Logic and Ontological Commitment:
Vincent Ferrer's Theory of Natural Supposition

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This paper draws attention to one way in which Vincent Ferrer (1350–1419) developed a theory of supposition which was supposed to be amenable to certain metaphysical commitments of his fellow Dominican, Thomas Aquinas. Specifically, Ferrer held that from a proposition in which the subject term supposits naturally – for example, "Man is risible" – one can descend copulatively to everything falling under the subject term – every human – even when there is not universal quantification – for example, "Some man is risible". And when there is nothing falling under the naturally suppositing subject term – supposing, for example, that there have been no humans, are no humans, and never will be any humans – a proposition like "Man is risible" is not only truth evaluable but true. While the bulk of this paper is concerned with explaining Ferrer's theory of natural supposition, I close the paper by exploring some of the metaphysical issues that arise on Ferrer's view that propositions with naturally suppositing subject terms can be true when there are no instances. I argue that Ferrer's position actually commits him to a kind of realism about natures that is probably not Thomistic – despite Ferrer's expressed loyalty to the Angelic Doctor.

I will proceed in the following way. After describing the way in which certain comments of Thomas Aquinas were influential on Ferrer with respect to his division of the kinds of supposition, I will give an account of Ferrer's theory of natural supposition, focusing on the four 'rules' he lays down and drawing out some of the odd inferences one can make by following these rules. I will then discuss some of the metaphysical problems arising from Ferrer's theory.

But first, a word about Ferrer's definition of supposition: according to Ferrer, a subject alone supposits. He says that supposition is "the property of a subject in comparison to a predicate in a proposition".[1] It is a property that always pertains to a term when it is the subject of a proposition. Ferrer seems to use "property" in a quasi-technical, Aristotelian sense, namely, as "something which does not show the essence of a thing but belongs to it alone and is predicated convertibly of it" (Aristotle (1831), I, V 102a18,9). Therefore, for Ferrer, a predicate never supposits. Instead, the predicate determines what sort of supposition a subject has: natural, simple, personal, material, or improper.

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[1] Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. III, p. 93, *suppositio est proprietas subiecti ad predicatum in propositione comparati.*

In *De ente et essentia* c. IV, 1, Aquinas says that a nature or essence can be considered in two ways. The first is the "absolute consideration" and concerns the *ratio propria* of the essence. Only the properties that fall under the definition of the essence are included in the *ratio propria*.[2] In the case of man, the properties of being rational and being animal would be included the absolute consideration of the essence, but being white or snub-nosed would not. Hence, the essence so considered is neither one nor many, since, if it were one, the essence could not be common to Socrates and Plato; and, if it were many, the essence could not exist in Socrates.[3]

The second way in which an essence can be considered is according to the existence that it has either in singulars or in the soul. Thus, when it is said, "A man is white", because Socrates is white, being white is predicated of the essence, man, inasmuch as it exists in Socrates, a singular.[4] When it is said, "Man is a species", being a species is predicated of the essence, man, inasmuch as it exists in the soul.[5] Aquinas insists that the essence exists only when it is in a concrete particular or in the soul; *the absolute nature as such does not exist*.[6]

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[2]Thomas Aquinas (1957), p. 14, *homini, in eo quod est homo, convenit rationale et animal et alia quae in eius definitionem cadunt.* "To man, inasmuch as it is man, pertains rational and animal and others which fall under its definition."

[3]Thomas Aquinas (1957), p. 14, *Si enim pluralitas esset de ratione eius, nunquam posset esse una, cum tamen una sit secundum quod est in Socrate. Similiter, si unitas esset de intellectu et ratione eius, tunc esset una et eadem natura Socratis et Platonis nec posset in pluribus plurificari.* "For if plurality were of its ratio, it never could be one, yet in this case one is according to what it is in Socrates. Similarly, if unity were of the understanding and the ratio of it, then to Socrates and Plato would be one and the same nature [which] would be unable in many to be made plural."

