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Ockham, William of

(*b*. Ockham, near London, England, *ca*. 1285; *d*. Munich, Germany, 1349)

philosophy, theology, political theory.

Traditionally regarded as the initiator of the movement called nominalism, which dominated the universities of northern Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and played a significant role in shaping the directions of modern thought, William of Ockham ranks, with Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, as one of the three most influential Scholastic philosophers. Of his early life nothing is known; but it is supposed that he was born in the village of Ockham, Surrey, between 1280 and 1290 and that he became a Franciscan friar at an early age. He entered Oxford around 1310 as a student of theology and completed his formal requirements for the degree by lecturing on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* in the years 1318–1319, thereby becoming a *baccalaureus formatus*, or *inceptor*. During the next four years, while awaiting the teaching license which would have made him a *magister actu regens*, or doctor of theology, Ockham took part in quodlibetal disputations, revised his lectures on the first book of the Sentences for public circulation, and wrote some philosophical and theological treatises.

In this period his teachings, recognized for their power and originality, became a center of controversy and aroused opposition from partisans of Duns Scotus, whose doctrines Ockham criticized, as well as from most of the Dominican masters and some of the secular teachers. In 1323 one of the latter, John Lutterell, went to the papal court at Avignon to press charges of heretical teaching against Ockham, who was summoned to Avignon to answer these accusations early in 1324. Because his academic career was cut short by these events, so that he never received his license to teach, he came to be known as "the venerable inceptor"—that is, candidate who never received the doctoral degree he had earned.

At Avignon, Ockham stayed at the Franciscan convent while awaiting the outcome of the process against him; and during this period he probably wrote several of his theological and philosophical works. A commission of six theologians was appointed by Pope John XXII to examine the charges against his teaching; and although this commission drew up two lists of suspect doctrines, no action appears to have been taken on the charges. Meanwhile Ockham became actively involved in the dispute then raging between Michael of Cesena, general of the Franciscan order, and Pope John XXII over the question of evangelical poverty; and he gave his support to Cesena.

When, in May 1328, it became apparent that the pope was about to issue an official condemnation of their position, Cesena, Ockham, and two other Franciscan leaders fled by night from Avignon and sought the protection of the German emperor, Louis of Bavaria. Louis, whose claim to the imperial crown was contested by Pope John, welcomed the support of Ockham in his cause, as well as that of Marsilius of Padua. The pope, enraged by this defection, excommunicated Ockham and his companions, not for heretical doctrines but for disobedience to his authority. During the ensuing years Ockham remained at Munich and devoted his energies to writing a series of treatises and polemical works directed against John XXII, some of which contained carefully argued discussions of the powers and functions of the papal office, the church, and the imperial or civil authority. When Louis of Bavaria died in 1347, the contest with the Avignon papacy became a lost cause; and there is some evidence that Ockham sought to reconcile himself with the Franciscan faction that had remained loyal to the pope. It is thought that he died in 1349, a victim of the Black Plague, and that he was buried in the Franciscan church at Munich.

Ockham's writings, as preserved, fall into three main groups: philosophical, theological, and political. The philosophical works include commentaries and sets of questions on Aristotle's *Physics* and commentaries on Porphyry's *Predicables* and Aristotle's *Categoriae*, *De interpretatione*, and *De sophisticis elenchis*. Ockham wrote an independent work on logic, entitled *Summa logicae*, that gave full expression to his own philosophy of language and logical doctrines. An incomplete treatise, published under the title *Philosophia naturalis*, dealt with the concepts of motion, place, and time in an original and independent manner. Of his theological writings the most important is the set of questions on book I of the *Sentences*, edited by Ockham for publication and therefore known as his *ordinatio*, along with the questions on the other three books, which are in the form of *reportata* (stenographic versions of the lectures as actually delivered). The *Quodlibeta septem*, containing 172 questions on theological and philosophical topics divided among seven quodlibetal disputations, are of great value as an expression of Ockham's distinctive philosophical positions.

Of logical as well as theological interest are the treatise *De praedestinatione et de praescientia dei et de futuris contingentibus* and the work known as *De sacramento altaris*, which seems to consist of two distinct treatises and which is devoted chiefly to

arguing that the doctrine of transubstantiation does not require the assumption that quantity is an entity distinct from substances or qualities. One other theological work, the authenticity of which has been questioned, is the *Centiloquium theologicum*, consisting of 100 conclusions directed mainly to showing that doctrines of natural theology cannot be proved by evident reason or experience.

The third group of Ockham's writings is made up of the polemical and political works written in his Munich period. Many of these are of interest only in connection with the historical events of the time; but some of them contain important discussions of moral, legal, and political concepts and issues developed in connection with the controversies over the powers of pope and emperor, of [church and state](). Such are the lengthy *Dialogus inter magistrum et discipulum de imperatorum et pontificum potestate*, the *Octo quaestiones super potestate et dignitate papali,* and the shorter but eloquent *Tractatus de imperatorum et pontificum potestate*, written in 1347. Modern critical editions of the political works are well under way; but editions of the philosophical and theological writings are very much needed, since the early printed editions are both rare and not fully reliable, while some important works (those on Aristotle's *Physics*) have never been printed at all.

