

William of Ockham and Nominalism

The great revival of philosophical and theological study which the thirteenth century witnessed was conditioned by the influence of Aristotle. The theory of the universe propounded by the Stagirite had to be reconciled with the traditional Platonic-Augustinian realism. This Thomas Aquinas undertook to do, following Aristotle as closely as possible. Duns Scotus, on the other hand, attempted to maintain the ancient realism, while supporting it by modern or Aristotelian methods. Interests and tendencies, however, came up in his work which drove his disciples away from his position. The growth of empirical research and psychological analysis together with the new activity of the reason in the epistemological field on the one side, and the recognition of the fact that the specific and the particular was the end of nature on the other, led to results widely divergent from those of Scotus. Here was Ockham's work ready to his hand. He was the leader of the nominalists, the founder of the "modern" school. Science has to do, he maintains, only with propositions, not with things as such, since the object of science is not what is but what is known. Things, too, are always singular, while science has to do with general concepts, which as such exist only in the human mind. Scotus had deduced the objective existence of universals from the concepts originated under the operation of the objects.

Ockham, on the other hand, asserts that "no universal is a substance existing outside of the mind," and proves it by a variety of keen logical reasons. He rejects even the milder forms of philosophic universalism, such as the theory that the universal is something in particulars which is distinguished from them not *realiter* but only *formaliter*. He considers the universal without qualification as an "intention" of the mind, a symbol representing conventionally several objects. In respect of the theory of cognition, where Duns Scotus had placed between the perceiving subject and the object perceived a "sensible species" and an "intelligible species," Ockham considers these as superfluous machinery. Objects call forth sense-impressions in us, which are transmuted by the active intellect into mental images. These images are thus a product of the intellect, not *species* which flow from the object into the *intellectus possibilis*. The reality of these images is thus, in the modern use of the terms, not objective but subjective. This is true not merely of the "terms of first intention" formed directly from sense-impression, but also of the "terms of second intention," i.e., the abstract terms which take note of common attributes, or universals. These latter correspond to a tendency of the human mind, which can not perceive individuals without at the same time attempting to form a general concept. A white object simultaneously suggests abstract whiteness; an extended, related, enduring object forces the conception of extension, relation, duration. The result of this line of reasoning is the absolute subjectivity of all concepts and universals and the limitation of knowledge to the mind and its concepts—although these are real entities because of their subjective existence in the mind, reproducing the actual according to the constitution of the mind.

Thus Ockham is really the pioneer of modern epistemology. The mysterious universals with their species in the sense of objective realities are abolished. Objects

work upon the senses of men, and out of these operations the active intellect frames its concepts, including the so-called universals, which, while they are in themselves subjective, yet correspond to objective realities. By the statement that science has nothing to do directly with things, but only with concepts of them, the theory of knowledge assumes vital import for the progress of science, and a new method of scientific cognition is made available. Of course this increases the difficulty of the task of theology.

However, Ockham was essentially of a skeptical and critical temperament, of great critical acumen, but (especially in the religious province) he was by no means equally great in constructive ability. He did not have the broad general conception of religion which guided his master Scotus through his attempts to criticize the old evidences and bring up new ones. Where Ockham shows its power at all, it is usually simply borrowed from Scotus.

Ockham's Razor

"*Pluralitas non est ponenda sine neccesitate*" or "plurality should not be posited without necessity." The words are those of the medieval English philosopher and Franciscan monk William of Ockham (ca. 1285-1349). Like many Franciscans, William was a minimalist in this life, idealizing a life of poverty, and like St. Francis himself, battling with the Pope over the issue. What is known as Ockham's razor was a common principle in medieval philosophy and was not originated by William, but because of his frequent usage of the principle, his name has become indelibly attached to it. It is unlikely that William would appreciate what some of us have done in his name. For example, atheists often apply Ockham's razor in arguing against the existence of God on the grounds that God is an unnecessary hypothesis. We can explain everything without assuming the extra metaphysical baggage of a Divine Being.

