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Joël Biard

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L'impegno ontologico nella logica medievale

Ontological Commitment in Medieval Logic

a cura di / edited by
Laurent Cesalli, Parwana Emamzadah
Frédéric Goubier

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SOMMARIO

LAURENT CESALLI - PARWANA EMAMZADAH - FRÉDÉRIC GOUBIER, <i>Presentation</i>	7
LAURENT CESALLI, <i>Mentalism without Psychologism: Abelard's Dicta as Objective, Mental Entities</i>	17
ANA MARÍA MORA-MÁRQUEZ, <i>The Dialectical Construction of a Notion of Truth in Some 13th-Century Masters of Arts</i>	39
DANYA MASLOV, <i>Francis of Meyronnes on the Ontological Status of the «First Complex Principle»</i>	57
CLAUDE PANACCIO, <i>Ockham's Commitment to Merely Possible Beings</i>	81
ERNESTO PERINI-SANTOS, <i>Wodeham against Chatton: The Second Part of the Way towards Complexe significabilia</i>	99
JOËL BIARD, <i>John Buridan and Natural Supposition: From the Semantics of Names to Atemporal Propositions</i>	123
GRAZIANA CIOLA, <i>The Void and the Chimera: Marsilius of Inghen on Imaginabilia</i>	141
MAGALI ROQUES, <i>Vincent Ferrer on Natural Supposition</i>	161

NOTE E DOCUMENTI

DAVIDE RISERBATO, <i>Lo statuto ontologico dell'idea e la critica di William Alnwick all'esemplarismo nelle questioni disputate de esse intelligibili (quaestio IV)</i>	181
In memoriam <i>Tullio Gregory</i> (GREGORIO PIAIA)	215
Pieter De Leemans (1973-2019) (ANDREA ALDO ROBIGLIO)	219
Abstracts	233
Indice dei nomi	243
Indice dei manoscritti	247

JOËL BIARD

JOHN BURIDAN AND NATURAL SUPPOSITION:
FROM THE SEMANTICS OF NAMES TO ATEMPORAL
PROPOSITIONS

John Buridan's adoption of natural supposition is surprising, and it has been seen as such. The concept of natural supposition was originally tied to the positing of a common nature as that which is signified by a common term, a theory which Buridan rejects in its various versions in his *Questions on the Metaphysics*. It would obviously not be sufficient to say that his *Summulae logicae* take as its guide a reworked version of Peter of Spain's *Tractatus*, which divide supposition in general into natural supposition and accidental supposition,¹ for it is clear that on many points Buridan does not hesitate to depart from the text that he uses both as manual and as material for his commentary. Moreover, he adopts and uses the concept of natural supposition in several other works. It is therefore necessary to understand the reasons internal to Buridan's system that not only make this adoption possible, but even require it. This task will be made easier if we recall that in the 13th-century natural supposition was not connected only, or even primarily, with the question of universals, but also with the question of the temporal determinations entailed by the way a general term is used in a proposition. Of course, the two issues are related, since singulars cease to be while the universal remains; however, even if common natures are rejected, there remains the question of the indexing of a proposition to a certain temporal determination.

1. Peter of Spain (Petrus Hispanus Portugalensis), *Tractatus called afterwards Summulae logicae*, VI, 4, ed. L.M. De Rijk, Van Gorcum, Assen 1972, 81.

The question arises when one has to specify the conditions of utterance of a necessary truth, at least if necessity is tied to omnitemporality. Such truths pertain to propositions such as ‘Every human being is an animal’, but also – especially – those used in the sciences, in particular the natural sciences, in which there is an unavoidable tension between the contingency of things on the one hand and the necessity of its propositions on the other. This is why natural supposition will be called “demonstrative supposition”.

I. NATURAL SUPPOSITION AS SCIENTIFIC SUPPOSITION

In the fourth treatise of Buridan’s *Summulae*, there is, as one typically finds, a division of the supposition of terms. Personal supposition in general is then divided into accidental supposition and natural supposition. This division is made in the lemma:

Suppositio communis solet dividi in suppositionem naturalem et accidentalem. Naturalis suppositio vocatur secundum quam terminus indifferenter supponit pro omnibus pro quibus potest supponere tam praesentibus quam praeteritis vel futuris. Et hac suppositione utimur [*corr.* utuntur] in scientiis demonstrativis. Suppositio accidentalis vocatur secundum quam terminus supponit solum pro praesentibus, vel pro praesentibus et praeteritis, vel pro praesentibus et futuris secundum exigentiam verborum et praedicatorum, ut post dicetur. Et hac suppositione utimur in sermonibus historialibus, qua etiam maxime utuntur sophistae.²

Despite the expression ‘solet dividi’, which is found in the majority of the manuscripts and is adopted by the editor, Buridan hastens to point out that natural supposition is rejected by «many moderns».³ In fact, it seems to have fallen into disuse, and in the 14th-century there is no master before Buridan who is known to have adopted or defended it.⁴

2. Iohannes Buridanus, *Summulae de suppositionibus* [= *SL*, 4] 3.4, ed. R. Van der Lecq, Ingenium Publishers, Nijmegen 1998, 45.

