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### Description of Module

Subject Name	Philosophy
Paper Name	Philosophy of Language
Module Name / Title	The Concept of Signification in Medieval Philosophy of Language
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Objectives	To provide an historiographical understanding of the medieval concept of signification
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# The Concept of Signification in Medieval Philosophy of Language

## (4.1) Introduction: Medieval Philosophy of Language

Medieval philosophy was a period in western philosophical history that lasted for more than a thousand years: from roughly the fourth century CE to the sixteenth century CE, encompassing philosophical activity in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Our focus in this module and the next will be on European medieval philosophy of language.

Both the length of the medieval philosophical period and the philosophical developments one finds in that period poses a problem for us. No study of philosophy in the medieval period—and especially not a brief study such as this—will be able to successfully cover both the breadth and depth of philosophical inquiry that occurred in Europe during that time. This is true even given that we will focus on just one aspect of that inquiry: the philosophy of language. Consequently, in this module and the next, the goal is not to treat medieval philosophy of language in a summary fashion. Rather, the goal will be to introduce you to concepts that are central to medieval philosophical inquiry into the nature of language. We will focus on two concepts in particular: signification and supposition. The hope is that, armed with an appreciation of these concepts (as well as other, related concepts that we will consider along the way), you will be prepared to conduct further research into the various topics of inquiry and dispute about language that one finds in the medieval period: topics such as the nature of analogy, the semantic differences between abstract and concrete terms (e.g. ‘humanity’ vs. ‘human’), or the referents of empty names.

To begin, it will be helpful to specify what we mean by ‘medieval philosophy’. By ‘medieval philosophy,’ we mean in particular philosophy as it developed in the Latin West. Restricting medieval philosophy in this way entails that we will be concerned with philosophers in the Catholic tradition. This is not to discount the contribution of philosophers from Muslim, Jewish, Orthodox Christian or Indian communities during that period. Indeed, a full accounting of medieval philosophy in the Latin West requires discussing especially the influence of Muslim philosophy upon it. But we can discern in the Latin West a relatively coherent narrative of philosophical development during that time, so that restricting our focus in this way will allow us to investigate in greater detail certain key concepts in that tradition.

Moreover, by ‘philosophy of language,’ we mean those topics, debates and theories which bear on the nature of meaning, broadly construed. In both the ancient and medieval world, issues of those sorts were often treated under the heading of logic (where by ‘logic’ philosophers meant not just the formal features of inference and argument but also issues which we today would recognize as central to the philosophy of language). For medieval philosophers in the Latin West, debates in the philosophy of language were strongly influenced by the first two books of Aristotle’s *Organon*, or “tool” for philosophical analysis: namely, the *Categories* and *On Interpretation*.<sup>2</sup> However, medieval philosophy of language was not merely derivative of Aristotle but was itself highly original. First, while the first two books of the *Organon* were extremely influential in medieval philosophy of language, medieval philosophers also had to contend with the authority of Augustine (d. 430), a fifth century bishop and philosopher.<sup>3</sup> Augustine was working in the late antique period of philosophy (even, perhaps, during the transition period between late antique and

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of medieval philosophy in its historical and philosophical context, see John Marenbon, *Medieval Philosophy: An Historical and Philosophical Introduction*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Following the reintroduction of the remainder of Aristotle’s corpus to the Latin West in the twelfth century, those medieval debates also come to be influenced by the other works of the *Organon*: the *Prior and Posterior Analytics*, the *Topics*, and the *Sophistical Refutations*.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent philosophical biography of Augustine, see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, Revised edition edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

medieval philosophy). As such, he engaged with not just with the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical traditions, but also with the skeptical and Stoic ones, all mediated through a Latin philosophical and theological tradition, resulting in highly original thought on a number of philosophical topics. Medieval philosophers had to wrestle with accommodating both sources of authority—Aristotle and Augustine—and the product of that engagement is often extremely novel itself.

Second, medieval access to ancient philosophical sources was, until around the twelfth century, meager. Beyond Aristotle's *Categories* and *On Interpretation*, Porphyry's *Isagoge* (an introductory text to Aristotle's logic) and parts of Plato's *Timaeus*, philosophers in the Latin West before the twelfth century were exposed to ancient philosophical sources only second- and third-hand. That paucity of authoritative texts forced medieval philosophers to develop novel responses to various philosophical problems not directly addressed in the few philosophical sources they had available to them. And even with the reemergence of the rest of Aristotle's corpus in the twelfth century, philosophers in the thirteenth and fourteenth century were tasked with reconciling those novel responses with the positions Aristotle seemed to take on those disputes in those newly rediscovered works, a project that itself provided original insights into vexed philosophical problems.

So philosophical activity flourished in the medieval period, including medieval philosophy of language, and that activity was quite innovative. That activity resulted in highly sophisticated work on a great many of the problems that are still live in the philosophy of language today. But what I hope to achieve in this module and the next is a brief survey of two concepts central to medieval philosophy of language: signification and supposition. Signification—the concept we will be most concerned with in this module—is a central concept in the philosophy of language of both Aristotle and Augustine, and so it is not surprising that it dominates philosophical discussions of language throughout the medieval period. Supposition—the focus of the next module—is a concept that has its roots not in ancient philosophy but rather in ancient grammar. But by the high medieval period (roughly the beginning of the thirteenth century), the concept of supposition was being repurposed for semantic theorizing. Thus medieval philosophical responses to problems in the philosophy of language typically involve the notion of signification, or supposition, or both. Consequently, by having an appreciation of the concepts of signification and supposition, the expectation is that you will have the appropriate background for further research into medieval philosophy of language.

