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Description of Module

Subject Name	Philosophy
Paper Name	Philosophy of Language
Module Name / Title	The Concept of Supposition in Medieval Philosophy of Language
Module Id	11.5
Pre-requisites	Medieval theories of signification
Objectives	To articulate the concept of supposition and its relationship to signification
Key words	supposition, appellation, term, reference, meaning

The Concept of Supposition in Medieval Philosophy of Language

(5.1) Medieval Philosophy of Language: Introduction to the Theory of Supposition

In the last module, we examined the evolution of the concept of signification in the medieval period. As we saw, that concept is prevalent throughout medieval philosophical history; indeed, it was the central semantic notion for much of that period. In this module, we will consider another semantic concept: supposition—or, rather, a family of concepts, with supposition at its center—which develops into what becomes known as the "theory of supposition." Whereas signification is a central concept throughout medieval philosophical history, supposition is introduced as a semantic concept only in the twelfth century. Also unlike signification (and other earlier semantic concepts like imposition and nomination), which is a semantic property that an expression has regardless of linguistic context, the theory of supposition is a theory about the sorts of semantic properties that a term (i.e. a subject or predicate) has relative to its sentential context. In contrast with earlier semantic concepts, then, the semantic concepts developed in the twelfth century suggest that the semantic value of an expression is not fixed, but rather depends on its use within a sentence.

Because of the apparent tension between these two semantic traditions, the history of medieval semantics beginning with the twelfth century can be regarded as, among other things, the process of reconciling these two very different ways of understanding the nature of the semantic value of an expression. This process appears to go through three stages. First, in the twelfth century, the relevant concepts (not just supposition but also others that we will mention shortly) enter logical discourse via the grammatical tradition. What develops during this stage is the so-called "theory of the property of terms," a theory that includes signification and supposition, as well as appellation, ampliation and restriction. Second, during the thirteenth century, the "theory of supposition" begins to take shape. In particular, the thirteenth century sees the slow subordination of semantic concepts like appellation, ampliation and restriction to the concept of supposition, so that, by the end of that century, the two main semantic concepts in medieval philosophy of language are signification and supposition. Concomitant with this process, the concept of supposition itself evolves into the much larger "theory" of supposition. Finally, in the fourteenth century, supposition theory comes to play a central role in debates between realists, such as Walter Burley, and nominalists, such as William Ockham. Of particular importance is a debate about the proper relationship between signification and supposition themselves.

In this module, then, we will begin by tracing the development of the theory of supposition, beginning with the twelfth century and ending with the fourteenth. By tracing that history, we will see central aspects of the theory of the supposition develop: what the concept of supposition is, the relationship of that concept to other semantic concepts that constitute the theory of the properties of terms, the expansion of the concept of supposition into a much larger theory, and finally the impact of that theory on important semantic and metaphysical debates in the fourteenth century.

(5.2) The Emergence of the Concept of Supposition in the Twelfth Century

Unlike signification, supposition began not as a semantic notion but rather as a syntactic one. It finds its roots in the *Institutes of Grammar,* a work by the sixth-century grammarian

Priscian. As a syntactic concept, supposition concerns the use of an expression as a subject term. This sense of supposition is reflected in a number of commentaries on Priscian's *Institutes* that were written in the twelfth century. The grammatical commentator Peter Hylias, for example, uses '*suppositio*' and its cognates in this way.[1] At some point during the twelfth century (or perhaps even slightly before it), however, supposition becomes as much as semantic notion as a syntactic one. As a semantic notion, supposition concerns the relations between a (subject) term in a proposition and the thing(s) that it stands for. The fourteenth-century logician Walter Burley, for example, states that "supposition is the taking of a term for something."[2] That the notion of supposition would undergo such a transformation, however, may not be all that surprising. As Catarina Dutilh Novaes notes,

> these two apparently different acceptations of the *suppositio* terminology […]—the syntactic one and the semantic one—are not really dissimilar if one considers that the prototypical subject of a proposition is a substantive noun and that, according to the grammatical tradition following Priscian, a noun signifies substance together with a quality. Hence, by placing a noun as the subject of a proposition, one also naturally invokes the substance that the noun signifies.[3]

Dutilh Novaes suggestion is that any (or, at least, nearly any) expression which can be put in the subject position of a proposition will be a substantive noun, but that in the tradition following Priscian (i.e. the tradition in which the syntactic notion of supposition develops), a substantive noun signifies substance qualified in some way. 'Human', for example, signifies individual substances—humans—which have or instantiate humanity. So the idea that 'human' could be used to stand for individual humans fits well within this grammatical tradition.

Within this semantico-grammatical tradition, supposition is seen as one among many of the semantic properties that terms in propositions have. One other property discussed in this tradition deserve mention here: appellation. The concept of appellation was already in use in Abelard's day, in the eleventh century. And, unlike the concept of supposition, it seems to have been primarily a semantic concept from its inception. In Anselm's *De Grammatico*, for example, appellation said to be a kind of signification. In particular, it is the sort of signification that occurs when something is signified "through another" (*per aliud*). For example, 'man' signifies individual men through another, that is, through the form of man, which 'man' signifies *per se*. Used in this way, then, it is the rough equivalent of *nominatio* (see module 1).

