

two distinct functions of terms, namely, meaning and naming, or in his terminology, *signifying* and *suppositing*.

7.2 Meaning, Naming, and Buridan's Theories of Signification and Supposition

Indeed, Buridan would absolutely agree with Quine's remarks that "a singular term need not name to be significant,"³ and that "there is a gulf between *meaning* and *naming* even in the case of a singular term which is genuinely a name of an object."⁴ As we saw earlier, Buridan would distinguish not only between *meaning* and *naming*, or in his terminology, between *signification* and *supposition*, but even between two different sorts of signification, namely, *immediate* and *ultimate signification*, and, correspondingly, between two different sorts of supposition, namely, *material* and *personal supposition*.

What a term immediately signifies is the mental act on account of which we recognize the term as a significative utterance or inscription, as opposed to some articulate sound or discernible scribble that makes no sense to us at all. Thus, those utterances that *do* have signification are meaningful precisely because they *are* associated with some act of understanding, or, in late scholastic terminology, because they are *subordinated* to some *concept* of the human mind, whatever such a concept is, namely, whether it is some spiritual modification of an immaterial mind or just a firing pattern of neurons in the brain. The point is that without being subordinated to a concept an utterance makes no sense, because for it to make sense is nothing but for it to evoke the concept to which it is subordinated.

But this is not to say that what we mean by our categorematic terms are our concepts. For by means of these concepts we conceive of the *objects* of these concepts, again, whatever these concepts are and whatever those objects are in their own nature. A categorematic term, therefore, is said to signify the concept to which it is subordinated *immediately*, but it is *imposed* to signify *ultimately* the object (or objects) conceived by this concept, in the manner that it is (or they are) conceived by means of this concept. Thus, by means of the concept immediately signified by the term 'Quine' in our minds, we conceive in a distinctive, singular fashion⁵ of the single person we all know and admire as one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth

century. So the term 'Quine' ultimately signifies the person, Quine, to us, even if he is no longer among us, because we can still conceive of him, just as we can conceive of any other person we know, even if he or she is not present in our sight, and even if we may just not know that he or she is no longer among present existents. Indeed, we can also conceive of Quine and any other person we know, and even of persons *we don't know*, indifferently, in a universal fashion, by means of the concept immediately signified by the term 'human', regardless of whether they actually exist, and regardless of whether we know whether they exist. Thus, Buridan would say that the term 'human' ultimately signifies all humans indifferently, just as the concept of humans represents all humans indifferently, regardless of whether they are present to us or not and whether they presently exist or not.

But just because these terms signify Quine or all humans in the ways described, it does not mean that they refer to or *supposit for* them. For, as I have said, terms supposit only in their function of subjects or predicates of propositions.

Indeed, the same term, signifying the same, may supposit for different things, or for the same things in different ways, in different contexts, or for some things in some context and for nothing in another. The medieval *theory of supposition* was devised precisely to describe how the same terms with the same significations may supposit in different contexts for different things or for the same things in different ways or for nothing at all.⁶

As we have already seen, the supposition of a term is variable not only with respect to its *kind*, namely, when the question is whether the term supposits for itself or its *immediate* or *ultimate significata*, but also with respect to its *range* over the term's *ultimate significata*, when the question is *which* of its *ultimate significata* the term supposits for in the given context, if for any at all.

7.3 Buridan's Theory of Ampliation versus Ontological Commitment through Quantification

As we have seen, tenses and modalities, terms implying in their meaning tenses or modalities, as well as verbs and their derivatives that signify the acts of our minds which enable us to be aware of different tenses and modalities, all generate *ampliative contexts*, in which the range of

supposition of the terms with which they are construed is *ampliated*, that is, extended to those of their significata that may not be presently existing. But in nonampliative contexts the supposition of terms is restricted to presently existing things.

Because a common term indifferently signifies all things of a given kind, abstracting from whether they actually exist or not, in the appropriate context it may certainly supposit for those of its significata that do not actually exist. The term ‘dinosaur’, being a common term subordinated to a universal concept whereby we indifferently conceive of all dinosaurs, indifferently signifies all dinosaurs, despite the fact that none of them presently exist, although they did exist in the past. So, in the past-tense proposition ‘Dinosaurs roamed the earth before man appeared’, the term ‘dinosaurs’ supposits for dinosaurs that existed in the past, even if presently no dinosaurs exist. But in the present-tense proposition ‘Dinosaurs roam the earth’, in which its supposition would be restricted to its presently existing significata, there being no such significata, the same term supposits for nothing, and so the proposition is false.

To be sure, present-tense propositions intended to convey not just some factual claim but a “lawlike statement,” such as ‘Dinosaurs are reptiles’, are put forward with the obvious intention of talking about any of the *significata* of the term, regardless of whether they actually exist, that is, the subject terms of such sentences have *natural supposition*.