To properly understand the concept of signification in the medieval period, however, we need to first consider how the concept of signification developed in the philosophical periods prior to it. So it is to ancient and late antique philosophy that we turn first.

#### **(4.2) The Concept of Signification in Pre-Medieval Thought**

Signification is the property of a sign. It is the relation that a sign has to the object that it signifies. But the nature of both the relation and its *relata* can be articulated in various ways. The account of signification most influential in medieval philosophical discussions of language was introduced and developed by Aristotle, in his *On Interpretation*. We will turn to Aristotle in just a moment. But most medieval philosophers did not read Greek, and so could only access Aristotle in Latin translation. The earliest Latin translations of Aristotle's works available to medieval philosophers date from the sixth century. But the seeds of medieval philosophy, including medieval philosophy of language, were already being planted roughly a century prior, in the Latin writings of Augustine. So it is to Augustine's philosophy of language that we should consider first.

Augustine discusses the nature of a sign in a number of works, but his mature account of the sign is developed in his *On Christian Doctrine*.<sup>4</sup> In that work, Augustine writes that “a sign is something more

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<sup>4</sup> That Augustine would address issues of signification in *On Christian Doctrine* is unsurprising, since Christian doctrine is something conveyed via linguistic signs. So, to properly understand Christian doctrine, Augustine argues, one must first understand the means by which that doctrine is delivered.

than the species which is impressed on the senses, making something other than itself come about in cognition—as when we see a footprint, we reason that an animal, who made it, passed through here.”<sup>5</sup> For Augustine, then, the signification relation is an epistemic relation between some sign—a footprint, for example—and some thing, such as the animal who caused the footprint. Moreover, Augustine argues that there are two kinds of signs: natural and conventional, or intentional. Natural signs are “those which have the effect of making something else known, without there being a desire or intention of signifying, as for example smoke signifying fire.”<sup>6</sup> Intentional signs, in contrast, are signs which “living beings mutually exchange for the purpose of showing, as best they can, the feelings of their minds, their perceptions, or their thoughts.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, intentional signs are products of a thinking creature, for the purpose of bringing something else to the mind of another—either as signs of his own mental states, or the objects of his perception, or the objects of his thought. Signs of this sort are not just products of human activity, but can be produced by other higher-order animals as well, “for when the poultry-cock has discovered food, he signals with his voice for the hen to run to him.”<sup>8</sup> Of those intentional signs, moreover, some linguistic.

In addition to his analysis and categorization of the sign, Augustine is also important for his introduction of the notion of the inner word (*interius verbum*), or mental word (*verbum mentis*). Augustine argues in his *De quantitate animae* (though similar views can be found in other works of his corpus) that the spoken word can be analyzed into its sound (*vox*) and its signification (*significatio*).<sup>9</sup> Its sound is a certain quantity of air, but its signification is the thought (*cogitatio*) about the thing (*res*) that the word signifies. For someone competent in the relevant language, the spoken word brings that thought to her mind, so that she thinks about the thing signified in the spoken word by means of that thought. It is that thought that Augustine will go on in later works to identify as an inner word.<sup>10</sup> “Outer words,” that is, the words of natural language, are words only in virtue of containing—as a kind of “soul”—the thoughts in virtue of which they signify. Consequently, at the most fundamental level, words exist in no language, for they are fundamentally thoughts in the mind, expressed in language via speech and writing.<sup>11</sup> This notion of the inner word will play a role in philosophical discussions about language and thought, and their relation, throughout the medieval period, and it foreshadows later medieval debates about whether thinking itself can be viewed as a kind of language—a mental language—in which all humans participate.

Augustine lived during the fall of the Roman Empire. He wrote his *On the City of God*, for example, partly in reaction to the sack of Rome in 410 CE. Roughly a century after Augustine’s life, the façade of the Roman *Imperium* remained, but actual power had shifted to Goths and other barbaric tribes. It is within this milieu that Boethius (d. 524/25), a sixth century philosopher, translator, and political advisor to the Ostrogothic king Theodoric the Great, lived. Boethius, perhaps more than anyone, keenly perceived that learned (i.e. Greek) culture was in rapid decline in the Latin West. In particular, Boethius

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<sup>5</sup> Saint Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1996), bk. II.1.1, p. 129. See also Augustine, *The Teacher* 2.3-4.7; Augustine, *On Dialectic* 5.7-8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. II.2.2 (p. 129).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. II.2.3 (p. 129–30).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. II.2.3 (p. 130).

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *The Greatness of the Soul, The Teacher*, trans. Joseph M. Colleran, Ancient Christian Writers 9 (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), chap. 33, pp. 94–5.

<sup>10</sup> See Augustine, *On the Trinity: Books 8-15*, ed. Gareth Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 2002), bk. 15.14.24–15.25 (pp. 194–6).

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *The Greatness of the Soul*, chap. 33 (pp. 95–7).

recognized that his culture's connection to the ancient Greek philosophical sources was quickly being lost. In response, Boethius set out for himself the task of translating from Greek into Latin the whole of ancient philosophy—which is to say, the whole of Plato's and Aristotle's works.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, Boethius' project was short lived, as he was executed for treason by Theodoric in his mid-forties. Rather than the whole of the ancient philosophical corpus, Boethius was only able to translate the first two, short books of Aristotle's logic: the *Categories* and *On Interpretation*. These two works (along with one other that Boethius translates—Porphyry's *Isagoge*, or introduction to logic—and his commentaries on those works) come to form almost the entirety of the ancient philosophical canon in the Latin West for roughly the next 600 years.