3. Buridanus, *Summ. supp.* [= *SL*, 4] 3.4: «Multi moderni negant suppositionem naturalem ad istum sensum qui positus est in textu».

4. Natural supposition would be revived by Vincent Ferrer in 1372, though in a very different form from Buridan’s, one entailing a realism regarding common natures; see Magali Roques’s paper in this volume, *Vincent Ferrer on Natural Supposition*.

In the 13th-century, however, natural supposition was a central concept in Parisian semantic theory.⁵ It could be found in Peter of Spain, as well as Nicholas of Paris, John Pagus, and Lambert of Lagny.⁶ However, it was tied to the view that a common term signifies a common nature, and thus entails that common natures exist – this is why its adoption is paradoxical, in the context of an ontology of singulars. In Peter of Spain, whose treatises served as the basis for the manuals in use in Paris at the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the 14th-century, natural supposition, as a subdivision of common supposition, is defined as «the taking of a common term in place of all the things that are naturally able to participate in it» (*acceptio termini communis pro omnibus a quibus aptus natus est participari*).⁷ The condensed and somewhat ambiguous formulation in this definition does not mention a common nature, but the signification of the common term was previously defined in terms of a *res universalis*. Nicholas of Paris was even more explicit:⁸ «terminus communis per se sumptus supponit pro omnibus illis qui sunt vel qui erunt vel qui fuerunt participantes formam communem a qua imponitur».⁹

Apart from this reference to a common nature (whether explicitly or only implicitly), the definitions of natural supposition include two additional pieces of information. First, the term is *per se*

It would also be seen again in some Albertists of the 15th-century, in the same sense that it had for Peter of Spain; see L.M. De Rijk, *La Philosophie au Moyen Âge*, Leiden, Brill 198, 195-196, 200-201.

5. For the history of the concept, see L.M. De Rijk, *The Development of suppositio naturalis in Medieval Logic*, «Vivarium», 9 (1971), 71-117; 11 (1973), 43-79; De Rijk, *La Philosophie au Moyen Âge*, 183-203. For an overview that highlights the theoretical issues around natural supposition in the 13th-century, see A. de Libera, *Supposition naturelle et appellation: Aspects de la sémantique parisienne au XIII^e siècle*, «Histoire, Épistémologie, Langage», 3/1 (1981), 63-77.

6. See A. de Libera, *Le traité De appellatione de Lambert de Lagny (Lambert d'Auxerre)*, «Arch. Hist. doctr. litt. M.Â.», 48 (1981), 227-285; 236.

7. Peter of Spain, *Tractatus*, 81.

8. It is ambiguous because it indicates a relation of «participation» in respect of the term, and not between what the terms signify.

9. John of Paris, *Synkategoremata*, ed. H.A.G. Braakhuis, *De 13de Eeuwse Traktaten over Synkategorematische Termen*, vol. I, Krips Repro, Leiden 1979, 184-246: 211; quoted by de Libera, *Le traité De appellatione*, 236.

sumptus (this gave rise to long debates, which I will not discuss here, on whether natural supposition has a contextual character or not);¹⁰ and second, it stands for its supposita, « which have existed, exist, and will exist »; in other words, this mode of supposition is omnitemporal or atemporal (I will leave this distinction aside for the moment).

While some of these elements were adopted, in particular omnitemporality, the revival of natural supposition by Buridan in the 14th-century is tied, as the passage quoted above reveals, to his theory of scientific knowledge, which was not the case with Peter of Spain.¹¹

Thus, unlike “many moderns”, Buridan accepts that this type of supposition is required: « Et istae naturales suppositiones negantur saepe a multis, tamen videtur mihi quod debent poni et concedi ».¹² In the *Summulae*, he starts with a rather general observation: natural supposition is frequently used in normal speech.¹³ The first defence of natural supposition appeals to verbs of cognition. These verbs are supposed to lie at the origin of a particular type of appellation, namely, appellation of reason, though this is not relevant here, at least not directly. Verbs which signify mental acts – or more precisely, acts of cognition taken broadly – are mentioned in order to prove that we often use a term in such a way that it does not stand for something with a specific temporal determination, but rather stands indifferently for things that have existed, that now exist, or that will exist. Such is the case when these terms fall within the scope of a verb such as ‘to understand’, ‘to know’, ‘to be acquainted with’, ‘to signify’, etc.¹⁴ When I think or signify ‘man’, I am not thinking about a man existing at a particular time, but about men past and future, as well as present – in other words, about every possible man. Clearly, the reason for this

10. Various debates had taken place in the 1260s and 70s on whether or not natural supposition has a contextual character. De Rijk summarized this issue in chapter 8 of *La Philosophie au Moyen Âge* (cited above).

11. Peter of Spain, *Tractatus* VI, ed. De Rijk, 81.

12. John Buridan, *Quaestiones in duos Aristotelis libros Posteriorum analyticorum* [QPA], transcription by Hubert Hubien, I, q. 16; see also *SL* 4.3.4, ed. Van der Lecq, 45.

