William of Ockham, Walter Chatton and Adam Wodeham on the Objects of Knowledge and Belief

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Though they practically all took the existence of mental discourse for granted, it was far from being the case that all 14th century philosophers and theologians identified the objects of knowledge and belief with mental sentences. When we examine the theories held within some circles, we will find that this was a thesis which seemed plausible when a certain conception of mental discourse was assumed, but which became quite indefensible in the eyes of some when another conception of mental discourse had become the preferred one.

Thus consider the views on the objects of knowledge and belief and on mental discourse held by William of Ockham, Walter Chatton and Adam Wodeham, all three Oxford philosophers and theologians, all three Franciscans. Ockham had, at the very beginning of his academic career, admitted that the objects of all knowledge and belief are mental sentences, conceiving at the time of mental discourse as formed of objects of thought. He later abandoned however that conception of mental discourse, conceiving of it instead as formed of acts of thinking, and, when he did so, he also abandoned, at least partially, his initial views on the objects of knowledge and belief. As for Chatton and

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1 This paper will, it is hoped, contribute to our “understanding of the controversy over the objectum scienti vel credendi in its development at Oxford” (Moody 1964, p. 65). It has been read, in a preliminary version, to a group of faculty and students from the Department of Philosophy at Ohio State University. May Calvin Normore, who gave me the opportunity of doing so, and the other members of the group be thanked for helpful discussion of the topics dealt with.

2 Chatton, it will be recalled, was a junior colleague of Ockham who had opposed his senior on many issues, and Wodeham had been a student of both men and was a friend of Ockham, mostly sympathetic to his views, but an opponent of Chatton, with whom he nevertheless concurred on some issues. On the relationship between these three Franciscans, each of whom had resided for some time at Oxford and lectured there on Peter Lombard’s Sentences, see Gál 1974 (p. 53*-6*), Courtenay 1978, ch.2, Tachau 1988 (ch. 7, p. 180-1 and ch.10, p. 275-7) and Wood 1990 (p. 12*-9*).

3 The present paper is partly based on the result of earlier research which led to the

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Wodeham, they both dismissed the way of conceiving mental discourse originally admitted by Ockham, embracing without hesitation the other. They also both opposed the view that the objects of all knowledge and belief are mental sentences, arguing that these objects should be identified with other entities. Clearly, for these three Franciscans, whether they were disposed or not to identify the objects of all knowledge and belief with mental sentences depended in part on which of two rival conceptions of mental discourse they subscribed to.\(^4\) I propose to explain why this should have been the case.

To that end, I shall first briefly describe both conceptions of mental discourse, which I shall refer to as the "object of thought" conception and the "mental act" conception respectively. This will be followed by an account, also quite succinct, of Ockham's original theory of knowledge and belief.\(^5\) On that basis, the thesis that the objects of all knowledge and belief are mental sentences, a thesis essential to Ockham's original theory, will be shown to depend for its plausibility on the "object of thought" conception of mental discourse. It will then be particularly interesting to see how Chatton, the older Ockham (by a few years at most) and Wodeham, who all dismissed the "object of thought" conception of mental discourse and subscribed instead to the "mental act" conception, each proposed to deal with the issue, which now had to be confronted anew, of identifying the objects of knowledge and belief.

drawing of a sharp distinction between two theories, not only of universals and concepts, but also of cognition and of mental discourse, successively held by Ockham. See Karger 1994. When researching these topics, I have greatly benefited from Claude Panaccio's forceful presentation of the later of Ockham's two theories of cognition and of mental language (see Panaccio 1991, chapter 2).

\(^4\) This is a fact which of course will be missed if one is not aware of these two rival conceptions of mental discourse. I have thus found it mentioned neither by K. Tachau, who deals with the debate between these three Franciscans on the objects of knowledge and belief in Tachau 1988, ch.12, p. 303-8, nor by G. Nuchelmans, who deals with the same topic in Nuchelmans 1980.

\(^5\) Both this account and that description are based on Karger 1994, where they are however developed in much greater detail than here. I have included here only what is strictly required for the purpose at hand.