

WHAT DOES OCKHAM MEAN BY 'SUPPOSITION'?

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Supposition theory is one of the most unique and important aspects of thirteenth and fourteenth century logic. The role played by the notion of supposition in medieval logic can be compared with the role of the notions of satisfaction and reference in modern logic. As the notion of satisfaction is introduced into modern discussions of truth, so supposition and truth are related in William Ockham's discussion, and their relation was debated by late fourteenth and early fifteenth century logicians.¹ And what little there is of a medieval attempt at developing a theory of quantification is imbedded in medieval discussions of the divisions of personal supposition.²

Despite the demonstrated importance of the notion of supposition, medieval logicians did not bother to make it very clear just what it was for a term to supposit for something in a proposition. William Ockham's general account of this at the outset of his discussion of supposition in the *Summa Logicae* I, c. 63, is among the fullest and, on the face of it, looks fairly explicit. Remarking that supposition is a property of terms, but unlike signification, a property that terms have only insofar as they occur in propositions, Ockham explains,

Moreover, 'supposition' means, as it were, being posited in place of something else. Thus, when a term stands for something else in a proposition, in such a way that we use that term in place of something of which, or of a pronoun indicating which the term (or the nominative case of that term, if it is in an oblique case) is verified, the term supposits for that thing . . .³

The meaning of this passage is less obvious than it looks, however. In what follows,⁴ I shall focus on this passage from Ockham and consider two interpretations of it, together with some attendant difficulties. Since the above passage incorporates the explanations of a number of other thirteenth and fourteenth century logicians, some of the problems that I uncover for Ockham will plague these logicians as well.

1 It is natural to take the above remarks of Ockham as providing a nominal definition of 'supposition': most generally, to supposit is to be