Of course, this description of appellation should sound remarkably similar to supposition, since both determine a range of objects that they stand for. And, indeed, appellation eventually comes to be absorbed, to varying degrees, within the larger theory of supposition.[4] But appellation can still be distinguished from supposition in an important respect. For appellation

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[1] See de Rijk, L.M. *Logica Modernorum: A Contribution to the History of Early Terminist Logic*, Vol. II.1, Assen: Koninklijke Van Gorcum & Co., 1967, p. 518ff.

[2] 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), 80.

[3] Catarina Dutilh Novaes, "Supposition," ed. Henrik Lagerlund, *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 1231.

[4] In fact, it seems that, originally, appellation rather than supposition was the primary semantic notion arising out of the terminist tradition. See Bos, "Terms, Properties of," 1253.

concerns the extension of a term on a particular occasion of use. As William of Sherwood, a thirteenth-century logician, puts it, "appellation […] is the present correct application of a term, i.e., the property with respect to which what the term signifies can be said of something through the use of the word 'is'."[5] One consequence of this account is that appellation is restricted in a way that supposition is not. For a term can supposit not just for the things that exist on its occasion of us, but for past and future things as well—indeed, it can supposit even for mere *possibilia*. In contrast, the appellation of (the use of) a term is restricted merely to things which exist when the term is used. For example, in 'Caesar was murdered', 'Caesar' supposits for something—namely, Caesar—but it has no appellation, because 'Caesar' does not presently extend to some existing thing.

The relationship between supposition and appellation varied from philosopher of language to philosopher of language. But, generally speaking, philosophers of language from the thirteenth century onward regarded appellation as a property of the predicate, if they recognized appellation at all. Supposition, in contrast, was understood to be ("strictly speaking," at least) a property of the subject term.[6] These two concepts could then be used to articulate the truth-conditions of a proposition. For example, consider the proposition 'A man is tan.' 'Man', in this proposition, supposits for all men—present, past, future, and even merely possible men. 'Tan', in contrast, appellates only for those tan things that exist when the proposition is uttered. If, then, 'tan' appellates for some *supposita* of 'man', the proposition is true; otherwise it is false. That is, if 'is tan' can be said right now of one of the *supposita* of 'man', then the proposition is true.

However, the predicate of 'A man is tan' can be "ampliated" or "restricted." For example, in 'A man was tan', the use of the past tense verb 'was' ampliates the predicate. So ampliated, 'A man was tan' is true just in case 'is tan' can be said either now *or at some past time* of one of the *supposita* of 'man'.[7] That is, we need to consider not only the extension of the term 'tan' in its use right now, but also its extension if and when it is used at any moment in the past, with the consequence that the appellation of the predicate is ampliated, or expanded. (Unsurprisingly, then, these two other semantic concepts of terms—ampliation and restriction—are usually introduced in the context of larger debates about supposition, appellation and their relationship).

While appellation seems to be a semantically useful concept, it too comes to have a minor role in the larger theory of supposition. This is due to the fact that we can just as easily articulate the truth conditions of a proposition simply in terms of the ampliation or restriction of the supposition of its terms, so long as well allow the predicate as well as the subject to supposit. For example, we can understand the present tense copula, 'is', to restrict the relevant *supposita* of a predicate expression to only those that presently exist, and for the truth of a proposition to require a certain co-extensiveness in supposition between the subject and the predicate, so restricted. From the thirteenth century onwards, then, supposition emerges as the dominant

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[5] William of Sherwood, *William of Sherwood's Introduction to Logic*, ed. Norman Kretzmann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966), 106.

[6] Ibid., 122. See also Walter Burley, *On the Purity of the Art of Logic*, 131; William Ockham, *Ockham's Theory of Terms: Part I of the Summa Logicae*, ed. Michael Loux (University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), chap. 63, pp. 188–9.

[7] Note that, on the standard medieval conception, 'A man was tan' is true even if the only *supposita* of 'man' of whom 'tan' can be predicated exists only at present, not in the past.

semantic concept among concepts such as appellation, ampliation and restriction, so that these other concepts come to have almost perfunctory roles in the theory of supposition.

While the emergence in the twelfth century concept of supposition (and other important semantic concepts) can be traced to the grammatical tradition, the development of the theory of supposition also owes its genesis to the reintroduction of Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations* in the eleventh century, and to an interest in the nature of semantic and logical fallacies more generally that arose among grammarians and logicians on account of that reintroduction. Of particular interest was the fallacy of equivocation, a fallacy of argument in which a term is used in a different way in the major and minor premises of the argument. The concept of supposition provided logicians from the twelfth century onward a way to quickly diagnose that fallacy. For supposition is the use of a term to stand for something else, but logicians quickly realized that what a term stands for can vary from one occasion of use the next. In particular, what a term is used to stand for in the major premise of an argument might be something different than what it stands for in the minor premise. Consequently, the theory of supposition develops as "a theory codifying the different use of terms in propositions," where codifying those differences in use allows medieval logicians to articulate "key logical concepts such as truth, (fallacious or valid) inference, and propositional content."[8] In other words, supposition theory becomes a powerful tool of semantic analysis, one that is important not just for semantics itself but in many other domains as well.