13. *SL*, 4.3.4, ed. Van der Lecq, 45: « Saepe utimur ea ».

14. *Ibid.*

is that the noun signifies without a temporal aspect, as was proposed in the *Peri hermeneias*. This is true not only for the spoken nominal sign, but also for the concept, as is explained in what follows: «Intellectus potest concipere hominem et animal sine differentia temporis illis conceptibus a quibus imponuntur isti termini 'homo' et 'animal'». ¹⁵ Here there is a revival of the basic model of the natural supposition of the previous century, that is, a relation of standing-for which is grounded on that which is signified by the term as considered in itself – though in the 14th-century this kind of supposition has only a contextual and propositional use.

Buridan then appeals in the *Summulae* to other uses that pertain to the same type of supposition, because of specifications by relative clauses or certain adverbs. However, it is the fourth use that is essential: «The demonstrative sciences use this kind of supposition». ¹⁶ The examples that he gives are drawn from Aristotle's *Meteorology* and have to do with phenomena of the sublunary world: «Omnis tonitruum est sonus factus in nubibus»; «Omnis iris est reflexio aut refractio lucis». There is also a mathematical example: «Omnis triangulus habet tres angulos aequales duobus rectis». The two natural propositions must be true even when there is no thunder or when one cannot see a rainbow, and the mathematical proposition is true of every new triangle that one might produce, even without a new demonstration. Thus, this type of supposition should make possible a scientific discourse about nature, a discourse that ultimately refers to things that are subject to generation and corruption, and the existence of which is contingent. There is thus a challenge here to authors who both defend an ontology of singulars and also insist on the contingency of created things – for science is supposed to be universal and necessary. In the *Questions on the Posterior Analytics*, Buridan at first associates natural supposition with propositions in which there is a necessary connection between subject and predicate. ¹⁷

15. *SL*, 4.3.4, ed. Van der Lecq, 47.

16. *SL*, 4.3.4, ed. Van der Lecq, 46: «Deinde quarto scientiae demonstrativae utuntur huiusmodi suppositione».

17. *QPA*, I, q. 16: «dixerunt antiqui quod aliquando in propositione in qua est necessitas [corr. necessarium ed. *Hubien*] consequentis, nec praedicatum nec subjec-

The need to accept this kind of supposition for scientific discourse (though its uses extend beyond that context) is mentioned by Buridan in several other texts. For example, in the *Questions on the Posterior Analytics*, book 1, question 16 («Utrum subiectum propositionis demonstrativae supponat indifferenter pro praesentibus, praeteritis et futuris»), the contrast between demonstration and historical discourse, which had already been formulated at the end of the passage from the *Summulae*, is taken up again:

Propter defectum distinctae impositionis, nos solemus uti illis verbis vocalibus aequivoce in historiis et narrationibus et in sermonibus demonstrativis. Quoniam in historiis et narrationibus utimur verbis secundum determinatas temporis differentias, sicut in sermonibus demonstrativis utimur eis secundum indifferentiam ad omne tempus.

Earlier in the same question, Buridan emphasizes the connection between natural supposition and the demonstrative sciences: «Ultimo notandum est quod haec suppositio inventa est propter artes demonstrativas». ¹⁸

Buridan also briefly addresses the problem in a text which, since it had not yet been edited, did not attract much attention in the 20th-century, namely, the *Questions on Generation and Corruption*. In book 1, question 2, which is about the relation between the destruction of known things and the destruction of knowledge, Buridan mentions natural supposition. ¹⁹ There it figures as an argument in favour of an affirmative science – and not simply a negative or hypothetical one – of corruptible things, in connection with a specific usage of the copula *est*.

tum restringitur ad aliquod tempus, immo indifferenter supponunt pro omnibus praesentibus, praeteritis et futuris, et etiam verbum indifferenter accipiendum est ad omne tempus».

18. *QPA*, I, q. 16.

19. John Buridan, *Quaestiones super libros De generatione et corruptione Aristotelis*, lib. 1, q. 2, ed. M. Streijger - P.J.J.M. Bakker - J.M.M.H. Thijssen, Brill, Leiden 2010, 43-49: «Quaeritur secundo utrum ad corruptionem rerum corrumpatur scientia de eis habita, posito quod de illis habetur scientia». The presupposition that there is a science of corruptible things comes from the preceding question, «Utrum de generabilibus et corruptibilibus sit scientia».

2. CRITIQUE OF THE OCKHAMIST THEORY

The text of the *Questions on Generation and Corruption* critiques a theory that is reminiscent of that of William of Ockham. In the discussion of the persistence of scientific knowledge once the things ultimately signified by it have perished, several types of propositions and the correlative mental dispositions are mentioned. The first type of knowledge that can be envisaged in this situation is a negative knowledge which does not require an actual supposit, such as 'No horse is a donkey'. The second is a conditional proposition, such as 'Every horse, if it exists, is capable of neighing'. The third is a temporal proposition, such as 'Every time it rains there is water that fall in drops from clouds'. The fourth is an affirmative proposition that asserts possibility, such as 'Thunder is possible' (or to put it more clearly, 'Lightning can be produced'). Finally, there are affirmative propositions of inherence (to which we shall return), those which use terms in natural supposition. At the end of this list, Buridan seems to accept a kind of equivalence between these affirmative propositions, and conditional and temporal propositions: «Et vos videtis quod ista propositio aequivalet condicionali et temporali, de quibus prius dicitur quod non auferatur earum veritas propter rerum corruptionem».²⁰ One might note however the caution of the formulation, which does not invite explanation or discussion. Is this equivalence a complete semantic equivalence, or does it only suggest the possibility that the truth of such affirmative propositions subsist once the things have ceased to be?