Ockham was a thinker of profound originality, independence, and critical power. Although he had scarcely any acknowledged disciples, and did not found a school in the sense of having followers committed to defense of his teachings (as did Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus), the actual influence exerted by Ockham's thought, in his own time and into the seventeenth century, was of a significance and breadth that may well have surpassed that of Aquinas or Scotus. This influence is clearly discernible in the empiricist doctrines of Locke and Hume, in the controversies concerning faith and merit associated with the Reformation, and in the political theories that found expression in the Conciliar Movement and in seventeenth-century constitutional liberalism. Although some historians have portrayed Ockham as an innovator who revolted against the traditional values and standards of medieval Christendom, it is nearer the truth to say that he was very much a product of the medieval culture and educational system, who sought to resolve problems that were generated by that culture and that had reached critical dimensions in his own time.

The condemnations of strict Aristotelianism that took place in 1277 were symptomatic of a crisis in the Scholastic effort to harmonize Greek metaphysics with the Christian creed; while the conflict between Philip the Fair and [Boniface VIII](), followed by the controversy between Louis of Bavaria and John XXII, brought to the surface issues concerning the sources of political and ecclesiastical authority that were becoming acute with the decline of the feudal system. It was to save the values threatened by these conflicts, rather than to destroy them, that Ockham subjected the prevailing Scholastic positions to criticism, and sought more adequate and powerful principles of analysis. His chief contributions to philosophy, lying in the areas of philosophy of language, metaphysics, and theory of knowledge, were the direct result of his effort, as a theologian, to meet the twofold commitment to reason and experience, on the one hand, and to the articles of the faith, on the other.

This dual commitment to faith and reason finds expression in two maxims that are constantly invoked in Ockham's writings. The first is that God can bring about anything whose accomplishment does not involve a contradiction. Although this principle is accepted on the basis of the Christian creed, it is equivalent to the philosophical principle that whatever is not self-contradictory is possible, so that what is actually the case cannot be established on a priori grounds but must be ascertained by experience. The second maxim, known as Ockham's Razor because of his frequent use of it, is the methodological principle of economy in explanation, frequently expressed in the formula "What can be accounted for by fewer assumptions is explained in vain by more." Ockham often expressed it, however, in this longer form: "Nothing is to be assumed as evident, unless it is known per se, or is evident by experience, or is proved by the authority of Scripture" (*Sentences* I, d. 30, qu. 1).

These maxims are equivalent in force and constitute the unifying principle of Ockham's doctrine, whether viewed in its theological or philosophical aspect. They determine a view of the universe as radically contingent in its being, a theory of knowledge that is thoroughly empiricist, and a rejection of all realist doctrines of common natures and necessary relations in things—all of which constitute what is called Ockham's nominalism. They also eliminate every form of determinism in Ockham's metaphysics and psychology, by associating the principle of divine omnipotence with that of divine liberty and freedom of choice and by making the liberty of the human will basic to moral and legal theory.

A first consequence of these principles is the elimination of various metaphysical "distinctions" that played a dominant role in late thirteenth-century Scholasticism and that derived in large measure from the interpretation of Aristotle made by the Islamic philosopher Ibn Sīnā. The real distinction between essence and existence, held to be a doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas, supposed that in an existing thing its essence or nature, although not separable from its existence, is nevertheless really distinct from it. Ockham argued that if essence and existence are distinct realities, then it is not self-contradictory for one to exist without the other; but since it is self-contradictory to suppose that an essence exists without existence, it follows that there cannot be a real distinction between the two. By a similar argument it is shown that there cannot be a real distinction between individuals and their natures, as the theory of common natures existing in individuals supposes.

Ockham directed his main critique against the Scotist theory that the common nature differs from the individuating principle by a formal distinction that is less than a real distinction but more than a distinction of reason. To show that this involves a contradiction, Ockham argued as follows: Let the common nature be indicated by the letter *a* and the individuating difference by the letter *b*. Then, according to Duns Scotus, *a* is formally distinct from *b*. But Scotus must concede that *a* is not formally distinct from *a*. Yet, Ockham argued. wherever contradictory predicates are verified of two things, those two things must be really distinct. Hence *b* and *a* cannot be really identical if they are formally distinct, as Scotus claimed; and by the same argument it can be shown that if they are really identical, they cannot be formally distinct.

The notion of a common nature in individuals, really or formally distinct from them, is therefore self-contradictory; and it remains that universality is a property of terms, or of concepts expressed by general nouns, and is simply their capacity to be used to signify or denote many individuals. In denying that there is any universality in things, Ockham does not deny that the basis for universal predication of general terms is objectively present in individual things; he only denies that the fact that Socrates and Plato, for example, are similar in that each is a man entails that there is some entity common to both and distinct from each. Ockham's nominalism is not to be construed as a doctrine that denies any foundation in things for the generality of terms, and his theory of human cognition rests squarely on the assumption that direct experience of existing things gives rise to concepts of universal character that directly signify things as they are or can be.

Since whatever exists is individual, Ockham holds that our knowledge of things is based on a direct and immediate awareness of what is present to our senses and intellect, which he calls intuitive cognition. He defines this type of awareness as one which enables us to form an evident judgment of contingent fact—that is, that the object apprehended exists, or that it is qualified in a certain way, or is next to another object, and so forth. Such cognition gives rise only to singular contingent propositions that are evident; hence it does not yield scientific knowledge in Aristotle's sense, in which premises and conclusions must be of universal character. Every intuitive cognition, however, can give rise to an abstractive cognition of the same object, which Ockham defines as the cognition of an object which does not suffice for an evident judgment concerning the existence of the object or concerning a contingent fact about the object. Thus, while I am observing Socrates and hearing him talk, I can judge evidently that Socrates exists and that he is talking; but if I depart from the spot and then form the proposition that Socrates exists, or that he is talking. my statement is not evident and may in fact be false.