In addition to setting the philosophical canon generally for more than half of a millennium, Boethius also impacts the development of the philosophy of language in particular, through his Latin translation of Aristotle's work. Especially important is his translation of the third chapter of *On Interpretation*, a chapter on verbs. In that chapter, Aristotle writes that “when uttered by itself, a verb is a noun and signifies something; the speaker arrests his thought and the hearer pauses.”<sup>13</sup> Boethius translates the passage in this way: “those verbs which are spoken by themselves are nouns and they signify something, for he who speaks establishes an understanding (*constituit intellectum*), and he who hears it rests.”<sup>14</sup> This notion of “establishing an understanding” becomes the central notion of signification in the medieval period. Subsequent debates about signification in medieval philosophy of language, then, involve disputes about what other notions of signification (if any) are necessary for an adequate semantic theory, what it means to establish an understanding, and what sort of object (if any) a sign establishes an understanding of.

Boethius impacts medieval philosophy of language in yet a third way, through his commentaries on Aristotle's logical texts. Three ideas of Boethius deserve special mention. First, Boethius introduces the notion of an order of speaking (*ordo orandi*), the idea that the elements of language are ontologically ordered.<sup>15</sup> There are first things, without which we could have neither language nor thought. Then there are the likenesses, or concepts, of those things in the mind. Third, spoken sounds are signs of those concepts. And, finally, written words are signs of the spoken words, written language being derivative upon spoken language. From this order of speaking, Boethius introduces, second, the idea of the semantic, or semiotic, triangle.<sup>16</sup> Ignoring written language (in part because of its derivative character), Boethius notes that spoken words denote things by signifying concepts. Consequently, every instance of meaningful speech involves the semantic triangle: spoken words are signs of concepts, which concepts are likenesses of things, in virtue of which spoken words can be used to talk about things. Third, and again as a consequence of his notion of the order of speaking, Boethius argues that there is, in addition to written and spoken speech, a kind of mental speech, made up of concepts. And, since (as Aristotle argues) concepts are the same for everyone, it is a kind of universal language that humans participate in.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Boethius announces this project in his second commentary on Aristotle's *On Interpretation*.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, “De Interpretatione,” 16b19–21 (p. 26).

<sup>14</sup> “[C]onstituit enim qui dicit intellectum, et qui audit quiescit” (Aristotle, “De Interpretatione Vel Perihermeneias, Translatio Boethii,” 7).

<sup>15</sup> See Suto, *Boethius on Mind, Grammar, and Logic*, 94–6.

<sup>16</sup> See Boethius, *In librum Aristotelis Peri Hermeneias*, editio secunda, ed. C. Meiser (Leipzig: Teubner, 1880): 24, 33.

<sup>17</sup> See Suto, *Boethius on Mind, Grammar, and Logic*, 226–30.

### (4.3) Peter Abelard (d. 1142)

While there are a few notable medieval philosophers of language prior to the twelfth century (see, for example, Anselm of Canterbury, who, influenced by the notion of a concept as a mental word, treats concepts themselves as signs), the most significant philosopher of language after Boethius was Peter Abelard.<sup>18</sup> Abelard's genius cannot be overstated. Beyond his insightfully original philosophical thought, Abelard was an accomplished poet, rhetorician, and teacher—the last of which ultimately provided the opportunity for his fateful affair with Heloise.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps Abelard's most important contribution to medieval philosophy of language concerns his discussion of the semantic properties of common names, such as 'human' or 'horse', a discussion that intersects with metaphysics. Does the meaningful use of a common name require that there exists an extra-mental universal, such as the universal humanity or the universal horseness, which serves as the content of that expression? Many philosophers throughout history have thought so. But Abelard is a nominalist with respect to extra-mental universals, that is, he denies that extra-mental universals exist. Abelard's challenge, then, is to explain how successful communication involving common names works.

In response to this challenge, Abelard makes a number of careful distinctions. First, Abelard distinguishes between signification in a broad sense and signification in a narrow, or strict, sense. Signification in a broad sense is simply an expression having some semantic relation or other to something.<sup>20</sup> In a broad sense, signification can come in many different forms, and the same word can have many different signification relations. In a broad sense, expressions can have significant relations to concepts, for example, as well as to things outside of the mind. Abelard argues that signification in the strict sense, in contrast, is a relation that holds between a sign and an act of understanding something, such that competence with that sign involves having a thought of that sort upon hearing or seeing it.<sup>21</sup> In other words, signification in the strict sense is a causal notion, whereby to be a sign is to cause a mind to have a thought that is about something.

Abelard's reply, then, involves distinguishing broad and narrow senses of signification with respect to common names. All names, common or proper, have reference (*nominatio*), and names have the reference that they do through imposition, which Abelard argues is a kind of signification relation broadly speaking.<sup>22</sup> Imposition can be understood as a kind of baptism ceremony, where an expression comes to refer to a thing, or kind of thing, on account of the intentions of the one who introduces the expression—the "impositor"—to use that expression in a certain meaningful way.<sup>23</sup> Proper names serve to name just one thing. 'Aishwarya Rai Bachchan', for example, names Aishwarya Rai Bachchan. Common names, in contrast, serve to name all of the things falling under a certain kind or within a certain class. For example, 'human' serves to name each and every individual that is a human. Imposition, in other words, serves to fix the extension of a name, so that a name refers to each and everything thing within a certain kind.

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<sup>18</sup> See Anselm, "Monologion," in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, trans. Simon Harrison (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), chap. 9–10 (pp. 22–4).

<sup>19</sup> For a general introduction to Abelard's philosophy, see John Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Peter Abelard, *Dialectica*, ed. L.M. De Rijk (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1970), 111–2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 112–4.

<sup>22</sup> See *Ibid.*, 112–3.

<sup>23</sup> Abelard likely has in mind here the biblical Adam, who names all the animals of the earth. See Genesis 2:19-20.