But properly speaking, when an affirmative proposition is simply used to make a factual claim without producing an ampliative context for its terms, its truth requires the actual existence of its terms’ personal supposita. So, affirmative propositions whose terms supposit for nothing are false, and thus their contradictory negations are true.

Accordingly, Buridan’s *dictum* to the effect that a nonbeing is not identical with or diverse from anything⁷ must not be understood, *pace* Wyman, as expressing some profound metaphysical truth about the nature of nonbeings. After all, nonbeings are just not there to have a nature in the first place. This negative claim is simply true because nothing is a nonbeing, and so the subject term of the negative proposition ‘a nonbeing is not identical with or diverse from anything’ supposits for nothing.

In fact, attributing existential import to affirmatives and making the distinction between contradictory negation and term-negation, Buridan can easily answer Quine’s purportedly perplexing questions about the possible fat man in the doorway and the possible bald man in the doorway,

when *there is nobody* in the doorway. Are they the same? No. Are they not the same? Yes. So, if they are not the same, are they different? No, and *non sequitur*, because the affirmative 'A is different from B' cannot follow from the negative 'A is not the same as B', given that the negative is true when its terms supposit for nothing, whereas the affirmative in that case is false. So, the answer to the question of how many merely possible men are standing in the doorway must be 'none', which makes the rest of the questions about how many of them are similar or dissimilar, and so on, simply pointless.

By contrast, because we are *talking* about *possibilia*, we can certainly provide true affirmative answers to the corresponding, appropriately modalized questions concerning the possible fat man and the possible bald man who *could be* standing in the doorway. *Could* they be different? Yes, given the fact that it is certainly possible for a single bald man and for a single fat man to stand in the doorway (well, provided that they would fit in together). For on account of this possibility we can form the true affirmative proposition 'the possible fat man in the doorway *could* be different from the possible bald man in the doorway'. But *could* they be the same? Of course, they *could*, given that it is clearly possible for a single fat, bald man to stand in the doorway. For on account of that possibility, this affirmative proposition is true: 'the possible fat man in the doorway *could* be the same as the possible bald man in the doorway' (reading 'could' with wide scope or, as Buridan would say, reading the sentence *in sensu composito*).

But could we talk in the same way about *impossibilia*? For example, could we successfully refer to a round square, say, in the context of the sentence 'The round square to be drawn on the blackboard *could be* round'? Clearly, because a round square just cannot be, it cannot be anything, not even round. Furthermore, because nothing can possibly be a round square and 'could' can only amplify reference to *possibilia*, the subject of this affirmative sentence refers to nothing, whence the sentence is obviously false, precisely because of the failure of its subject to refer to anything.

But don't we have at least something in mind when we are talking about round squares? And even if we perhaps cannot imagine or genuinely conceive of round squares because we immediately realize the inconsistency of their concept, what about the cases of *impossibilia* that we do not immediately recognize as such or of which we just have no idea that they are impossible? What about the case of someone talking about the greatest

prime number, failing to realize that assuming its existence leads to a contradiction? Doesn't this person refer to something at least in an appropriate ampliative context, say, in the context of the sentence 'What I am thinking about is the greatest prime'?

In such cases, we have to distinguish between what the speaker (mistakenly) takes himself to refer to and to what the phrase he uses refers. For, of course, it is possible for someone to think, mistakenly, that what he is thinking about is the greatest prime. But what he is thinking about is not, because it cannot be, the greatest prime, but merely an object of his thought of which he mistakenly believes that it is the greatest prime. Therefore, when he says 'The greatest prime is what I am thinking about', what he says is false, since the subject of his affirmative sentence refers to nothing. So, although this person does not refer to the greatest prime by the definite description in this sentence, still, it is true that he mistakenly takes himself to be referring to the greatest prime.

To be sure, the definite descriptions in the propositions just considered are singular terms, and, as Buridan himself remarks, in the case of singular terms one cannot properly speak about *ampliation*,⁸ that is, *extending* the range of their supposition to their nonexistent significata, because they only have one *significatum*. But even so, Buridan can certainly stipulate that if its *significatum* is not among present existents, then in nonampliative contexts a singular term *cannot* supposit for its *significatum*, although in the appropriate ampliative context it *can*.

So, given that Wyman does not exist, he *is not* anywhere, and he *does not* do anything, since he *is simply not* any thing. In short, as Quine would put it, just nothing actually Wymanizes. Still, we *can* truly say that Wyman *could be* somewhere, and that he *is imagined* to be doing something, and that for that reason he *could be* something. That is to say, something *could be* Wymanizing.

Accordingly, when we are *thinking* of Wyman, given the *ampliative force* of the verb 'thinking', we can truly say that we are thinking of someone who does not exist. Indeed, when we are thinking of Quine now, we are thinking of someone else who does not exist either, although someone who existed in the past. However, according to Buridan, from this we cannot conclude that when we are thinking of Quine, or of Wyman, then we are thinking of a nonexistent, or a nonbeing. For according to him, a nonbeing cannot be thought or understood.

