

# A Critical Note on Claude Panaccio's *Ockham on Concepts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004. xi + 197 pp.)

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In his book *Ockham on Concepts*, Claude Panaccio suggests a strong externalist interpretation (SE) of Ockham's view on perceptual content. I argue that his SE is in conflict with his another interpretation of Ockham's view on conceptual similitude.

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Is it possible to understand past philosophies with contemporary philosophical notions? Peter Strawson once said yes to this question without hesitation. He said “no philosopher understands his predecessors until he has re-thought their thought in his own contemporary terms.”<sup>1)</sup> Claude Panaccio’s *Ockham on Concepts* (henceforth ‘OC’) is an excellent work written from Strawsonian point of view on history of philosophy. In this dense book, Panaccio reconstructs William of Ockham (c. 1287-1347)’s theory of concepts in contemporary terms, and shows many interesting similarities that Ockham’s theory has with recent ideas in analytic philosophy, such as Jerry Fodor’s Language-of-Thought hypothesis and the Externalist movement promoted by Tyler Burge and Hilary Putnam.<sup>2)</sup> Along with Marilyn Adams’s monumental work on Ockham<sup>3)</sup>, OC is by far one of the best books we have on Ockham’s philosophy.

There are two big projects in OC: one positive and the other negative. The negative project (Chapter 4-6) is to dethrone the so-called ‘Standard

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1) Peter Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, (London: Routledge, 1990), 10-11.

2) In his recent works, Panaccio expands his externalist interpretation to Ockham’s epistemology. See Claude Panaccio and David Piche, “Ockham’s Reliabilism and the Intuition of Non-Existents,” in *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: the Missing Medieval Background*, ed. H. Lagerlund (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 97-118. According to his interpretation, Ockham’s epistemology has striking similarities with Alvin Goldman’s process reliabilism. In addition, there has been a great deal of discussion concerning the similarity between late medieval epistemology in general and contemporary reliabilism. See, for example, Dominik Perler, “Does God Deceive Us? Skeptical Hypotheses in Late Medieval Epistemology,” in *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: the Missing Medieval Background*, ed. H. Lagerlund (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 171-92; Eleonore Stump, “Aquinas on the Foundations of Knowledge,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 17 (1991): 125-58; Jack Zupko, “Buridan and Skepticism,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31, 2 (1993): 191-221.

3) Adams (1987).

Interpretation' of Ockham's theory of concepts, according to which Ockham's Mental Language is a kind of logically ideal, stripped-down language. On this picture, most of our intellectual representations are complex mental expressions that can be reduced to few primitive absolute concepts.<sup>4)</sup> With his careful examination of Ockham's texts, Panaccio—quite plausibly, I think—shows that the Standard Interpretation is misleading. Ockham's Mental Language, on his view, has some connotative concepts as its primitives as well, and it is not that kind of logically ideal, radically reductive language.

I think Panaccio's negative project largely succeeded. So, in what follows, I will mainly discuss his positive project in OC. More specifically, I will focus on one critical point, concerning Panaccio's strong externalist interpretation (henceforth 'SE') of Ockham's view on the content of perception—'intuitive cognition (*notitia intuitiva*)' in Ockham's words (Chapter 1): his SE is in conflict with his interpretation of Ockham's view on conceptual similitude (*similitudo*) (Chapter 7).

An intuitive cognition, according to Ockham, is an immediate apprehension of an external particular. In this respect, it corresponds to what contemporary philosophers call 'perception.' And there are two kinds of intuitive cognition: sensory intuition and intellective intuition. Sensory intuition is an apprehension of an external particular by our senses, e.g., seeing and hearing, while intellective intuition is a conceptual grasping of an external particular by the intellect.

Panaccio's SE is a thesis about the content of *intellective* intuitive cognition.<sup>5)</sup> According to SE, the content of an intellective intuition is

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4) For a defense of the Standard Interpretation, see Adams (1987) and Spade (1975).

5) One might ask: "Then, what about the content of sensory intuitive cognition?"

