Walter Burley on The Kinds of Simple Supposition

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1. Background

By the early-fourteenth century at the latest, the mediaeval theory of supposition could be divided in most authors into two main branches, which in recent literature have come to be called the theory of “supposition proper” and the theory of “modes of personal supposition,” respectively. While the relation between these two branches remains obscure, we can say to a first approximation that the theory of supposition proper was a theory of “reference,” designed to answer the question what entity or entities a term refers to or “supposit” for in a given occurrence in a given proposition, whereas the theory of modes of personal supposition, whatever its ultimate purpose, was the part of the theory that included the much-discussed accounts of “descent to singulars” and “ascent from singulars.”

Walter Burley and his somewhat younger contemporary, William of Ockham, for the most part agreed about the modes of personal supposition, that is, although their definitions of the modes of personal supposition differ, those definitions appear to agree in assigning the various modes to particular cases—at least in the contexts the theory seems to have been primarily designed to handle. (John Buridan’s definitions behave the same way.) On this odd fact and its significance, see Spade 1988 (op.cit., above n. 3).
but they disagreed fundamentally about supposition proper, particularly about the kinds of supposition known as “personal” and “simple.” Even there, however, they agreed on the main paradigm cases. In “Every man is mortal”, for example, they both held that “man” is in personal supposition and supposits for individual human beings; in “Man is a species”, they both held that “man” is in simple supposition and supposits for the universal man. Their disagreement was over what is going on in these and other cases, both metaphysically and semantically.

Metaphysically, Ockham was a nominalist. For him, talk about universals—which had been an important part of logical discourse ever since Aristotle’s *Categories* and Porphyry’s *Isagoge* came to be included in the logical corpus—only makes sense as talk about universal concepts in the mind. Of course, like everything else in Ockham’s ontology, concepts are metaphysically individual. Some of them, nevertheless, can be regarded as universal “by representation,” so to speak; they are general concepts (mental representations) of many individuals at once. Burley, by contrast, was a metaphysical realist of some kind or other. For him, talk about species and genera is talk about the world.

Semantically, the main basis for the disagreement between Burley and Ockham was over signification, and hence over the proper way to define personal and simple supposition. For Ockham, a term in personal supposition always supposits for what it signifies (that is, for everything it signifies), which is always one or more individuals (there are nothing but individuals in Ockham’s ontology), whereas in simple supposition it supposits non-personally for a mental concept. For Burley, on the other hand, a term in personal supposition does not always supposit for what it signifies, and indeed only rarely does so; it is typically only in simple sup-

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6 For Ockham, of course, that universal is the concept “man.” See the following paragraph.

7 And, derivatively, about universal spoken or written words subordinated to such concepts in conventional languages.

8 The exact form Burley’s realism took is a matter still under discussion. For some recent treatments of the question, see Alessandro D. Conti, *Ontology in Walter Burley’s Last Commentary on the Ars Vetus*, in: Franciscan Studies, 50 (1990), 121-76; and Elizabeth Karger, *Mental Sentences according to Burley and to the Early Ockham*, in: Vivarium, 34 (1996), 192-230.

9 In fact, this occurs only in cases of what Burley calls “simple discrete terms,” for exam-