

CAN GOD KNOW MORE? A CASE STUDY IN LATE MEDIEVAL DISCUSSIONS OF PROPOSITIONS

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In this paper, I trace the development of a peculiar debate between William Ockham (d. 1347) and some of his immediate successors at Oxford over the question of whether ‘God can know more than he knows’. Discussion of this question (which begins well before the fourteenth century) has its origin in specific theological concerns about the compatibility of divine omniscience and immutability. At the hands of Ockham and his colleagues, however, it comes to take on much broader philosophical significance. This is because, as they see it, whether or not God can know more depends entirely on the nature of the entities which serve as objects of his knowledge. And this, in turn, raises a further question about the nature of objects of propositional attitudes generally—divine or otherwise. Thus, for Ockham and his successors, this traditional question about God’s knowledge serves as an occasion for debating issues surrounding the nature of what we, nowadays, might refer to as ‘propositions’.¹ Yet, even if it is clear that these thinkers are addressing issues closely connected to contemporary debates about propositions, the theories that emerge from their discussion will, no doubt, strike most contemporary philosophers as rather peculiar (to say the least). The types of entity Ockham and his colleagues introduce to serve as objects for propositional attitudes are a far cry from propositions as they are conceived now.²

¹ ‘Proposition’ is, of course, a term of art; these days, philosophers use it to designate entities that play a number of theoretical roles—including not only (1) objects of propositional attitudes, but also (2) truth-bearers, and (3) meanings of sentences. In what follows I’ll be using the expression ‘proposition’ primarily for entities playing the first of these three theoretical roles. As will become clear, however, Ockham and his colleagues think of the entities that serve as objects of propositional attitudes as filling some of other roles as well—most notably that of truth-bearer. Also, it is worth emphasizing that I am *not* using the expression ‘proposition’ as a translation for the Latin expression ‘*propositio*’. This is because the Latin, ‘*propositio*’, approximates more nearly the notion expressed by our English expression ‘sentence’ as it applies to sentence *tokens*. While medieval philosophers do regard sentences as bearers of truth and falsity, there is no consensus among them as to whether (natural language) sentence tokens (i.e. *propositiones in voces/in scriptum*) serve as objects for the attitudes or as the *primary* bearers of truth and falsity.

² In contemporary discussions propositions are typically taken to be *some* type of abstract entity. Although this broad characterization leaves open a number of important questions about the exact nature of such entities (e.g., whether they are structured or not and, if so, whether they include particulars as constituents; whether they exist necessarily or contingently; etc.), the general assumption is that they are abstract entities of some sort or other. Among medieval thinkers, however, there is considerable resistance to the idea that the entities which function as truth-bearers and objects of propositional attitudes are abstract.

The aim of this paper is to clarify both the nature of the debate itself and the theories that emerge from it.

My discussion falls into three sections. In the first section, I provide an overview of the debate itself. I begin by sketching Ockham's answer to the question about whether God can know more; I then trace the reception of his views among two of his immediate successors, namely, Walter Chatton (d. 1343) and Robert Holcot (d. 1349). As will be clear, the sorts of positions these thinkers defend—both on the issue of divine knowledge and on the issue of propositions generally—are deeply puzzling. Indeed, part of my aim in this first section is simply to call attention to the difficulties (both interpretative and philosophical) their discussions raise. In the second section, I go on to advance a hypothesis about what's needed in order to make sense of their discussions. The key, I argue, lies in getting clear about how each of the participants in the debate conceives of propositional attitudes and, more specifically, how they conceive of the role played by the 'object' of propositional attitude relations. In a third, and final, section, I briefly discuss how my interpretation of this debate can be seen as opening up some new ways of thinking about (and classifying) later medieval theories of propositions.

1. CAN GOD KNOW MORE? A DEBATE ABOUT THE OBJECTS OF PROPOSITIONAL ATTITUDES

As I indicated above, the debate about whether God can know more begins well before the fourteenth century. In fact, the origin of this particular debate traces to the twelfth century and, more specifically, to Book 1, d. 39 of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (d. 1160), where he considers “whether God's knowledge can increase, diminish, or be changed in some way”.³ What prompts discussion of this issue, both in Lombard and in later figures, is a general concern about the compatibility of divine omniscience and immutability. If God is omniscient, he must know everything. But since what is true can change from one time (or world) to the next, it is difficult to see how divine omniscience is to be squared with immutability. If what God knows is changeable, doesn't it follow that God himself is changeable? Now, in Lombard's case, the concern seems to be primarily one about whether God's immutability is consistent with changes in his knowledge across worlds. In subsequent authors, however, the concern gets focused more on whether divine immutability is compatible with changes in God's knowledge *across times*. This is, in any case, the focus of concern for

³ Lombard 1971-81, I.39, 280. In the course of this discussion, Lombard specifically asks (in article 3 of D. 39) whether “God can know more than he knows”. Lombard's *Sentences* is a theological treatise that was used as a “textbook” for training students of theology in 13th and 14th century universities.

Ockham and his colleagues. For them, the issue at stake is whether God can know something more (or less, or simply other) than what he knows *right now*.

As we shall see, Ockham, Chatton, and Holcot all think that answering this question requires first getting clear about the nature (and mutability) of the ‘truths’ to which God’s knowledge relate. And this, in turn, requires taking a stand on the nature of the entities which serve as objects for propositional attitudes generally. Thus, for them, this traditional theological question about divine knowledge provides an opportunity for addressing broader questions about the nature of propositions. And, as we shall see, their discussion not only highlights their views about the nature of propositions, but also a host of difficulties associated with their proper interpretation.

1.1 Ockham on whether God can know more. Ockham begins his discussion by drawing two preliminary distinctions.⁴ The first is a distinction between different ways of understanding the question itself. In asking whether God can know more one might, Ockham thinks, be asking either of the following two questions:

- (I) Is it possible for God to come to know a greater quantity of things than he knows now?
- (II) Is it possible for God to come to know something other than what he knows now?⁵

Understood the first way, the question is about the *measure* or *quantity* of what God knows: can it increase? Understood in the second way, however, the question is merely about the *mutability* of what God knows: can it change? As we’ll see, Ockham thinks it makes a difference which of the two questions we’re asking. Indeed, he gives different answers to each.

The second distinction Ockham draws is between two different types of knowledge corresponding to two different senses of the term ‘to know’.

‘Know’ is taken in two ways—in a broad sense and in a strict sense. In the first way it is the same as ‘cognize’ insofar as cognizing [is a relation that] extends to all things. And, in this way, God knows—that is, cognizes—all things: propositional and non-

⁴ “Utrum Deus possit scire plura quam scit?” In what follows, citations of Ockham’s Latin texts are to Ockham 1967-88. The *Ordinatio* (=Ord) is part of Ockham’s commentary on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*. Distinction 39 of Ockham’s *Ordinatio* is translated by Marilyn Adams and Norman Kretzmann in Ockham 1983, 92-95. In what follows, I adopt this translation, with some modification.

⁵ Ockham himself puts the two questions this way: “First, we must consider how the question is to be understood. Here it must be noted that it is one thing to ask whether God can know more than He knows, but it is another to ask whether God can know something that He does not know.” *Ord.* d. 39 (*OTh* IV, 589); *Cf.* Ockham 1983, 92.

propositional, necessary and contingent, true, false, and impossible. In the [second,] strict sense, ‘know’ is the same as ‘cognize what is true’; and in that sense nothing is known but what is true.⁶

Here, Ockham distinguishes two different cognitive relations that the term ‘know’ might be taken to designate. In the broadest possible sense, to know (or have knowledge of) something is just to cognize it. Understood in this way, knowledge is just a relation that holds between a cognizer and whatever she cognizes. Thus, objects of knowledge in this sense can be either propositional or non-propositional (necessary or contingent, true or false) in nature. In the strict sense, however, knowledge is a distinctively *propositional* attitude. For, taken strictly, ‘knowledge’ is not mere cognition, but cognition of and assent to what is *true*.⁷ Taken in this sense, therefore, ‘knowledge’ designates a relation which obtains between a cognizer and whatever she (correctly) cognizes *as true*.

If we take this latter distinction between two senses of ‘to know’ in conjunction with the foregoing division of the question, it should be clear that each of the questions at I and II above admit of a further two-fold division. Thus, in asking whether God can know more one might be asking any of the following:

- (Ia) Is it possible for God to come to cognize a greater quantity of things than he does now?
- (IIa) Is it possible for God to come to cognize something other than what he does now?
- (Ib) Is it possible for God to come to know a greater quantity of truths than he knows now?
- (IIb) Is it possible for God to come to know some truth other than what he knows now?