(5.3) The Rise of Supposition Theory in the Thirteenth Century

Whereas the twelfth century saw the emergence of supposition as key semantic concept, the thirteenth century saw that concept developed in a much larger theory: the theory of supposition. The development of supposition theory cannot be traced to any one individual. Rather, that theory comes to be developed in a number of different ways by logicians known as terminists. These terminists, as the name suggests, were especially interested in the semantic properties of the terms of propositions. A staple of terminists in both the thirteenth and fourteenth century was the production of logical textbooks (a *summa*, or *summulae*) investigating these properties. Thirteenth-century terminists include Roger Bacon (to whom we were introduced in the last module) and Peter of Spain (to whom we weren't). However, since our focus in the next section of this module will be fourteenth-century English logicians, it may be useful to look carefully at the theory of supposition developed in the early thirteenth century by the English logician William of Sherwood. By paying close attention to the theory that Sherwood develops (as well as some of the ways in which it differs from other, later English accounts), we will gain an understanding of the general features of supposition theory, as well as the context in which to situate the debates about supposition between Walter Burley and William Ockham.

As was mentioned in the last section, the theory of supposition codifies the different uses to which a term in a proposition can be put. Articulating those different uses involves, first, articulating what sorts of things a term can be used to stand for, and, second, the precise way in which it stands for those thing(s). Contemporary scholarship typically divides these into two separate aspects of supposition theory: the theory of the **kinds** of supposition, and the theory of the **modes** of supposition, the latter of which concerns especially the modes of a certain kind of

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[8] Dutilh Novaes, "Supposition," 1230.

supposition called personal supposition. So let us consider the kinds of supposition that Sherwood discusses, and then turn to the question of their modes.

(5.4) The Theory of the Kinds of Supposition

In discussing the kinds of supposition that there are, Sherwood begins by dividing supposition into material and formal. Other philosophers (such as Burley and Ockham) hold that the material-formal division is a division not of supposition *simpliciter*, but of what they call proper supposition. Proper supposition is when a term is used in a literal sense. Improper supposition, in contrast, involves non-literal uses of a term: hyperbolic, metonymic, and metaphorical uses, for example. At least by the fourteenth century, then, there is a conscious effort on the part of supposition theorists to have a motivated theory of all the myriad ways that a term can be used in a sentence, rather than merely of its literal uses.

Returning to Sherwood's distinction between material and formal supposition, however, Sherwood argues that supposition is material "when a word itself supposits either for the very utterance itself or for the word itself, composed of the utterance and the signification—as if we were to say 'Man is a monosyllable' or 'Man is a name'."[9] For Sherwood (as for many others), material supposition is similar to our quote-names convention, wherein we refer to words in natural language. However, it is important to note that it is not itself a quote-names theory. Sherwood's example is not ' 'Man' is a monosyllable' but rather 'Man is a monosyllable'.[10] For Sherwood, then, an expression having material supposition supposits for itself. The supposition is "material" because the supposition concerns the material of that very expression—its actual utterance or inscription (either alone, or along with a consideration of its function as a sign)— rather than concerning the significate, or "form," of the expression.

Formal supposition, in contrast, is the kind of supposition concerned with the "form," or significate, of the expression. Formal supposition, Sherwood goes on to say, can be divided into simple and personal supposition. Supposition "is simple when it supposits what it signifies for what it signifies."[11] That is, supposition is simple when a term supposits for the very thing that it signifies. Sherwood's example here is 'Man is a species', where 'man' signifies a certain form, man, which falls under some more general kind. 'Man is a species' is true, then, because 'man' supposits in this case of the form of man (rather than individual men), and that form is in fact a species of something else, namely, the genus animal. Supposition is personal, in contrast, when a term supposits for some individual thing subordinate to what it signifies. For example, in 'A man is running', 'man' supposits not for the form, man, but rather for an individual that has that form: namely, some individual man. That proposition is true, then, just in case some individual man is a member of the class of things that are currently running. We can see, then, that the kind of supposition can be divided into material and formal, and formal supposition itself can be divided into simple and personal. What distinguishes these kinds of supposition from one another,

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[9] William of Sherwood, *William of Sherwood's Introduction to Logic*, 107.

[10] Medieval logicians did in fact have a quote names convention. They would use the enclitic 'ly' or 'li' before the name to be quoted. For example, 'ly homo' would serve as the name of the word 'homo'.