A significant feature of Abelard's account of imposition is that he does not require the impositor to have more than a vague intention to impose a name on a particular thing of a certain kind. For example, whoever imposed the name 'human' onto humans did not need to know anything about the nature of human beings; all he required was an intention to name individuals of that kind, whatever the true nature of that kind might be. (Think, for example, of an impositor pointing to a human and saying that he intends for 'human' to name that individual with respect to its kind, whatever that kind may be.) In other words, Abelard defends an account of direct reference, where the use of a name to refer is not contingent on its user being aware of the sense of that name.<sup>24</sup>

However, even if reference is direct, we still need some account of that in virtue of which common names come to be imposed onto particulars of a certain kind. Why is it that 'human' refers to humans? A realist with respect to universals would readily point to universals, which those particulars share in. On her account, 'human' refers to humans by having a certain relationship—perhaps an epistemic one—to humanity, which each individual human possesses. But Abelard is, of course, a nominalist, so he cannot employ extra-mental universals in his response. Rather, Abelard argues that the “common cause” of imposition is what he calls a *status*.<sup>25</sup> A *status* is not a universal; indeed, according to Abelard, it is not a thing at all. Abelard argues that a *status* is not anything because it is not form, matter, or essence, nor anything composed of them—and so not anything in his ontology. The reason that it is not any of those things is in part due to the fact that a *status* is not simple but rather complex. For example, the *status* in which every human shares is not humanity—some simple thing that, if it did exist, would exist in the category of substance; rather, it is *being a human*, which has a complex structure, the sort of structure that nothing can have. In addition to being complex, *status* can be negative. For example, a human also has the *status* of *not being a cow*. But, negatives, lacks and the like are not things; they are rather the absence of something(s). Consequently, since imposition is determined by a *status*, but since a *status* is not anything at all, imposition clearly does not depend on any universal thing. And so extra-mental universals are otiose with respect to semantic theorizing.

With respect to imposition and naming, then, Abelard's semantic theory seems to cohere with his nominalist metaphysics, since those semantic relationships are between words and particulars alone. For all that, however, Abelard recognizes that a motivated account of language requires more than simply reference. His notion of signification in the strict sense is supposed to capture this fact. Signification in the strict sense, recall, is the causal relation a word has to an act of understanding something. For example, 'Aishwarya Rai Bachchan' signifies, in the strict sense, an act of thinking about Aishwarya Rai Bachchan. What, then, is strictly signified by common names, like 'human'? We might expect that it is a thought about human nature, some nature shared by each and every individual human. But that would conflict with Abelard's nominalism, because it requires extra-mental universals, which would be the natures that general thoughts would be about. Rather, Abelard denies that common names signify, strictly speaking. But he does not thereby conclude that common names are meaningless. Here, then, is where Abelard makes his second careful distinction, between the object of a thought and the content of a thought. Abelard denies that, with respect to a common name, there is some object of thought—something out in the world—that one thinks about when one understands what that name means. At the same time, competent use of a common name involves being in some contentful state. To have a thought

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<sup>24</sup> Whether Abelard defends a theory of direct reference is a matter of some debate in the literature, though most Abelardian scholars appear to believe that he does. The most prominent defender of this interpretation is Peter King. See, e.g., Peter King, “Peter Abelard,” accessed April 22, 2011, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/abelard/#Log>.

<sup>25</sup> On *status*, see Peter Abelard, “Peter Abelard, from the ‘Glosses on Porphyry’ in His Logica ‘Ingredientibus,’” in *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals: Porphyry, Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Ockham*, ed. Paul Vincent Spade (Hackett Pub Co Inc, 1994), 37–56.

of what it is to be human, then, is to have a thought with a certain content, but there is no object—no common thing, humanity—of which this thought is about.

Abelard recognizes that the difference between content and object is subtle. To motivate it, therefore, he uses the analogy of a desire for something that does not exist.<sup>26</sup> We can distinguish between, on the one hand, the thing that one desires, and, on the other hand, the desire that one has. It is possible that the thing which one desires (a house on the moon, for example) does not exist, that is, is not **anything**. But that does not entail that he does not have the desire for a house on the moon. In other words, it does not entail that his desire is not contentful. Likewise, the act of understanding which the competent use of a common name produces does not have any object, since (Abelard argues) there exist no extra-mental universals which could be the object of that acts of understanding. But that is not to deny that that act does not have any content.

#### (4.4) Roger Bacon (d. 1292)

Roger Bacon was philosophically active a mere century or so after Abelard. But the intellectual world that Bacon inhabited was drastically different than Abelard's. The greatest educational institutions during Abelard's time were the cathedral schools (Canterbury, Chartres, Notre Dame, etc.) and the monasteries. Abelard himself was active in both environments. He was a scholar-in-residence at Notre Dame earlier in life, and was the abbot of Saint Gildas de Rhuys in Brittany later in life. During Abelard's own day, however, the educational system in Europe was undergoing a radical reformation, in two ways. First, there was the rise of the great European universities: Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge, among others. Second, the turn of the thirteenth century saw the rise of two mendicant orders: the Franciscans and the Dominicans. Mendicants, unlike monastics, lived within the larger, secular community. One important consequence of this is that many mendicants become extremely active in the new educational landscape that was growing around them. Bacon was firmly entrenched in this new intellectual world. He was, first, a Franciscan, and, second, a longtime member of the university system (educated at Oxford, and a faculty member at Oxford and Paris at various points in his career).