Since only the content of intellective intuition is conceptual, sensory cognition

*wholly* determined by an external, causal relation that an intuitive cognition has with its object. His claim is strongly supported by Ockham's interesting thought experiment below:

Even if an angel intuitively sees [another angel's] cognition of a certain singular [thing], and—we may suppose that—that angel also intuitively sees this singular thing, nevertheless he would not see that [that] cognition is of this singular [thing]. This is because if there were two similar [things], equally approximate to the intellect, and [another angel intuitively] sees one of them, he would not know whether this cognition is of one singular thing more than of another singular thing, provided that they [i.e., two singular things] are maximally similar. (*Reportatio*. II. q. 16; *OTH* V, 378-9)

Suppose there are two indistinguishable twins, say, John and Zorn. Gabriel is intuiting John, and Michael tries to find out the object of Gabriel's intuition by looking into his mind, i.e., his internal states. Can Michael know that the object of Gabriel's intuition is John? Ockham answers no, since Gabriel's internal states could be a similitude not only of John, but also of Zorn. To know the particular object of an intuition, one must know what causes that intuition. This is one central claim of SE, which I call 'Causal Determination Thesis':

- (1) Causal Determination Thesis (CDT): the content of an (intellective) intuitive cognition is wholly determined by the causal relation that an intuitive cognition has with its object.

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would either (i) be non-representational or (ii) have pre- or non-conceptual content. For a defense of (ii), see for example Dominik Perler, "Seeing and Judging: Ockham and Wodeham on Sensory Cognition," in *Theories of Perception in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy*, eds. S. Knuuttila and P. Karkkainen (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 151-69.

In addition to CDT, Panaccio holds that, an external particular, which is the cause of an intuitive cognition, just is the content of that intuition. To use Panaccio's vocabulary, an intuitive cognition, *qua* a mental singular term in one's Mental Language, is a "direct designator that ... refers to its object without the help of any form of description (OC, 13-4)" which is determined by internal features of a perceiver. This is another central claim of SE, which I call the 'Direct Reference Thesis':

- (2) Direct Reference Thesis (DRT): an intuitive cognition, *qua* a singular term in one's Mentalese, directly refers to its object without any descriptive content.<sup>6)</sup>

So far so good. There seems to be no serious inconsistency in SE, and SE seems to have strong textual evidence. Let us now focus on Panaccio's another interpretation. In the Chapter 7 of OC, Panaccio holds that Ockham never abandons the belief that concepts are similitudes (*similitudo*) or assimilations (*assimilatio*) of thing(s) that they represent. The following text seems to support Panaccio's claim:

Then, I say that an intellection [including an intellectual intuitive cognition] is similitude of the object just like a species would if it was admitted, and no more a similitude of one object than of another [similar] one. Thus, likeness is not the precise reason why [the intellect] understands one thing rather than another...For although the intellect assimilates equally to all these individuals...nevertheless it can cognize one of them determinately and not the other one. (*Reportatio* II. qq. 12-3; *OTh* V, 287-8)

The notion of assimilation or similitude is closely related to internal

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6) I am not alone who analyzes SE into CDT and DRT. See Brower-Toland (2007).

features of an intuitive cognition, as we have seen in the above thought experiment: Michael cannot know the proper object of Gabriel's intuition only by looking into his mind since internal states of Gabriel could be a similitude of two indistinguishable twins. That is why Ockham appeals to the external, causal relation to explain the intentionality of intuitive cognition. Does this mean that Ockham entirely renounces the notion of similitude and explain the intentionality of concepts solely by causality? Many proponents of SE say yes<sup>7)</sup>, but Panaccio says no. On his view, Ockham never abandons the belief that concepts are similitudes. Thus, Panaccio seems to adopt the following thesis:

- (3) Similitude Thesis (ST): an intuitive cognition, *qua* a similitude, can represent many objects that are maximally similar.

This is an interesting point. For ST seems to be in conflict with CDT and DRT: if ST is true, then, contra CDT, at least some of intuitive content, i.e., the content that makes an intuition a similitude of maximally similar things, would not be determined by an external, causal relation. Also, if ST is true, then, contra DRT, an intuitive cognition would have some descriptive content that makes an intuition a similitude of maximally similar things. For example, if my intuition of John contains some descriptive content, e.g., John's paleness, being tall, and so on, my intuition *qua* a similitude would represent things that are maximally similar to John, i.e., pale and tall things.

To resolve this inconsistency problem, Panaccio slightly revises his

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7) See for example King (2007) and Normore (2003). King holds that "although he [Ockham] preserves the traditional terminology, declaring that 'the act of understanding is the likeness of the object', it's clear that this is an empty formula (King 2007, 98)."

interpretation in his later works, e.g., Panaccio (2010), (forthcoming). He saves CDT and ST by abandoning DRT, i.e., an intuitive cognition directly refers to its object *without any descriptive content*. He grants that “Ockham does hold that an intuitive cognition internally incorporates some description of its object (Panaccio 2010, 244).” But this does not mean that he abandons DRT as a whole. He claims that “the likeness component...is not part of the *semantic* content of an intuitive cognition; rather it is *pragmatically* required to secure the correct reapplication of the concept (Panaccio 2010, 244).” So, for example, even if I represent John as pale when intuiting him and hence my intuition can represent all pale men, John’s paleness is not part of the semantic content of my intuition; it does not determine what my intuition refers to.