But Ockham insists that there is no distinction between intuitive and abstractive cognition with respect to objects cognized, but only with respect to their capacity to yield evident judgments of existence and contingent fact. In the natural course of events, every abstractive cognition presupposes an intuitive cognition of an object understood by it; but Ockham says that since the cognitions are distinct from each other and from their objects, it is logically possible for God to cause an intuitive cognition of an object which is not present or not presently existing. In such a case. Ockham says, the intuitive cognition will yield a judgment that the object is not present or that it does not exist; for it would be self-contradictory to hold that one can have an evident judgment that an object exists, if it does not exist.

The general propositions which serve as premises of scientific knowledge, in the strict sense, are established by inductive generalization from singular judgments evident by experience. But Ockham holds that such scientific statements, being formed from abstractive cognitions of their objects, cannot have absolute evidence, or necessary truth, as categorical propositions; they must be construed as necessary propositions concerning the possible, or as conditional statements. Except for premises of mathematics, which are known per se by the meanings of the terms, the principles of the natural sciences are held by Ockham to be evident by experience but not as necessary in the absolute sense, although they may be said to be necessary in the conditional sense of presupposing the common course of nature without divine interference.

Ockham's empirical theory of knowledge and his nominalist doctrine of the relation of discourse to reality are reinforced by a remarkably original and thoroughgoing use of the *logica moderna* of the arts faculties, with its theory of the supposition of terms, which takes the form of a fully developed philosophy of language. Ockham's *Summa logicae* gives the most complete expression to this semantically oriented logic.

Ockham's treatment of theology is consistent with his treatment of philosophy and natural science, in the sense that absolute evidence for theological propositions cannot be had in this life and only a positive theology based on acceptance of the testimony of Christ and the saints is possible. The order established by God and revealed in the laws of the church, which Ockham ascribes to God's *potentia ordinata*, is freely established by divine choice but is not necessary, since God, by his absolute power, could have ordained a different order. In moral and political philosophy Ockham applies these same criteria of divine freedom and omnipotence to refute the claims of pope and emperor alike to absolute power and dominion over members of the church or citizens of the state. The dignity of man is found in his freedom of choice; and Ockham reiterates that the law of God is a law of liberty, not to be degraded and corrupted into absolutism and coercive tyranny.

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Ockham, William of

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b. Ockham, [later Woking], near London, England, c. 1285; *d*.Munich, Germany, 1347)

logic, philosophy, theology. For the original article on Ockham see DSB, vol. 10.

Ockham's renown is due primarily to his contributions to logic and their impact on ontology, natural philosophy, and theology. He adopted a form of nominalism that is more accurately designated as conceptualism. This postscript focuses on revisions of his biography, contributions to natural philosophy, and influence.

Recent scholarship has revised Ockham's biography on his likely residence at London before and after his period of study at Oxford, scholarly activity at Avignon, date of death and circumstances related to his death, and the location of his burial place in Munich. The completion of the Latin edition of his philosophical and theological works along with translations of several of them has contributed to a better understanding of Ockham's relation to his predecessors and contemporaries, and of his influence on later authors. His conceptualism and account of connotative concepts continue to challenge scholars, and inform our understanding of his contribution to modern empiricism. Likewise, the projected completion of the edition of his political works will likely deepen our understanding of Ockham, making it clearer which ideas were traditional and which link him to modern liberalism.

Life Ockham entered the Franciscan order around the age of twelve as a novice probably at the London friary, and spent his early years studying the liberal arts and philosophy. In 1306 he was ordained subdeacon at South-wark, London, in the diocese of Winchester. In 1306 or 1307 he began his study of theology at Oxford, and completed the principal requirement of lecturing on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard by 1319. He probably returned to London to wait for his teaching license. During the next four years he revised his commentary on the first book of the *Sentences*, participated in academic disputations, and wrote some of his major works on logic and natural philosophy.

Ockham's controversial views provoked some to accuse him of heresy. The papacy summoned him to its court at Avignon in 1324. While he awaited the outcome of the investigation, he completed his last treatise on philosophical and theological questions. At the Franciscan friary where he resided, he met other Franciscans who challenged Pope John XXII's views on evangelical poverty, the cornerstone of Franciscan spirituality. When it became clear that the pope was about to condemn even the moderate Franciscan view, Ockham fled with his associates, all of whom were excommunicated. As a result, he never received his doctorate, and eventually ended up in Munich where over the next twenty years he wrote polemical treatises against John XXII and his successors. Contrary to myth, Ockham died impenitent in 1347 probably before the Black Death reached Bavaria. He was buried in the Franciscan cemetery in Munich, which is now the site of the Bavarian National Theater. On the steps to the garage closest to the front entrance of the theater a plaque commemorates Ockham, Orlando di Lasso, and others.

The "Razor." Aside from his extensive works on logic and relevant discussions in the *Sentences* commentary, he wrote several treatises on natural philosophy. Among these are a commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*, a questions-commentary containing 151 questions and two shorter summaries. Although he intended to write commentaries on other organic treatises and on metaphysics, his focus on the *Physics* and his turn to political and moral questions diverted him from that project.

In logic his most important contributions are his so-called razor against superfluous entities and his reactions against philosophers who multiplied the number of existing things by speculating in ways that derive from inconsistencies and a careless use of language. By observing a few simple precautions, Ockham thought, such errors can be avoided. In applying his logical principles, he distinguished between absolute and connotative terms. Absolute terms are substance terms and abstract quality terms that can refer to real things. Connotative terms are concrete quality terms and terms in all of the Aristotelian categories other than substance that can refer to one real thing primarily and to another thing secondarily, but they do not signify things distinct from individual substances and inhering qualities. He applied this distinction extensively, particularly in the analysis of three of the most important topics in Aristotle's *Physics*, motion, time, and place. Ockham did not deny that bodies really move, or that change takes time, or that bodies are in place and move from place to place. He treated all three as connotative terms, the result of which was the elimination of talk about them as individual things that exist independently of the things in motion, in time, and in place.