[11] William of Sherwood, *William of Sherwood's Introduction to Logic*, 107.

moreover, is the kinds of things for which they supposit: either the term itself, or the thing which the term signifies, or things which are "subordinate" to what the term signifies.

We should stop here to consider why a term has the kind of supposition that it does in a particular propositional context. As we have seen, for example, 'man' supposits personally in 'Man is an animal' but simply in 'Man is a species'. What determines that change in the kind of supposition? There are in fact two issues here. First, we require some explanation of the determination of the kind(s) of supposition that a term *can* have in a given sentential context. Second, we need to know what determines the kind of supposition that the term *actually has* in that context. To address the first of these two issues, we need to consider a division among terms that was standard in the medieval period: between terms of first and second imposition, and, among terms of first imposition, between terms of first and second intention. While precise accounts of the division vary, as a rough approximation, terms of second imposition are "names of names," that is, they are terms that refer to parts or features of natural, or conventional, language: for example, 'noun', 'verb', 'tense'. In contrast, terms of first imposition are "names of things," terms that refer to non-linguistic features of reality (or, rather, features of reality that are not exclusive to natural language). These terms have themselves be divided into two kinds: terms of first intention and terms of second intention. Accounts of how to distinguish between terms of first and second intention vary widely, so providing a general description of that difference is not possible. But, regardless of the account, logicians usually agree on which terms in particular are terms of first or second intention. For example, there is general agreement that 'human', 'dog', and 'white' are terms of first intention, whereas 'species', 'individual', 'accident', and 'genus' are terms of second intention.

For most supposition theorists, what determines the kind of supposition that a subject term in particular *can* have in a given sentential context was the nature of the predicate term: whether it is a term of second or first imposition, and, of the latter, whether it is a term of first or second intention.[12] 'Man' can supposit simply in 'Man is a species', for example, because 'species' is a term of second intention. 'Man' can supposit materially in 'Man is a noun', moreover, because 'noun' is a term of second imposition. For some logicians—including Sherwood himself, it seems—the nature of the predicate term determines not just the kind of supposition the subject term *can* have, but even what it in fact *does* have.[13] On this account, for example, 'Man' must supposit materially in 'Man is a noun'. But, for most others (Ockham and Burley, for example), such terms merely license such a reading, for these philosophers held that, regardless of the nature of the predicate term, a subject term could always supposit personally.

Even if propositional context determines the kinds of supposition a term *can* have, then, for many logicians, it remains an open question about what kind of supposition a term *does* have in a given sentential context. In other words, sentential context allows for multiple readings of a proposition. In such cases, medieval authors claimed that the sentence was "multiplex," that is, that is can be interpreted in more than one way. The process of determining which interpretation

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[12] Though many logicians favored an analysis of the kinds of supposition a term could have in terms of the nature of the term to which it was paired, there were exceptions. Paul of Venice, a late fourteenth century logician, argued that it is the intention of the speaker which determines the kind of supposition that a term has. Likewise, John Buridan, a mid-fourteenth century French philosopher, argued that it was the agreement of the participants in the conversation that was the final arbiter of the kind of supposition that a term has.

[13] Or, at least, the nature of the predicate term along with various syncategorematic elements.

was correct varied from author to author. But the standard account, typified by Ockham, introduced rules of interpretation unconnected to the truth value of the various readings in question. That those rules were unconnected with truth were important, moreover. As Dutilh Novaes notes, to connect correct interpretation with truth is problematic which alternative readings both render the sentence true.[14] For, in such a case, the rules will not be able to determine which reading is correct, since both readings render an interpretation of the sentence which is true. Consequently, "Ockham's position—according to which the kinds of supposition a term may have in a [sentence] are defined by certain rules unrelated to truth-values—seems more satisfactory."[15]

(5.5) The Theory of the Modes of Supposition

The theory of the kinds of supposition, then, plays a central role in determining the sorts of possible readings that one can give to a sentence. Beyond the kinds of supposition that a term might have, however, theorists of supposition also articulate the ways, or modes, by which a term can supposit for the thing(s) that it does. This issue here is not *what* a term supposits for, but rather *how* that term supposits for that thing(s). Sherwood describes modes of supposition both for simple supposition and for personal supposition. For some philosophers in the fourteenth-century (Ockham, for example), the only sort of modes that survive in their theories of supposition are the modes of personal supposition. That the modes of personal supposition receive outsized attention, however, should not be surprising, given that most of our language is used to talk individuals in the world.[16] And, as we have seen, personal supposition is the kind of supposition in which a term is used to talk about individuals. In 'A man is running', for example, 'man' is used to talk about an individual man, rather than (for Sherwood, at least) the form of man. Likewise, in 'Socrates runs', 'Socrates' supposits personally, for an individual—namely, Socrates. Given the outsized role that the modes of personal supposition have, then, and for the sake of brevity, we will focus only on the modes of personal supposition in this module.

