

My research primarily focuses on the realist philosophical tradition in the fourteenth century, with a special emphasis on the philosophical program of Walter Burley (died c. 1345). That program constitutes one expression of an intense philosophical interest throughout fourteenth-century Europe—and at Oxford in particular—in issues at the intersection of the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind and metaphysics. William Ockham is perhaps the best-known representative of this historical episode. He combines a relatively bare ontology, according to which the created world is populated only by particular substances and the particular qualities which inhere in them, with a semantic account meant, among other things, to explain our ability to have thoughts with general content and to express such thoughts in natural language. Burley's philosophical program acts as a counter to Ockham's. While he is ultimately willing to accept the solution of his nominalist contemporaries when it comes to the question of the natures of things, Burley maintains that the reality of extra-mental universals is still essential to a successful account of meaning and cognition. Burley, then, represents a sophisticated—and, in some ways, strikingly contemporary—realist strand running through late medieval philosophical thought. However, we are only beginning to understand Burley's views and the broader late medieval realist perspective of which they are but one example. My current research takes as its focal point a central aspect of Burley's philosophical program: his account of the proposition. I argue that Burley defends a novel and sophisticated account of the proposition, one which helps us gain further insight into his more general semantic, cognitive and ontological commitments. It is also an account which scholars of late medieval philosophy have misunderstood.

According to the standard view in late medieval scholarship, Burley holds that a proposition is a purely mental entity, created by the mind from its concepts. This interpretation faces serious exegetical difficulties, however. For example, it struggles to explain Burley's claim that the mind can predicate things outside the mind of one another, a claim he makes consistently and repeatedly throughout his career. Likewise, it requires a strained and unsatisfying account of Burley's notion of signification, one which I argue is incongruous with the texts themselves.

My own account, in contrast, provides a motivated explanation of those and other claims. That account takes as its starting-place Burley's claim that a proposition is a structured entity composed of "things outside the soul" (*res extra animam*): the proposition that Socrates is wise, for example, is composed of Socrates, an individual, and wisdom, a quality. Burley argues that a proposition such as that one is formed by a mental act in which the mind predicates one thing of another, thereby structuring those things relative to one another in a truth-apt way. That act is the exercise of a capacity of the mind to conceive of things' being identical to one another in a certain respect: of Socrates' being identical to wisdom, for example. And so, I argue that, for Burley, a proposition is something composed of things, whose structure just is the exercise of a capacity to conceive of those things' being identical to one another in some respect. Burley is led to this account of the proposition in part because of his commitments to *referentialism*, *compositionality*, and *intellectualism*. Burley articulates his commitment to referentialism—the thesis that the semantic content of an expression is simply its referent—in terms of the standard medieval semantic notion of signification. In contrast to many of his immediate predecessors, Burley holds that certain expressions in natural language, such as nouns, signify the very things in the world that are their referents. So, for example, Burley maintains that 'wise' signifies the quality, wisdom, itself, rather than a mental representation of some sort. Coupled with Burley's referentialism is his commitment to a compositional semantics, one according to which the content of a sentence is built up from the contents of its subject and

predicate terms. Burley's commitment to referentialism and compositionality results in a view of the proposition according to which propositions are structured entities composed of things, similar to some neo-Russellian accounts of propositional content today.

Burley's intellectualism, moreover, is a thesis about truth-aptness, according to which truth-aptness is fundamentally analyzed in terms of the mind's exercise of an ability to represent things' being related in a certain way. Since Burley holds that the truth-aptness of a proposition is to be explained by appeal to something internal to it, that exercise must itself in some way constitute the proposition. On Burley's view, then, propositions have truth conditions because they are complexes of things that have a certain truth-conditional structure, where that structure just is the exercise of a certain mental capacity to represent.

With a proper understanding of Burley's theory of the proposition in hand, we are also able to see the implications of that theory for other aspects of Burley's philosophy. Much of my near- and mid-term research focuses on these other aspects. For example, Burley's account of the relationship of the mind's exercise of an ability to represent in a propositional manner to the proposition itself evolves significantly over the course of his career. My own view is that that evolution, while motivated by the fact that earlier versions of the theory require a suspect metaphysics, requires a significant change in Burley's articulation of the correspondence theory of truth. Likewise, Burley's commitment to mental language—that is, the thesis that the mind is able to make statements out of its concepts—can't be meant to give an account of the metaphysics of the proposition, as it does with many of his contemporaries, nominalist and realist alike. Rather, I argue that it serves as a response to certain criticisms of his philosophy of science. And, finally, his account of the proposition—and his more general commitment to referentialism—have immediate implications for his metaphysics. I have argued (“Properties in Walter Burley's Later Metaphysics”) that his commitment to the reality of universals in the second half of his career is in fact motivated entirely by his semantic commitments, and (unlike other realists in the medieval period) not also by a metaphysical concern about the natures of things, explaining why things are the kinds of things that they are. Consequently, but for semantic and epistemic considerations, Burley appears to have been happy to accept the ontology of his nominalist colleagues.

Finally, beyond its intrinsic historical and philosophical interest, Burley's philosophy has relevance for contemporary debates in the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind. There is currently a renaissance in the kind of account of the proposition that Burley himself developed and defended. Philosophers such as Scott Soames, Peter Hanks and Friederike Moltmann have all developed accounts of the proposition which analyze propositions not as mind-independent abstract objects but rather in terms of the exercise of the representational capacities of linguistic or cognitive agents; that is, each defends some version of intellectualism and compositionality. Moreover, Soames and Moltmann have each argued that the constituents of the propositions that linguistic or cognitive agents form are things in the world: objects and properties. And so, like Burley, Soames and Moltmann accept a version of referentialism too. These accounts are still relatively immature; they face criticism with respect to their internal coherence and plausibility, and the implications for other issues in the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind, and metaphysics remain largely unexplored. I believe that Burley's own theory of the proposition, forged in the crucible of fourteenth-century nominalist critique—much of which reflects challenges that have been raised against similar theories today—can be a source of insight now for philosophers who are once again engaged in the project of developing and defending the thesis that propositional contents must be rooted in our cognitive capacities.