Over the course of his discussion Ockham addresses all four of these questions, yet, as we shall see, he is primarily interested questions Ib and IIb—that is, in the questions having to do with the quantity and the mutability of *truths* known by God. For this reason, these same questions become the focus of the subsequent debate.

⁶ *Ord.* d. 39 (*OTH* IV, 589); *Cf.* Ockham 1983, 93.

⁷ The distinction Ockham has in mind is similar to the one he marks in other contexts as a distinction between ‘apprehension’ and ‘judgment’. To apprehend something is just to consider or be aware of it. Thus, apprehension extends to propositional and non-propositional objects. Judgment, on the other hand, is always a propositional attitude inasmuch as it involves not only awareness of some object, but also some further attitude (such as assent or dissent) with respect to its truth. See for example, *Ord.* Prologue, q.1 (*OTH* I, 16).

Once Ockham dispatches with these preliminary distinctions, he turns to address the question itself. Beginning with the first of the two senses of ‘know’—i.e., cognition—he says that regardless of how we interpret the question—i.e., as either about the quantity (viz., Ia) or mutability (viz., IIa) of what God cognizes—it must be answered in the negative. For, insofar as God’s knowledge in this broad sense is just his cognition of all things, there can be no question of its increase or change at all, since it already extends to everything (whether actual, merely possible, impossible, propositional or non-propositional).

When Ockham turns to knowledge in the strict sense, matters are a bit more complicated. If the question is interpreted along quantitative lines (viz., IIa), that is, as having to do with the quantity of truths God can know, Ockham thinks we must, once again, give a negative reply. God cannot, he says, know any more (or, for that matter, any fewer) truths than he knows now. Even so, he insists, God can come to know *other* truths than those he knows now. Hence, if the question is interpreted along the lines of mutability (IIb), that is, as a question about whether he can come to know *different* truths, then we must answer in the affirmative.

Now, on the face of it, these latter two answers seem inconsistent. If God cannot know a greater number of truths than he knows now, how is it possible for him to know any truth other than those he knows now? Ockham’s idea, in general, seems to be that while the quantity of truths always remains fixed, the members of the set of truths may, in fact, vary over time.

It is not possible that there are more truths at one time than at another. This is because at each time one or the other part of a contradiction is true, and nothing is true but what is one or the other part of a contradiction. And since it is not possible for both parts of a contradiction to be true [simultaneously] it is always the case that there are as many truths at one time as at another. And while there are neither more nor fewer truths [from one time to another], some things may be true at one time that are not true at another time.⁸

Although Ockham never explicitly specifies the precise nature of these “truths” to which God’s knowledge relates, it is clear, nonetheless, that as he conceives of them they are entities capable of changing their truth-value over time. What is more, as Ockham argues in this passage, the mere fact that what is true changes over time doesn’t by itself entail that the overall quantity of truths known by God changes. For “if one thing becomes false that was true earlier, another thing will become true that was false earlier.”⁹ Thus, even if the quantity of truths God knows never varies, it still remains an open question precisely *which* truths God

⁸ *Ord. d. 39 (OTh IV, 589-590); Cf. Ockham 1983, 93.*

⁹ *Ord. d. 39 (OTh IV, 590); Cf. Ockham 1983, 93.*

knows at any given time. “For everything true, when it is true, is known by God; and when it is not true it is not known by God.”¹⁰

In light of the foregoing, we may summarize Ockham’s argument this way:

1. God is omniscient.
2. Therefore, God knows every truth.
3. The quantity of truths never varies.
4. Therefore, God cannot know more—i.e. a larger quantity of truths—than he knows now.
5. But what is true at one time may be false at another (and vice versa).
6. Therefore, God can come to know different truths than those he knows now.

The conclusions at 4 and 6 correspond to Ockham’s views about the quantity and mutability of what God knows in the strict sense (i.e., his answers to questions Ib and IIb, respectively). As he sees it, while God cannot know *more* truths than he knows now, he can know *other* ones.

Ockham’s treatment of God’s knowledge in d. 39 raises a number of questions—both interpretive and philosophical. Foremost among these is a question about the implications of d. 39 for his theory of propositions generally. While Ockham says nothing in d. 39 about the nature of the truths that function as objects for divine knowledge, in a number of other contexts he makes quite clear that the primary bearers of truth and falsity are linguistic entities—namely, true and false sentences (*complexa*). Consider, for example, his remarks in the following passages:

Everything that is true or false is a sentence (*complexum*).¹¹
 Truth and falsity are in composition and division. Thus, an expression (*oratio*) composed affirmatively from a noun and a verb—or such an expression composed negatively—is true or false.¹²

Nothing is believed except what is true [or false], and nothing is true [or false] except a sentence.¹³

What these passages show is that Ockham takes sentences (and apparently only sentences) to be the primary bearers of truth (and falsity) and, hence, holds that sentences function as objects for propositional attitudes. What is more, insofar as his remarks in these passages are about expressions as they occur (or, are

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Expositio in Librum Praedicamentorum Aristotelis* 17, sec.13 (*Oph* II, 317). ‘Complexum’ is a phrase Ockham uses (often interchangeably with ‘propositio’) to designate complex—i.e. sentential—linguistic expressions.

¹² *Ibid.* (*Oph* II, 373).

¹³ *Quodlibeta Septem* III.8 (*Oph* IX, 236)

“composed”) in natural language, it would appear that when Ockham speaks of sentences as the bearers of truth-value he has sentence *tokens* in mind. And, since sentential expressions occur not only in spoken and written language, but also in mental language, for Ockham (as for most medieval thinkers), truth-bearers will include not only spoken and written tokens, but also tokens in the language of thought.

The foregoing passages seem to represent Ockham’s considered view regarding the nature of truth-bearers. Even so, they seem to be in tension with his account of divine knowledge in d. 39. Indeed, it would seem that a token-sententialist account of truth-bearers is simply inconsistent with the conclusions Ockham draws regarding the quantity of what God knows. Holcot calls attention to precisely this point when he responds to Ockham’s discussion. He argues that, given Ockham’s *own* views about the nature of truths, Ockham is simply not entitled to claim, as he does, that God cannot know a greater number of them.¹⁴ After all, Holcot reasons, if Ockham holds that sentence tokens (spoken, written, and mental) are the bearers of truth and falsity, then to say that God knows every truth is just to say that he knows every true sentence token. But, of course, if the objects of God’s knowledge are sentence tokens—namely, contingently existing, transient entities—the quantity of things known by God would be changing constantly. Thus, Holcot claims that “according to him [namely, Ockham], it ought to be entirely granted that God can know more than he knows.”¹⁵ Accordingly, Holcot concludes that “in this article he [namely, Ockham] seems to contradict his own views in many places”.¹⁶

Of course, if Holcot’s criticism is right, then Ockham is guilty of a serious philosophical blunder, namely, that of failing to see the consequence of his own views about the nature of truth-bearers and objects of propositional attitudes in their application to God’s knowledge. Rather than lay such a charge at Ockham’s feet, more recent commentators have instead preferred to challenge the accuracy of Holcot’s interpretation. Norman Kretzmann, for example, has argued that “much of Holcot’s criticism of Ockham is founded on the assumption that Ockham was attempting to use the [sentence] token as the object of knowledge. That is an unfounded assumption about Ockham’s position generally.”¹⁷ Thus, rather than draw the uncharitable conclusion that Ockham’s solution to d. 39 is evidence of inconsistency, Kretzmann recommends that we take d. 39 as evidence

¹⁴ Holcot takes up this issue in one of his Quodlibetal disputations, namely Quodlibet I, question 6. Although several of Holcot’s quodlibetal questions have been edited individually, there is no single critical edition of all of his Quodlibeta. In what follows, I rely on William Courtenay’s 1971 edition of Holcot’s Q.I.6. See Holcot 1971. Translations are my own, though I have consulted Robert Pasnau’s English translation of Holcot’s text (see, Holcot 2002).

¹⁵ Holcot 1971, 9.

¹⁶ Holcot 1971, 11.