[4]Thomas Aquinas (1957), p. 14, *Alio modo consideratur, secundum quod habet esse in hoc vel in illo: et sic de ipsa preadicatur aliquid per accidens, ratione eius in quo est, sicut dicitur quod homo est albus, quia Socrates est albus, quamvis homini non conveniat in eo quod est homo.* "In the other mode [the nature] is considered, according to the existence which it has in this or in that: and in this way something is predicated of it accidentally, by reason of that in which [the nature] is, just as it is said that man is white, because Socrates is white, although to man this does not pertain inasmuch as it is man."

[5]Thomas Aquinas (1957), c. IV, 2, p. 14, *Relinquitur ergo quod ratio speciei accidat naturae humanae secundum illud esse quod habet in intellectu. Ipsa enim natura habet esse in intellectu abstractum ab omnibus individuantibus, et ideo habet rationem uniformem ad omnia individua, quae sunt extra animam [...] et ex hoc quod talem relationem habet ad omnia individua, intellectus adinvenit rationem speciei et attribuit sibi.* "It remains, therefore, that the *ratio* of species pertains to human nature according to that existence which it has in the understanding. For this nature has existence in the understanding, abstracted from all individuals, and thus it has a uniform *ratio* to all individuals which are outside the soul [...] and by such a relation which it has to all individuals, the understanding devises the *ratio* of species and attributes it to it."

[6]Thomas Aquinas (1957), c. IV, 1, p. 14, *Haec autem natura habet duplex esse: unum in singularibus, aliud in anima; et secundum utrumque consequuntur accidentia dictam naturam. Et sic in singularibus habet multiplex esse secundum diversitatem singularium; et tamen ipsi naturae, secundum propriam considerationem, scilicet absolutam, nullum istorum esse debet.* "But this nature has a twofold existence: one in singulars, the other in the soul; and in virtue of both of these accidents

Ferrer's classification of supposition explicitly follows Thomas Aquinas's classification of the ways in which a nature or essence "can be considered".[7] Aquinas's two ways of considering an essence, *absolutely or according to the existence it has in individuals or the soul*, become for Ferrer a division of two kinds of supposition, natural and accidental. Accidental supposition itself divides into two. The nature considered as it exists in individuals is called *personal* supposition, and the nature considered as it exists in the soul is called *simple* supposition.[8]

In cases of natural supposition, the term that is predicated of the subject signifies some property that pertains to the essence absolutely considered, that is, according to the *ratio propria* of the essence, such as *Homo est animal*.[9] In this way, the essence is considered apart from the conditions both of singularity, which pertains to an essence as it exists in concrete particulars, and universality, which pertains to an essence as it exists as an intention of the soul.

Ferrer's definition of natural supposition is the following: it is "a property of a common term that is taken with respect to a predicate which pertains to it essentially".[10] The definition is canonically expressed in the first rule of natural supposition:

(1) Whenever in some proposition the predicate is said of the subject in some
    sort of *per se* predication, the subject always supposits naturally.[11]

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follow said nature. And thus in singulars [the nature] has multiple existence according to the diversity of singulars; but, nevertheless, none of these [singulars] belong to the nature itself, according to its proper – that is, the absolute – consideration."

[7] Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. III, p. 100, *Secundum autem veritatem Sancti Doctoris in textu suo De Ente et Essentia, natura seu essentia importata per terminum communem potest dupliciter accipi seu etiam considerari.* "But according to the truth of the Holy Doctor in his text *On Being and Essence*, a nature or essence conveyed by a common term can in two ways be received or considered."

[8] Thomas Aquinas (1957), c. IV, 1; Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. III.

Thomas Aquinas	Vincent Ferrer
nature absolutely considered	natural supposition
nature considered as it exists in individuals	accidental supposition, personal
nature considered as it exists in the soul	accidental supposition, simple

[9] Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. III, p. 100, *suppositio naturalis dicatur quando terminus communis accipitur respectu predicati sibi essentialiter convenientis, quemadmodum est in ista propositione, homo est animal. Tunc enim res per terminum huiusmodi importata sumitur absolute per suam essentiam seu naturam [...].* "It should be said that natural supposition occurs when a common term is taken with respect to a predicate which pertains to it essentially, as in this proposition, 'Man is an animal'. For then the thing conveyed by such a term is taken absolutely through its essence or nature."