Natural Philosophy Ockham's emphasis on eliminating superfluous entities contributed to a more empiricist and less inflationary ontology. Ockham remained an Aristotelian, however, in his acceptance of formal and material causes. He tended, though, to emphasize efficient causes over final causes in nature. Like other scholastics, he made distinctions in the analysis of place and the medium through which bodies move that imply a distinction between a description of motion and a causal analysis of motion. Contrary to Aristotle, Ockham, like Thomas Aquinas, accepted the theoretical possibility of the motion of a body through a vacuum. Because a body cannot exist in two places at the same time, its motion from one side of a postulated vacuum to the other side would require some lapse of time. This led Ockham to distinguish between the conditions of local motion and the causes of greater or lesser speed.

Ockham shared several ideas with other late medieval scholastics, but the clarity of his arguments led later authors to cite him occasionally as an inspiration. For example, several authors concluded that matter and form are not just abstract principles but really existing constituents of things. In Ockham's version really existing physical things are composed of matter and a hierarchy of substantial forms. That doctrine along with his reduction of rarefaction and condensation to a function of the local motions of the parts of a thing inspired later authors to defend atomism. For example, Nicholas of Autrecourt, the German atomist Joachim Jungius, Kenelm Digby, and Thomas Hobbes appealed to Ockhamist doctrines in support of mechanistic analysis and atomism.

Another major consequence of Ockham's doctrine of connotative terms is found in his analysis of mathematics. Where Aristotle prohibited transition from one genus or species to another in proofs to avoid ambiguity and thus fallacious arguments, Ockham tended to relax such prohibitions. Aristotle maintained that we should not compare circular and rectilinear motions, because the difference constitutes a specific difference, meaning that they belong to different species such that any comparison would be fallacious. Ockham's theory of connotation, however, led him to reject Aristotle's prohibition. In Ockham's view *circular* and *rectilinear* do not stand for specifically different entities but express nominal definitions that can be predicated of motions in a way that permits comparison.

More generally, Ockham interpreted Aristotle as allowing for the subordination of a mathematical analysis to physical considerations, the subordination of a physical analysis to mathematical considerations, and even the partial subordination of one science to another. The consequence is that Ockham subdued the logical and ontological restrictions on mathematics, making it a suitable instrument for analyzing any problem that can be quantified or clarified logically by means of mathematics.

Even more startling was Ockham's denial of the traditional doctrine of perceptual and cognitive species, a denial that led him to affirm action at a distance. This argument constitutes an example of Ockham's more empiricist side. Ockham, however, followed the Aristotelian emphasis on efficient causes as deriving from potencies in things, even if his reductionistic tendencies led him to eliminate several speculatively generated entities.

Influence Ockham's ideas influenced three philosophers at Merton College, Oxford, William Heytesbury, John Dumbleton, and Richard Swineshead, who developed a more mathematical approach that generated some interesting consequences for the mathematical description of change and motion. Among these consequences is the Merton mean-speed theorem, which provides a way of understanding the relation between a uniformly accelerated motion by comparison with a uniform motion over the same time and in the same distance. If a body moves from rest at a uniform rate of acceleration, it will cover the same distance in the same time as the same body moving uniformly at a constant velocity that is half the final velocity of the uniformly accelerated motion. It should be added, however, that medieval philosophers regarded such an analysis as useful for understanding all kinds of changes, including intension and remission of immaterial and incorporeal qualities.

Ockham's influence on Parisian philosophers of the fourteenth century is more complex. Although his conceptualism and critique of inflationary metaphysics influenced Parisian thinkers, they tended to reject his more extreme conclusions by developing moderate interpretations consistent with high medieval scholastic Aristotelianism. For example, the views of John Buridan, Marsilius of Inghen, and Albert of Saxony tend to be more conservative. Nicole Oresme, however, shows how Ockham's influence, even when moderated, contributed to the most original and challenging analysis of nature in the fourteenth century. Like Ockham, Oresme characterized terms such as *motion* as connotative. Oresme's view was not as reductive as Ockham's but he too followed Ockham's critique in applying mathematics to problems of change and variation. He did not deny that motion is a real thing altogether, but affirmed it only as a mode of being. He denied the material or corporeal reality of species and their reality in the sensible world, allowing them only a spatial-temporal reference and thus rendering them intelligible in purely mathematical terms.

The influence of these ideas on later authors is difficult to trace. In general, they inspired more mechanistic thinking or greater emphasis by Aristotelians on mathematical analysis, but most historians consider Galileo Galilei's innovations as surpassing by far the achievements of his predecessors and contemporaries.

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André Goddu

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William of Ockham

The English philosopher and theologian William of Ockham (ca. 1284-1347) was the most important intellectual figure in the 14th century and one of the major figures in the history of philosophy.

The first half of the 14th century was one of the most active, creative periods in medieval thought. Building on the solid foundation of the 13th-century achievements in science, logic, metaphysics, and epistemology, William of Ockham and his immediate followers developed an approach to philosophy and theology that became known as nominalism. This school of thought, alongside the humanist movement, aided in the transition from the medieval to the modern world.