Although Panaccio’s modified view seems to resolve the tension between SE and ST, I think this view also has some problems. First, as Brower-Toland (2007) has shown, Panaccio’s view is too coarse-grained to individuate intuitive cognitions of the same object. As is said, according to SE, intuitive content co-varies with an external particular which is the cause of an intuitive cognition. That is, without difference in the object, there would be no difference in intuitive content. However, this sits uneasily with Ockham’s view on the relation between an intuition and perceptual judgment:

Intuitive cognition is such that when certain things are cognized, one of which inheres in the other, or is distant from the other, or stands in some relation to the other, it is at once known by virtue of this non-propositional cognition of those things whether a things inheres or does not inhere, whether a thing is distant or not distant, and so on. (*Ordinatio* Prol. q. 1, a. 1; *OTH* I, 31)

As he [the cognizer] approaches this visible object (say, a white thing), his

vision of it is intensified and becomes clearer. And, accordingly, diverse judgments can be caused—for example, that the thing seen is a being, or a body, or a color, or a paleness, etc. (*Quodlibeta* I. 13; *OTh* IX, 76)

Here, Ockham claims that different intuitions of the same thing cause different perceptual judgments. But why would he think this? A natural answer would be that different descriptive content in intuitive cognitions of the same thing, e.g., John as being, John as body, John as colored, John as pale, makes the difference in perceptual judgments that immediately follow those intuitions, e.g., “John exists”, “John is a body”, “John is colored”, “John is pale”.<sup>8)</sup>

Secondly, positing descriptive content explains perceptual indistinguishability much better than Panaccio’s interpretation. Consider the following example, which I borrow from Susanna Schellenberg:

Imagine that Anna sees cup<sub>1</sub> at time t<sub>1</sub>. Then she closes her eyes briefly and without her noticing cup<sub>1</sub> is replaced with the qualitatively indistinguishable cup<sub>2</sub>. So when she reopens her eyes, she is causally related to a numerically distinct cup. Even though she cannot tell, her experiences before and after the cup was exchanged are of different objects. If she perceives cup<sub>1</sub> at time t<sub>1</sub> and cup<sub>2</sub> at time t<sub>2</sub>, then her claim that the cup she sees at t<sub>2</sub> is the same as the cup she saw at t<sub>1</sub> does not have the status of knowledge, since the claim is false. (Susanna Schellenberg, “Perceptual Content Defended,” *Nous* 45, 4 (2011), 735)<sup>9)</sup>

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8) This reasoning depends on what Jeff Speaks recently calls the Perception/Availability Principle, according to which “If two experiences differ in which thoughts they make available to the subject of the perception, then they differ in content (Jeff Speaks, “Transparency, Intentionalism, and the Nature of Perceptual Content,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 79, 3 (2009), 560).”

9) Interestingly, Schellenberg’s example has a long history. Gyula Klima uses the very similar example in Klima (2009) when he discusses late medieval debates



In the example, Anna cannot distinguish two cups by her perceptual abilities, and hence she cannot notice the fact that one cup was replaced with another cup. If we posit descriptive content, this phenomenon can easily be explained by the sameness of the descriptive content between Anna's two intuitions: since Anna represents two cups as the same, she cannot distinguish them. Now, how can Panaccio's SE explain this phenomenon? It would be a hard problem since, according to SE, there is no common content between Anna's two intuitions; they would have different cups as their sole semantic content, no matter whether Anna distinguishes two cups or not.

To sum up, despite its initial plausibility, I think Panaccio's SE ultimately fails. But such criticism only slightly diminishes Panaccio's overall achievement that he shows throughout OC.OC is outstanding work, and recommended reading not only for anyone interested in Ockham's philosophy and late medieval theories of cognition, but also for anyone interested in contemporary philosophy of perception and cognitive science.<sup>10)</sup>

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on singular concept and singular cognition: "when I see horse, I have a singular cognition of this particular horse, which there I can name by a proper name expressing my singular concept of this particular horse? ... Well, here is the problem ... if in a blink of my eye someone (say God, to go directly to the top) swapped it for another, exactly similar one, I would not notice the difference. (Klima 2009, 69)" Klima holds that Nicole Oresme already suggested this kind of example—the case of two indistinguishable eggs—in the 14th century.

10) Thanks to Jaekyung Lee for helpful comments.

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