[10] Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 104, *Suppositio naturalis est proprietas termini communis accepti respectu predicati sibi essentialiter convenientis.*

[11] Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 105sq., *Quandocumque in aliqua propositione predicatum dicitur de subiecto in aliquo modo dicendi per se, semper talis propositionis subiectum supponit naturaliter et e converso.*

As Ferrer indicates, (1) is simply a restatement of the definition of natural supposition. He says, "The rationale [*ratio*] of this rule is that natural supposition [occurs] when the predicate essentially pertains to its subject".[12]

Ferrer lists three species of propositions whose subjects have natural supposition. The first two occur, respectively, when the predicate pertains to the essence of the subject, or pertains to a *proprium* of the essence of the subject. So, for example, *homo* not only has natural supposition in *Homo est animal* and *Homo est rationalis*; *homo* also has natural supposition in *Homo est risibilis*, since risibility is a property that pertains exclusively to man. The third species is only identified by examples, "The dead have died", "The murdered have perished", and "Justice pleases God".

Ferrer distinguishes two kinds of natural supposition: *definite* and *indefinite*. Definite supposition occurs when a term suppositing naturally is "determined by some sign", as "man" is determined in "Every (*omnis*) man is an animal" or "Some (*quidam*) man is risible". Definite natural supposition is divided into *universal* and *particular* definite natural supposition. Indefinite natural supposition, on the other hand, occurs when a term suppositing naturally is not determined by some sign, as "man" occurs in "Man is an animal" or "Man is risible".[13] Natural supposition is *indefinite* when the subject is not preceded by a quantifier, and it is *definite* if it is preceded by a quantifier; *universal definite* if the quantification is universal, and *particular definite* if the quantification is existential.

Ferrer contrasts definite and indefinite supposition with determinate and confused supposition, and denies that a term suppositing naturally can ever have determinate or confused supposition. Ferrer says of determinate supposition, "For the truth of a proposition in which a subject has determinate supposition, it is required that this proposition is verified by some one supposit (*pro aliquo uno suppositio*), as, 'This man runs,' 'Some man sleeps'".[14] And when a term has distributive and confused supposition[15], "it is required that this proposition be verified by every supposit (*pro quolibet supposita*)".[16]

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[12]Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 106, *Ratio autem regule est, nam suppositio naturalis est quando predicatum essentialiter convenit ipsi subiecto.*

[13]Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 104, *Suppositio vero naturalis dividitur, quia quedam est definita, alia est indefinita. Suppositio definita dicitur quando terminus supponens naturaliter est aliquo signo determinatus, ut hic, omnis homo est animal, quidam homo est risibilis. Suppositio indefinita dicitur quando terminus supponens naturaliter sumitur sine signo, ut hic, homo est animal, homo est risibilis. [. . .] Suppositio autem definita dividitur, quia quedam est universalis, quedam particularis.*

[14]Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 104, *Dicitur etiam suppositio determinata, quia ad veritatem propositionis in qua subiectum habet talem suppositionem, determinate requiritur quod ipsa propositio verificetur pro aliquo uno suppositio, ut, hic homo currit, quidam homo dormit.*

[15]In the text (c. IV, p. 104), Ferrer calls the mode of supposition he has in mind *confusa*, not *distributiva et confusa*. But context clearly indicates that Ferrer has the *distributiva et confusa* mode in mind, and not *confusa tantum* (which he later rejects as a mode of supposition in c. V, p. 141).

[16]Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 104sq., *Dicitur autem suppositio confusa, quia ad veritatem propositionis in qua subiectum habet huiusmodi suppositionem requiritur quod ipsa propositio verificetur pro quolibet supposito, ut hic, omnis homo est albus, uterque horum currit.*

The modes of personal supposition are distinguished, according to Ferrer, "by the supposits of the suppositing terms".[17] This confusing locution is supposed to describe a contrast with the way in which the modes of natural supposition are distinguished, which is according to "the diverse modes of attributing a predicate to a subject".[18] Modes of natural supposition cannot be diversified "by the supposits of the suppositing terms", because, "Every proposition in which a subject naturally supposits is verified by *everything* falling under the subject".[19] In other words, if a naturally suppositing subject has instances, then any proposition in which it occurs is true of everything that falls under the subject. Thus there is no way to distinguish modes of natural supposition on account of what falls under the subject term. Moreover, the inferences one can make from propositions with naturally suppositing terms are different from the inferences one can make from personally suppositing terms. These thoughts are expressed in the second rule and its corollary, as follows:

(2) Every proposition the subject of which has natural supposition is universally true, for all times and for all supposits [. . .] because in all such propositions the predicate is of the essence of the subject or at least it follows from its essence, as was said (1), and thus the predicate can indifferently be attributed to everything participating in or pertaining to the essence of the subject[20];

and

(2C) Each subject suppositing naturally can be descended under copulatively to all of its supposits with respect to the predicate, whether the subject supposits indefinitely, or particularly, or universally.[21]

The predicate in any proposition whose subject supposits naturally pertains to anything falling under the subject term, regardless of quantification. Thus the division of modes of natural supposition is merely syntactical in a way that the

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[17]Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 105, *Unde he differentie seu modi suppositionis, scilicet, confusa et determinata, recte competunt suppositioni personali, que diversificatur per supposita termini supponentis [. . .].*

[18]Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 105, *suppositio naturalis [. . .] diversificatur secundum diversos modos attributionis ipsius predicati ad subiectum [. . .].*

[19]Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 105, *[. . .] omnis propositio in qua subiectum naturaliter supponit verificatur pro omnibus inferioribus subiecti.*

[20]Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 107, *Omnis propositio cuius subiectum habet suppositionem naturalem seu demonstrativam est universaliter vera, scilicet, pro omni tempore et pro omnibus suppositis. Ratio regule est quoniam in omni huiusmodi propositione predicatum est de essentia subiecti vel saltem consequitur essentiam eius, ut est dictum, et ideo predicatum potest indifferenter attribui omnibus participantibus et convenientibus in essentia subiecti.*

[21]Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 107, *Sub omni subiecto supponente naturaliter potest descendi copulative ad omnia eius supposita respectu predicati, sive tale subiectum supponat indefinite, sive particulariter, sive universaliter.*

division of the modes of personal supposition are not: the absence or presence of a quantifier determines the mode of natural supposition, but these modes have no bearing on the semantics of propositions whose subjects have natural supposition.

This is a strange view, since it makes quantification irrelevant in all cases of natural supposition. With respect to Ferrer's own example, "A certain man is an animal", one might think that the grammatical form of the sentence (specifically the presence of the quantifier, *quidam*) suggests that the subject has personal determinate supposition. But Ferrer's view is that the subject of any proposition in which the predicate pertains to the essence of the subject, has natural supposition, regardless of the grammatical form of the proposition. Now, if it is true that a subject has natural supposition whenever the predicate pertains to the essence of the subject, then it is impossible ever to say of *this* man (and only this man), that he is an animal.

By including particular definite essential predication as a mode of natural supposition, Ferrer embraces the counterintuitive consequence that it is semantically impossible to use a general term (e.g., "man") to supposit for a limited number of things (e.g., a certain man, or fifty men) when what is predicated of that term is an essential predicate. Ferrer preserves the specialness of essential predication, at the expense of analyzing away the quantifier (*quidam* or "fifty"). Reflecting on this view should make us wary of translating Ferrer's conventions into modern symbolic logic with quantifiers. It is perfectly commonplace for modern logicians to symbolize "A certain man is an animal" as an existentially quantified formula, being egalitarians about predicates with respect to logical symbolization. But Ferrer's theory resists this translation, because the inferences that can be drawn from a proposition whose subject has particular definite natural supposition would not be valid if that proposition were symbolized as an existentially quantified formula. By (2C) it follows from "A certain man is risible", that "This man is risible, and that man is risible, etc.". Similarly, if there are one hundred men, it follows from "Fifty men are animals" that all one hundred men are animals. Surely, this is a bizarre result.

One objection to (2C) has to do with empty terms. According to (2C), it should follow from "Rain is water that falls in drops", that "Therefore, this rain is water that falls in drops, and that rain is water that falls in drops, etc., for all rain". But the objector observes that the antecedent is true even if there is no rain, and concludes that [2C] is not a valid rule.[22] Ferrer responds that (2C) should be understood conditionally, that is, if the subject has actual supposits, then it is valid to descend copulatively to each of those actual supposits.[23] A valid application of (2C), then, requires the existence of at least one supposit.