Early Life

William was born in the village of Ockham in Surrey. Having received his early education in Latin grammar and the liberal arts, possibly at the nearby monastic house of Augustinian canons at Newark, he joined the Franciscan order and studied arts and philosophy at their convent in London. In February 1306 he was ordained a subdeacon at the church of St. Saviour at Southwark in London, where Southwark Cathedral now stands. The following fall Ockham began his 13 years of theological study at Oxford.

During the years 1317 to 1320 Ockham lectured on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, the standard theological textbook from the 12th to the 16th centuries. After the completion of his theological studies, he became lecturer at the Franciscan convent in Reading, where he taught off and on until 1324. There he revised the first book of his commentary on the *Sentences*, lectured on logic and Aristotle's *Physics*, and engaged in quodlibetic disputes with other theologians.

In these various works Ockham set forth ideas which, within 20 years, earned him an international reputation and placed him alongside Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus as one of the most significant minds of the age. Like Thomas and Scotus, the different areas of Ockham's thought are closely interrelated and marked by distinctive features that give his thought a special character. Ockham's ideas should not, however, be seen as a rejection or destruction of 13th century thought. He borrowed from the past and perfected constructive tendencies already present in the previous period.

Epistemology and Empiricism

The 13th-century tendency to base scientific knowledge, knowledge of the physical world, on sense experience was accepted and extended by Ockham. In place of the Aristotelian description of how man comes to know (a description that sees the human mind primarily as a passive receptacle that abstracts the universal form or concept from particular things that are experienced and transmitted through a multistage process), Ockham described the mind as an active agent that knows the particular immediately and directly through intuitive cognition. Intuitive cognition is the direct apprehension by the mind of a particular, existing thing according to which the mind forms a judgment that such a thing exists and apprehends those facts contingent upon its existence, such as size, shape, color, and so on. In addition to intuitive cognition, which is the initial and primary means of knowledge, there is abstractive cognition, closely related to memory, which can reflect on an object but does not convey any knowledge of whether the object presently exists.

This direct apprehension of the existing particular thing by means of intuitive cognition increased the empirical quality of medieval thought at the expense of the Platonic reliance on forms or ideas. It also meant that man initially and primarily knows the particular, and only on the basis of that and similar experiences does he begin to form a more general concept known as the universal.

It is because of Ockham's rejection of the "realistic" interpretation of the universal or general concept that the term "nominalist" is applied to him. Ockham rejected the idea that there is similarity among things of the same species because there exists a "common nature," prior to existing individual things, which inheres in the latter and makes them similar. While recognizing similarities among things in nature, Ockham saw that similarity as the result of a generic relationship that does not endanger the peculiar individuality of each object. The concept is formed when several individuals of the same species are considered at the same time, and when one forms a composite in the mind of those features they have in common. One of the results of this approach, with its stress on the priority and importance of knowledge of the particular, was to give added impulse to the scientific tradition of the 13th and 14th centuries by stressing both empiricism and an inductive method.

Theology and Ethics

By restricting the objects of scientific knowledge to those individuals known directly through sense experience and by rejecting the idea of a common nature prior to and inherent in the things experienced, Ockham limited the kind of things man could know by reason apart from revelation, and he thus changed the character of metaphysical discussion. In much the same way, Ockham limited the number of truths in theology that can be established by reason alone, thus making theological propositions depend much more on revelation and the teaching of the Church than would be true for earlier scholastic theologians from Anselm to Aquinas. Most "truths" of natural theology are, for Ockham, learned by way of revelation.

Because most theological propositions are known only through revelation, this does not make them any the less certain for Ockham, who saw certainty as the result of different types of evidence. Scientific knowledge produces a certainty based on belief in the way man's mind operates and in the validity of human sense experience. For Ockham this form of knowledge is so compelling that it is impossible not to acknowledge its certainty. The certainty of theological knowledge is based on belief that what God has revealed through Scripture and the Church cannot be in error. Such "knowledge" is compelling only for the Christian and is not of the same order as scientific knowledge.

The overriding conception of Ockham's theology is the freedom and omnipotence of God, an idea that shapes much of his philosophy as well. The realm of God's choice is limited only by the principle of contradiction, namely, that God cannot do that which is logically impossible. Since God wills from eternity and not within time, the choices made by God have become the reliable principles upon which the human world depends. The uniformity in nature which Ockham continually asserted is basically a uniformity in God's will, which can never be arbitrary because it is one with His intellect and wisdom. By His initial choices God has freely bound Himself to act in reliable, definable ways, both within the physical world and within the Church.

The contingency of the universe and the theological order upon the will of God includes the ethical system according to which God rewards and punishes. Good deeds are defined by their conformity to God's revealed law, and although God retains his freedom to reject as meritorious those good deeds done in a state of grace, he has in fact committed himself to accept them as meritorious of eternal life.

Final Years

In 1324 Ockham was called to Avignon to answer charges of heretical doctrine in his writings. Two lists of suspect opinions were drawn up, but neither resulted in a formal condemnation.

While living in Avignon near the papal court awaiting the results of the investigation, Ockham wrote a defense of his theories on the Eucharist, which was one of the major areas of his thought under attack. In addition, at the urging of the head of the Franciscan order, Michael of Cesena, Ockham undertook a study of the concept of apostolic poverty, a concept basic to the Franciscan ideal and one under attack by Pope John XXII. When in 1328, Ockham came to the conclusion that John XXII was incorrect on the issue of apostolic poverty and perhaps even heretical—and when it appeared that the Pope was about to deliver a pronouncement on the issue that would make the Franciscan position appear heretical—Ockham, Cesena, and several others fled Avignon on the night of May 26 toward Italy, and they sought and received the protection of John's major enemy, Emperor Louis of Bavaria.