¹⁷ Kretzmann 1970, 781-782.

that Ockham did not, in fact, mean to be defending a token-sententialist account of propositions. E.A. Moody and Marilyn Adams argue in much the same vein. Indeed, all three of these commentators take d. 39 as evidence for an alternative interpretation of Ockham's account of propositions—one according to which sentence *types* function as the ultimate bearers of truth and, likewise, as the objects for knowledge, belief, and so on. Thus, as Moody argues:

All of Holkot's arguments turn on his extremely nominalistic refusal to construe the word "proposition" (and hence the word "true") as designating anything other than particular complexes of terms or concepts actually formed by particular men at particular times. ... In modern parlance, Holkot uses the word "proposition" for *token-sentence* and not for *type-sentence*. The fact that Ockham does not do this has perhaps not received the notice that it deserves.¹⁸

Marilyn Adams concurs with this assessment: "Ockham ... in assuming that the number of truths and falsehoods is constant and equal seems to treat propositions as [sentence] types."¹⁹

But it's not at all clear that this alternative reading of Ockham's account saves Ockham from inconsistency. In saddling Ockham with sentence *types*, these commentators also saddle Ockham with a commitment that runs directly counter to his own strict nominalism. After all, on the most natural construal of them, sentence types look to be a kind of universal.²⁰ But as is well known, Ockham is resolute in his rejection of universals. And even if, contrary to fact, Ockham were willing to admit such entities, it is by no means clear that he would thereby be entitled to claim that the quantity of truths does not change over time. For sentence types are not obviously eternally existing entities; one might, for example, suppose that they come into and go out of existence when a new language is born and an old one dies. What is more (and worse), it is not obvious that sentence types are themselves truth-bearing entities. Indeed, to the extent that truth belongs to sentences at all it looks to be a feature of token sentences, not types, since only the former (i.e. only sentences in a context) can make specific

¹⁸ Moody 1964, 69.

¹⁹ Adams 1987, 1088.

²⁰ There are perhaps other ways of construing sentence types. Moody and Kretzmann offer no alternative account, but Adams does attempt to provide some notion of types that would be acceptable to Ockham. On the account she offers, sentence types turn out to be, roughly, divine ideas. Developing the details of her account is neither feasible here nor necessary since, in the end, Adams herself gives up the project. Ultimately, she is forced to admit that Ockham is not entitled to sentence types. As she points out, even if Ockham intended to construe sentence types as ideas in God's mind such entities would not be eternal. After all, even if God had in mind an instance of every possible sentence (of every possible natural language), in order for such a sentence to be true, on Ockham's view, there must be an interpretation of these conventional sentence types. But interpretations come into and out of existence with linguistic communities. See 1987, ch. 26.

truth-evaluable claims. It is not clear, therefore, that this alternative reading does anything to resolve the original difficulties raised by Ockham's discussion in d. 39. Indeed, if anything, it simply relocates the inconsistency and leaves Ockham with a less plausible theory of propositions.

What's needed, therefore, is a way of understanding Ockham's discussion in d. 39 that not only yields a consistent theory of propositions, but also accommodates his broader nominalist proclivities while also preserving God's omniscience and immutability. On the face of it, the prospects for such an account look dim.

1.2 Chatton on whether God can know more. Chatton's discussion of the question regarding whether God can know more comes at Book I, d. 39 (article 2) of his own commentary on the *Sentences*.²¹ His account is essentially a critical reaction to Ockham's earlier treatment of the same issue. Accordingly, Chatton begins by summarizing Ockham's account, calling attention both to his division of the question and his distinction between the two senses of 'knowledge'. Unlike Holcot, who criticizes Ockham for not allowing more change in what God knows, Chatton is critical of Ockham's allowing any change at all in what God knows. Chatton claims that it is impossible not only for God to know something more (or less) than he knows now, but likewise for him to come to know something *other* than what he knows now. Ultimately, therefore, Chatton wants to resist Ockham's second conclusion (that is, his answer to IIb); instead, he argues that God's knowledge relates to the same objects—the same “truths”—at all times.

As becomes clear from Chatton's discussion, his disagreement with Ockham about divine knowledge is a direct consequence of a broader disagreement over the nature of objects of propositional attitudes. Chatton himself hints at this broader disagreement at the very outset of his discussion. Thus, after reviewing Ockham's distinction between two notions of knowledge, Chatton proceeds to introduce his own, preferred analysis. “For me,” he says, “‘to know’ is to cognize the thing (*res*) that is signified by a true sentence.”²² And, again, a bit later, he repeats the same point: “strictly speaking, to know is to assent to something that is signified by a true sentence.”²³ According to Chatton, therefore, the objects of God's knowledge (and indeed, of propositional attitudes generally) are not, as Ockham holds, sentences or linguistic signs (“*signa*”) of any sort; they are, rather,

²¹ References to Book I of Chatton's *Sentences* commentary are to Chatton 2002. All translations are mine.

²² *Rep.* I d. 39, q.u, a.2 (*Reportatio dd.10-48*, 365).

²³ *Ibid.* Although Chatton recognizes that this notion of knowledge maps neither of Ockham's, he insists nonetheless that Ockham would have to allow that God's knowledge includes a relation of this sort. As he says: “he too would have to say this, [namely, that God cognizes the thing signified by a true sentence]—whether he does so directly or indirectly.” (*Ibid.*)

the entities *signified* by them. “After all,” he explains, “it is certain that there are no sentences in God’s mind, and God does not assent to our [spoken, written, or mental] sentences.”²⁴

Although Chatton says very little in d. 39 about the precise nature of the “things” which are signified by sentences, his discussion in other contexts makes fairly clear that he takes these items to be concrete, worldly entities. This view emerges most clearly in his discussion of objects of belief in the prologue to his *Sentences* commentary.²⁵ In this context, he argues that the object for a given propositional attitude is the individual entity (typically, a substance) signified by the (categorematic) terms which occur in sentences expressing that attitude. For example, he claims at one point that the object of the belief that God is three and one is just that entity which is signified by the terms that occur in the sentence ‘God is three and one’. And, as he goes on to make clear, this is nothing other than God himself. For, as he explains, “each part of that sentence is a way of thinking about God.”²⁶ Indeed, in general, Chatton seems to think that the subject and predicate expressions occurring in affirmative atomic predications (i.e. sentences whose logical structure is of the form ‘a is F’) refer to one and the same object.²⁷

Although Chatton’s view about the nature of objects of propositional attitudes is treated explicitly only in the prologue of his *Sentences* commentary, he makes clear in subsequent discussions that this general account applies equally in the case divine knowledge:

I am supposing what was made clear in the *Prologue*, namely, that it is not necessary that one assents to a sentence (*complexo*), but rather one can [assent] directly to the thing signified by a sentence. And, therefore, in this case, when God assents to the thing signified by ‘A exists’, it is not the case that he assents to a sentence, but rather [he assents] to some *thing*.²⁸

²⁴ Chatton makes this point, not in d. 39, but just afterward at dd. 40-41, q.2, a.1 (*Reportatio dd.10-48*, 393).

²⁵ Chatton’s most extensive treatment of objects of propositional attitudes occurs in q.1, a.1 of the Prologue to his *Sentences* commentary. For a fuller treatment of Chatton’s discussion in that context see Brower-Toland, forthcoming.

²⁶ *Sent. Prol.* q.1, a.1 (*Collatio et Prologus*, 39).

²⁷ Thus, for example, speaking of sentences in the language of thought, Chatton says: “A mental sentence is a certain propositional cognition. Thus, it is a cognition of just that which is cognized through the subject, or the predicate or the copula [of that mental sentence]. For its being a cognition accrues to it through its parts—but its parts are cognitions of an extra-mental thing. An external thing (*res*) is cognized through the subject, the predicate, and the copula since those terms are cognitions of an external thing. Throughout the whole time in which the sentence signifying an external thing is formed in the mind, the external thing is cognized—sometimes by the subject of the sentence, sometimes by the copula, sometimes by the predicate.” *Prol.* q.1, a.1 (*Collatio et Prologus*, 24).

²⁸ *Rep.* I dd.40-41, q. 2, a. 1 (*Reportatio dd.10-48*, 393).

Clearly, therefore, on Chatton's view, God's knowledge is a relation not to true sentences, but to the objects that are "signified" by them.

Despite Chatton's insistence that knowledge is primarily a relation to *things* and not to representational or linguistic entities, he is willing, nonetheless, to follow Ockham in speaking of God's knowledge as a relation to "truths".²⁹ For, as Chatton sees it, sentences are not the only items to which the notion of truth applies; on the contrary, he thinks that the concrete worldly things (*res*) to which they correspond, and which they signify, can also be said to be true. What is more, he thinks that truths of this latter sort are such that they do not alter their truth-value over time. Thus, says Chatton, "as far as truth applies to the thing that is known (*res cognitae*), it is impossible that something be true [in this sense] at any time without its also being true now."³⁰ In light of all this, of course, Chatton rejects Ockham's claim that God can know something different than what he knows now. If God knows all true *things*, and if what is true now is true at all times, it follows, as Chatton says, that it is "impossible for God to know something that he does not know now".

