This paper is inspired by two remarks of Paul Spade. At the end of his article on *insolubilia* he draws several interesting contrasts between the medieval attitude towards logical paradoxes and the modern.¹ The mediev–
als, he says:

\[\text{did not seem to have had any ‘crisis mentality’ about these paradoxes. Although they wrote a great deal about them, there is no hint that they thought the paradoxes were crucial test cases against which their whole logic and semantics might fail.}^2\]

Spade has elsewhere contrasted this medieval view with that of Quine’s. Quine views the paradoxes in just this way, as crucial test cases. Consequently, our inability to solve them will mean that we must repudiate “part of our conceptual heritage.”³ Again, Spade suggests that the mediev–
als did not learn much from their treatment of the paradoxes. He says:

\[\text{The mediev–
als did not draw great theoretical lessons from the insolubles. They did not seem to think the paradoxes showed anything very deep or important about the nature of language or its expressive capacity. Once again, contrast modern attitudes. One might do well to speculate on the reasons for these differences between medieval and modern semantic theory.}^4\]

The modern attitude mentioned here by Spade is nicely expressed in the recent work of Keith Simmons.⁵ Simmons thinks that the Liar paradox

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⁵ K. Simmons, *On a Medieval Solution to the Liar Paradox*, in: *History and Philosophy of Logic*, 8 (1987), 121-40, and his more recent and much more detailed treatment in *Universality and the Liar: An essay on truth and the diagonal argument*, Cambridge 1993. In addition to Simmons I have benefited from the recent discussions of François Recanati, *Une solution médiévale du paradoxe du Menteur et son intérêt pour la sémantique contemporaine*, in: *Archéologie*
has a lot to teach us about the expressive ability of natural languages. What is interesting about Simmons’ excellent and extensive treatment of the Liar paradox is that he owes his inspiration for the solution he propounds to various medieval discussions of insolubles. His painstaking analysis (nearly 200 pages worth) fills out in great detail the suggestions presented by the medieval authors. But Simmons’ analysis in a way confirms Spade’s point: while the medievals are very much interested in language and logic, they do not seem to draw out at great length deep lessons about language in the same way that we do. Why? Spade is right: this is a question worth speculating about.

And speculate is what I propose to do. In particular what I want to investigate is William of Ockham’s treatment of the Liar paradox. In contrast with Simmons and Spade who look to the paradox to teach us something deep about human language, Ockham’s treatment, as we shall see, puts a great deal of emphasis on what he calls an *actus humanus*, “a human act,” that is responsible, in part, for the generation of the insoluble. I shall devote most of the paper to speculating about what this term might mean in Ockham and just how this act is responsible for generating a paradox. The aim of this paper, then, will be to offer an interpretation of this term in Ockham that fits with this particular context as well as with the corpus. Furthermore, it will suggest an answer to Spade’s question, for once we understand what Ockham means by the term *actus humanus* we shall see that for Ockham the treatment of insolubles is more an admission of human frailty and limitation rather than as with Quine a crisis and loss of our intellectual heritage. I shall, however, begin with a brief sketch of Ockham’s resolution of the Liar paradox. In the light of Simmons’ work such an exposition almost seems unnecessary, but the overview will locate us in the historical context that will serve to provide a framework for our discussion, introduce us to the main problems for consideration, and suggest an obvious approach for understanding this term.6

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6 This exposition of the text is also valuable because it brings to light a mistake in the text. Cf. note 24 below, and the appendix.