COMPLEXIO, ENUNCIATIO, ASSENSUS: THE ROLE OF PROPOSITIONS IN KNOWLEDGE ACCORDING TO JOHN BURIDAN

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This paper is an attempt to rethink Buridan’s ideas concerning knowledge (which are well known after the work of de Rijk and Zupko) from two perspectives: On the one hand, I explore Buridan’s theory of knowledge in the hope that it will shed some light on the intuition that the structure of propositions determines the justification of our beliefs on various different levels. On the other hand, I would like to contribute to demonstrating the consistency of Buridan’s thought, which has been remarked by almost all scholars working on Buridan: in particular, I am interested in exploring the benefits of using supposition theory when applied to the theory of knowledge.

The aim of this paper, suggested in the subtitle: the role of propositions in knowledge, is therefore to explore the interweaving between Buridan’s theory of propositions and some aspects of his theory of knowledge. I will start by examining Buridan’s conception of scientia (as opposed to error, opinio and fides), from the perspective of two distinctions which are very

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important to Buridan's theory of the proposition: complexio / enuntiatio and enuntiatio / assensus. Then I will recall Buridan's analysis of propositions (and his use of supposition to define truth conditions) to show their consistency with this conception of knowledge.

1. Buridan's idea of science

According to Buridan, humans are related to the world in a particular way: on the one hand, they are naturally inclined to know it, but, on the other hand they are also open to error and doubt; moreover, the realm of knowledge is extended by a new possibility absent in Aristotle: faith. Buridan's idea of science is drawn up against these related notions. Among the four senses of scientia that he distinguishes in the eighth tract of his Summulae, I will take the wider sense, according to which science is contrasted mainly with opinion,\(^2\) a sense which is captured by the following definition:


\(^{3}\) Sed tamen opus est notare quod ad salvandum dicta philosophorum opus distinguere de hoc nomine 'scientia', sciat distinct Commentator, primum Posteriorum. Scientia nonaque communiter accepta in nobis est notitia propositionis adhaesiva cum certitudine et quae determinate in opinione est. Sed proprie, nomine 'scientia' distinct ad notiam intellectualem necessariae propositionis. Et ista notitia bene est Christian. Sciamus primum quod quae sunt consubstantiales ad notiam cognoscendi, sem etiam principiorum demonstrabilium, quae non sunt acquisita per quos ea acquisita est. Adhuc, quae proprie, nomine 'scientia' distinct ad notiam intellectualem demonstrabilium. Et ista, sem quae distinct ad notiam intellectualem demonstrabilium, quae non sunt consubstantiales ad notiam intellectualem demonstrabilium, sem etiam principiorum demonstrabilium. Adhuc, quae proprie, nomine 'scientia' distinct ad notiam intellectualem demonstrabilium, quae non sunt consubstantiales ad notiam intellectualem demonstrabilium. Et ista, sem quae distinct ad notiam intellectualem demonstrabilium, quae non sunt consubstantiales ad notiam intellectualem demonstrabilium.

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«Scientia est assensus firmus et evidens superveniens propositioni mentali, quod illi cum certitudine et evidentia assensus.» (Summ VIII, 3.7. p. 88)

That is, for Buridan, science is a kind of assent, having a proposition as its immediate object, and characterised (in contrast to error, opinion, and faith) as having certainty and evidential. Let us examine separately each of these four elements.

1.1. Propositions

According to Buridan, propositions are the immediate object of science. We may claim to have science of several non-propositional things (such as animals, stones, celestial bodies, etc.) only in so far as we have science of the corresponding propositions that include terms supposing for them. This central role of propositions suggests the hypothesis that the features of scientific knowledge are determined by the structure of propositions and their relations to the world.

In Buridan's opinion, a proposition is a special type of complex linguistic expression, which has a special semantic relation to the world. On the one hand, a proposition, being an expression composed of signifying terms, does signify something, and so it is similar to terms in so far as it has the same semantic relation to the world, namely, signification. But, on the other hand, signification, although present in propositions, is not the semantic relation specific to them. Buridan's distinction between complexiones distantes and complexiones indistantes is introduced to mark the dif-

monstrationem, sed non omnis conclusionis necessariae et evidenter demonstratae est scientia; sunt enim demonstratio necessariae et evidentes in arte et in prudencia, ut in moribus et in medicinalibus, et non est modo scientia conclusionis demonstratae, sed ursus et prudencia. (Summ VIII, 4.3, p. 109-110).