Interestingly, toward the end of his discussion in d. 39, Chatton acknowledges that his disagreement with Ockham regarding God's knowledge owes to broader differences in their accounts of the nature of the "truths" to which God's knowledge relates.

As to the argument he [viz. Ockham] offers (that God can know something that he does not know, because something can be true which is not now true), I respond that if he means to be talking about ["truth" as] the denomination of a *thing* by a sign, then his [conclusion] is impossible. But if [he intends to be talking about truth as something] on the side of the sign—[i.e. of the "truth"] by which a sign is now true—then, in that case, something that is not [now] true *can* be true. But this question asks about the truth of the *thing* cognized, not about the truth of the sign.³¹

Chatton here concedes that if the truths in question were sentences, then what is true could change over time; indeed he is even willing to "concede that [in such a case] God can know or cognize something that is not true now."³² But he insists that what God knows principally is things, not sentences, and thus, that when it comes to questions about the quantity and mutability of the objects of God's

²⁹ Indeed, Chatton even follows Ockham in characterizing God's omniscience as a matter of God's assenting to every truth. As he explains, "every unqualified perfection is suited to God, and to assent to every truth whatsoever is an unqualified perfection, therefore, [God assents to every truth]." *Rep.* I, dd. 40-41, q. 2 a. 1 (*Reportatio* dd.10-48, 395).

³⁰ *Rep.* I d. 39, q.u, a.2 (*Reportatio* dd.10-48, 366).

³¹ *Rep.* I d. 39, q.u, a.2 (*Reportatio* dd.10-48, 367).

³² *Ibid.*

knowledge the question is “about the truth of the thing...not about the truth of a sign”.³³

Given what Chatton wants to say about the objects of knowledge generally, his response to this question is perfectly in keeping with his broader views about propositional attitudes. But his discussion of divine knowledge does bring into relief the oddity of these broader views. For, as the foregoing makes clear, Chatton wants to treat ordinary concrete things not only as objects for propositional attitudes but even as things that can be said to be true. The problem with this view, of course, is that such entities seem utterly unsuited for the job; to the extent that Chatton is appealing to these sorts of entity to fill roles traditionally associated with propositions (namely, that of truth-bearer and object of belief) his account seems confused.

As a way of illustrating the point we may, once again, take a page from Holcot, whose discussion of God’s knowledge includes not only a critique of Ockham’s account, but also a critique of Chatton’s.³⁴ Regarding Chatton’s view, Holcot has the following to say:

Against this view, I argue as follows: Only what is true is known, but an external thing (*res*) signified by a [sentence] is not true. Therefore, etc. Again, only what is known as true (*tantum...quod vere est scitum*) in an act of knowing is the object of that act of knowing. But an external thing is not known as true by an act of knowing. Therefore, an external thing is not an object of an act of knowing.³⁵

...

Indeed, ordinarily, it is not proper for philosophers [to use] the expression ‘I know stone,’ or ‘I know wood,’ rather this is proper: ‘I know *that* stone is hard’, ‘I know *that* wood is soft’ and so forth. Likewise, ordinarily, for Catholic theologians this is not a proper expression ‘I believe God,’ but rather ‘I believe *that* God exists,’ or ‘I believe that God is three and one.’³⁶

Holcot’s aim in these passages is, of course, just to call attention to the oddity of Chatton’s position. Not only are things like individual substances not susceptible of truth (or falsity), but it is precisely for this reason that they are the wrong sort of entity to serve as objects for knowledge (or any other propositional attitude). After all, to believe or to know something is to assent to its truth—that is, to take it *as true* (as Holcot says “only what is true can be known”). But we don’t, as he notes, assent to individual entities. That this is the case is clear, Holcot points out, from the structure of ordinary knowledge and belief ascriptions—that is, from the

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Holcot explicitly considers and rejects Chatton’s account of truth-bearers and objects of knowledge in article 1 of his discussion in Q.I.6.

³⁵ Holcot 1971, 4;

³⁶ Holcot 1971, 7;

structure of the sentences we typically use to ascribe knowledge (or belief) to a given subject. Holcot claims that if Chatton's account were right, we would expect such ascriptions to take an altogether different form than they in fact do. We would say 'S knows x' (where x is an expression that stands for an individual object—a stone, in Holcot's example), rather than 'S know that p' (where p is a sentential expression). The very fact that we don't ascribe knowledge and belief in this way appears, as Holcot rightly points out, to tell against Chatton's view.

Unlike the case of Ockham, therefore, the central difficulty for Chatton's discussion in d. 39, is not that of identifying a theory of propositions consistent with his various conclusions about divine knowledge. On this score, his account is fairly straightforward. Rather the difficulty is in understanding why Chatton would hold such a theory in the first place.

1.3 Holcot on whether God can know more. Holcot is the third of our three authors to take up the question about whether God can know more. As we've seen, his discussion is informed by his disagreement with both Ockham and Chatton. Unlike the latter two, however, Holcot addresses the issue not in his *Sentences* commentary, but in the course of a Quodlibetal disputation (Quodlibet I, question 6). What is more, it is even clearer in his case that this question about God's knowledge serves largely as an occasion for addressing questions about the nature of propositions and propositional attitudes generally. Indeed, we can see this from the very structures of q. 6. Holcot divides his discussion into two separate articles: in the first, he inquires about the objects of propositional attitudes generally and only after that, in the second article, does he consider the question about God's knowledge.

In the first article, Holcot addresses his disagreement with Chatton. For reasons we've already canvassed, Holcot rejects as implausible Chatton's account of "things" as truth-bearers and objects for propositional attitudes. Accordingly, he concludes his discussion in the first article by defending (what he takes to be) Ockham's position, namely, the view that sentence tokens are the primary bearers of truth and the immediate objects of belief and knowledge.³⁷ In the second article, however, when Holcot turns to the question about whether God can know more, Ockham becomes his target of criticism. As we've already seen, Holcot holds that Ockham's account of God's knowledge is inconsistent with his broader, token-sententialist account of truth-bearers. As Holcot sees it, Ockham has simply

³⁷ Holcot begins article 1 by summarizing both Ockham and Chatton's view: "One view, which Ockham holds, is that only a sentence [*complexum*] is known. But another view—a view held by Chatton—is that the object of knowing or believing is not a sentence, but the thing signified by a sentence. Accordingly, the act of believing that *God is three and one* has God himself as its object, and the act of knowing that a *human being is an animal* has *human being* for its object." Holcot 1971, 3.

misapplied his own theory of propositions to the question about whether God can know more. Holcot's central aim in article 2, therefore, is to demonstrate the inconsistency in Ockham's account and to correct it. In this regard, he takes himself to be defending the position to which Ockham himself is in fact committed.

The problem Holcot identifies in Ockham's account has to do with the first of his two conclusions (i.e. step 4 in his argument), namely, the claim that God cannot know a greater *quantity* of truths. Ockham's defense of this conclusion, as we've seen, turns on his contention that the quantity of truths is constant at all times since one or the other of a pair of contradictories is always true. As Holcot sees it, however, this line of reasoning violates Ockham's own principles. As he explains:

Each of these claims, namely, that “one part of a contradiction is always false” and “there are always equally many true things, so that there are not sometimes less and sometimes more” are false. This is the case given two other claims that belong to this doctor, namely, [his claim that] “everything true is an existing thing (*esse*)” and that “only a sentence is true, whether it is a concept, something written, or a spoken utterance.”³⁸

Given Ockham's own views about the nature of truth-bearers, Holcot insists, there is no reason to suppose that the number of truths will be fixed at all times. For, if what Ockham is calling “truths” are token sentences (spoken, written, or mental), the quantity of truths must be changing constantly, namely, with every sentence spoken, every thought entertained (or dismissed), with every line penned (or erased). And, as Holcot goes on to point out, there is simply no reason to think that each existing truth comes paired with its contradictory. As Holcot explains, “it is possible that some sentence is true but has no [existing] contradictory”³⁹; or

³⁸ Holcot 1971, 11. Holcot goes on immediately after this to cite further evidence from Ockham: “For in his *Summa logicae*—which is so usefully compiled—Ockham himself says (at part two, chapter two, at the end, where he speaks of necessary propositions):

It must be known that a sentence is not said to be necessary because it always was true or always will be true, but because it is true and cannot be false. For example, the spoken sentence ‘God exists’ is necessary, nevertheless, it is not always true since when it does not exist, it is neither true nor false. But it is necessary because when it exists it is true and cannot be false.