The remainder of Ockham's life was spent at the Franciscan convent in Munich, where he wrote political treatises against the positions of John XXII and his successors. In these treatises Ockham argued that Scripture and the established theological tradition of the Church are the two sources for authority in doctrine. Neither the papacy nor secular political powers have the authority to proclaim doctrines that go against Scripture or tradition. Ockham agreed with Marsilius of Padua that Christ did not establish the papacy, and one can find in Ockham a strong defense of the authority of a general Church council. However, unlike Marsilius, Ockham believed that the pope did possess administrative authority within the Church, and as long as he did not fall into heresy he should not have his administrative or judicial power questioned.

Further Reading

The best introduction in English to Ockham's thought is *The Collected Articles on Ockham* (1958) by Philotheus Böehner, who, more than anyone else, was responsible for the revised understanding of Ockham. Particular aspects of Ockham's thought are examined in Ernest A. Moody, *The Logic of William of Ockham* (1935); Damascene Webering, *The Theory of Demonstration according to William Ockham* (1953); and Herman Shapiro, Motion, *Time and Place according to William Ockham* (1957). For background see Philotheus Böehner, *Medieval Logic: An Outline of Its Development from 1250 to c. 1400* (1952); Gordon Leff, *Medieval Thought: St. Augustine to Ockham* (1958) and *Paris and Oxford Universities in the 13th and 14th Centuries* (1968); David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* (1962); and Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh, eds., *Philosophy in the Middle Ages: The Christian, Islamic and Jewish Traditions* (1967).

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Ockham, William Of

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William of Ockham, political theorist and philosopher of science, was born about 1280, probably at Ockham, a village in the county of Surrey, near London. He entered the Franciscan order, studying and lecturing at Oxford University from about 1309 to 1323. In 1324 he was summoned to Avignon by Pope John XXII to answer charges of having expounded heretical doctrines. It appears, however, that the commission appointed to investigate the charges against him reached no final agreement concerning the heretical character of his teachings.

Ockham was still in detention in Avignon in 1327, the year that Michael of Cesena, the general of the Franciscan order, arrived there to answer for his attacks upon the papal position on evangelical poverty. Ockham became involved in the issue, siding with his general against the pope. In May 1328, evidently fearing the worst, Ockham, along with Michael and several others, fled for protection to the court of the pope's political enemy, Louis of Bavaria, and the pope promptly excommunicated them. Ockham retaliated with the pen: during the next twenty-odd years he directed a series of bitter polemics at successive popes and their exalted claims of power.

With the death of Louis of Bavaria in 1347, Ockham's position became hopeless, and he appears to have taken steps to reconcile himself with the church. A formula of submission was drawn up, but it is not known whether Ockham actually signed it. He died in Munich about 1349, probably a victim of the Black Death.

Political thought. Despite their polemical tone, Ockham's political writings are essentially conservative in outlook. In general he favored moderate opinions in regard to the hotly contested political issues of his time. He appears to have been interested

not in political theory as such but rather in the special problem of the relation between church and state. Ultimately, his position, which remained rooted in the traditionally established separation between the two powers, contributed little to the solution of the knotty problem of precise definition.

Specifically, Ockham maintained that the spiritual power is autonomous because of its divine origin. Within its own realm it retains absolute independence, subject only to divine law. Neither the emperor, then, nor any other representative of the secular arm, has the right to interfere in church affairs, except in the instance of some evident breach of divine law—as, for example, when a heretic occupies the papal seat.

Similarly, the secular power is derived from God through the consent of the people. It too retains absolute autonomy within its proper sphere, subject only to natural law. Neither the church, then, nor the people, can divest the emperor of his power, except in the instance of an evident breach of natural law—as, for example, when he proves dangerous to the general welfare.

Philosophy of science. Ockham was enormously influential in shaping and giving impetus to the empirical trend which came to dominate thought in the late Middle Ages. Science, for Ockham, consists in a body of statements about natural entities and occasions. In all cases, the ultimate ground for the truth of a stated fact is the actual being of the things about which the fact is true. The scientific proposition, that is, is itself related to matters of physical fact as sign is to significatum; hence, it is objective circumstance alone that lends verity to a scientific statement. Truth, then, and falsity, when predicated of a proposition, mean that there obtains or does not obtain agreement between the proposition as formulated and the fact as given.

Clearly, in the light of the possibility of empirical verification as thus envisioned by Ockham, there is a great disparity between such statements as "Socrates is walking" and "Time is composed of instants." In the former case, verification is relatively simple. In the latter, however, verification is not so simple: where and how does one seek out and encounter "time"? How does one demonstrate that its structural components are "instants"? Still, if Ockham's notion of the relation obtaining between truth, scientific assertion, and empirical fact is to avoid a breakdown, such verification must, in some way, be possible. It was with this problem in mind that Ockham noted the distinction between absolute terms *(nomina absoluta)* and connotative terms *(nomina connotativa)*.

Absolute terms, for Ockham, have real definitions, while connotative terms are nominally defined. Thus, when the elements entering into the definition of a term signify only the individual entities for which the defined term can stand, the term is absolute. When, on the other hand, the elements entering into the definition of a term do not all signify the same individual entities for which the definiens is a sign, the term is connotative.

