

# OCKHAM AND LOCKE ON MENTAL LANGUAGE

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Mental language was the topic of intense philosophical discussions in late scholasticism, at least from the early fourteenth century to the first half of the sixteenth century. Authors such as Walter Burley, William of Ockham, Crathorn, Gregory of Rimini, John Buridan, Albert of Saxony, Pierre d'Ailly, John Dorp, Paul of Venice, Jerónimo Pardo, Juan de Celaya, Fernando de Enzinas, John Major, and a host of others actively, and sometimes lengthily, debated precise questions about the syntactical structure of mental discourse, the unity of the mental proposition, the semantics of mental terms and propositions, and the connection between mental, spoken, and written languages. The earlier part of this story – especially concerning Ockham and Buridan – is of course the best known so far, and it still inspires a significant amount of research.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, work done in the last twenty-five years or so by a handful of scholars has given us penetrating insights into early sixteenth century Spanish, Scottish, and French contributions to the theme;<sup>2</sup> but we still lack, on the whole, a satisfactory overview of its development over this span of two hundreds and fifty years. Much more research is needed before a synthesis will become possible.

What is extremely striking, though, at the present state of our knowledge, is that all this interest in mental language abruptly cools down towards the middle of the sixteenth century, leaving apparently but few traces in the thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I say “leaving *apparently* but few traces” because there is some uncertainty here. There are, after all, interesting, if scattered, occurrences of the theme of the mental language in the seventeenth century. Thomas Hobbes, for one, in chapter III of the *Leviathan*, speaks of what he calls ‘mental discourse’

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<sup>1</sup> For general surveys of the history of the idea of mental language up to the times of Ockham and Buridan, see Maierù 1996, and Panaccio 1999.

<sup>2</sup> See in particular Ashworth 1974 and 1985; Broadie 1985; Nuchelmans 1980a.

(*discursus mentalis* in the latin version).<sup>3</sup> And most notably, John Locke sometimes speaks of *mental propositions*, which, he thinks, are prior to and underlie spoken sentences. Intriguing questions thus arise about the connections between these seventeenth century developments and the late scholastic ideas of *oratio mentalis* or *propositio mentalis*. My limited aim in the present paper is to contribute to the discussion of these questions by comparing John Locke and William of Ockham on mental propositions with the goal of identifying the main doctrinal similarities and differences between these two great thinkers.

I chose Ockham not merely because he is the medieval author I know best, but also because he is certainly the most important single contributor to the medieval history of the idea of mental language. And I chose Locke as a term of comparison because there can be a *prima facie* suspicion of significant doctrinal connections between Ockham and him. Already in 1915, Édouard Krakowski, in his published dissertation on the medieval sources of the philosophy of Locke, presented the author of the *Essay* as a “direct follower” of Ockham.<sup>4</sup> Krakowski undoubtedly exaggerated the point, and he did not have much to say about mental language anyway, but a more recent and outstanding scholar, namely Norman Kretzmann, held in his own Ph.D. dissertation in 1953 that Locke’s central concept – that of ‘idea’ – descended “in a practically unbroken line” from the ‘mental terms’ of medieval logicians.<sup>5</sup> Now, this is immediately relevant for our present purposes, since ‘mental terms’ were held by Ockham to be the basic units of mental propositions, while Locke’s ideas (which are the main subject of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) were the basic units of what he – Locke – called ‘mental propositions’. So there is a *prima facie* important correspondence here. It is rendered even more interesting, moreover, since Jennifer Ashworth showed in the 1980s how Locke’s doctrines on language depended upon a seventeenth century scholastic background which was directly connected with late medieval discussions.<sup>6</sup>

The paper will have two main parts. First, I will stress some striking similarities between Ockham and Locke on mental language. Secondly, however, I will identify some crucial differences, which seem to me in the end more important: Ockham’s and Locke’s theories will turn out to belong to radically different families. I will try, in conclusion, to locate more deeply where the break lies between the two philosophers.

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<sup>3</sup> See on this Pécharman 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Krakowski 1915, 118.

<sup>5</sup> Kretzmann 1953, 284.

<sup>6</sup> See Ashworth 1980b, 1981a, 1984.

## 1. STRIKING SIMILARITIES

The general lines of Ockham's theory of mental language are well-known by now. Let me simply recall that according to Ockham, thought is a sort of inner discourse, made up out of concepts – the 'mental terms' – assembled by the mind into propositions, true or false.<sup>7</sup> These concepts are natural signs of external things, all of which are irreducibly singular (this is the core of Ockham's nominalism), and they belong to no particular tongue such as Latin, English, or French. Concepts, in Ockham's view, are prior to spoken words and underlie them, in the sense that spoken words receive their meanings by being associated in some special way with concepts.<sup>8</sup> Turning to the main passages where Locke speaks of mental propositions, we find some strong convergences with this Ockhamistic doctrine.

**1.1** First, the apparent general structure of the theory is approximately the same. Locke has it that what he calls mental propositions are composed of ideas, just as Ockham's mental propositions are composed of concepts. And Locke's ideas, like Ockham's concepts, are said to be *signs* representing external things.<sup>9</sup> As far as I know, Locke does not explicitly say that these mental units are *natural* signs, as Ockham does, but this seems to be the only reasonable interpretation of his thinking on the topic, as a number of commentators have stressed.<sup>10</sup> It is clear at any rate that ideas are mental signs for him, and they are certainly not conventional signs. The most basic of these mental signs, just as in Ockham, are prior to and underlie the conventional linguistic signs, and thus belong to no particular tongue, exactly as in the good old Augustinian tradition Ockham

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<sup>7</sup> For more detailed presentations and discussions of Ockham's doctrine on mental language, see Normore 1990; Spade 1996; Panaccio 1992 and 1999, chap. 9.

<sup>8</sup> The following passage from Ockham's *Summa logicae* (henceforth: *S. L.*) I, 1 is especially famous in this regard: "Est autem sciendum quod sicut secundum Boethium, in I *Perihermenias*, triplex est oratio, scilicet scripta, prolata et concepta, tantum habens esse in intellectu, sic triplex est terminus, scilicet scriptus, prolatus et conceptus (...). Terminus conceptus est intentio seu passio animae aliquid naturaliter significans vel consignificans, nata esse pars propositionis mentalis, et pro eodem nata supponere." (*Opera Philosophica* – henceforth: *OPh* – I, 7).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (henceforth: *Essay*) IV, 5, 2 (Locke 1979, 574.8-12): "The *joining* or *separating* of signs here meant is what by another name, we call Proposition (...) whereof there are two sorts, *viz.* Mental and Verbal; as there are two sorts of Signs commonly made use of, *viz.* *Ideas* and Words."

Unless otherwise noted, throughout this paper all orthography and italics in quotations from Locke's *Essay* are Locke's own.

<sup>10</sup> Chappell 1994b, for example.

The Medieval Heritage in Early Modern Metaphysics and  
Modal Theory, 1400-1700

Friedman, R.; Nielsen, L.O. (Eds.)

2003, VI, 349 p. 1 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1631-8