Here, he explicitly says that the sentence ‘God exists’ was not always true; but it is also certain that its opposite was never true. Therefore, there was a time at which neither part of this contradiction, ‘God exists’/‘God does not exist’, was true. This is the case since at some point in time neither of these sentences existed.” Holcot 1971, 11-12.

³⁹ Holcot 1971, 15.

again “it is possible that there could be a thousand true sentences to contradict one false sentence.”⁴⁰ Given these sorts of considerations, Ockham’s claim that the number of truths always remains the same over time appears utterly unfounded.

In article 2, therefore, Holcot goes on to offer the answer he thinks Ockham himself should have given:

In this article, I argue otherwise [than Ockham himself did]: [First, I claim] that God can know something that he does not know, and can know both more than he knows and less than he knows. ... Second, it must be said that, whenever I wish, I can make God not know many things that he [now] knows, and make him know many things that he does not [now] know. For if I say or think many true things, or set out in a book many true things, then it is certain that God knows all those things. Now suppose that I burn my book and fall asleep. All these truths will perish, and if they cease to exist, they cease to be true, and as a consequence they cease to be known by God.⁴¹

Obviously, if God’s knowledge extends to all truths, and truths are nothing other than true sentences tokens, God’s knowledge involves a relation to entities that are constantly coming into and out of existence. Indeed, as Holcot says here, the number of things God knows increases whenever we write something down, and decreases whenever we go to sleep (since this reduces the number of mental sentence tokens). Thus, God can know not only more than he knows, but also less than he knows. In fact, as Holcot goes on to point out, “even this is possible: *God knows nothing*.”⁴² After all, “it is possible for nothing to be true.”⁴³ What all this shows, Holcot concludes, is that “on Ockham’s own view it ought to be granted that God can know more than he knows.”⁴⁴

Unlike Ockham, Holcot provides an account of divine knowledge that is perfectly consistent with a broader, token-sententialist theory of propositions. Even so, Holcot’s discussion of God’s knowledge calls attention to a number of difficulties with that broader theory.⁴⁵ Not only does Holcot’s token sententialism about propositions seem incompatible with divine immutability (since the view

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10. After all, Holcot goes on to explain, “suppose I order ‘Socrates runs’ to be written in a thousand places (and suppose it is the case in fact [that Socrates runs])...and suppose I order ‘Socrates does not run’ to be written in just one place...then the thousand true sentences contradict this one.”

⁴¹ Holcot 1971, 13.

⁴² Holcot 1971, 9

⁴³ Holcot 1971, 11.

⁴⁴ Holcot 1971, 13.

⁴⁵ The two worries I discuss below are similar to ones raised for sententialist views of assertion (i.e. views according the things asserted or said are sentences) first raised by Richard Cartwright (1962) and later discussed by Howard Wettstein (1976).

entails that God could know more than he knows now, less than he knows now, or even nothing at all), but it also seems incompatible with commonsense views about propositional attitudes. How, for example, can entities as ephemeral and transient as utterance tokens or thought tokens serve as objects for attitudes which seem to persist over long periods of time? If, as Holcot supposes, belief, knowledge and every other propositional attitude involves a relation to some token utterance (or inscription, or mental sentence), it follows that what we know (believe, etc.) is constantly changing as such tokens go into and out of existence. Yet, knowledge and beliefs are states that persist over extended durations—not only in God’s case, but in humans’ too.

Again, even supposing it could be shown that token sentences are suitable objects for belief and knowledge, there are further problems. To see why, note first of all that we need some explanation of precisely which of all the relevant existing tokens are supposed to serve as the object of a given act of belief or knowledge. In God’s case, the answer is easy enough: insofar as God is omniscient his knowledge relates him to all true sentence tokens. But what about the case of human knowers? It appears that, on Holcot’s view, any sort of token—that is, any written, spoken, or mental sentence—may serve as the object for an act of believing or knowing. Indeed, as Holcot’s remarks about the objects of God’s knowledge make clear, the token believed by a subject needn’t be one uttered, written, or thought by the believing subject herself. But if this is right, then, we need some explanation of precisely which of the relevant existing tokens functions as the object for a given act of believing. Suppose, for example, I form the belief that a triangle is a three-sided figure. Which among the class of suitable sentence tokens will serve as the object for this belief? Surely, not all of them. But, if not all of them, what will be the criterion for including some rather than others in a class of equally suitable candidates? How can the answer be anything other than arbitrary?⁴⁶

In light of these sorts of considerations, Holcot’s discussion of God’s knowledge and the theory of propositions on which it rests turns out to be every bit as puzzling as those developed by Chatton and Ockham.

2. MAKING SENSE OF THE DEBATE

By now it should be clear that this theological dispute over God’s knowledge provides Ockham and his colleagues a context for addressing much broader

⁴⁶ There are actually two issues here. We’re not only going to need some account of why, among a class of relevantly similar tokens, one token is the object of a given belief rather than another, we also need some way of specifying the class itself. How Holcot specifies the relevant class as well as his account of which member of the class is the object for a given instance of belief (and why) will emerge presently.

philosophical issues about the nature of the entities which function as objects of propositional attitudes generally. At the same time, it should also be clear just how puzzling the general theories that emerge from this discussion are. Indeed, one might be forgiven for wondering whether they are even coherent. In what follows, I propose a way of reading these accounts that not only renders them coherent, but even defensible—at least against the sorts of difficulties discussed in the previous section.

2.1 Ockham on objects of knowledge revisited: As we've seen, Ockham's account of divine knowledge in d. 39 is difficult to reconcile with the account of truth-bearers he develops in other contexts. In particular, his contention that the quantity of truths known by God never varies looks to be incompatible with a token-sententialist theory of truth-bearers. Nor are matters improved, as I've argued, by reading Ockham's claim about the fixed quantity of truths as evidence of a commitment to sentence types. But then what is the alternative?

As it turns out, there is a fairly straightforward way to resolve the apparent conflict in Ockham's account. To see what it is, we may begin by noting that Ockham's claim about the quantity of truths being fixed conflicts with his broader token sententialism *only* if he intends that claim to range over *all* true sentence tokens. But why should we suppose that he intends this? When Ockham argues in the context of d. 39 that "the number of truths never varies", it's natural to assume that the 'truths' he has in mind are just those that serve as objects for God's knowledge. Of course, if God's knowledge relates him to every true sentence token (written, spoken, or mental), this qualification will do nothing to restrict the scope of the claim. But, here again, why should we suppose that Ockham thinks divine knowledge is a relation to all true tokens? Admittedly, Ockham does claim that (1) sentence tokens are the primary bearers of truth (and falsity), and, likewise, that (2) God, insofar as he is omniscient, knows every truth. But these two claims don't by themselves entail a commitment to the further claim that (3) God's omniscience consists in relation to every true sentence token. Indeed, given that this further claim conflicts with Ockham's claim about the fixed quantity of truths, there is good reason for thinking he isn't committed to it. As I understand Ockham, therefore, God's omniscience does not consist in a relation to *every* existing true sentence token, but rather just to a proper subset of them—namely, those that are tokened in his own mental language.

This way of reading Ockham provides a means for reconciling his sententialism about truth-bearers with his claims in d. 39 about the quantity of truths known by God. For, on this interpretation, Ockham's claim (at 2 in his argument) that God knows every truth asserts nothing more than that God stands in the relation of knowing to every true sentence in his own language of thought. Accordingly, when Ockham goes on to assert (in premise 3) that the number of

truths never varies, the “truths” in question are those which serve as objects of divine knowledge. Unlike other sentence tokens, however, sentences in the mind of God, insofar as they depend for their existence on God’s eternal act of thinking, do not come into nor go out of existence—they exist at all times. On this interpretation, therefore, Ockham can conclude quite plausibly that the quantity of truths known by God doesn’t change.