\(^{4}\) «Tertia clausula est quod omnis opinio est propositionis opinabilis et omnia scientia propositionis vel nihilis. Nullus enim dicit se scire vel opinari hominem vel eum quod quisquis (sicrit vel opinatur aliquam propositionem formatam ex illis terminis 'hominem' et 'eius'). Quod quod opinatur hominem esse probum vel eum esse forensi, et huiusmodi. Tamen non propter hoc debemos dicere quin habemus scientias vel opiniones de animalibus, de lapidibus, de corporebus. Quia tamen non sunt propositiones; et quin habemus scientias et opiniones de substantiis scientiis et eorum passionibus, quia etiam non sunt propositiones, sed termini significativi. Sed debemos dicere quod illud cujus immediate est scientia vel opinio, est propositio cuius scientia vel opinione assensus. De terminis autem sciamus habere dicimus vel opinionem, e ex quod scientiam vel opinatur propositionem ex illis terminis constitutum. Et iterum res alias, ut lapides et ligna, dicimus esse scientias vel opinatas, vel de eis esse scientiam vel opinionem, ex eo quod significatum per terminos e quibus propositiones scientiae vel opiniae componuntur. Et hoc modo, et non alias dubios modis, habemus scientiam de omnibus rebus. (Summ VIII, 4.3, p. 100). See also: Q. An Post I, 32 and Q Phys I, 1, f. 2va.
ference between propositions and mere complex terms. Propositions are the only *complexiones distantes*, complexes in which the copula 'est' or 'non est' mediates between the terms combined: the result of this mediation is that the complex constitutes a unity of a higher level, an *enunciatio* rather than a mere *complexio*. That is, a proposition is intended to say something about something, not just plainly to signify things (as terms do), and, as a consequence, propositions have a specific semantic relation to the world, by virtue of which they can be said to be true or false.

Here is then a first quality of propositions, which determines the nature of science by contrast with error: as propositions are the kind of complex expressions that are open to truth and falsity, our attempts to know, which concern propositions, are open to being right and wrong, and what distinguishes science from error is that the former's object is a true proposition, whereas the latter's object is a false one. The fact that it consists of a kind of grasping some kind of propositions is essential to the characterisation of science. To see what kind of grasping is indicated, we now need to examine the next element of the definition.

1.2. Assent

Not only science, but also error, opinion and faith, are a special kind of intellectual operation: an assent to a proposition, which consists of a belief that a proposition is true. Assent is the second level distinguished by Buridan in a set of (up to) three levels of intellectual operations concerning propositions: first, one can consider a proposition without assenting to or dissenting from it; second, one can assent to or dissent from the proposition first considered; and third, if the proposition concerns something *agibile* (something than can be done), one can either want or reject it.

**Footnotes**


6 Concerning the possibility of error in sensory (non-propositional) knowledge, see *In Met II*, 1, f. 9r and *De An II*, 11, p. 316-324.

7 'Quodcumque sic assentitius appareat, quia omnis scientia et omnis opinio est fides seu creditula quaedam qua de propositione putatur vel creditum quod ipsa sit vera, vel quod ipsa sit falsa, ad sensum alias datum; et habeam fidei seu creditulatum (ut quocumque nomine vocueris) volubilis 'assensus'.' (Suum III, 4.3, p. 107). See also *Q An Post 1*, 32.

8 'Quaestum ad primum scindendum est quia propositionem mentalem duc possunt esse motus animae. Unus est apprehensio vel consideration illius propositionis sine assensu vel dissentia, et ipsis motus animae ab Aristotele aliquando vocatur \'phantastico\' vel \'phantastia\'; alius pro-

9 Let us focus on the difference between merely considering a proposition and assenting to (or dissenting from) it. Buridan insists that assent cannot be assimilated to the proposition itself, but is a new operation of the intellect, added to the formation of the proposition. The strongest proof that they are different is, as usual in Buridan, the possibility of existing separately: in fact, it is possible to construct a mental proposition, without having a cause that generates either the assent to or the dissent from it. In the move from a proposition to the assent to it, the intellect always needs a cause that impels it into action.

So what are the causes that generate assent or dissent? Sometimes the intellect is moved to assenting to the proposition by an act of the will (this is, for example, the case of the assent of faith); on other occasions, the intellect is moved to assenting to the proposition not by an extrinsic cause, but by the very proposition that manifests itself as true (be that truth a real or an apparent one). This is a conclusion that can be drawn from Buridan's repeated thesis that the intellect is naturally inclined to assent to truth. Given this natural inclination, the cause that moves the intellect actually to assent to a proposition, when there is no decision of the will, is that the proposition presents itself to the intellect as true. As we shall see, this may happen in two ways: either the truth of the proposition is manifested as 'evident' (which, in turn, may happen in different ways that we will consider), or the proposition, true or false, just «appears» to be true.
ample, the intellect is not forced to assent to the conclusions (such as "omnis triangulus habet tres angulos equales duobus rectis"), when the reasons that support them are not yet available, nor is it forced to assent to the principles acquired by experience (such as "omnis ignis est calidus") before having gained the necessary experience. In contrast, when the intellect is moved "per se" or "by its nature", for example, when faced with the first principles (either with first principles evident by their logical form, such as "impossible est eundem hominem currere et non currere", or with first principles evident by their terms inclusion, such as "nullum calidum est frigidum") the intellect cannot dissent, although it can decide not to consider them.