Among terms that supposit personally, Sherwood notes that those terms can supposit either determinately or what he calls "confusedly." When a term having personal supposition supposits determinately, one can identify the particular of which it is said. This is especially clear in sentences such as 'Socrates runs', where Socrates is the determinate individual in question. But 'man' in 'A man is running' also has determinate supposition, because we can (if true) identify one of the *supposita* in question of which 'running' is said: for example, Socrates, or Plato, or Aristotle. (Both Burley and Ockham have a slightly different account, according to which a term supposits determinately when one can "descend" from the statement to what Burley and Ockham seem to take to be an equivalent disjunctive statement, composed of proper names or demonstratives. For example, 'man' in 'A man is running' is determinate because one

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[14] C Dutilh Novaes, "An Intensional Interpretation of Ockham's Theory of Supposition," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46, no. 3 (2008): 383.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Nor should it be surprising that nominalists especially give an outsized role to personal supposition, since they maintain that the only things which exist are particular.

"descend" to a sentence of the form 'Socrates runs, or Plato runs, or Aristotle runs, …' for all presently existing men.)

In contrast to determinate supposition, a term has confused supposition "when the word supposits for many," that is, when the term supposits for more than just one determinate thing.[17] Confused supposition can be either distributive, "when it supposits for many in such a way as to supposit for any," or merely confused, so that it supposits for many things but in such a way that it does not supposit for any one of them in particular. An example of confused and distributive supposition can be seen in the sentence 'Every man is an animal', where 'man' supposits for each and every man, on account of the universal quantifier 'every'. An example of merely confused supposition, in contrast, is the predicate term of that sentence—'animal'—which supposits for particular animals but not any one animal in particular. Finally, confused and distributive supposition can be further divided into mobile and immobile supposition. Supposition is mobile when one can infer a singular sentence from a more general one whose subject term supposits confusedly and distributively, whereas it is immobile when some additional syncategorematic element make such descent impossible (such as 'All men *except* Socrates are foolish', where no singular sentence can be inferred).

Understanding Sherwood's various modes is, clearly, a somewhat tricky and cumbersome affair. A significant advance in the theory of the modes of personal supposition, however, was developed by Walter Burley. Burley articulates the various modes of personal supposition in terms of inference rules of ascent and descent (an idea that is evident, but only sporadically, in Sherwoord's text). So, for example, a term supposits merely confusedly when "a common term supposits for several things in such a way that the proposition is inferred from any one of them and one cannot descend to any of them copulatively or disjunctively."[18] For example, 'animal' in 'A man is an animal' supposits merely confusedly because you can infer that sentence from 'A man is this animal', but you cannot infer from 'A man is an animal' either 'A man is this animal, or a man is that animal, or …' or 'A man is this animal, and a man is that animal, and…'. Similar rules are developed to handle cases of both mobile and immobile confused and distributive supposition.

The mechanics of supposition theory—while complex, and varied from logician to logician—are relatively straightforward. What is more obscure, however, is the purpose of supposition theory itself. Until recently, the most popular explanation of the theory of supposition is that it is a theory of reference. But that explanation faces significant challenges. We can note two here.[19] First, if the theory of supposition were a theory of reference, we should expect that the theory would determine the referent(s) of a term in a context. But supposition theory typically does not do this. On the contrary, it merely serves to articulate the sort of things a term *could* supposit for, and (given the relevant kind of supposition and the presence of various syncategorematic elements) the way in which it can supposit for them. What things a term actually supposits for is determined by something else (rules of interpretation unconnected to truth, for example, or the will of the speaker that a term has one kind of supposition rather than

[17] William of Sherwood, *William of Sherwood's Introduction to Logic*, 108.

[18] Ibid., 116.

[19] For a fuller treatment of these challenges, see Catarina Dutilh Novaes, *Formalizing Medieval Logical Theories: Suppositio, Consequentiae and Obligationes* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 17–29.

another). Rather, the medieval concept which best approximates reference appears to be signification—a point seen in the last module.

Second, if we interpret the theory of supposition as a theory of reference, it is unclear how best to categorize the relationship between the kinds of supposition, on the one hand, and their modes, on the other. Indeed, it seems that, if it were a theory of reference, medieval logicians would do well to abandon the aspect of supposition theory that deals with modes, since that aspect of the theory seems ill-suited for reference-determination. Some scholars have suggested as much, arguing that, by the fourteenth century at least, the theory of the modes of supposition no longer serves an important function in semantic theorizing.[20] If that is true, however, the continued philosophical attention paid to the modes of personal supposition in the fourteenth century should strike us as surprising. Why devote so much philosophical energy to a dead or otiose semantic theory?

Conceiving of supposition as an approximation of our notion of reference thus seems suspect. But, within the last decade, some scholars have offered an exciting alternative proposal. Rather than regarding supposition as approximating our notion of reference, they suggest that supposition is most closely approximates contemporary theories of meaning.[21] Leading this charge is Catarina Dutilh Novaes. Dutilh Novaes argues that the theory of supposition is best understood as a theory which determines the various possible interpretations, or meanings, that a proposition can have—where the actual meaning is then determined by linguistic rules or speaker intention. In contrast to the received scholarly view, then, which approximates signification to meaning and supposition to reference, Dutilh Novaes suggests that just the opposite is true: that signification is best conceived of as approximating notions of reference, whereas supposition best approximates meaning.