Clearly, then, we have a way of making sense of Ockham’s discussion in d. 39 without appealing to sentence types. Not only that, but this way of reading him also squares with what I take to be his overarching views about propositional attitudes and, in particular, his conception of the role played by the ‘object’ of propositional attitude relations. I have argued in great detail elsewhere that Ockham conceives of knowledge, belief, and other propositional attitudes as the holding of a relation between a mental act or state (i.e. the subject’s act of knowing, believing, etc.), on the one hand, and its representational content, on the other. Thus, for Ockham, the items which function as objects for propositional attitudes are what we might think of as ‘*content* objects’—that is, as items which function both as the object (or *relatum*) of propositional attitude relations and as representational content of the acts or attitudes relating to them.⁴⁷ Given this way of thinking about propositional attitudes and their objects, it should be clear why Ockham would suppose that only a subset of existing sentence tokens function as objects for divine knowledge (or belief, etc.). After all, linguistic tokens (whether written, spoken, or mental) produced by creatures surely do not supply the representational contents of God’s knowledge. The *only* token entities which could plausibly be thought to function as content objects for divine knowledge are token thoughts in the mind of God himself. Indeed, in general, it would seem that the only sentence tokens that *could* serve as representational contents for attitudes such as knowledge and belief (etc.) are just those that occur in the subject’s own language of thought. It is no doubt for this same reason that Ockham, in contexts outside of d.39, often argues explicitly for the view that the objects of knowledge and belief are mental entities—namely, *mental* sentences.⁴⁸

In light of all of this, we can now see that Ockham’s discussion of God’s knowledge in d. 39 is not only perfectly coherent, but is also perfectly consistent

⁴⁷ This claim applies only to Ockham’s early views about the objects of propositional attitudes. Ockham’s views about the nature of the objects of propositional attitudes evolve over the course of his career. Since d. 39 is among Ockham’s earlier writings, however, the subsequent developments in his thinking needn’t concern us here. For a more detailed treatment of Ockham’s account and of the developments it undergoes see Brower-Toland 2007.

⁴⁸ As he insists: “every science (*scientia*) whatsoever—whether it is real or rational—concerns only mental sentences. For it concerns those things which are known (*scita*) and only mental sentences are known (*scitur*).” *Ord.* d.2, q.4 (*OTh* II, 135). Here too it is worth emphasizing that Ockham’s views about mental sentences serving as objects of judgment evolve over time—my remarks in this context apply only to his earlier theories.

with his broader nominalist (and token-sententialist) proclivities. For, given Ockham's broader analysis of propositional attitudes, it should by now be clear that, for him, God's knowing every truth does not entail that God stands in the relation of knowing to every existing true sentence token; rather, all it entails is that God's mental language include a representation of all possible states of affair (paired as contradictories) and that, at any given moment, God stands in the relation of knowing to just those representations (i.e. those tokens of his mental language) that are, at that moment, true.

2.2 Chatton on objects of knowledge revisited: Returning now to Chatton's discussion, recall that the central difficulty with his account was not that of identifying the theory propositions it presupposes, rather the difficulty is in understanding why Chatton would want to hold such a theory in the first place. Once again, however, the solution lies in getting clear about Chatton's conception of propositional attitudes and the role he assigns to the objects of such attitudes.

Just as Ockham's discussion of God's knowledge comes into focus once we recognize that he is supposing that objects of knowledge are *content* objects, so too, I now want to suggest, much of Chatton's discussion falls into place once we read it as an account of what we might call the *referential* objects of God's knowledge. Though distinct from the notion of a content object, the notion of a referential object is closely connected to it. To see how, simply note that there is a connection between the way a belief represents the world as being (i.e. its content) and what it is that is thusly represented. We might think of the latter as the belief's 'referent'. Understood in this way, the object of a given propositional attitude is not to be identified with its representational content, but rather with that object to which the attitude relates *in virtue of* its content. In order to distinguish this notion of object from that operative in Ockham's discussion, let us call it the 'referential object' of the attitude.

When read as an account of the *referential* objects of propositional attitudes, much of what initially seems puzzling in Chatton's discussion begins to make sense. For example, his central contention that non-linguistic, non-mental *things* function as objects for propositional attitudes now appears much more plausible. For, read in this way, Chatton merely means to be offering an account of what propositional attitudes are *about* or directed at in virtue of their content. Thus, for him, the object or *relatum* of a given propositional act or attitude is just the entity that is represented by it; it is that which is believed, known—or otherwise judged—*about*. Thus, for example, on Chatton's view, the belief that *Socrates is pale* has Socrates for its object.⁴⁹ Understood this way, Chatton's claim that

⁴⁹ Indeed, as we've seen, Chatton holds that the object of a given attitude is just the entity (or entities) that the terms which comprise the sentence expressing that attitude "signify". See n. 28 above.

individual, concrete *things* function as objects for propositional attitudes looks far less controversial.⁵⁰

But what about Chatton's willingness to refer to the *things* to which God's knowledge relates as "truths"? What sense is there in saying that non-linguistic, non-mental, things are truths? Indeed, what notion of truth could even apply to them? I think we can begin to make sense of Chatton's way of speaking if we note that Chatton is thinking of individual things not only as the *referents* for acts of belief and or knowledge (and for the sentences which express them), but also as what corresponds to them and, hence, as what makes them true. Thus, Chatton is supposing that the entity which serves as the object and referent of a given attitude is also that in virtue of which it is true (when it is true). Although this claim, namely, that beliefs (or the sentences which express them) are made true by the individual things to which they refer may be contentious, it nevertheless, does provide a basis for explaining why Chatton should think there is a sense in which such things are appropriately called 'truths.' Chatton is very likely adopting the Aristotelian notion that certain expressions can have 'focal meaning'—that is, can apply to different things in different, but related senses.⁵¹ Thus, just as food or exercise can be called 'healthy' in virtue of causing or being generally productive of health so too, non-linguistic, non-mental *things* can called 'true' or 'truths' insofar as such things are truth-makers.

So far so good. But as yet, it may still seem unclear why Chatton holds that the truths to which God's knowledge relates are such that they are true at all times. After all, even if there is a sense in which 'truth' can be applied to things one might still wonder why Chatton holds the predicate applies to it at all times. Yet this is precisely what he does say. Consider, for example, his remarks in the following passage:

It is impossible that something ever (*unquam*) be signified by a true sentence without now (*modo*) being signified by a true sentence. For the same thing that is signified by an affirmative sentence is also signified by its negative contradictory. And, from the fact that it is impossible to prevent one or the other of [a pair of] contradictories from being true, it follows, therefore, that whatever *can be* signified by a true sentence is now signified by a true sentence. And since this is [a thing's] being true (*Et cum hoc sic esse verum*), it is therefore impossible for God know something [that is, some *true thing*] that he does not now know.⁵²

⁵⁰ It is not altogether uncontroversial, however. Indeed, one of Chatton's contemporaries—Adam Wodeham—does in fact take issue with precisely this claim; Wodeham contends that what propositional attitudes refer to are not things, but rather facts, or concrete states of affair. For more on Wodeham's criticisms of Chatton's position see Brower-Toland 2006.

⁵¹ Owen (1960) coined the term for this Aristotelian notion.

⁵² *Rep.* I, d. 39, q.u, a. 2 (*Reportatio dd 10-48, 365-6*).

As we've already seen, Chatton claims that the things to which true sentences refer can themselves be said to be true insofar these things ground the truth of that sentences. Interestingly, Chatton also seems to think that everything that exists is at all times the referent of some true sentence. His argument for this claim takes its start from the following assumptions: (1) contradictory sentences refer to one and the same thing and (2) that for every existing entity, there exists a pair (at least) of contradictory sentences which refer to it.⁵³ But since at all times one or the other of a pair of contradictories is true, it follows that "whatever can be signified by a true sentence is now signified by a true sentence". Hence, if truth applies at any time to some thing, it applies to it all times and, so, the number of true *things* will not vary over time.

Admittedly, this argument calls attention to a number of further questions about Chatton's account that I can't pursue further here—in particular, questions about the precise ontological status of sentences and of the objects signified by them. Even so, what I've said so far is, I think, sufficient to resolve the *prima facie* difficulties associated with his theory about the objects of knowledge. For we can now see that his account as a whole is motivated by the assumption that the "objects" of propositional attitudes are just those items to which such attitudes refer or which they are about.

2.3 Holcot on objects of knowledge revisited: Recall that Holcot's attempt to treat sentence tokens as objects of knowledge faces at least two difficulties. First, it seems implausible to suppose that persisting states such as knowing, believing, etc. involve relations to objects as ephemeral and transient as spoken, written, and mental sentence tokens; second, there seems to be no non-arbitrary means of specifying precisely which of any class of relevant tokens is the object for a given act or attitude. Once again, however, the key to resolving these difficulties lies in getting clear about the role 'objects' play in Holcot's account of propositional attitudes.

The first difficulty can be handled simply by recognizing that for Holcot, as for Chatton, objects of propositional attitudes do not function as content objects.

⁵³ As he puts it at another point in d. 39: "The same thing that is now signified truly by 'you are sitting' will immediately be signified by its contradictory when you arise. For contradictories signify the same thing altogether—otherwise they would not be contradictories" *Rep.* I, d. 39, q.u, a. 2 (*Reportatio dd 10-48*, 366). This is a point Chatton repeats elsewhere: In the next question, for example he says: "I am supposing that that very thing which is signified by 'Socrates is sitting' is also signified by this 'Socrates is not sitting'—otherwise they would not be contradictories." *Rep.* I, dd. 40-41, q. 2, a. 1 (*Reportatio dd 10-48*, 393) Chatton's idea here is not, of course, that such sentences have the same content, but rather merely that such sentences *refer* to—or are about—the same thing—namely, you. After all, if such sentences were about different things they wouldn't be contradictory.