While a product of the new educational order, however, Bacon was in some ways an idiosyncratic intellectual. First, even as he was a major figure in university circles, Bacon was critical of the university curriculum—not just of philosophy but of theology as well—arguing (among other things) that the university curriculum should prize the acquisition of foreign language proficiency and rhetorical ability over logical training. Second, Bacon's analysis of language, and signification in particular, differed from the prevailing views of his day. Bacon explicitly draws the Aristotelian and Augustinian accounts of signification into conversation with one another—one of the first thinkers in the medieval period to do so—and suggests that the Aristotelian account of signification serves as an important corrective to the Augustinian account: "A sign is that which, offered to the senses **or the intellect**, represents itself to that intellect, since not every sign is offered to the senses, as the common [i.e. Augustinian] definition of a sign supposes. Rather, on the testimony of Aristotle, another kind [of sign] is offered to the intellect."<sup>27</sup> The sign offered to the intellect, Bacon argues, is the affection of the soul (*passio animae*) in Aristotle's discussion, which Bacon argues is a sign of that which it represents. Even while Bacon uses the Aristotelian account of signification as a corrective, however, he rejects the semantic triangle that Boethius, for example, found implicit in the Aristotelian texts. That triangle, recall, suggests that spoken words are about things only by signifying concepts—that, in other words, reference is indirect. In contrast to that account of language, Bacon argues that spoken words directly signify things. Like Abelard, then,

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<sup>26</sup> On Abelard on the nature of content, see Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, 184–90. The example of desire is used by Abelard in his commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*.

<sup>27</sup> Roger Bacon, "An Unedited Part of Roger Bacon's 'Opus Maius': 'De Signis,'" ed. Jan Pinborg, K.M. Fredborg, and Lauge Nielsen, *Traditio* 34 (1978): sec. 1.2 (p. 82).

Bacon endorses a theory of direct reference, where the signification of a thing by a word in natural language is not determined by its sense.

Perhaps Bacon's most original contribution to medieval philosophy of language, however, was his insistence that the signification of a linguistic sign is not merely a relation between a sign and the object that the sign signifies, but also requires a third term, namely, somebody to interpret the sign. Indeed, Bacon argues, the relation between the sign and the interpreter of that sign is more basic than the relation that that sign has to its significate, since a sign is only a sign insofar as there is some agent who interprets it as a sign.<sup>28</sup> Bacon's approach to language, then, can be labelled pragmatic, since the signification of an expression depends on the communicative intentions of the speaker and the interpretative intentions of the listener.

This stress on interpretation in signification also leads Bacon to the claim that the meaningful use of an expression depends on the intentions of the speaker, so that expressions constantly acquire and change their signification. Unlike many in the medieval period, then, who held that imposition was largely a one-off affair, Bacon stresses that the signification of an expression is not fixed and permanent; rather, every language-user, at every occasion of her use of that expression, establishes what that expression signifies on that occasion of use.<sup>29</sup> Often, this involves the reapplication of an expression to the thing it signified in past instances. But this need not be the case; language can evolve, so that the signification of expressions shift and change over time.

In fact, Bacon argues that, in certain cases, subsequent, meaningful uses of an expression do not just allow but indeed requires a new act of imposition. As we have seen, like Abelard, Bacon defends an account of direct reference, where signs signify things in the world, rather than intermediate semantic objects. Bacon is also a presentist, that is, Bacon holds that only present things exist. Consequently, things come into and go out of existence all the time. Caesar, for example, existed in 50 BCE but no longer exists now. Consequently, argues Bacon, nothing can be said univocally of an existing thing and a non-existing thing; 'Caesar' cannot signify the same thing now as it did in 50 BCE – for what 'Caesar' signified in 50 BCE was some existing thing, and what it signifies now is at best something that merely had existed, not something that does exist.<sup>30</sup> Rather, the use of 'Caesar' now is equivocal with the use of 'Caesar' in 50 BCE, since the same expression signifies different objects at different occurrences of use. And so our use of 'Caesar' today must signify something different than it did in 50 BCE. Indeed, the moment anything ceases to exist, subsequent use of a name used to refer to that thing when it existed requires intent on the part of the speaker to use it to signify something different than that thing, for that thing no longer exists.

Perhaps the strongest objection to Bacon's account of re-imposition in Caesar-style cases is phenomenological. In most cases it does not seem that, when one uses an expression whose usual referent no longer exists, she takes herself to be re-imposing that expression onto something else; it seems rather that the name is being used in the same way as in previous instances. But Bacon argues in response that these phenomenological considerations are not pressing. For re-imposition is an act that often goes unnoticed, because "a greater preoccupation of the soul obscures a lesser just as a brighter light hides a dimmer one from sight."<sup>31</sup> That is, we use language primarily to talk about the world, and so it is usually to the world that our minds are directed when you use language—even when we begin to use language in a novel way. Since, then, even when we re-impose a name, such as 'Caesar', we will typically be concerned

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., sec. 1.1 (pp. 81–2).

<sup>29</sup> Roger Bacon, *Compendium of the Study of Theology*, trans. Thomas Maloney (New York: E.J. Brill, 1988), para. 115–7 (p. 101–2).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., para. 112–28 (pp. 101–9), esp. 125–6.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., para. 126 (p. 107).

not with the activity of re-imposition but rather of communicating what it is we are thinking, we will often be unaware when we use a word to refer to something new.

#### (4.5) John Duns Scotus (d. 1308) and the “Great Debate”

Both Abelard and Bacon are committed to direct reference, the idea that the reference of an expression is not determined by its meaning, or sense. But it would be a mistake to assume that they are representative of the wider medieval philosophical community. In fact, commitment to direct reference seems to have been a decidedly minority position until relatively late in the medieval period. This is in part due to Aristotle’s remarks in *On Interpretation* that spoken words signify affections of the soul, that is, concepts. But it also seems to reflect fundamental concerns with direct referentialism itself—how one accounts for the content of empty names, for example, or whether a satisfying semantic theory could be purely extensional.