Dutilh Novaes makes her case by focusing mainly on the semantics of Ockham, though she suggests that her analysis can be generalized, at least to other logicians in the late medieval period. I believe that this suggestion has a great deal of merit. Moreover, I believe that interpreting especially late medieval semantics in this way helps bring into clearer focus the semantic debates during that period. In the last section of this module, therefore, we will consider some broad semantic disagreements between two of the foremost logicians of the fourteenth century: Walter Burley and William Ockham. In particular, I intend for us to examine how each of these men goes about reconciling the two concepts we have examined in this module and the last: signification and supposition.

(5.6) Burley, Ockham and Semantics in the Fourteenth Century

In his theory of supposition, Sherwood distinguishes between two kinds of formal supposition: simple and personal. That division is fairly standard in thirteenth and fourteenth-

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[20] This position is mentioned (though not endorsed) by Gareth Matthews in Gareth B. Matthews, "Two Theories of Supposition?," *Topoi* 16, no. 1 (March 1, 1997): 35–40.

[21] Dutilh Novaes, "An Intensional Interpretation of Ockham's Theory of Supposition," 355.

century theories of supposition.[22] Simple supposition is when a common term supposits for something common (on Sherwood's account, some form that an individual can have), whereas personal supposition is when a term, proper or common, supposits for those individual(s) that are its "inferiors". Both Burley and Ockham accept that the kinds of supposition ought to be understood in this way. However, they differ with respect to the role that signification plays in formal supposition generally. Burley, for his part, follows Sherwood; he argues that a common term supposits simply when it supposits for what it signifies. For example, Burley argues that, in 'Man is a species', 'man' supposits for the form of man, which is what 'man' signifies. But, in 'Man is a species', 'man' supposits simply. More generally, then, whenever a term supposits simply, it supposits for what it signifies.

Ockham, in contrast, argues that, when a term supposits for what it signifies, that term supposits personally. In 'Man is an animal', for example, 'man' supposits personally, for individual men. And it is these individual men, Ockham argues, that constitute the things which 'man' signifies. Perhaps this difference is not so surprising, given the relative accounts of signification that we saw Burley and Ockham defend in the last module. Both Burley and Ockham, recall, are committed to a theory of direct reference. However, Burley and Ockham disagree about the sort of things that predicate expressions refer to. Burley maintains that predicate expressions refer to some form which a number of individuals can possess. Ockham, however, argues that predicate expressions refer to individuals. 'Man', for example, refers not the form of man, but rather to individual men. If, as Ockham contends, signification is a direct referential relationship between an expression and some individual(s), then simple supposition cannot be the kind of supposition a term has when it supposits for what it signifies. For simple supposition occurs when a common term supposits for something common. Rather, supposition must be personal when a term supposits for what it signifies. Consequently, for Ockham, if predicate expressions refer to (that is, signify) individuals, then it must be that a term supposits personally, rather than simply, when it supposits for what it signifies.

Beyond this difference about the way in which the kinds of formal supposition is to be articulated, however, Burley and Ockham may well have a more fundamental (and far more philosophically interesting) disagreement—a disagreement that concerns the very foundations of semantics itself. This is a disagreement over the priority relations that obtain between the concepts of signification and supposition. Burley, who (just as in the debate over the nature of simple and personal supposition) defends the traditional account, argues that signification is logically prior to supposition. For Burley, to signify is simply to "establish an understanding" of something. Consequently, that a term signifies something depends in no way on whether and how that term supposits. That a term signifies depends rather on a certain act of imposition, in which a term comes to have the signification that it does, by being imposed onto something. 'Man', for example, signifies the form of man, and it does so because it was imposed on that form by an individual, or by a group of experts, or by implicit agreement among members of the relevant linguistic community, depending on one's account of imposition. Indeed, for Burley, it is only because of its signification that a term can supposit in the formal ways that it does. That 'man' can supposit for the form of man is due to the signification that it has, and that it can

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[22] A notable exception here is John Buridan, who argued that proper supposition was only of two kinds: personal and material. Simple supposition was, according to him, otiose, since, in "simple" supposition, a term supposits for another term, namely, a term in mental language, but to stand for a term is to have material supposition.

supposit for individual men is due to the ontological relationship that the form of man has to individual men.

That Burley conceives of the relationship between signification and supposition in this way suggests a certain view about the nature of meaning. In particular, it suggests that Burley regards meaning as a bottom-up affair. That is, the propositional content of a sentence is determined by the referents of the terms of that sentence and the compositional rules, or syntax, of the language by which they are combined. Moreover, the meaning of the terms themselves are determined in a natural way: causally, for example. Understood in this way, meaning is atomistic (the meaning of the simple expressions in a language do not depend on the inferential roles they play in the language, but rather the meaning of a proposition depends upon them) and also non-normative (meaning-determination is not a matter of fulfilling certain obligations).