As Ockham saw it, the physical universe admits of but two varieties of actual existent: substance and quality. Hence, there are but two kinds of absolute terms: terms properly ascribed to the category of substance (concrete absolute terms) and terms properly ordered under the category of quality (abstract absolute terms). Neither class of actual existent, however, is ever experienced in abstraction from contingent circumstance. Substances, that is, are never apprehended per se apart from their accidental determinations, any more than qualities are ever experienced apart from change; and since the written, spoken, or conceived expression of these contingent circumstances is invariably couched in connotative terms, it is the connotative term which is first in the order of "coming-to-know." But all such terms, according to Ockham, are susceptible of resolution into functions of absolute terms.

The significance of the distinction and ultimate relationship between absolute and connotative terms for Ockham's theory of empirical verification is quite clear. Unless there is some way of exhibiting connotative terms as functions of absolute terms whose significata, in turn, can be sought out and confronted in the physical realm of substances and qualities, definition as well as demonstration would involve circularity, or infinite regress, and the possibility of empirical verification of scientific statements as conceived by Ockham would be vitiated.

In sum, Ockham's approach provides the philosophic basis for the formulation of two regulative questions to which he would submit all physical descriptions, laws, and hypotheses: (1) What do the terms that we use in these physical explanations actually mean? and (2) How can we be assured of the truth of that which is asserted? In the last analysis, Ockham allowed as meaningful only those assertions that are reducible to statements whose elements designate observable entities, and as true only those that are satisfied by an existing state of affairs.

Herman Shapiro

[*Other relevant material may be found in*Scientific Explanation.]

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William of Ockham

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions
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William of Ockham or William of Occam (14th cent.). Christian philosopher. He studied at Oxford but, since he did not complete his master's degree, he remained an inceptor, hence his nickname, Inceptor Venerabilis. He began to write logic and commentaries, especially on [Aristotle](#)'s Physics. Here he argued against prevalent views which allowed the intellect to constitute individuals as universals, never perceiving them directly as such, but knowing them to be so by reflection. To Ockham, individuals alone are real, as they are and as they can be observed; and what can be known is the individual, not some unperceivable universal. In this insistence on observation, he has been regarded as the forerunner of Bacon, Newton, and [Descartes](#). His name has been given to the principle of ontological economy (popularly known as 'Occam's razor'), *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* ('entities ought not to be multiplied beyond necessity'), i.e. that in accounting for phenomena, one should not posit more (especially by way of cause or reality) than is necessary to give a satisfactory or true explanation; and as such it might seem to call in question the propriety of invoking [God](#) to account for anything. The principle is derived from Aristotle, and is referred to by Grosseteste as *lex parsimoniae*, but the words do not occur in the surviving works of Ockham.

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William of Ockham

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Franciscan philosopher, theologian, and political writer, called *Venerabilis inceptor* (also, occasionally, *Doctor invincibilis* and *Doctor singularis*), the most outstanding representative of the "modern way"; b. Ockham. Surrey, *c*. 1285; d. Munich, April 10, 1347.

Life. The first certain date of his life is Feb. 26, 1306, when he was ordained subdeacon of Southwart, in the diocese of Winchester (hence not yet a resident of Oxford). On June 19, 1318, he was presented to the bishop of Lincoln for license to hear confessions. He studied theology at Oxford, but was not a disciple of Duns Scotus. From 1317 to 1319, as a *baccalarius sententiarum,* he commented on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. During the following two years, now as *baccalarius formatus,* he fulfilled the remaining scholastic requirement for the title of master of theology and probably also held his *principium* or *inceptio* (hence the name Inceptor), but he never became regent master. This was due almost certainly to the opposition of john lutterell (chancellor of Oxford University from October 1317 until September 1322), who in 1323 went to Avignon and denounced Ockham as a heretic, substantiating his accusation with a list of 56 propositions extracted from the writings of Ockham.

John XXII summoned Ockham to Avignon and appointed a commission of six theologians (among them the same Lutterell and durandus of saint-pourÇain) to examine the incriminating propositions. In 1326 the commission presented 51 propositions as open to censure, but no formal condemnation was pronounced by the pope. Nevertheless, Ockham was not allowed to leave Avignon. At this time michael of cesena, the minister general of the Friars Minor, at variance with the pope about the interpretation of Franciscan poverty, was summoned to and detained in Avignon (December 1327). Prompted by his general, Ockham undertook the study of the papal constitutions concerning the Franciscan rule and became firmly convinced that the pope, by contradicting the Gospels and the constitutions of his predecessors, had fallen into heresy and had forfeited his right to the Chair of Peter. The personal views of John XXII about the beatific vision, expressed in 1332, only added fuel to the fire. On May 26, 1328, after having composed and signed an appellation against the pope, Michael of Cesena and Ockham, with two other friars, escaped to Italy, as a result of which they were excommunicated.

In September they joined at Pisa the archenemy of the pope, Louis of Bavaria, whose election as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire John XXII did not recognize. In 1330 they journeyed with him to Munich and, remaining under his protection, by their counsel and writings aided him in his struggle against John XXII (d. Dec. 4, 1334) and his successors, benedict xii and clement vi. During all this time Ockham professed himself a faithful Catholic, willing to submit to the *legitimate* authorities of both the Church and the Franciscan Order. He died at Munich April 10, 1347 (according to his epitaph), and was buried in the choir of the Franciscan church. The opinion that places the date of his death in 1349, after a tentative reconciliation with the Church and his order, lacks solid foundation, as was shown by C. K. Brampton.

Teaching. The principal doctrines of Ockham may be conveniently summarized under the headings of knowledge, logic, nature and man, being and cause, and theology.