In any case, in question 6 on book 6 of the *Ethics*, where Buridan deals with the problem at greater length, he criticizes those who restrict themselves to conditional propositions. This question of the *Ethics* is about whether everything that can be known scientifically is eternal («utrum omne scibile est eternum»). The problem thus is again the relationship between the universality and necessity of scientific knowledge on the one hand, and the corruptibility and singularity of things, as well as of mental dispositions, on the

20. Buridan, Q. *Gen. corr.*, lib. 1, q. 2.

other. After a lengthy discussion of the sense in which one can understand the eternity and necessity of a proposition, Buridan focuses on the things that are signified, at which point he lays out several opinions.²¹ The first posits a distinction between the being of things and their essence (or quiddity). According to this opinion, knowing things with regard to their essence amounts to knowing them eternally, even though in their being they are generated and they perish. Of course, this position is rejected, for as Buridan takes care to point out, he criticized in his questions on the *Metaphysics* the distinction, of Thomistic origin, between being and essence.²² He then describes the doctrine of Giles of Rome (who is named explicitly), according to which science is not about things as they are *in effectu*, but about the being that they have *in suis causis*, such that, from this perspective, they are eternal. This doctrine is also rejected, for it would mean that science is only about causes, and not about things as they are as effects – of course, the argument presupposes that the cause is itself apprehended as a singular thing.²³ Propositions about thunder or rain must be true with regard to the actual existence of thunder or rain (*quantum ad esse pluvie et tonitruum in effectu*).²⁴ A third opinion distinguishes between singulars and universals in external reality, with science then being about these real universals. Here too, Buridan has already rejected the ontological foundations of such an epistemology in his questions on book VII of the *Metaphysics*. The fourth opinion accepts universals only in the mind, but posits that the object of science can be eternal, since in the succession of individuals of the same

21. *Questiones Johannis Buridani super decem libros Ethicorum Aristotelis* [Q. Eth.], Parisiis 1513, VI, q. 6, fol. 122ra: «Si autem loquamur de scibili pro re significata vel rebus significatis per terminos conclusionis, vel pro quibus termini conclusionis supponunt, sic de questione proposita sunt diverse opinionones».

22. Johannes Buridanus, *In Metaphysicam Aristotelis questiones argutissime* [Q. Met.], qq. 8-9, Parisiis 1518; see also J. Biard, *Science et nature: La théorie buridanienne du savoir*, Vrin, Paris 2012, 279-285.

23. See J. Biard, *Le système des causes dans la philosophie naturelle de Jean Buridan*, in A. Hasnawi - A. Elamrani-Jamal - M. Aouad (cur.), *Perspectives médiévales (arabes, hébraïques, latines) sur la science et la philosophie grecques*, Peeters-IMA, Leuven-Paris 1997, 491-504.

24. Q. Eth., VI, q. 6, f. 122^{rb}.

species, there is always something, or several things, for which the terms of the conclusion supposit; for example, there has always existed one or more human beings. This seems to be very close to Buridan's own position, yet he rejects it on the basis of two examples: first, one can utter true propositions about the rose in winter, when there are no roses; and second, propositions about thunder or rain are true even when there is no thunderstorm and no rain. Buridan then adds the mathematical example of the triangle, which has three angles equal to two right angles, probably in order not to limit every scientific truth to a natural succession within genera and species.

Finally, one last doctrine will be rejected on the basis of a doubt that arises from the requirement that there be an adequation of intellection to the thing. Some maintain that one can indeed form propositions that are true, and even necessary, about non-existent things, in particular negative propositions such as 'The void does not exist'. However, about things that can exist but do not, one can form only hypothetical propositions. We thus find the same model as in the *Questions on Generation and Corruption*, though in simplified form:

Secundo isti dicunt quod de his que non sunt possunt formari propositiones perpetue veritatis affirmative sed tamen hypothetice ut 'si vacuum est ipsum est locus', vel 'si tonitruum est ipsum est sonus in nubibus', et ita de non entibus potest haberi scientia affirmativa.²⁵

This science is thus to some extent a positive one; however, about such things that do not now exist, one cannot form a true affirmative categorical proposition in the present tense, because of the requirement that the subject supposit for something existent, which is the generally accepted rule.²⁶ If one does use such

25. *Q. Eth.*, VI, q. 6., f. 122^{vb}.