Along with this division of assent according to the mediated or immediate nature of the relation between intellect and truth, Buridan establishes another division of assent according to the nature of the truth of the proposition. On the one hand, there is the evidentness of necessary propositions; on the other hand, there is the evidentness of contingent propositions (as, in the first, wider sense of science that we are examining, contingent propositions may also be scientifically known: for example, when I see Socrates running, I am forced to assent to the proposition "Socrates currit", and this

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11 "Nem non evidenter quaedam humana est secundum quam virtus cognoscit in ea natura vel per rationem evidentem determinatur ad assentendum velri su compositione verse [...]." (Summ VIII, 4, 143, 114).

12 "Tunc de secundo modo de quo principaliter est quaestio, videolit de assentio, sit primo ista distinctio quod intellectus aliquibus assentit per se ut, quamvis cognoscit terminos, ipsa cognoscit et eis assentit, sic est de prima principi; aliquibus autem assentit ex quibusdam alias, si cot conclusionibus assentit propter praeensiones et propter quasdam apparentias et probabilitates."

13 "Tunc sit prima (conclusio); principii complexus in istius intellectus non potest dissentire. Patet, quia sunt manifeste vera, quod quamvis praeassertum intellectu, intellectus indicat ea esse vera, eo quod apparent intellectu esse vera; et cum intellectu indicetum sit ad assentientiam vero si manifesto, statim eis assentiet et nullo modo dissentient. Nihilominus intellectus primo principio potest non assentire, quia intellectus potest omni non considerare; eum autem non consideratur, primo principio non assentire, ex eo quod assentire est considerandum."

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is science in the wider sense). As for the evidentness of necessary propositions (that is, propositions that cannot be falsified) there is a further distinction: there is the evidentness of those propositions that cannot be falsified at all (or simpliciter, that is, by any power, not even divine power) on the one hand, and there is evidentness, by contrast, of those propositions that cannot be falsified in natural circumstances (or ex suppositione communis cursus naturae), although they can be falsified by divine power, in a supernatural way. It should be noted that this division of kinds of evidentness does not introduce any difference concerning the degree of assent: whether it is a contingent or a necessary truth, either simpliciter or ex suppositione, when faced with an evident truth, the intellect is always determined to assent to it.

But the intellect is not always determined to assent to the proposition that causes the assent. The intellect can even give assent to a false proposition, and Buridan is convinced that there can only be determination to assent about true propositions: a false proposition cannot have any kind of evidentness (unless we admit a weak and improper sense of 'evidentness', the one that suffices for moral acts). But if the intellect can, sometimes, give assent to a non-evident proposition, it must be moved not by evidentness, but by other causes: Buridan says «per rationes et persuasiones proba-

18 «Sed tu quaeeres, si ego manifeste video Socratem currire, un ego scio quod Socrates currit vel quod ego solum hoc opinor. Et ego respondeo quod tunc hoc non opinor sed scio. Omnes enim sic loquentur "scio quod hoc currere est calidum, quia manifeste sentio ipsum esse calidum" et "scio firmare quod Socrates hodie currebat, quia visi eum currere". Sed hac scientia non est quae dicat vel in tument vel in quarto modorum praetens distinctorum, sed in primo modo. Ille nam primum modus bene universaliter distinguere contra opinionem. Ut si iste assensus quos ego assentio quod Socrates currit, videm usum currire, remanente, reedente Socrate a sensu, iste amplius non est scientia, sed opinio. Ideo tals modus scientiae eito et faciliter mutabilis est in opinionem. (Summa VIII, 4a, p. 114).

19 «Proportionabilis modo distinguere de evidentia sic ut de certitudine. Nam evidentia quaestum humanae est secundum quam virtus cognoscitiva ex eius natura vel per rationem evidentem determinat ad assentendum veritati seu propositioni verae, non possibili falsificare per aliquam potentiam; et ista non requirit ad scientiam naturalen. Alia est secundum quan virtus cognoscitiva determinatur ex natura sua (vel per rationem evidentem) ad assentendum veritati seu proposito verae, non possibili falsificare naturalerit, licet falsificaret (posset) supernaturalerit. Et haec requirit ad scientiam naturalen. (Summa VIII, 4a, p. 114). See also Q. A. Post I, 2.

20 «Ymo non solum possumus assentire propositione vere, ymo sepe assentium falsius. (De Met II, 1, f. 8vb).