Clearly, it *would* be absurd to suppose that a mental state's having a given representational content is to be explained in terms of a relation to entities which are constantly coming and going out of existences (as are utterances and thought-tokens). Such a view would seem to entail that the content of my knowledge and belief is changing constantly—which is obviously false. But, so long as Holcot does not take sentence tokens to function as the content objects of propositional attitudes his account entails no such thing.

That Holcot does not take sentence tokens to function as content objects is evident from a variety of claims he makes about the nature of God's knowledge. Holcot, as we've already noted, maintains that the quantity of truths (i.e., quantity of existing, true, written, spoken and mental sentence tokens) changes over time and, hence, that the number of truths known by God also changes over time. But, as Holcot is well aware, this raises questions about divine immutability. Doesn't his view violate the traditional doctrine? Holcot explicitly addresses this worry, and his reply is significant:

When it is said that God's knowledge cannot be increased or diminished, I grant this, since his knowledge is his essence. Nevertheless, that knowledge sometimes knows more and sometimes less given that there are sometimes more true things (and, as a result, more knowable things) and sometimes there are fewer.⁵⁴

As Holcot sees it, to say that God can know more or less than he does is just to say that God can be related by his single, everlasting act of knowing to more or fewer objects, but, as he seems to be saying here, this entails nothing about the content of what he knows.⁵⁵ In fact, Holcot allows that even if no one had ever formed a sentence at all, the content of God's knowledge would be just what it is now.

God by knowing his own essence knows every truth. Thus, supposing that no sentence existed [about, say, triangles], God would in that case know no less about triangles than he knows now, although he would not have known as *many truths* about triangles.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Holcot 1971, 21. Notice that Holcot speaks of God's "knowledge" (rather than God himself) as knowing more or less. This is typical of Holcot's way of speaking throughout Q.I.6; he alternates between speaking of the *relations* of belief and knowledge as holding between subjects—that is, knowers—and certain objects, on the one hand, and as holding between mental acts and those same objects on the other.

⁵⁵ This is because, on Holcot's view, "God himself is Truth and is a single true cognition equivalent to and pre-existing every true sentence". (Holcot 1971, 7) Or, as he puts it elsewhere, God is something equivalent to every sentence that would be true if it existed. Thus, if he had only known that [truth] which is himself, he would be as wise as he is now." (Holcot 1971, 13)

⁵⁶ Holcot 1971, 5.

Thus, which objects God's knowledge relates him to makes no difference to the content of his knowledge.⁵⁷

But if sentence tokens do not function as content objects, then how are they functioning? Are we to take them as 'referential objects'? Understood this way, Holcot's view would be that sentence tokens function merely as those objects *about which* a subject believes or knows (e.g., when she believes or knows that that token is true). Although some of Holcot's remarks do suggest this interpretation, in the end, I think we must resist it. After all, if Holcot conceives of objects of propositional attitudes as *referential objects*, his objections to Chatton's lose much of their force. If the objects of belief are just those objects *about which* we form beliefs and judgment, then Chatton's contention that individuals can function as objects of the attitudes would hardly be objectionable. In fact, Holcot's own position (on this reading) would seem far less plausible than Chatton's since it entails that our beliefs (etc.) are always directed at sentences. Yet, there's no reason to think that all or even the majority of our thoughts or beliefs are about or directed at sentence tokens.

But if Holcot's objects of belief are neither content objects nor referential objects, what else could they be? In order to answer this question, as well as to see what Holcot has in mind when he speaks of objects of propositional attitudes, consider again the sorts of claims Holcot makes about the objects of God's knowledge. As we've noted already, Holcot holds that since God's act of knowing relates him to every true proposition, the question of which objects God knows is a completely contingent matter—having to do only with what true sentence tokens happen to exist at a given time. One of his favorite ways of calling attention to this fact is by pointing out that he himself can, if he so desires, alter what God knows. We've already seen him make this point in a passage cited earlier, but compare also the following remarks:

Suppose that I order the sentence "Socrates runs" to be written in a thousand places (and that it is the case [that Socrates runs] in the truth of reality). ... Say I likewise order the sentence "Socrates does not run" (which is false) in one place alone. ...

⁵⁷ Holcot's claim (in the foregoing passage) that God would "know" no less about triangles even if he'd not "known" as many truths about them makes clear he is willing to use propositional attitude expressions such as 'know' and 'believe' in two different senses. In one sense (e.g. in the first occurrence above), he uses such expressions to talk about the content of a mental act, in another sense (e.g. in the second occurrence) to talk about a relation to the object of that act. While he doesn't do so in the passage just quoted, Holcot sometimes signals these different senses by actually using a different expression to talk about a belief's content. For example, in the passage cited in n. 50 above he claims that while God can "know" more or fewer truths, he is at all times "just as *wise (sapiens)* as he is now." At other points he uses the Latin expression 'novit' in place of 'scivit' when discussing what God knows in the sense of content. Also, Holcot never uses the expression *object (obiectum)* in contexts in which he's talking about a belief's content.

Suppose then that Socrates sits down. Assuming the truth of all other sentences remains fixed, it follows necessarily that God knows less than he know—by 999 sentences. For of those 1000 sentences that he once knew, he now knows, *de novo*, only one.⁵⁸

While Holcot's radical way of stating the view doesn't contribute much to its *prima facie* plausibility, it does give us some clues about the alternative notion of object that he has in mind. Clearly, Holcot wants to say that because God is omniscient, he stands in the knowledge relation to every presently existing true proposition. And if we ask what it is about God's act of knowledge, on the one hand, and (true) sentence tokens, on the other, that explains the obtaining of this relation, Holcot seems to have a perfectly natural explanation to hand. A propositional attitude relation is one that obtains between a given mental state and an object just in case that object expresses—or, we might say, *encodes*—the representational content of the state in question.

Thus, to say that God stands in the knowledge relation to every true sentence is just to say that every existing true sentence token is such that it specifies or encodes (some portion of) the representational content of God's (single) act of knowing. Holcot puts it this way: "God is [in virtue of his act of knowing] equivalent to every sentence that would be true if it existed."⁵⁹ This claim makes perfect sense if we suppose (as Holcot does) that every existing true sentence token is such that it encodes (some part of) the representational content of God's knowledge—every such token is "equivalent in signification" to one of God's acts of knowing (or, more accurately, to some aspect of his one, eternally existing knowledge state). Thus, what is "known" by God are certain linguistic objects—namely, those sentences that are equivalent in signification to God's act of knowing.⁶⁰ And, according to Holcot, every existing true sentence token is of this sort.⁶¹ Of course, inasmuch as the sentences that do the encoding are entities that

⁵⁸ Holcot 1971, 10-11.

⁵⁹ Holcot 1971, 7. See also n. 50 above.

⁶⁰ Actually, while Holcot thinks that it is sentence tokens that primarily function as objects of propositional attitudes, he does allow that some non-linguistic entities can be objects for propositional attitudes as well. For some non-linguistic objects are truth-bearers. In this connection, Holcot mentions the example of a barrel hoop which signifies equivalently to this sentence: "Wine is sold here". See Holcot 1971, 7.

⁶¹ There are, of course, certain truths for which this claim raises problems and, hence, in virtue which it might require further qualification. For while the claim that God's omniscience is God's knowing (standing in the knowing relation to) every truth is, on the face of it, an intuitive explication of omniscience, one might suspect that there are some sentences that may be true and yet are not equivalent to—and so do not encode—anything God can be said to know. Here I have in mind situations that might arise with demonstratives. For example, is there anything in God's mental language which the true token (in my mouth) "I am Susan" encodes? What Holcot would say about this depends on how fine-grained a notion of content he has—or how strict a notion of

come into and go out of existence and change their truth-value over time, Holcot is forced to allow that God's eternal act of knowing does not always relate him to the same objects. Hence, as we've seen, Holcot thinks that divine "knowledge sometimes knows more and sometimes less given that there are sometimes more things (and, as a result, more knowable things) and sometimes there are less."⁶²

Recognizing that sentence tokens function on Holcot's account as what we might call 'encoding objects' also provides the resources for resolving the second of the two difficulties for his account, namely, the problem of specifying, in a non-arbitrary way, which among the class of relevant tokens is the object for a given act or attitude. In fact, by now, the answer should be clear: a given state of belief or knowledge (or other attitude) will relate to *every* token that encodes its content. Thus suppose, for example, that at time t1, S believes that triangles have three sides. And suppose further that at t1, S utters assertively the sentence "triangles have three sides." This token utterance will, on Holcot's view, be an object of S's belief since it encodes the content of that belief. But, S's utterance at t1 isn't necessarily the only object of her belief.