26. *Ibid.*: «Tertio dicunt isti quod de his que non sunt nulla potest formari propositio categorica affirmativa vera, saltem de inesse et sub verbo presentis temporis [...] quia propositio affirmativa per logicas regulas ex eo est vera quia termini supponunt pro eodem, quod autem non est nulli est idem». Actually, this rule is not universally accepted; but it is by Buridan, as it was by Ockham.

affirmatives of inherence in the sciences, they will have to be thought of as an abbreviated form of hypothetical propositions.²⁷

This doctrine is so similar to certain passages from William of Ockham's *Summa logicae* that in the margin of the incunabulum there is printed the annotation « opinio nominalium ». What does Ockham himself say? In chapter 5 of the second treatise of part 3 of the *Summa*, he considers the properties of the propositions required for a demonstration and in what sense they can be called "incorruptible". The explanation in logical and linguistic terms of the idea of incorruptibility leads to the conclusion that, although demonstration can be said to be about things that are necessary, perpetual, and incorruptible, this is so only in the sense that it is about propositions that cannot be false when they are uttered, but only true.²⁸ The immediate consequence of this, though it goes against Aristotle, is that purely affirmative present-tense propositions of inherence, the terms of which stand for corruptible things (which includes all propositions of natural science), can be neither principles nor conclusions in a demonstration. From the requirement that the subject supposit, it follows that propositions such as 'Homo est animal', 'Homo est compositum ex corpore et anima', and so on, are contingent, since it is possible for the *suppositum* to which the subject refers not to exist. Strictly speaking, the corresponding hypothetical is not equivalent, since using a categorical proposition and using a hypothetical proposition as a premise of a syllogism do not amount to the same thing.²⁹ Nevertheless, a science of natural things is possible, but it is made up of conditional propositions, or of propositions of possibility, or of equivalent propositions (here we should probably take hypotheticals together with their conditions of verification as conceptually equivalent to affirmatives):

27. *Ibid.*: « Ideo dicunt isti quod in scientia de talibus rebus non debemus intelligere propositiones categoricas licet categorice proponantur gratia brevitatis, sed ypothetice ».

28. See Guillelmus de Ockham, *Summa logicae*, III-2, c. 5, ed. P. Boehner *et al.*, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure (NY) 1974 (*Opera Philosophica*, I), 512.

29. Ockham, *S. log.*, III-2, c. 5: « Nec valet dicere quod ista equivallet isti 'si homo est, homo est animal rationale', quia ista est condicionalis et non categorica ».

Haec enim simpliciter est necessaria 'Si homo est, animal est', et ista 'Si homo ridet, animal ridet', et ista 'Omnis homo potest ridere', si subiectum stet pro his quae possunt esse.³⁰

There is a striking similarity between Ockham's position, which he reiterates in the Prologue to his *Sentences* commentary, and the position that Buridan describes.³¹ In both cases, science can form only conditional propositions about contingent things such as thunder. But Buridan then turns to a critique of this position, which, according to him, results from nothing less than a lack of logical acumen: «Et credo quod tanta fuit orta controversia inter opinantes ex defectu logice».³²

What its defenders are lacking is the theory developed by the «old logicians», namely, the theory of natural supposition.³³ Buridan reintroduces this theory in his *Questions on the Ethics* on the basis of the atemporal signification of names. Since common names do not co-signify a determinate time, they signify past, present, and future things indifferently; it is only the verb that adds the signification of a temporal determination. Likewise, nothing prevents me from intellectually cognizing without a temporal determination, including by forming a mental proposition using a concept corresponding to such a common name; here is where natural supposition comes in, which is likewise indifferent to temporal determination.³⁴ It is this use which prevails in the demonstrative sciences, both in the mathematical sciences, without which we would not have knowledge about future triangles, and in the natural sciences.

30. Ockham, *S. log.*, III-2, 513. See also the conclusion of the chapter (514).

31. See Guillelmus de Ockham, *Scriptum in primum librum Sententiarum ordinatio*, Prologus, q. 4, ed. G. Gál - S. Brown, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure (NY) 1967 (*Opera Theologica*, I), 157.

32. *Q. Eth.*, VI, q. 6, f. 122^{vb}. Buridan's judgement applies to the entire debate, but the last position also falls under it.

33. See for example *QPA*, lib. I, q. 16: «Sciendum est quod antiqui logici posuerunt duplicem suppositionem personalem terminorum communium, quarum unam vocabant 'naturalem' et aliam 'accidentalem'».

34. A bit further on, Buridan refers to his *Summulae logicae*; see *Q. Eth.*, VI, q. 6, f. 123^{rb}.

Buridan himself recognizes that his own position is similar to the one that precedes his. He admits that they both have the same goal. Nonetheless, he emphasizes that they differ «secundum logicam in modo loquendi». ³⁵ He accepts that categorical propositions (provided that they use natural supposition) can be true, while the other position does not accept this unless treating them as expressions of hypothetical propositions – but this would mean, in Buridanian terms, that from a conceptual point of view they would be hypothetical, not categorical.