Buridan explicitly considers this issue in his *Sophismata*, when he raises the question whether the *sophisma* (problem-sentence) ‘A nonbeing is understood’ is true.

First, he lays down that the proposition is affirmative with an infinite subject, that is to say, the negation preceding the term ‘being’ is a narrow-scope term-negation, and not a propositional negation, so the entire proposition is affirmative. Hence he argues for its truth as follows:

. . . the sophism is proved: for such infinite terms are analyzed so that saying ‘A non-man runs’ is equivalent to saying ‘What is not a man runs’. And thus saying ‘A non-being is understood’ is equivalent to saying ‘What is not a being is understood’. But the second is true, for Antichrist, who is not a being, is understood.⁹

Next, Buridan argues for the opposite side before resolving the issue:

O.1 The opposite is argued: for the term ‘non-being’ supposit for nothing, but a proposition is false if its subject supposit for nothing and it is affirmative; therefore, etc.

In his response, Buridan sides with the second position, namely, that the sophism is false, and argues for this position on the basis of his theory of ampliation.

I respond that the sophism is false, for the term supposit for nothing. And this is clear in the following manner: for the verb ‘to understand’ or ‘to be understood’ ampliates supposition to past, and future, and even all possible things. Therefore, if I say, ‘A being is understood’, the term ‘being’ supposit indifferently for every present or past or future or possible thing. But the rule is that an infinitizing negation added to a term removes its supposition for everything for which it supposited and makes it supposit for everything for which it did not supposit, if there are any such things. Therefore, in the proposition ‘A non-being is understood’, the term ‘non-being’ does not supposit for some present, nor for some past, nor for some future, nor for some possible being; therefore, it supposit for nothing, and so the proposition is false. And I say that ‘A non-being is understood’ and ‘What is not a being is understood’ are not equivalent, for by the verb ‘is’ you restrict the infinity [*infinitatem*] to present things. Therefore, the supposition for past and future [and possible] things remains, and thus this has to be conceded: ‘What is not [a being] is understood’. If, therefore, we are to give an equivalent analysis

of ‘A non-being is understood’, then it will be the following: ‘What neither is, nor was, nor will be, nor can be is understood’, and this is false, just as the sophism was.

So, the upshot of Buridan’s discussion is that he would absolutely agree with Quine: nothing is a nonbeing; everything is a being, everything exists, and it is not true that something does not exist. Still, Quine would not be happy with Buridan’s solution.

For even if Buridan were to agree with Quine and disagree with Wyman on the claim that everything exists (or, equivalently, that it is not the case that something does not exist), Quine would be quite *unhappy* with Buridan’s *reasons* for agreeing with him. Indeed, he might even regard Buridan as the wolfish Wyman in sheep’s clothing, overtly agreeing with his claims denying nonexistents in assertoric contexts, while smuggling them back in through the backdoor, by *sneakily* quantifying over them in his so-called ampliative contexts, thereby recreating Wyman’s bloated universe.

7.4 Buridan’s Alternative

So whose side is Buridan really on? Would Quine’s charge be justified? Is Buridan, and for that matter everybody else in the medieval logical tradition, really just a “crypto-Wyman”?

To see how Buridan’s position is related to the other two competing positions as contrasted by Quine, let me first try to restate it in terms that make it more easily comparable to both.

As I have argued earlier, the best way to reconstruct Buridan’s theory using modern logical tools is in terms of a quantified modal semantics with restricted variables representing Buridan’s common terms in their referring function. In this reconstruction, the ranges of these restricted variables may be “cut off at the edge” of the domain of the actual world, or they may go beyond this domain to pick up individuals from the domains of possible worlds, depending on the context in which these variables occur.

Even without going into technical details, I think it is clear that in such a semantic system one may easily construct formulae representing Buridan’s claims that come out as true in models representing the situations in which Buridan would say those claims are true.

So, in this regard, the reconstruction would absolutely faithfully represent Buridan's ideas. But then it might seem that the same reconstruction equally justifies Quine's possible (and Lambert's actual) charges of "crypto-Wymanism" on Buridan's part (and on mine): in this system there is "quantification over nonexistents" all over the place. So even if Buridan's claim that nothing is a nonbeing reconstructed in the object-language of the system would come out as true, in the meta-language of the same system we could perfectly consistently say that he is committed to nonentities after all, on account of his quantifying over nonentities, that is, entities in the domains of possible worlds, in his "ampliative" contexts. Accordingly, the situation is this. The object-language formula of the system representing Buridan's claims that nothing is a nonbeing or that everything exists would come out as true, indeed, as logically true. Still, in the meta-language of the system it is equally true that some values of some of Buridan's variables are in the domains of possible worlds; so on Quine's criterion, some values of some of Buridan's variables do not exist, which is to say, in the meta-language of the system it is true that something does not exist. Therefore, the semantic system *in its meta-language* is clearly committed to mere *possibilia* on Quine's criterion.