How, in contrast, does Ockham understand the nature of meaning? Let us first consider how Ockham understands the relationship of signification and supposition. There is at least *prima facie* evidence that Ockham regards supposition to be prior to signification. Ockham writes that "a sign is said to signify something when it supposits for or is capable of suppositing for that thing in such a way that the name can, with the verb 'to be' intervening, be predicated of a pronoun referring to that thing."[23] In other words, what a term signifies is determined by what it supposits for in personal supposition. 'Man' signifies some individual man because 'He is a man' is true when 'he' is used to indicate (*demonstrare*) some man.

Whether Ockham endorses the priority of supposition over signification is a topic of some controversy in the literature, however. Claude Panaccio, for example, argues that a close reading of Ockham's logical works, with an eye towards his epistemology, reveals that Ockham defends the traditional account, according to which signification is prior to supposition.[24] In contrast, two other scholars of Ockham—Dutilh Novaes and Nicholas Vaughan—have suggested that Ockham's account of supposition and supposition-determination suggest just the opposite: that supposition is in fact prior to signification.[25]

The specifics of this debate about Ockham exegesis would take us too far afield of our present project. But I want to end by highlighting the semantic implications of that debate. If Panaccio is correct, Ockham's semantics, in its general features, looks similar to Burley's: language is atomistic, and what a term means isn't fixed by the fulfillment of certain linguistic obligations, but rather by certain causal relations. If scholars such as Dutilh Novaes and Vaughan are correct, however, Ockham's semantics looks radically different. First, Ockham's semantics will be holistic, rather than atomistic. The meaning of term does not determine the meaning of the sentence it composes, on this view. On the contrary, the meaning of a term is itself a function of the inferential roles that term plays in the language as a whole. To understand the meaning of any term, then, we need to understand its relationship to all the other terms in the language—

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[23] William Ockham, *Summa Logicae*, chap. 33, p. 113.

[24] Claude Panaccio, *Ockham on Concepts*, Ashgate Studies in Medieval Philosophy (Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 53–55.

[25] See Dutilh Novaes, *Formalizing Medieval Logical Theories: Suppositio, Consequentiae and Obligationes*, 61, and Nicholas Vaughan, "Ockham's Conception of Logic as a Rational Science: An Inferentialist Interpretation" (Trinity College, Oxford, 2013), 116–20, https://www.academia.edu/6008467/Ockhams_Conception_of_Logic_as_a_Rational_Science_An_Inferentialist_Interpretation._DPhil_PhD_Thesis_Balliol_College_University_of_Oxford._2014_.

what sorts of inferences its use in a sentence licenses, and what sort of inferences license its use. Moreover, scholars such as Vaughan have suggested that the inferential relations that sentences bear to one another are governed by norms of "inferential commitment" and "inferential entitlement," with the result that meaning itself is determined in part by certain norms. If Vaughan is correct, then, second, Ockham sees meaning-determination as fundamentally normative, rather than naturalistic. Consequently, on Vaughan's reading, Ockham defends a version of inferential role semantics popularized by Robert Brandom, among others, according to which meaning is holistic and normative.[26]

If this latter interpretation of Ockham's semantics is correct, then Burley and Ockham can be seen as standing as the poles of the contemporary semantic landscape. Burley favors a semantics that is atomistic and non-normative in nature, whereas Ockham favors a holistic and normative account of meaning. Casting the disagreement between Burley and Ockham in this way has exciting implications, both for our understanding of the semantic debates that dominate the fourteenth century, and for the possible contributions that this debate could make to our theorizing about meaning today.

(5.7) Conclusion

I trust that the last two modules have provided at least some insight into the sophisticated and innovative approaches to the nature of meaning that one can find in the medieval period. Our survey in these two modules has been brief, and there is a great deal of medieval philosophy of language that we have been unable to discuss in even a cursory fashion. But, by examining closely the development of the concepts of signification and supposition, you should have at your disposal the basic tools necessary to engage in further research into medieval approaches to number of semantic problems that remain vexed even to this day.

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

Read, Stephen. "Medieval Theories: Properties of Terms." The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Spring 2011. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/medieval-terms/

Dutilh Novaes, Catarina. "Supposition Theory." Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy. Edited by Henrik Lagerlund. New York: Springer, 2011. 1229-1236.

Bos, Ivan. "Terms, Properties of." Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy. Edited by Henrik Lagerlund. New York: Springer, 2011. 1250-1258.

de Rijk, L.M. The Origin and Early Development of the Theory of Supposition. Vol. 2, Part 1 of *Logica Modernorum: A Contribution to the History of Early Terminist Logic*. Assen: Van Gorcum & Co., 1967.

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.

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[26] Or, at least, of the semantic theories live today, Ockham's semantics best approximates Brandom's inferential role semantics.