3. LANGUAGE AND TEMPORALITY

By reintroducing in this text, as he does in the *Summulae logicales*, natural supposition for propositions that can be the principle or conclusion of a demonstration, Buridan presents natural supposition as supposition that is *indifferent* to temporal determinations:

Naturalis [suppositio] autem est quando [terminus] supponit indifferenter pro omnibus suis suppositis, sive sint presentia, sive preterita, sive futura. ³⁶

This is expressed in two ways: first, by the reference to the atemporal signification of the name and the possibility of conceiving atemporally, which he emphasizes at length in the *Summulae*; and second, by the interpretation of the *dictum de omni* in terms of natural supposition:

de omni homine dicitur animal quia si verum est dicere aliquid esse hominem verum est illud dicere animal. [...] hoc est dictu quod ista propositio ‘Homo est animal’ vel ‘Omnis homo est animal’ est de omni secundum suppositionem naturalem. ³⁷

There is, however, a question that can be asked: is it legitimate to go from atemporal intellection of what is signified by a name, to supposition in a proposition involving a verb, which necessarily is in the past, present, or future tense? The problem did not arise in the

35. Q. *Eth.*, VI, q. 6, f. 123^{ra}.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Q. *Eth.*, VI, q. 6, ff. 122^{vb}-123^{ra}. See also *SL*, 4,3,4, ed. Van der Lecq, 46; Q. *Gen. corr.*, lib. I, q. 2, ed. Streijger *et al.*, 47; *QPA*, I, q. 16. Cf. Aristotle, *An. post.*, I, 4, 73a²⁸⁻³⁴.

Parisian theories of the 13th-century, which presupposed a transtemporal common nature, and so one would simply be referring to all the supposita that participated in it. The atemporal reference of the common name to the nature that is signified would be sufficient to ground the supposition of 'homo' in 'Homo est animal', even if no individual man existed. However, what is needed is to know how to do justice to the temporal aspect of a proposition when it includes a verb that plays the role of shifter in the discourse.

Buridan addresses this problem explicitly in the *Summulae*. There he clearly accepts that one can go from a simple concept, which is the immediate signified of a common name and that by which I conceive of humans indifferently to time, to a « complex concept » (*conceptus complexus*) such as a proposition:

Sicut intellectus potest concipere hominem et animal sine differentia temporis illis conceptibus a quibus imponuntur isti termini 'homo' et 'animal', ita verisimile est quod potest formare conceptus complexivum illorum sine differentia temporis.³⁸

This complex concept is thus a mental proposition that is indifferent to any temporal determination: «Et tunc erit propositio mentalis omni tempore, praesenti, praeterito vel futuri indifferenter».³⁹

However, Buridan adds an important qualification: such a usage of the copula *est* is not its proper usage. Why not? One might think that in its normal usage in a given community of speakers, the verb has to do precisely with a temporal situation, whether the present that is contemporaneous with the speaker, or an extension or displacement (as the case may be) to the past or the future.⁴⁰ The verb does delimit the scope of the temporal reference, which is in relation to the speaker who utters or actualizes this proposition – Buridan admits these points, to which his opponents can also appeal. It is true that the verb *est* was instituted, according to

38. *SL*, 4.3.4, ed. Van der Lecq, 47.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Thus, in 'Homo fuit animal', the subject can supposit for what is or what was a man; the predicate on the other hand, according to the reinterpretation of a traditional expression that one finds up until Albert of Saxony, «appellates its form», that is, it limits the supposita to the time of the verb (in this case the past).

its *proprietas sermonis*, to signify the present, that is, a moment that is fixed according to the speaker. In this sense, the propositions of natural science would indeed be false:

non essent verae de proprietate sermonis, cum hoc nomen 'est' de proprietate sermonis non est impositum ad significandum nisi praesens tempus, et tamen forte nec est tonitruum nec eclipsis lunae in praesente tempore.⁴¹

However, he accepts a usage that is improper as regards the *proprietas sermonis*, though it may be appropriate to the specific domain of discourse of a given science, according to the principle of the *materia subiecta*. Thus, scientific propositions adopt a specific usage, which can be called *improper* in the sense that it uses the copula for another function, or *abbreviated* because the present is understood as equivalent to a copula that applies to all times:

Et ita tales propositiones ad brevius loquendum ponuntur loco talium 'omne tonitruum quandocumque fuit, est vel erit est, fuit vel erit sonus factus in nubibus'.⁴²

Such propositions are not false, for they are true *sicut positae sunt*. If some logicians reject them, this is because they recognize as true only those propositions that are understood according to the literal meanings of their terms. All this is consistent with what Buridan says elsewhere about the different meanings of terms and propositions, and about his interpretation of *virtus sermonis*.⁴³

41. *SL*, 4.3.4, Van der Lecq, 47.