Debates over the nature of the objects of signification became especially prominent in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. John Duns Scotus, a Franciscan philosopher who was educated at Oxford and later taught at Oxford, Paris and Cologne, writes that during his day there was a “great debate (*altercatio*)” about what it is that a linguistic sign signifies.<sup>32</sup> Some held that what a linguistic sign signifies is a certain mental object, called a concept (*conceptus*). Others held that what it signifies must be a thing (*res*). We can conceive of this dispute as one over direct reference: whether names and other meaningful expressions directly refer to objects in the world, or whether that reference is indirect, mediated by mental representations.

Late in his own career, Scotus himself comes to argue that signification is best understood as a relationship between a word and a thing.<sup>33</sup> Instead of indirectly referring via a concept, then, the signification of a word is direct.<sup>34</sup> That said, Scotus maintains that signification is still mediated by concepts. And this is because language fundamentally depends on cognition. Words acquire their signification via acts of imposition, but imposition itself requires that the impositor have a thought of the thing onto which the name is imposed. Having thoughts of that sort, moreover, requires cognitive activity, that is, it requires concept possession. Consequently, an adequate explanation of why words signify what they do will need to articulated partly in terms of concepts.

Support for Scotus’ semantic account rests ultimately on a sophisticated account of mental representation, one which addresses problems which plagued earlier theories of mental representation. Like Aquinas and many others, Scotus wants to explain mental representation in terms of similarity of form, according to which a mental representation represents a thing by being the same form as is had by that thing. Aquinas accommodates that view with the claim that mental accidents—real qualities of the mind—have the very same form as the things that they represent. But this suggests, for example, that the mind’s representing a round object requires the mind itself to be round—a seemingly absurd result! Aquinas and others sought to block this inference by attributing a special ontological status to mental

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<sup>32</sup> John Duns Scotus *Ordinatio* 1.27.1-3 in *Opera Omnia*, ed. Commissio Scotistica (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis, 1950-) 6:97.

<sup>33</sup> This claim is controversial. Giorgio Pini, for example, argues that Scotus considers how these two opposing views might be reconciled, but does not himself take a firm position on the matter even late in his career. See Giorgio Pini, “Signification of Names in Duns Scotus and Some of His Contemporaries,” *Vivarium* 39 (April 1, 2001): 20–51.

<sup>34</sup> In earlier works, Scotus suggests that the problem can be dissolved, by identifying concepts with things. See, e.g., *Super I Periherm.* I, q. 3, ed. Vivès 1891, 545. He appears to have abandoned this account in the *Ordinatio*, however.

accidents, claiming that they have merely “intentional being.”<sup>35</sup> Scotus, in contrast, argues that once we distinguish between mental accidents and their content, we can see that similarity in form is not required of the mental accidents themselves but rather simply of their contents. Consequently, we need not attribute any sort of odd intentional being to mental accidents, nor are we forced to say that mental accidents will make their possessors have the same shape, etc., as the things they represent; mental accidents, on this picture, can be any form whatsoever. It is rather their content which must evidence some similarity to the form of the thing represented. It is these contents that expressions in natural language signify.

However, Scotus’s account still requires an explanation of the conformality of the content itself with the thing represented, if something is indeed represented. In response to this challenge, Scotus can rely on his more general metaphysical picture. Scotus argues that things of the same kind (i.e. human beings) are of that kind in virtue of the fact that they possess the same form, which Scotus (among others in the medieval period) calls a common nature. These common natures exist “subjectively” in individuals, but Scotus argues that they can also exist “objectively” in mental accidents, as their contents. Consequently, Scotus argues, common natures have two “modes” of being: subjective and objective. The same holds true of a nature proper to an individual—for example, Socrates’s own, unique nature, “Socrateity.” To have a thought of Socrates is to have a thought whose content is the nature peculiar to Socrates.

Like Bacon, then, Scotus argues that expressions in natural language signify things—that is, he is committed to direct reference, articulated in terms of signification. But, unlike Bacon, who endorses a theory according to which a common name signifies some particular thing(s), Scotus argues that the content of a common name is not the particular things within its extension on an occasion of use, but rather the nature that every particular in the extension of the expression shares, which determines that extension. The account can still be classified as one of direct reference, then—common names still directly refer to things (natures) in the world—but it is intensional rather than extensional, and so departs from the theories developed by Abelard and Bacon with regards to what it is to which common names refer.

#### **(4.6) William Ockham (d. 1347), Walter Burley (d. circa 1345) and the 14<sup>th</sup> Century**

Scotus’s contributions to medieval philosophy of language were original and sophisticated. But they rested on a fairly robust metaphysical picture, according to which there exist extra-mental universals—common natures—which are constitutive of particulars in the world, and which serve as the contents of predicate expressions. Not every medieval philosopher was comfortable with that metaphysical picture, and this was especially true of philosophers in the fourteenth century, who generally tended towards nominalism. The form of nominalism favored in the fourteenth century was inaugurated by William Ockham. Ockham’s metaphysics was in fact extremely sparse. Besides denying the reality of extra-mental universals, he also sought to cut down his ontology to substances and qualities, denying that there really are quantities, for example, or relations.<sup>36</sup> But what made Ockham’s metaphysics in particular and his philosophy in general so special was the way in which he defended his philosophical views: through rigorous metalinguistic analysis.

To defend his nominalism—both with respect to extra-mental universals and with respect to the categories besides substance and quality—Ockham employs two important concepts. We are already familiar with the first: signification. Like Abelard, Bacon and Scotus before him, Ockham defends a theory of direct reference. Moreover, like Abelard and Bacon, Ockham argues the reference has to be articulated as a relation between an expression and some individual(s), so that, for example, ‘human’

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<sup>35</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 56, a. 2, ad 3.