William's use of the *principle of unnecessary plurality* occurs in debates over the medieval equivalent of psi. For example, in Book II of his *Commentary on the Sentences* of Peter Abelard, he is deep in thought about the question of "Whether a Higher Angel Knows Through Fewer Species than a Lower." Using the principle that "plurality should not be posited without necessity" he argues that the answer to the question is in the affirmative. He also cites Aristotle's notion that "the more perfect a nature is the fewer means it requires for its operation." This principle has been used by atheists to reject the God-the-Creator hypothesis in favor of natural evolution: if a Perfect God had created the Universe, both the Universe and its components would be much simpler. William would not have approved.

He did argue, however, that natural theology is impossible. Natural theology uses reason alone to understand God, as contrasted with revealed theology which is founded upon scriptural revelations. According to Ockham, the idea of God is not established by evident experience or evident reasoning. All we know about God we know from revelation. The foundation of all theology, therefore, is faith. It should be noted that while others might apply the razor to eliminate the entire spiritual world, Ockham did not apply the principle of parsimony to the articles of faith. Had he done so, he might have become a Socinian like John Toland (*Christianity not Mysterious*, 1696) and pared down the Trinity to a Unity and the dual nature of Christ to a single nature.

William was somewhat of a minimalist in philosophy, advocating nominalism against the more popular view of realism. That is, he argued that universals have no existence outside of the mind; universals are just names we use to refer to groups of individuals and the properties of individuals. Realists claim that not only are there individual objects and our concepts of those objects, there are also *universals*. Ockham thought that this was one too many pluralities. We don't need universals to explain anything. To nominalists and realists there exist Socrates the individual and our concept of Socrates. To the realist there also exist such realities as the *humanity* of Socrates, the *animality* of Socrates, etc. That is, every quality which may be attributed to Socrates has a corresponding "reality", a "universal" or *eidos*, as Plato called them. William might be said to have been skeptical of this realm of plurality called the realm of universals. It is not needed for logic, epistemology or metaphysics, so why assume this unnecessary plurality? Plato and the realists could be right. Perhaps there is a realm of *eidos*, of universal realities which are eternal, immutable models for individual objects. But we don't need to posit such a realm in order to explain individuals, our concepts or our knowledge. Plato's *Eidos* (Forms) are excess and unnecessary metaphysical and epistemological baggage.

Ockham's razor is also called the *principle of parsimony*. These days it is usually interpreted to mean something like "the simpler the explanation, the better" or "don't multiply hypotheses unnecessarily." In any case, Ockham's razor is a principle which is frequently used outside of ontology, e.g., by philosophers of science in an effort to establish criteria for choosing from among theories with equal explanatory power. When giving explanatory reasons for something, don't posit more than is necessary.

The original principle seems to have been invoked within the context of a belief in the notion that perfection is simplicity itself. This seems to be a metaphysical bias which we share with the medievals and the ancient Greeks. For, like them, most of our disputes are not about this principle but about what counts as necessary. To the materialist, dualists multiply pluralities unnecessarily. To the dualist, positing a mind as well as a body, is necessary. To atheists, positing God and a supernatural realm is to posit pluralities unnecessarily. To the theist, positing God is necessary. And so on. To others, these aliens are unnecessary pluralities. In the end, maybe Ockham's razor says little more than that for atheists God is unnecessary but for theists that is not true. If so, the principle is not very useful. On the other hand, if Ockham's razor means that when confronted with two explanations, an implausible one and a probable one, a rational person should select the probable one, then the principle seems unnecessary because so obvious. But if the principle is truly a minimalist principle, then it seems to imply the more reductionism the better. If so, then the principle of parsimony might better have been called Ockham's Chainsaw, for its main use seems to be for clear-cutting ontology.

Today, we think of the principle of parsimony as a heuristic device. We don't assume that the simpler theory is correct and the more complex one false. We know from experience that more often than not the theory that requires more complicated machinations is wrong. Until proved otherwise, the more complex theory competing with a simpler explanation should be put on the back burner, but not thrown onto the trash heap of history until proven false.