42. *Ibid.*

43. There have been many studies about the history of this concept; see especially C. Marmo, *Virtus sermonis/verborum entre théologie et arts de langage aux XIII^e-XIV^e siècles*, in N. Bériou - J.-P. Boudet - I. Rosier-Catach (cur.), *Le Pouvoir des mots au Moyen Âge*, Brepols, Turnhout 2014, 46-69, and I. Rosier-Catach, *Regards croisés sur le pouvoir des mots au Moyen Âge*, in Bériou-Boudet-Rosier (cur.), *Le Pouvoir des mots*, 511-588. The connection between Buridan's use of this concept and the Parisian statute of 1340 has been frequently studied, but it is important also to take into account the changes that Buridan makes to it: see Fr. Goubier and N. Pouscoulous, *Virtus sermonis and the Semantics-Pragmatics Distinction*, « Vivarium », 49 (2011), 214-239; and J. Biard, *Jean Buridan, une philosophie du langage ordinaire?*, in L. Cesalli - F. Goubier - A. de Libera (cur.), *Formal Approaches and Natural Language in Medieval Logic*, FIDEM, Barcelona 2017, 435-452, esp. 447-449.

One can even imagine – though this is a theological point – that God conserves mental propositions outside time, or by suspending all motion (and thus time). In that case, the souls of the blessed or of the angels could still form true propositions such as ‘God is good’, thanks to such an atemporal use of the copula. In a certain sense, there is a purely copulative use of the copula that does not involve time – this is why Buridan mentions a purely syncategorematic usage – unlike with verbs that connote a definite time.⁴⁴

Thus, we pass from the atemporal signification of names to the omnitemporal interpretation of reference in scientific propositions.⁴⁵ It might seem again that Buridan’s position is very similar to Ockham’s. However, the hypothetical proposition – in the medieval sense of the term⁴⁶ – that is accepted here is a temporal proposition (introduced by *quandocumque*), not a conditional one (introduced by *si*). As in the *Questions on Generation and Corruption*, Buridan here reinterprets the affirmative categorical proposition. However, he does not equate it with a conditional, for he wants to

44. *SL*, 4.3.4, ed. Van der Lecq, 48: «Et videtur mihi quod copula vocalis imposita praecise ad significandum talem conceptum complexivum esset iam pure syncategorematica. Illa autem quae connotant certum tempus iam participant de categoremate, qua praeter conceptum significant rem extra conceptam et aliam ab hiis quas subiectum et significatum significant, scilicet tempus».

45. A discussion has arisen among interpreters on the “atemporal” or “omnitemporal” character of natural supposition in Buridan: see M.J. Fitzgerald, *Problems with Temporality and Scientific Propositions in John Buridan and Albert of Saxony*, «Vivarium», 44 (2006), 305-337, who criticizes De Rijk’s interpretation. Magali Roques takes up the debate in the present volume in her chapter, *Vincent Ferrer on Natural Supposition*. One might wonder whether the hardening of this alternative comes from projecting models inherited from the 20th-century. Clearly, Buridan would not accept some kind of realm of atemporal essences. The expression that appears throughout his texts is *indifference* to temporal determinations. The basis of this is the *signification* of the word and the concept, which are clearly atemporal. In the *Summulae logicae*, this indifference to any temporal determination is transposed to the supposition of the term, which then can stand indifferently for things past, present, and future. The verb itself is then indifferent to any time (*QPA*, I, q. 16). But this makes the proposition true regardless of when it is uttered; in this sense therefore, truth is omnitemporal. ‘The rose is fragrant’ remains true in winter, even if there is neither the essence of rose nor a singular rose in winter, but because the scientific usage of the copula is equivalent to *quandocumque est vel fuit vel erit*.

46. Following Boethius, a “hypothetical” proposition is any composite proposition, not just a conditional, which is only a specific case.

show that it is legitimate to use categorical propositions. But the scientific proposition as it is reformulated here does not entail that there is always thunder or an eclipse, even if one accepts that there is always a man or a phoenix; one can thus also save propositions about the rose in winter. The case of the triangle seems slightly different, since a triangle does not produce another triangle, even with the help of the sun, but the theorem will hold even when one is not drawing a triangle or when no one is reasoning mathematically about triangles. In none of these cases is one attempting to apprehend something like an essence distinct from being, or a nature distinct from singulars: an ontology of singulars is maintained.

Despite their similarity, Buridan insists that his position is different from Ockham's. He does this mainly in the *Questions on the Ethics*, but in consistency with other texts. Does the difference consist simply in a way of speaking (*modus loquendi*)? It is not clear.

On the one hand, it would be hardly parsimonious to reformulate all scientific propositions – or more broadly, all categorical universal propositions – as hypotheticals, at least at the conceptual level:

nec oportet, si sensus alicuius propositionis declaratur per hypotheticam, quod propter hoc illa propositio sit hypothetica. Sic enim omnis propositio esset hypothetica.⁴⁷

On the other hand, and more importantly, Buridan constantly emphasizes the importance of confirming categorical propositions. And beyond natural science, the idea of reformulating the vast majority of our propositions as hypotheticals is repugnant to him. But why? This leads me to my last hypothesis.