When I know this token sentence (formed by me): *A Triangle has three [sides]*, then I know (or am truly said to know) another equivalent sentence formed by you, since that one [viz. yours] is equivalent in its signification to this one [of mine].⁶³

Even in the case of human (or non-divine) subjects, therefore, the relation of believing or knowing is conceived by Holcot to obtain between a token and a subject just in case that token encodes the content of the subject's belief state. And, as he makes clear in this passage, it is perfectly possible that there may be more than one object of her belief. Indeed, any tokens that are "equivalent in signifying", as Holcot describes them here, will be counted among the objects of the belief. For such tokens are, according to Holcot, equally said to be the objects believed by her. Even with human beings, therefore, it will often be the case that a subject is related by a single act of knowing or believing to a plurality of objects. Hence, if tokens are in fact functioning on Holcot's account as encoding objects, there is an obvious and non-arbitrary way of specifying which, among the relevant class of suitable tokens, will be the objects for a given propositional attitude: all of them. Clearly, therefore, if we read Holcot along these lines, we are in a position not only to resolve the main difficulties for his account, but also to see why the claims which initially seemed so radical are, in fact, not so very radical at all.

equivalence is required for encoding. (I make clear how equivalence enters into the notion of encoding below.)

⁶² Holcot 1971, 21.

⁶³ Holcot 1971, 5.

3. BROADER IMPLICATIONS

Obviously, there's much more that could be said about Ockham, Chatton, and Holcot's (respective) theories as well as about the debate as a whole. The purpose of my discussion, however, has not been to provide an exhaustive treatment of the debate, or even to resolve all the difficulties associated with the theories that emerge from it. Rather, my purpose has been merely to find a way of rendering their discussions intelligible. If the argument of the preceding section is correct, however, it should be clear that doing so requires that we be clear about the precise role played by 'objects' in these thinkers' analyses of propositional attitudes. What is more, if my argument is correct, it turns out that there are no less than three different notions of object at issue in the context of this single debate about God's knowledge. Although this is perhaps a surprising result, the explanatory power of the interpretation itself counts strongly in its favor. After all, this way of reading the debate goes a long way toward resolving the puzzles and difficulties it presents. I can, moreover, think of no other way of making sense of the various claims Ockham and his colleagues make either about God's knowledge or about propositional attitudes in general.

If my interpretation is correct, however, it also has significant implications about our understanding of the later medieval debate about propositions as a whole. Until now, scholarship on medieval discussions of propositions has typically proceeded on the assumption that when medieval philosophers debate questions about the objects of belief, knowledge and other propositional attitudes, they employ the notion of 'object' in a single, univocal sense. As a consequence, commentators have generally assumed that medieval theories of propositions can be classified simply in terms of the ontological *type* or *category* of entity introduced to serve as the object for propositional attitudes.⁶⁴ Indeed, according to the scheme now standard in the secondary literature, medieval theories of propositions are divided into three main categories: "*complexum* theories",

⁶⁴ Scholars have, of course, been sensitive to the fact that medieval authors, in developing a theory of propositions, are often addressing different sorts of issues. That is to say, they typically distinguish between three different questions medieval authors discuss in theorizing about propositions: (a) what sort of entity functions as the bearer of truth/falsity; (b) what sort of entity function as the meaning (*significatum*) of sentential expressions; (c) what sort of entity functions as the object of propositional attitudes. (See, for example, Keele 2003; Ashworth 1978; Kretzmann 1970.) What has been overlooked, however, is the fact that even in cases where the debate is focused specifically on one of these sub-questions—say, on the question about objects of propositional attitudes—participants in the debate may still be addressing different sorts of questions. Thus, in the case at hand, Ockham, Chatton, and Holcot are clearly all addressing the third of these three questions. Nonetheless, insofar as they are each operating with different conceptions of what it is for something to be an object of judgment they are not addressing the same question.

namely, theories that take objects of propositional attitudes to be complex linguistic expressions (i.e. sentences); “*res* theories”, namely, theories which hold that ‘things’ (i.e. ordinary substances) are objects for the attitudes; and “*complex-significabile* theories”, which argue for the introduction of some *sui generis* entity.⁶⁵

Given what we’ve now seen, however, it should be clear that this standard tripartite taxonomy is far too coarse-grained to capture what’s really going on. Not only does it fail to capture the nature of the various theories on offer, but it also misrepresents the structure of the debate itself. Because these thinkers are often operating with a different conception of what it is for something to be an object of a propositional attitude they are also often operating with very different conceptions of the nature of propositional attitude relations. It follows, therefore, that any taxonomy that classifies positions in the debate solely in terms of the ontological type to which the objects of such relations belong will be inadequate. In order to properly understand the nature of the various positions within the debate, we must first get clear about what each thinker means to be offering a theory of. And this requires developing a classificatory scheme capable not only of sorting theories according to the ontological type of object introduced by each, but also—and, perhaps, more importantly—of sorting them according to the theoretical role such objects play in an account of propositional attitudes. Only then will we be in a position to understand the differences among the various theories or to assess their respective merits. Indeed, as we’ve just seen in the debate between Ockham and his colleagues, it is only by getting clear about the precise role played by objects of propositional attitudes that we are able to arrive at a coherent interpretation of their accounts respectively.

Not only will a more refined taxonomy yield a better understanding of the nature of various theories on offer in this debate, it will also yield a rather different picture of relationship between various positions within the debate. Indeed, what we will find, I suspect, is that philosophers previously supposed to be on opposite sides of the debate—and even those typically thought to be on the same side—turn out not to be disagreeing (or, for that matter, agreeing) at all, but merely (and perhaps unbeknownst to themselves) talking past one another.⁶⁶ To

⁶⁵ This classificatory scheme owes to Gabriele Nuchelmans’s (1973) pioneering study of ancient and medieval theories of propositions and has been widely adopted by scholars since then. See, for example, Keele 2003; Karger 1995; Zupko 1994; Grassi 1990; Adams 1987; Nuchelmans 1980.

⁶⁶ Thus, for example, Ockham and Chatton are often characterized as holding opposed positions regarding the nature of propositions (Ockham as a *complexum*-theorist, Chatton as a *res*-theorist) whereas Holcot and Ockham are depicted as falling in the same camp (both being *complexum*-theorists). (See, for example, Nuchelmans 1973, chs. 12-13; Keele 2003; Karger 1995; Adams 1987.) But not only are their positions not clearly opposed, there is reason to suspect that there might be a fair amount of agreement between them. Indeed, Chatton and Holcot would agree with

see this, consider what we've just seen in the debate between Ockham, Chatton, and Holcot over whether God can know more. A moment's reflection makes clear that Ockham and his colleagues may not actually disagree either about the nature of the objects of God's knowledge or about the nature of propositions generally. Indeed, to the extent that each thinker approaches this particular debate with his own, distinct conception of the nature of propositional attitude relations as well as a distinct conception of the role played by the objects of such relations, the theories they develop are not necessarily competing theories at all. In principle, one could hold all three views without any inconsistency. In such a case, one would simply be holding one view about the nature of the entities which function as the representational content of propositional attitudes, a second view about the items which encode that content, and a third about the nature of the entities to which such attitudes refer in virtue of their content. Clearly, therefore, the mere fact that Ockham, Chatton, and Holcot introduce entities of different ontological type to serve as objects for propositional attitudes doesn't entail any disagreement between them. Of course, none of this is to say that there are not genuine disputes among later medieval philosophers on questions about objects of propositional attitudes (indeed, Ockham and his colleagues clearly disagree about *what it is for something to be the object* of propositional attitudes), but it does make clear that understanding where these disagreements occur and precisely what the disagreements are will require more caution in how we identify them.⁶⁷

Ockham that the content of a propositional attitude is to be identified with a mental sentence; Ockham and Holcot would concede to Chatton that the referential objects for such attitudes are entities falling within the Aristotelian categories of substance or accident; and, finally, I suspect that Ockham and Chatton would have no objection to Holcot's claim that token sentences encode the content of propositional attitudes. I have discussed the extent of agreement and disagreement between Ockham and Chatton on this issues in much more detail elsewhere (see Brower-Toland, forthcoming).

⁶⁷ I'm grateful to Jeffrey Brower for his valuable comments and feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

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