Here is a recipe for ontology. First divide the expressions of one’s language into those which purport to pick things out and those which don’t. Then see whether some of those which purport to pick things out can be defined in terms of others. Finally admit into your ontology whatever an undefinable term purports to pick out. This scheme expresses (though vaguely and incompletely) one of the central intuitions behind many ontological programmes. What is admitted by an ontologist operating within this framework will depend, of course, upon how he or she divides expressions, on what resources of definition are available, and, perhaps, on pressures from other theories. What I hope to do in this paper is to show the influence of the intuition behind this sketch on the work of the fourteenth century Parisian master Jean Buridan.

To some extent, I shall compare Buridan’s views with those of his contemporary, William Ockham. In doing so, I hope both to present Buridan’s own very striking contributions to ontology and to shed a little light on the inner life of 14th century nominalism.

1. LANGUAGE

We think, we speak and we write. For Ockham and Burdian each of these activities is carried out in a language. Both of them postulate a language of thought with a structure common to all men as well as the diversity of natural languages with which we are familiar. Both suppose that written language constitutes a distinct level bearing much the relation to spoken language that spoken language bears to mental. For each of them this relation is not holistic but at the most basic level, piecemeal; particular written words are related to particular spoken words and particular spoken words to particular concepts. But they conceive this relation slightly differently. Ockham calls it subordination and explains that a spoken term is subordinate to a concept if a change in the signification of the concept eo ipso produced a change in the signification of the spoken term. Buridan however calls the relation between term and concept itself signification.

Signification is the most basic term in medieval semantic theory and its
sense varies from author to author. As Ockham understands it a typical term used normally signifies things — those things of which (or proper names of which) it could be truly predicated either in an ordinary assertoric (de inesse) sentence (this yields the signification of a term narrowly conceived) or in a sentence de possibili (this gives the signification in a wide sense). Thus for Ockham ‘man’ narrowly signifies all men (all those things of which it would be correct to say ‘This is a man’) and widely signifies all possible men (all those of which it would be correct to say ‘It is possible for this to be a man’). Of course not all terms signify ordinary things — ‘noun’ signifies certain words and ‘concept’ all concepts.

Ockham’s use of ‘signify’ seems to be a reform of the usage of his contemporaries and not one which found universal acceptance. Buridan in particular seems to use the term more loosely. On his view a term of written language immediately signifies the corresponding spoken term which in turn immediately signifies the concept. Both the written and the spoken term also have an ultimate signification which is determined as Ockham suggests and which is what is ‘conceived by’ the concept. Thus Buridan’s ‘immediate signification’ is Ockham’s ‘subordination’ and his ultimate signification is what Ockham calls ‘signification tout court.’

Not all terms have (ultimate) signification. Both Buridan and Ockham accept the traditional distinction between categorematic terms (like ‘man’, ‘word’) which have signification and syncategorematic terms (like ‘and’, ‘not’, ‘all’ and ‘is’) which do not. Syncategorematic terms are sometimes described as modifying the signification of categorematic terms. But this is, as well shall see, something of an over simplification. There are two kinds of categorematic terms. Ockham calls them absolute and connotative, Buridan sometimes uses ‘absolute’ as Ockham does but calls appellative those terms which Ockham calls connotative. On both views absolute spoken terms correspond to simple concepts (concepts without internal logical structure) while for Ockham but not for Buridan appellative/connotative terms invariably correspond to complex concepts or complexes of concepts.

Terms are so-called etymologically because they are the ends of sentences. Sentences are distinguished from terms by being either true or false and an adequate theory of language has to give an account of this. Central to the account Buridan and Ockham share is the notion of supposition.

Supposition, on the view Buridan and Ockham share, is properly speaking a property of the subject or predicate of a sentence and is in Buridan’s words “the taking of a term in a sentence for some thing or some things, of which