So, it might seem that Buridan's semantics, represented by this semantic system, is equally committed to mere *possibilia*, which would show that Quine's possible charges are justified. But the tricky thing about Buridan's semantics is that it makes no distinction comparable to the modern distinction between object-language and meta-language, so it has *no* meta-language comparable to the meta-language in which we see Quine's charges justified.

Buridan has only *one* language to talk about the world as well as about that language and its semantic relations to the world. And in that *one* language we cannot truly say that there are mere *possibilia*, or that something that is merely possible exists. Accordingly, from this Buridanian perspective, the issue of ontological commitment in terms of a meta-linguistic description of the relationship between language and the world is radically ill-conceived.

From this Buridanian perspective, one simply cannot make claims about the relationships between language and reality from some external, God-like position, from the position of the user of a meta-language, who has a certain "context-free" or "context-neutral" access to the object-language and "the world" (the totality of semantic values of items in that language), both as it is in itself and as it is conceived by users of the object-language. We

only have this *one* language we actually speak (where, of course, it does not matter which particular human language we take this *one* language to be), and we can speak about those semantic values only by means of the context-dependent ways of referring that are afforded to us by *this* language.

But speaking this *one* language, Buridan would absolutely reject the “Meinongian” claim that something does not exist, and would side with Quine, saying that everything exists, despite the fact that he would also endorse the claim that we can think of, signify and refer to things that do not exist, given the ampliative force of ‘think’, ‘signify’, and ‘refer’. For even if we do not have a separate meta-language, we certainly *can* reflect on the relationships between *this* language and what it is about; that is to say, in these reflections we use the *same language* to talk about *its semantic relations*. But our language is about whatever we can think of, and we certainly *can* think of things beyond our narrower or broader actual environment. So, talking about the semantic relations of our language will necessarily generate ampliative contexts, without, however, committing us *in this language*, the *only* language we have, to any spurious existence-claims or actual property-claims concerning things we can talk about, but which do not exist.

Therefore, when we are thinking of something that does not exist, we are not exploring a mysterious realm of nonbeings, say, the realm of merely possible or fictitious beings, for, *pace* David Lewis, there is just no such a realm to be explored. A merely possible being or a fictitious entity is not just a special kind of entity; indeed, no more than a fake diamond is a special kind of diamond or forged money is a special kind of money. Just as a fake diamond is not something that is both a diamond and is fake and forged money is not something that is both money and forged, so a fictitious entity is not something that is both an entity and is fictitious. And just as a fake diamond is no diamond at all, and forged money is no money at all, so a fictitious entity is not an entity at all.

But then what are these things we have in mind when we are thinking about things that do not exist? Well, some of them are things that existed, but no longer exist, others are things that will exist, but do not yet exist, and still others are things that could exist, but actually do not exist. But what is the nature of these things? Well, nothing, just as these things are nothing, that is, none of the things there are. In short, Buridan’s *metaphysical* point is that if you want to do metaphysics, then you should deal with *being qua being*, and not with *nonbeing qua being*, for then, assuming a contradiction,

you might just draw any silly conclusion. After all, *ex impossibili quodlibet* (from an impossible proposition anything follows).

Now whether we like it or not, this is certainly an interesting theoretical alternative, which is quite unparalleled in contemporary discussions, perhaps because in those discussions we usually *presuppose* our access to the perspective of a meta-language. Indeed, it might appear that we do so *with good reason*, provided that Tarski is right about semantic closure and the imminent paradoxes it engenders (to be discussed in chapter 10).

However, Buridan has more tricks up his sleeve. He would argue that Tarski was not quite right about the inevitability of Liar-type paradoxes under the conditions of semantic closure. According to him, the paradoxes only emerge because of our unwitting and unrestricted assent to Tarskian biconditionals, which is fine for nonreflective uses of the language but generates paradox in its reflective uses. Accordingly, the solution Buridan offers is not an overall split between object-language and meta-language but a more careful regulation of the *reflective uses* of the *same* language.¹⁰ In any case, if Buridan is right about rejecting, or just doing without, the Tarskian distinction, then he may be just as right about rejecting what he would justifiably regard as the “philosophical mirage” of ontological commitment through quantification. But the further details of this approach will have to be explored in the context of a systematic analysis of Buridan’s closed, token-based semantics.

However, before launching that investigation, let us see the details of how Buridan *de facto* constructs his semantic theory *without* the machinery of quantification we are so used to in post-Fregean logic. Once we have seen that, we are going to be in a better position to evaluate the merits and demerits of Buridan’s approach.