The two Summulae mentioned in the title are Peter of Spain’s Summulae Logicales, written by the realist master sometime in the first half of the 13th century, and the monumental Summulae de Dialectica of John Buridan, written by the nominalist master about a century later. Although the latter work is ostensibly written as a commentary on the former, the doctrine expounded in the latter is sometimes diametrically opposed to the doctrine of the former. As Buridan noted in his preface:

I have chosen to deal in particular with that short treatise of logic which the venerable professor master Peter of Spain composed a while ago, by commenting on and supplementing it; indeed, occasionally I am going to have to say and write things that differ from what he has said and written, whenever it appears to me suitable to do so.¹

In what follows, I will examine in some detail exactly how the doctrines expounded in the two Summulae differ from one another, thereby hoping to shed some light on the general issue of what the real difference between medieval realism and nominalism consists in. Indeed, since that real difference will turn out to be not so much a difference in ontology, as in two paradigmatically different ways of constructing semantic theory, this discussion will also provide an opportunity for some abstract speculation on the nominalism/realism distinction in general. But in order to engage in this sort of speculation, it will be useful to introduce some general terminology.

If by ‘the adverbialization of semantics’ we mean the transition from a semantic theory that relates different syntactical categories to different ontological categories to one that relates different syntactical categories to the same ontological categories but differently (here is the adverb), then, as we shall see, we can plausibly claim the following:

¹ John Buridan 2001, 4.
1. Buridan’s nominalism is obtainable by the adverbialization of Peter of Spain’s semantics.

Indeed, this comparison will easily prompt the obvious generalization of this claim:

2. Nominalism is obtainable by the adverbialization of realist semantics.

Furthermore, since the adverbialization of realist semantics as understood here can cover a broader or narrower range of syntactical and ontological categories, I will also consider some instances of the following obvious corollary:

3. Nominalism comes in various degrees.

If, in accordance with this possible ‘gradation’ of nominalism, we understand the terms ‘nominalism’ and ‘realism’ as designating two extremes of a range of theoretical possibilities with all sorts of intermediaries in between, then we can immediately see what motivated the introduction of the qualifiers ‘extreme’ and ‘moderate’ by historians of medieval philosophy, as they were trying to compare and classify medieval theories, which upon closer look always prove to differ in such subtle detail that cannot possibly be captured by the crude classifications of ‘nominalism’, ‘realism’ and ‘conceptualism’.

As the precise ‘gauging’ of Peter of Spain’s realism and Buridan’s nominalism within this theoretical framework will reveal, their theories are in fact better characterized as fundamentally different versions of conceptualism. These considerations will finally give rise to the following, tentative generalization:

4. Medieval realism and nominalism are just different versions of conceptualism, differing especially in how they handle the problems of describing and identifying mental content.

But instead of wasting more time on issues of terminology, let us just get down to what would count in this framework as one extreme of this range of theoretical possibilities, the one that we might even call ‘extremely extreme realism’, and see where Peter of Spain’s actual semantics and ontology would be on the scale relative to this theoretical extreme.