It is precisely in order to reject Ockham's solution that Buridan appeals to the concept of natural supposition, but reinterpreting it in such a way that it is not bound to the positing of a common nature, and reviving another idea that was widely adopted in the 13th-century, namely, the independence of natural supposition from any definite temporal determination. But what is his underlying reason? While both accounts involve a structural transformation of the proposition which reveals an underlying structure

47. Q. *Eth.*, f. 123^{ra}.

of thought, for Buridan the affirmative form and its assertive force remain identical. Certainly, the conditional hypothetical proposition can be affirmative in the logical sense: it affirms and it posits a link. On the other hand, it is less tied to the existence of the things it is speaking about. The categorical proposition has a greater assertive force: it presupposes the present, past, or future existence of its supposits. By insisting on the assertoric form of the scientific proposition, Buridan ensures that it is more strongly anchored in the natural world than a merely hypothetical propositions would be. Certainly, hypothetical propositions are related to things by the supposition relations of the terms, but the form of the proposition is not that of a categorical affirmation about the world as it is. Now, for Buridan the mental habit of science does not aim merely at propositions, even if they signify, but ultimately at things. This too is more simply a difference of emphasis, though it will be seen as a radical divergence in the summaries given by authors of the mid-14th-century.⁴⁸ Science aims at things, and its conditional necessity is that of the factual order of the world, even if sometimes one develops imaginary cases as counterpoints. And leaving aside miracles, this order is stable. Buridan passes over the only reference to eternal genera and species, even if they are always instantiated and not separate, for in certain domains they are not always exemplified, but the context is the question of the eternity of the world and of natural kinds.⁴⁹ And about them one can truly affirm something: regularities, causal relations, as well as existence... Science aims at things «quantum ad esse earum in actu producto», and nothing expresses this better than categorical propositions.⁵⁰ But in order to do this, one cannot restrict oneself to a conception that defines signification according to the primacy of actual reference to the present, as in the Oxford tradition since the 13th-century.

48. Besides question 1 on book I of the *Physics*, which is the best-known text on this issue, see also *Q. Gen. corr.*, lib. 1, q. 2, where Buridan explicitly criticizes the theory that a demonstrable conclusion is *scibile* (ed. Streijger *et al.*, 44).

49. See *QPA*, lib. 1, q. 16: «Sic [*i.e.* secundum suppositionem naturalem] etiam conceditur, in libro *De Generatione*, quod perpetuae sunt generationes et corruptiones».

50. *Q. Gen. corr.*, lib. 1, q. 2, ed. Streijger *et al.*, 46. This passage addresses the theory attributed to Giles of Rome.

Rather, for scientific discourse, what is used is natural supposition, which is found in Peter of Spain and the whole Parisian tradition. This is why in these propositions the copula *est* is no longer a simple logical link, despite what is said about its syncategorematic use; the last paragraph of the passage in the *Summulae* devoted to natural supposition proposes the view that the copula in categorical propositions of this kind could signify or co-signify a common concept of time, without any differentiation among its various determinations.⁵¹ But what would this time be, without any differentiation among present, past, and future? What remains is the mere affirmation not of the present, but of being-given in the world. Such an *est* affirms something actual, and is about what is actually the world, according to the order of nature; taken in this sense, it expresses the whole of the epistemological realism of Buridanian science.

51. *SL*, 4.3.4, ed. Van der Lecq, 48-49: «posito quod necesse esset in propositione categorica copulam significare cum tempore, tamen correspondenter conceptibus non oporteret eam determinate significare praesens tempus aut determinate praeteritum vel futurum, sed posset secundum conceptum communem ex parte temporum consignificare tempus sine differentia praesentis, praeteriti vel futuri».

sincategorematiche diverse, ma con le stesse componenti categorematiche, corrisponderebbero allo stesso atteggiamento proposizionale nella cornice di Chatton, il che è una conseguenza indesiderata. Il risultato è che dobbiamo postulare che gli oggetti dell'assenso sono fuori dalla mente, *contra* Ockham, che non sono significati da componenti categorematiche frasali, *contra* Chatton, ma che sono irriducibilmente significati dalle frasi nella loro interezza.

Keywords: Propositional semantics, truth, *complexe significabile*, Adam of Wodeham, Walter Chatton

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John Buridan and Natural Supposition:

From the Semantics of Names to Atemporal Propositions

What reasons internal to his philosophical system led Buridan to adopt the concept of natural supposition? In its original version in the thirteenth century, natural supposition entailed the positing of common natures, which Buridan rejects. In this article, I will briefly outline the history of the concept of natural supposition, its initial implications, and the way in which Buridan modifies it in order to use it in the context of an ontology of singulars. According to him, the problem that natural supposition addresses better than the other solutions that were available in his time, is that of the nature of scientific propositions. The question is thus about the relation between time and language.

Quali ragioni interne al suo sistema filosofico hanno portato Buridano ad adottare il concetto di supposizione naturale? Nella sua versione originale del XIII secolo, la supposizione naturale implicava la posizione di nature comuni, che Buridano respinge. In questo articolo, illustrerò brevemente la storia del concetto di supposizione naturale, le sue implicazioni iniziali e il modo in cui Buridano lo modifica per utilizzarlo nel contesto di un'ontologia dei singolari. Secondo lui, il problema che la supposizione naturale affronta meglio delle altre soluzioni disponibili al suo tempo, è quello della natura delle proposizioni scientifiche. La questione verte quindi sul rapporto tra tempo e linguaggio.

Keywords: Supposition, natural supposition, temporal determination, Peter of Spain, John Buridan, scientific propositions