<sup>36</sup> Ockham does allow for a few kinds of relations, on certain theological grounds, but these are peculiar cases.

signifies individual humans, rather than some nature common to them. But, unlike those earlier philosophers, Ockham couches his theory of signification within a larger theory of supposition, which is the concept at issue in the next module. Ockham argues, for example, that a concrete expression, such as ‘human’, is a sign because it “brings something to mind and can supposit for that thing.”<sup>37</sup>

In response to this account, Walter Burley, a philosophical contemporary and opponent of Ockham, sought to raise objections to Ockham’s account of signification and his account of supposition. We will examine their dispute over supposition in the next module. But Burley’s argument against Ockham’s account of signification deserves mention here. Ockham argues that names signify particular things—with a few theologically-based exceptions, things either in the category of substance or in the category of quality. How can names, including common names, refer to individuals in this way? Ockham argues that the signification of a name in a natural language is determined by the signification of the concept that it is subordinated to in the mind. For Ockham, concepts are acts of the mind, where those acts signify the things that they are about. The concept HUMAN, for example, signifies individual humans, because it is about individual humans. ‘Human’, then, signifies individual humans in virtue of being subordinated to that concept, that subordination occurring via an act of imposition. Like Burley and many other philosopher in the medieval, then, Ockham wants to situate his account of signification within a wider Aristotelian framework, where the ability to signify something is articulated in terms of its ability to bring about a thought (or concept) of that thing.

On Ockham’s account, a name’s ability to signify potentially many individual things is due to the fact that the concept to which it is subordinated can itself signify many individual things. And concepts signify in that way because what we think about by those concepts are those individual things. Consequently, competent use of a common name, such as ‘human’, involves thinking about each and every human. But Burley argues that it cannot be the case that competent use of a common name makes one think of *all* the particular objects in the world of which that name can be predicated. Invoking the notion that words come to signify in the way that they do via an act of imposition, Burley argues that “he who imposed the name ‘human’ to signify did not know me or John who is now present. Therefore, the name ‘human’ does not signify my or John who is now present.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, it is implausible that the individual who introduced the name ‘human’ into the English language—the individual who fixed its reference—was aware of each and every individual human. Indeed, it seems likely that he had no interaction whatsoever with most individual humans. But if he never interacted with them in any way, he would not be able to think about them—and so could not impose the name ‘human’ on them. In contrast, then, Burley argues that common names, such as ‘human’, must signify extra-mental universals, which he argues are possessed by individuals and account for the ability of ‘human’ to name them.

However, Ockham is unwilling to concede Burley’s argument. Burley is correct that whoever introduced ‘human’ into English never distinctly conceived of most humans. But, Ockham argues, that need not entail that he did not think about them at all. For names have the signification that they do by being subordinated to concepts, and certain concepts can be what Ockham calls confused. A confused concept is one in which all the individuals that it represents are each represented equally well. For example, the confused concept HUMAN is one in which “one man is no more understood than another, and yet by such a [concept] a human is more cognized or understood than a donkey is.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, certain concepts represent equally well all of the particulars within a certain kind, no one particular within that kind any more represented than the other, with the result that possession of that concept makes one

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<sup>37</sup> William Ockham, *Ockham’s Theory of Terms: Part I of the Summa Logicae*, ed. Michael Loux (University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), chap. 1 (pp. 49–50).

<sup>38</sup> Walter Burley, *On the Purity of the Art of Logic: The Shorter and the Longer Treatises*, trans. Paul Vincent Spade (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 88.

<sup>39</sup> William Ockham, *Commentary on Aristotle’s De interpretatione* I, Prologue, §6

think of everything represented by it “confusedly.” Ockham uses the example of the desire for some infinity (of the points composing a particular line, for example) to motivate this claim. He notes that someone “can love all the parts of some continuum, which is infinite [...]. Yet by such a longing, nothing is longed for except some part of that continuum. Or he can long for all the parts of the continuum to endure in being.”<sup>40</sup> Take a line, composed of infinite points. Assume that you love this line—not any line like it, but this very line, composed of these infinite points; you do want to see it changed in any way. You have a desire, then, that the infinite points in that line, each and every one of them, to stay exactly as they are. But, crucially, your desire is not directed at any one point more than the other. Rather, all of the infinite points in that line are represented in your desire *confusedly*. Just as with desire, then, so too thought can be a mental state in which its many objects are represented equally well, but confusedly.<sup>41</sup>

Of course, Ockham’s account stands or falls depending on whether he can provide a plausible account about how concepts can represent in that confused way. It is, fundamentally, a problem about the nature of mental representation: how and in what way can mental representations represent? But investigating that issue would take us too far afield, and, in any case, it is better suited to an introduction to medieval philosophy of mind. It is at least important to note, however, that Ockham’s account of signification, including the way in which the signification of expressions in natural language depend on how they are related to concepts, leads to novel insights about the nature of the mind, and motivates a sophisticated theory of mental language. In fact, in many ways, we can see Ockham’s theory of mental language as the culmination of a project that begins all the way back with Augustine, with his account of the mental word. What is merely suggested in the work of Augustine and Boethius—that thinking is in some way linguistic—becomes explicit in Ockham’s account, where natural language is wholly subordinated to a language of thought, along lines similar to those that some contemporary philosophers of language, such as Jerry Fodor, advocate.

**For further background on the philosophers and concepts discussed in this module, please consult the following:**

Eco, Umberto. “Signification and Denotation from Boethius to Ockham.” Franciscan Studies 44 (1984): 1–29.

