acts of knowing, and then form a proposition [made up of them], it is not apparent what change has occurred in them on account of which they are [now] put together with one another any more than earlier." (Peter of Ailly, *Concepts and Insolubles* [par.103], pp. 38-39.)
16. Ockham, *Ockham's Theory of Terms: Part I of the Summa Logicae*, p. 74.
17. For a detailed discussion of Ockham's *intellectio* theory and the dispute concerning the *intellectio* theory and the *factum* theory, see Adams, *William Ockham*, chapter 3; and also see Spade, *Thoughts, Words and Things*, chapter 5.
18. Peter of Ailly, *Concepts and Insolubles*, p. 43.
19. Normore, for example, seems to have this kind of worry in his "Ockham on Mental Language," p. 63.
20. See my "Metaphysical Simplicity and Semantical Complexity of Connotative Terms in Ockham's Mental Language," *The Modern School man* (1998, forthcoming).