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[22] Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 110.

[23] Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 122, *Ad sextam autem instantiam dicitur quod illa regula correlativa, que dicit quod sub omni subiecto supponente naturaliter potest descendi copulative ad omnia eius supposita respectu predicati, intelligitur si tale subiectum habeat supposita actu, et non aliter*. "To

The third rule of natural supposition codifies this concession to the objector to (2C). It holds that no proposition whose subject supposits naturally has existential import. In Ferrer's formulation, it says,

(3) From a proposition of three adjacent [words] the subject of which supposits naturally, a proposition of two adjacent [words] never validly follows. Hence it does not follow: man is risible; therefore, man is.[24]

By "three adjacent words" Ferrer means a subject, copula, and predicate. When the subject has natural supposition, (3) says that it cannot be inferred that the subject term has any instances. This much is consistent with modern logical conventions, according to which it is invalid to infer from $\forall x(Fx \supset Gx)$ that $\exists x Fx$. But, according to Ferrer, while this restriction holds for natural supposition, it does not hold for personal supposition. This view is stated in Ferrer's response to an objection to (3), namely, that when an accident is predicated of the subject, one *can* move from three words to two, as in, "A man is hot; therefore, a man is". Therefore, the objection goes, one should also be able to do it in cases when the subject supposits naturally.[25] Ferrer grants the objector's assumption. When a subject has personal supposition, a proposition *does* have existential import. A proposition in which there is accidental predication, such as, 'A man is hot,' can only be true if there actually is a man who is hot, since an accident "presupposes" a substance in which it can inhere.[26] But a proposition with natural supposition, since it is a proposition about an essence absolutely considered (cf. note 9), does not presuppose a substance.

The objector's assumption holds even if the subject has distributive confused personal supposition. From "Every man is hot" it is possible to infer "Every man is", for the same reason that it is possible to infer "A man is" from "A man is hot". For an accidental predication to be true, there must be actual supposits of which the predicate is true.

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the sixth objection it should be said that the correlative rule (2C), which says that under all subjects suppositing naturally one may descend copulatively to all its supposits with respect to its predicate, should be understood if such a subject has actual supposits, and not otherwise."

[24] Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 125. *Tertia regula principalis est hec: a propositione de tertio adiacente cuius subiectum supponit naturaliter ad propositionem se secundo adiacente nunquam valet consequentia. Unde non sequitur: homo est risibilis; ergo, homo est [. . .].*

[25] Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 126.

[26] Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 128, *Et propter primam est sciendum quod, licet substantia multo perfectior sit quolibet accidente, attamen accidens aliquando presupponit perfectiorem entitatem quam substantia. Presupponit enim ipsam substantiam, et ultra hoc presupponit ipsam in esse completo, scilicet, in rerum natura, ut patet quando dicitur, homo est calidus.* "And concerning the first it should be known that, although substance is more perfect than any accident, nevertheless an accident sometimes presupposes a more perfect being than substance. For it presupposes a substance itself, and in addition to this it presupposes substance in complete existence, namely, in the nature of things, as is clear when it is said, 'Man is hot'."

But if it is invalid to infer from a true proposition in which the subject supposits naturally to the existence of a thing described by the subject, then such a proposition is true even when the subject term is empty. This is Ferrer's fourth rule of natural supposition, and it is stated as follows:

(4) No proposition the subject of which supposits naturally requires for its truth the existence of a term.[27]

In the objections to (2C), one of Ferrer's responses was to make the validity of (2C) conditional on the existence of things falling under the naturally suppositing term. Ferrer admitted to the objector that "Rain is water that falls in drops", would be true even if there were no rain. And (3) says that it is invalid to infer from a true proposition whose subject supposits naturally to the existence of a supposit falling under the subject. (4), then, is the explicit formulation of this view. Ferrer's truth conditions for natural supposition comport with the truth conditions of a material conditional: $\forall x(Fx \supset GX)$ can be true even if $\sim \exists xFx$. But we have seen that the truth conditions for distributive confused personal supposition do not comport with the truth conditions of a material conditional, since "Every man is hot" is true only if there is at least one man.[28]

But what exactly is the difference between propositions with accidental and with natural supposition, such that the latter do not and the former do have existential import? A first approach at answers to this question is to note that Ferrer considers this a metaphysical issue, not a semantic one. For Ferrer, propositions with essential predication cannot fail to be true, whereas propositions with accidental predications can fail to be true. If essential predications depended for their truth on actual instances, then the truth of such predications would seem to be grounded in contingent circumstances, and therefore to lack the necessity that sets essential predications apart from accidental ones.