———. "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.

Glossary of Terms

A	Ampliation	Originally conceived of as a distinct property of a term, ampliation is the ability of certain syncategorematic features of a proposition (e.g. tense) to widen the scope of a term. The term is paired with restriction
A	Appellation	The natural extension of a term. It has its roots in Anselm's *De Grammatico*. While it was recognized as a semantic property distinct from supposition even in the fourteenth century, it came to play a minor role in analyses of meaning
C	Copulation	Originally the syntactic property of using an expression as predicate, its similarity to supposition relative to semantic analyses resulted in its relative obscurity in semantic analyses by the fourteenth century
K	Kinds of Supposition	Part of the theory of supposition, most terminists recognized three kinds of proper supposition: material, simple and personal. Each kind of supposition was distinguished by the kind of thing that a term supposits for
M	Material Supposition	The supposition a term has when it supposits for itself
M	Modes of Supposition	The modes of supposition are the ways in which a term supposits for the thing(s) that it supposits for. Most attention was paid to the modes of personal supposition. Modes of personal supposition include determinate, confused and distributive, and merely confused.
P	Personal Supposition	Personal supposition occurs when a term supposits for some particular(s). Burley and Ockham disagree about whether a term supposits personally when it supposits for what it signifies.

S	Simple Supposition	Simple supposition occurs when a term supposits for something common. Only common terms can supposit simply. Burley argues that a term supposits for a common nature when it supposits simply, whereas Ockham argues that it supposits for a mental concept which represents, or can represent, many particulars.
S	Supposition	Supposition, as a semantic concept, is a term's standing for something(s). What thing(s) a term supposits for depends on the kind of supposition that the term has. Supposition has its roots in the ancient grammatical tradition. It comes to be one of the two dominant semantic concepts in later medieval logic.
S	Supposition, Theory of	The theory of supposition includes both the kinds and the modes of supposition.
T	Terms, Theory of the Properties of	A theory (or, perhaps better, a general approach) that investigated the properties that a term of a proposition has. Besides signification, the other properties investigated in this theory were context sensitive – in particular, sensitive to propositional context.

Component V: Assessment and Evaluation

	Q. 1	The medieval concept of supposition develops out of
	A	Boethius' commentaries on Aristotle's *On Interpretation*
Correct	B	eleventh and twelfth century commentaries on Priscian's *Institutes of Grammar*
	C	thirteenth century theological commentaries on Anselm's *De Grammatico*
	D	debates about the nature of universals in the fourteenth century

	Q. 2	During the thirteenth century, the theory of supposition (choose all that apply)
Correct	A	begins to take shape
Correct	B	is developed by Terminists
	C	plays a central role in debates between realists and nominalists
	D	is replaced by the theory of appellation

	Q. 3	The concept of supposition was originally a
	A	semantic concept
Correct	B	syntactic concept
	C	pragmatic concept
	D	concept central to medieval philosophy of mind

		Q. 4	As a semantic concept, supposition is
	A	the use of an expression as a subject term
Correct	B	the use of an expression to stand for something(s)
	C	the natural extension of a term
	D	the use of an expression as a predicate term

		Q. 5	The appellation of a term is (choose all that apply)
Correct	A	the natural extension of a term
Correct	B	similar to the concept of *nominatio*
Correct	C	something that can be ampliated via the tense of a verb
Correct	D	a property that can be used in articulating the truth conditions of a proposition

		Q. 6	The development of the theory of supposition is due to (choose all that apply)
	A	debates about the nature of signification in the eleventh century
Correct	B	the grammatical tradition following Priscian
	C	a rejection of Aristotle's philosophy in the eleventh century
Correct	D	the reintroduction of Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations* in the eleventh century, and a general concern with fallacies

		Q. 7	According to William of Sherwood, the three kinds of supposition are
	A	Proper, Improper, Supraproper
Correct	B	Material, Simple, Personal
	C	Determinate, Confused and distributive, Merely confused

		Q. 8	Walter Burley improves on the theories of supposition developed in the thirteenth century by
	A	getting rid of simple supposition
Correct	B	articulating the modes of personal supposition in terms of rules of ascent and descent
	C	introducing the concept of signification into medieval semantics
	D	showing how the theory of supposition can be used to support a nominalist metaphysics

		Q. 9	Over the years, scholars have suggested that the theory of supposition approximates (check all that apply)
Correct	A	a theory of reference
	B	a theory of syntax
	C	a theory of cognition
Correct	D	a theory of meaning

	Q. 10	Walter Burley argues that
Correct	A	signification is prior to supposition
	B	supposition is prior to signification
	C	neither signification nor supposition is prior to the other
	D	supposition is not a useful theory in semantics

	Q. 11	Contemporary scholars of medieval philosophy disagree about (choose all that apply)
Correct	A	the purpose of the theory of supposition
Correct	B	whether signification or supposition is prior in Ockham's semantics
	C	whether the theory of supposition plays a role in Aristotle's semantics