CHAPTER 1

Chatton’s Critique of Ockham’s Conception of Intuitive Cognition

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1 Introduction

William Ockham (1287–1349) was lecturing on the Sentences of Petrus Lombardus between 1317 and 1319 in Oxford. At this time, Walter Chatton (ca 1285–1343) was studying theology at the same university. The careers of the two Franciscan friars developed in rather opposite directions: Ockham was excommunicated by the Church and was engaged in a battle against the pope until his death whereas Chatton assumed the function of an examiner of writings in Avignon under Popes Benedict xii and Clement vi in his last years. Moreover, they held opposing views concerning metaphysical and epistemological issues. Scholars usually identify Chatton as one of Ockham’s earliest and most vehement opponents. Ockham, on his part, seemed to have changed his view for

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1 As some scholars hold, Chatton probably took an active part in taking out a summons against Ockham one year before the latter was actually summoned to Avignon. Wey and Etzkorn write: “Ockham was summoned to a provincial chapter of the Friars Minor in 1323 wherein he was required to justify his position on relations. It may be indeed likely that Chatton was instrumental in inaugurating this ‘summons.’” Walter Chatton, Lectura super Sententias, Lib. 1, distinctiones 3–7, (eds.) with intro. and notes, Joseph C. Wey and Girard J. Etzkorn, (Toronto, 2008), ix. See also Girard J. Etzkorn, “Ockham at a Provincial Chapter: A Prelude to Avignon,” Archivum Franciscanum Historicum 83 (1990), 557–567.


3 This becomes plausible if one looks at Chatton’s Reportatio, since there, as in the later Lectura, a second version of his commentary on the Sentences, Chatton structures the different Quaestiones by quoting and criticizing Ockham’s, as well as Peter Aureoli’s, arguments. It is very likely that Chatton composed the Lectura prior to his regency in Oxford. Cf. William J. Courtenay, Adam Wodeham: An Introduction to His Life and Writings (Leiden, 1978), 66–74; Stephen Brown argues that the Lectura was written between 1323 and 1324. See Stephen F. Brown, “Walter Chatton’s Lectura and William of Ockham’s Quaestiones in Libros Physicorum Aristoteles,” in Essays Honoring Allan W. Wolter, (eds.) William A. Frank and Girard J. Etzkorn (St. Bonaventure, N.Y, 1985), 81–115, esp. 92. Note that Chatton commented only on the first book of the Sentences in his Lectura.
instance on the nature of concepts and the object of acts of judgement due to Chatton's critique.⁴

In this chapter, I shall present Chatton's critique of a kind of singular intellectual cognition, namely intuitive cognition that plays a central role for Ockham's epistemology insofar as he thereby explains how the process of knowledge acquisition is initiated; according to him contingent knowledge about extra-mental particulars is the first knowledge human subjects acquire at all.⁵ Ockham calls this kind of knowledge “evident.”⁶

Scholars commonly agree that it is one of Ockham's major philosophical innovations to have argued for the possibility of a kind of singular intellectual cognition of particulars, very similar to sense perception.⁷ Chatton rejected the assumption of an intellectual intuitive cognition. He was more in line with the (traditional) view that we can cognitively grasp extra-mental particulars only with the senses. Chatton's argumentation is partly grounded on metaphysical considerations. Ockham and Chatton hold clashing views about the metaphysical structure of the soul and its powers. According to Ockham, the intellectual and the sensory powers of the human soul are ontologically distinct because the rational and the sensitive soul are two distinct entities.⁸ Chatton is more

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⁵ In this paper, I use the expressions ‘intuitive cognition’ and ‘intuition’ interchangeably.

⁶ On the other hand, Ockham accounts for the acquisition of general concepts of kinds of things on the basis of intuition. In the end, necessary general knowledge about what kind of things there are and can be in this world derives from intuition. Cf. Sonja Schierbaum, “Ockham on Concepts of Beings,” ProtoSociology—An International Journal and Interdisciplinary Project 30 (2013), 254–270.


⁸ For Ockham's view on the structure of the soul see his Quodl. 2.10 (156–161); Quodl. 1.12 (68–71); Quodl. 1.15 (83–86); Quodl. 2.11 (162–164); Quodl. 4.15 (371–375). For discussion see Dominik Perler, “Ockham über die Seele und ihre Teile,” Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales 77 (2010), 329–366 and also his “The Soul and its Parts,” Medieval Mereology, (ed.) A. Arlig, Turnhout: Brepols (in print).