One explanation of this necessity might be that propositions with essential predication are tautologies, or true merely in virtue of meaning. Recall the third species of natural supposition, which was identified by examples such "The dead have died", and "The murdered have perished". But this view, however tempting it is with respect to some examples, is obviously not what Ferrer has in mind.

Alternatively, one might adopt the position of Peter of Spain and John Buridan, who understood naturally suppositing terms to stand for every instance of the subject, past, present, and future, what de Rijk calls an "omnitemporal" view of natural supposition.[29] Accordingly, a term has natural supposition in a proposition

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[27]Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 132, *Quarta regula principalis est ista: nulla propositio cuius subiectum supponit naturaliter ad sui veritatem requirit existentiam terminorum.*

[28]This contrast between personal and natural supposition in Ferrer's logic has been noted before. See Thomas (1952), pp. 92–94, and Kneale and Kneale (1962), pp. 264sq.

[29]Peter of Spain (1972), p. 81, *Suppositio naturalis est acceptio termini communis pro omnibus a quibus aptus natus est participari, ut 'homo' per se sumptus de natura sua supponit pro omnibus hominibus qui fuerunt et qui sunt et qui erunt.* "Natural supposition is acceptance of a common term

when the predicate pertains to every past, present, and future instance of the subject. So even if the subject term is presently empty, a proposition in which it occurs may nevertheless be true if it did or will have at least one instance. In support of this interpretation of Ferrer, recall that his second rule for natural supposition holds that a proposition whose subject has natural supposition is "universally true, for all times and for all supposits".

Nevertheless, we can surely conclude that Ferrer does not have an omnitemporal view of natural supposition. Ferrer would object to Buridan's omnitemporalism on the grounds that it is insufficient to ground the necessary truth of propositions whose subjects have natural supposition. For Buridan as well as for Ferrer, natural supposition is the supposition of choice for apodeictic or demonstrative science. But Knuuttila and Moody have noted that Buridan recognizes that statements about the natures of some things, such as humans, have only a weak or hypothetical necessity, conditional on, say, God keeping the universe in being.[30] A proposition like "Man is rational" would be false if everything were annihilated. If such a proposition is true at all, then it must have instances at some time or other, even if not the present. But Ferrer's view entails a stronger necessity than this. For Ferrer, by contrast, a proposition with a naturally suppositing subject need never have any instances for it to be true. It would be tempting, then, to hold that Ferrer thinks that some absolute essence is the truth-maker of a proposition whose subject has natural supposition, and therefore that a proposition whose subject has natural supposition can be true, even if there are not and have not been any instances of the subject. De Rijk interpreted Ferrer this way, calling him a "realist".[31]

But things are not quite so straightforward. Ferrer says that a nature considered as such is not *in actu*, but only *in potentia*.[32] In his rationale for his third rule of natural supposition, which holds that it is illicit to move from three adjacent terms to two, Ferrer writes that in a proposition whose subject has natural supposition, the predicate always pertains to the essence of the subject. But in a proposition of two adjacent terms, e.g., *Homo est*, the predicate pertains to *esse sive existere*.

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for everything it is apt to take part in: 'man' taken as such, naturally stands for all men who were, are, and will be", translated by F. P. Dinneen, in: Dinneen (1990), p. 70. John Buridan (1998), p. 45, *Naturalis suppositio vocatur secundum quam terminus indifferenter supponit pro omnibus pro quibus potest supponere tam praesentibus quam praeteritis vel futuris. Et hac suppositione utuntur in scientiis demonstrativis.* "Supposition is called 'natural' when a term indifferently supposits for everything for which it can supposit, past and future as well as present; this is the sort of supposition we use in demonstrative science", translated by P. King in: King (1985), p. 125. De Rijk (1973) has noted that, whereas Peter of Spain allows for the supposition of terms outside of a proposition, Buridan holds that a term can only supposit when it is in a proposition, and that this difference is common among thirteenth and fourteenth century logicians who made use of natural supposition.