21 «Quinta conclusio: impossibile est quod aliquid habeat apparentias evidenter de falsae. Paut, quia de falsae non potest esse evidentia. (De Met II, 3, 479).

22 «Immo est aedificis effectum que sufficient ad bene agendum morali, sed ictice quando visus et inquisitio omnibus c sandwichie in factis quaem homo cum diligentia potest inquisire, et ictice secundum exigentiam humani, ad c sandwichie ilium judicium est evidentia sufficiente ad bene agendum morali, etiam licet judicium aliud falsum propter iniquitates ignotum alicuius circumstancie. (De Met II, 1, 9a).

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Buridan distinguishes (as Jack Zupko has remarked) an «objective» sense of certitude (certainty), also called firmitas veritatis and a subjective sense (certainitatem), also called firmitas assensus. Objective certainty is the same as the truth of the proposition (or its necessary truth, when it comes to the stricter senses of 'scientia'), and it is required in order to have science as opposed to error, since something false cannot be known. Subjective certitude, on the other hand, is required in order to have science as opposed to opinion. Buridan distinguishes three ways to obtain certitude: first, by evidentness (this is scientific assent); second, by an act of the
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21 "Quod autem de invidendis et non scitis homo habet firmam credulitatem, scilicet si-ne alium formidine, appareat per Aristotelim, septimam Ethicorum, dicentem "quidem credimus nihil minus quibus opinamus quam aliis quibus scimus". Provenit autem in nobis tails firmas assen-sus sine aliqua formidine de oppoite triplexite: uno modo per evidentiam, et ille est assensus scientificus; alio modo ex voluntate, cum auctoritate sacrae scripturae, et sic est de fide katholica in sanctis qui pro ea suscinta eligan morti et adhibit, tertio modo, ex apparentia fusa cum ve-lutate ad hoc detenta, sicus est de perniciose haeresiae, qui etiam nos eligent pro sua falsa opinione sustinuenda." (Summa III, 4, 4, p. 112). See also In Met II, 1, f. 8v.b.

22 "Tunc sit prima conclusio: si aliqua proposition est certa, et si sunt apparentiae aequae fortis pro ea et ibi contradictoria, intellectus neutri illorum assentit nec dissentit. Pane, quia tamen quantum apparentia pro una moveret intellectum ad assentendum illi, tantum apparentia pro alla retrahit intellectum et per consequentiam tenet se in suspensu, non judicat nec sententiis pro una nec alias. (De An III, 13, p. 474)."

23 De An III, 13, p. 474.
24 "Deceit quam "cum evidentia" ad differentiam illius credibilitatis quem nos fidibus habebum debemus de articulis fidelis katholico, ut quod Deus est unum et unus. Nam certissima est illa cre-dibilis ex parte propositionis: est enim verissima proposition quod Deus est unum et unus. Et de-bet esse esse firmissima sine aliqua formidine ex parte nostra, iuxta illud in Symbolo, in fine vi-delict: "Haece est fides katholica, quam nisi quisque fitteret fidei etque crediderit, salvus esse non poterit". Et tamen cum hoc perfecta certitudine certissima stat quod prophe invidendiam nunc habemus proprie scientiam de illius articulis. Est autem inproprie evidentia, ex eo quod virus cognoscita ex sua natura cius suis circumstantiis concursus est determinata ad assen-tendum veritatis. (Summa VIII, 4, 4, p. 111)." (Deinde estem exigitur evidentia, ad differentiam fi-dic: quia articulus qui assentitur per fides est firmissimae veritatis, et illi assensum etiam debet esse firmis sine aliqua formidine, sed tamen non est scientia, qua est evidentia. (Q An Post I, 32)."

25 "Vide P. Pérez-Izarbe, John Buridan and Jerónimo Vando... cit. (note 3)."
does not follow from the logical relations between terms nor can it be perceived immediately by the senses. Other reasons, therefore, are needed, that move the intellect to assent firmly. In the case of the conclusions, it is necessary to go back to some other propositions that are immediately evident. In the case of the principles acquired by experience, the identity of all the supposita of the subject with one or other suppositum of the predicate, required for the truth of an affirmative universal, is made evident by induction, when the identity has been observed in a sufficient number of cases with no case of lack of identity.

Finally, it is also clear in what sense the intellect can be mistaken about a first principle: Buridan says that this happens when we assent to a false proposition whose terms supposit for a first principle. Unlike the first principle itself, which is evident, such a kind of proposition does not manifest itself immediately as true (that is, it does not manifest immediately the identity of supposita).

Through this little sample, I have tried to show the coherence between different parts of Buridan's thought. His analysis of the structure of categorical propositions and his definition of truth conditions based on the supposition of terms are in harmony with his view of science as a special kind of assent.