Magee, John. Boethius on Signification and Mind. Leiden: Brill, 1989.

Maloney, Thomas. “The Semiotics of Roger Bacon.” Medieval Studies 45 (1983): 120–154.

Markus, Robert. “St. Augustine on Signs.” Phronesis 2: 60–83.

Meier-Oeser, Stephen. “Medieval Semiotics.” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Summer 2011. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/semiotics-medieval/>.

Pini, Giorgio. “Species, Concept and Thing: Theories of Signification in the Second Half of the Thirteenth Century.” Medieval Philosophy and Theology 8 (1999), 21–52.

Spade, P.V. “The Semantics of Terms.” In N. Kretzmann, et al. (eds), The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy, pp. 188–96. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

———. “Thoughts, Words and Things: An Introduction to Late Mediaeval Logic and Semantic Theory, Version 1.2,” December 27, 2007.

[http://pvspade.com/Logic/docs/Thoughts,%20Words%20and%20Things1\\_2.pdf](http://pvspade.com/Logic/docs/Thoughts,%20Words%20and%20Things1_2.pdf).

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. For a detailed discussion of this example, and the larger issues that motivate it, see Paul Vincent Spade, “Thoughts, Words and Things: An Introduction to Late Mediaeval Logic and Semantic Theory, Version 1.2,” December 27, 2007, 148–155, [http://pvspade.com/Logic/docs/Thoughts,%20Words%20and%20Things1\\_2.pdf](http://pvspade.com/Logic/docs/Thoughts,%20Words%20and%20Things1_2.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> For a fuller discussion of this example, see Paul Vincent Spade, “Thoughts, Words and Things: An Introduction to Late Mediaeval Logic and Semantic Theory, Version 1.2,” December 27, 2007, 154–155, [http://pvspade.com/Logic/docs/Thoughts,%20Words%20and%20Things1\\_2.pdf](http://pvspade.com/Logic/docs/Thoughts,%20Words%20and%20Things1_2.pdf).

## Glossary of Terms

A	Affection of the soul	In Latin, <i>passio animae</i> . Aristotle argues that expressions signify affections of the soul. Medieval philosophers debated about the nature of these affections: whether they were concepts (i.e. mental representations) or things
C	Concept	A mental representation. See 'affection of the soul'
I	Imposition	In Latin, <i>impositio</i> . Imposition was the act by which an expression came to signify something, by being imposed on it. An individual who carries out an act of imposition is known as an impositor.
O	Order of Speaking	In Latin, <i>ordo orandi</i> . The order of speaking is a hierarchy among the elements involved in successful communication. There are first things, then mental representations, then spoken signs, and finally written signs. This order also reflects a dependency, those posterior depending on what is prior
O	Organon	From the Greek for 'tool'. The Organon was comprised of Aristotle's six logical works. Until around eleventh century, medieval philosophers had access to only the first two: the <i>Categories</i> and <i>On Interpretation</i> .
S	Semantic Triangle	Articulated by Boethuis, the semantic (or semiotic) triangle is meant to capture the semantics of expressions in spoken language. Spoken expressions refer to things in the world by signifying concepts, which concepts represent those things. The triangle suggests that reference is indirect. Roger Bacon was one of the first significant medieval critics of the semantic triangle.
S	Signification	The relationship that a sign has to what it signifies. Medieval inquiry into the nature of signification was influenced by the writings of Aristotle and Augustine, though significant innovation occurred throughout the medieval period.
S	<i>Status</i>	For Peter Abelard, a status is the cause or reason why common names (e.g. 'human') refer to individuals of a certain kind. A status is not anything, nor is it nothing. Rather, it falls outside of any category of being. In part because a status is not anything - and especially because it is not a universal thing - Abelard argues that the only things that exist are particulars.

Component V: Assessment and Evaluation

- Correct Q. 1 The earliest source of philosophical influence on medieval discussions of signification was:  
A Peter Abelard  
B Aristotle  
C Augustine  
D William Ockham
- Correct Q. 2 Prior to the eleventh century, most medieval philosophers had access to which of Aristotle's works?  
A *De quantitate animae*  
B *The Timaeus*  
C *The Categories* and *On Interpretation*  
D *On the City of God*
- Correct Q. 3 Boethius's semantic triangle suggests that Boethius considered reference to be:  
A direct  
B indirect
- Correct Q. 4 Peter Abelard maintains that a *status* is (choose all that apply):  
Correct A the cause of a common name's referring to what it does  
Correct B not anything  
C a universal  
D what a common name signifies
- Correct Q. 5 Peter Abelard argues that a common name, strictly speaking, signifies:  
A a status  
B an individual  
Correct C nothing  
D a universal
- Correct Q. 6 Roger Bacon rejects Augustine's suggestion that signs can be:  
A offered only to the senses  
B offered only to the intellect  
C natural  
D conventional

- Q. 7 Roger Bacon argues that, after a thing ceases to exist, a name used in the past to signify that thing (choose all that apply):
- Correct A needs to be reimposed to be used meaningfully again  
B still signifies that thing  
Correct C is used equivocally on a subsequent use
- Q. 8 John Duns Scotus argues that a word signifies
- A a concept  
B a thing as it exists  
Correct C a thing as it is understood
- Q. 9 Walter Burley rejects Ockham's account of signification because it (choose all that apply):
- Correct A requires that one think of everything of which a predicate can be truly predicated  
B rejects the standard Aristotelian account  
C is an inconsistent theory  
D plagiarizes Aristotle's *On Interpretation*
- Q. 10 William Ockham responds to Burley's criticism of his account of signification by invoking the notion of a:
- Correct A categorematic concept  
B confused concept  
C syncategorematic concept  
D connotative concept