[30] Knuuttila (1993), pp. 156sq.; Moody (1975), p. 156.

[31] de Rijk (1973), pp. 47–52.

[32] Vincent Ferrer (1977), Proemium, p. 87, *Unde ex hoc patet quod circumscripto omni actu intellectus non est aliqua actualis unitas preter individui unitatem. Nec etiam est dare universale actu, sed solum potentia, ut est dictum.*

To move from three adjacent terms to two, then, involves a move from essence to existence, or from potency to act.[33] A nature is educed from potency to act only when *individuals* of that nature exist.

Finally, and perhaps not consistently, Ferrer briefly sketches his view of universals in the Proemium to *De suppositionibus*, describing his view as a *via media* between a realist like Burley and a nominalist like Ockham.[34] A universal, he says, is a thing having universality, just as a white thing (*album*) has whiteness (*albedinem*). Inasmuch as it is a thing having universality, the universal is *ens reale*, because it is a concrete particular; but universality is *intentio mera*, a mere thought. Likewise, then, for all natures. A man is a thing having humanity; a man is *ens reale*; but humanity is *intentio mera*.[35]

One should not, then, be very comfortable with calling Ferrer a realist. He never says that the absolute nature exists (following Aquinas). He calls it a "mere intention". On the other hand, he thinks that propositions with natural supposition can be both true and have empty terms, and offers nothing like Buridan's omnitemporal view as an account for this position. Settling on Ferrer's precise view of universals is beyond the scope of this paper; my guess is that a precise view cannot be gleaned. One might think that Ferrer's semantics simply committed him to abstract entities, despite his disavowal of realism. It is usually more interesting to take a thinker at his own words, however. If we do this, we come up with at least two interesting lines of enquiry, neither of which are explored in this paper. First, we might look into whether Ferrer was committed to something like a theory of truth makers according to which a truth maker need not exist in order to make sentences true. For example, the absolute essence doesn't exist but is the truth maker for sentences with essential predication. Or, second, we might wonder whether, for Ferrer, a sentence can be true and there be nothing that makes it true.

Ivo Thomas, John Trentman, Lambertus Marie de Rijk, and the Kneales have all noted Ferrer's recognition that universal affirmative propositions can have empty subject terms and nevertheless be true. Alain de Libera has shown that the issue of empty subject terms was discussed, and positions staked, as early as the thirteenth century, refuting Thomas's claim that Ferrer's allowance for the truth of propositions with empty subject terms was "logical news".[36] The contribution of this paper has been to make explicit Ferrer's utilization of Thomistic metaphysics in the development of his semantic theory. Furthermore, concerning the theory

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[33]Vincent Ferrer (1977), c. IV, p. 125, *Unde generaliter est verum quod in propositione de tertio adiacente cuius subiectum supponit naturaliter semper predicatum pertinet ad subiecti essentiam; in propositione vero quacumque de secundo adiacente predicatum totaliter pertinet ad esse sive existere [...]*.

[34]Vincent Ferrer (1977), Proemium, p. 87.

[35]Vincent Ferrer (1977), Proemium, p. 87, *Universale est enim res habens universalitatem, et quantum ad id quod dicitur res est ens reale, quantum vero ad d quod dicitur universalitatem est intentio mera*.

[36]de Libera (1991); Thomas (1952), p. 94.

itself, the paper has shown (a) that Ferrer thinks that the only universal affirmative propositions that can be both true and have empty subject terms are propositions with naturally suppositing subject terms; (b) that *any* proposition with a naturally suppositing subject term, including particular affirmative propositions, can be both true and have an empty subject term; and finally (c) that, since any proposition whose subject term has natural supposition is true by virtue of some absolute essence, therefore, the quantification of any such proposition is semantically irrelevant.

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