Knowledge. One of the basic tenets of Ockham's philosophy is that whatever exists, by its very existence, is singular and individual. There are no universal ideas in the divine mind, as patterns of creation; much less are there universals or common natures in things. The universal concept itself in the mind is singular; it is universal only inasmuch as it can be predicated of many singulars by reason of their similarity. Accordingly, the first step to knowledge is intuition, the appropriate way to the cognition of singular things, which enables man to know whether a thing exists or not. Ordinarily it presupposes the presence of an object that immediately becomes present to the senses in sense intuition or to the mind in intellective intuition. Also, the contents of the mind (intellection, volition, desires, etc.) are objects of direct intuition. Abstractive cognition of a singular thing

presupposes the intuitive knowledge of the same, but it is not proper knowledge of a singular thing. It abstracts from existence or nonexistence and from all contingent conditions. Both forms of cognition can be sufficiently explained without species, either sensible or intelligible; therefore they must be eliminated (see species, intentional). This is required by the frequently invoked principle of economy (Ockham's razor), which forbids positing a plurality of entities without necessity. On the same principle Ockham also suppresses the distinction between the agent and possible intellect. Intuitive cognition of nonexistent but possible things he regarded as possible on the constantly invoked principle that God can produce the proper effects of all secondary causes without the aid of the secondary causes.

In an earlier period Ockham was inclined to hold that the universal concept is a thought-object, formed or fashioned (*fictum*) by the mind as a likeness of the object outside the mind; later he inclined to the opinion that it is the same as the act of intellect, which by its very nature (*signum naturale*) stands for the actual thing to which it refers. Though the proper name of this position is conceptualism, Ockham generally became labeled as nominalist and was called *Princeps nominalium*.

Science, for him, is either speculative or practical, real or rational, and is concerned with propositions. In the strictest Aristotelian sense of the word, science (scientia) means an "evident cognition of some necessary truth caused by the evident cognition of necessary premises and a process of syllogistic reasoning" [P. Boehner, *Ockham, Philosophical Writings* (Edinburgh 1957) 5]. Whenever Ockham says that a proposition cannot be proved (*demonstrari*), he has in mind this kind of demonstration, which obviously has a very limited possibility of application. He does not mean that experimental knowledge, dialectical proofs (*ratio probabilis, persuasio*), or authority are conducive only to doubts; on the contrary, they often yield a high degree of certitude.

Logic. Ockham's most valid contribution was to logic. He commented on the *Isagoge* of Porphyry and on the *Praedicamenta, De interpretatione,* and *De sophisticis elenchis* of Aristotle, attempting to show that these do not imply any form of realism. He wrote three treatises on logic (one long and two compendiums) dealing with terms, propositions, syllogisms, demonstrations, consequences, and fallacies. His theorems on consequences reveal a knowledge of the laws that now pass under the name of A. de morgan.

Since the distinctive trait of the "modern way" was the logic of terms (hence the name terminism), special attention should be given to Ockham's doctrine on the supposition of terms (*suppositio terminorum*). The difference between logic and the real sciences is that the latter are about terms (not things) that stand (*supponunt*) for things; logic, on the other hand, is about terms or mental contents (*intentiones animae*) that stand for other terms or mental contents. Hence the capital importance of the doctrine on the supposition of terms. Supposition is either personal, simple, or material. Personal supposition obtains when a term of a proposition stands for what it signifies and is used in its significative function; in simple supposition the term stands for a mental content but is not used in its significative function; material supposition occurs when a term does not stand for what it signifies but for a vocal or written sign, as in the proposition: "Man" is a noun (Boehner, *op. cit.* 65–67).

Nature and Man. The science of nature, according to Ockham, is about mental contents that are common to corruptible and movable things and that stand precisely for such things (Boehner, *op. cit.* 11). Its more appropriate method is induction, which starts from the more known, and—through observation, experience, and reasoning—ascends from effects to causes. Of the generally admitted three natural principles, matter, form, and privation, he eliminates privation as superfluous; it means only that something lacks something (see matter and form). Primary matter is not pure potentiality but a positive entity; it is the same (*eiusdem rationis*) in all composite physical bodies, heavenly as well as terrestrial. Matter and form are sufficient to explain the composite; no principle of individuation is required apart from the efficient cause. The form of the whole (*forma totius*) is nothing more than the united parts. Scotus's formal distinction he rejected. Ockham's razor was in full swing: of the Aristotelian categories only substance and quality were recognized as absolute entities; quantity, motion, place, time, relation, etc., he regarded as in no way different from the bodies concerned. This becomes clear, he thought, when one replaces these terms with their definition or uses verbs instead of nouns. He rejected also the theory of impetus, claiming that the movement and the moving body are identical.

Concerning man, Ockham held it reasonable to admit that the intellective soul is the form of the body, though it cannot be demonstrated in the strict sense. Man has, by experience, evident knowledge of free will, but this defies a priori demonstration—one of many instances in which the impossibility of a priori demonstration is compatible with absolute certainty. There is no distinction, either real or formal, between the soul and its faculties, but it is likely that the sensitive soul is different from the intellective soul and perishable. It is also reasonable to assume a form of corporeity for the body (*forma corporeitatis*), distinct from the soul.

Being and Cause. Being, in Ockham's words, "is associated with a concept which is common to all things and can be predicated of all things in the manner of quiddity" (Boehner, *op. cit.* 90). In its broadest sense it does not imply any likeness, either substantial or accidental, in the things of which it is predicated, and in this sense it is univocal to God and creatures. Man would not be able to know God at all in this life unless he knew Him in a concept common to Him and other things. There is no "being as such" outside the mind in which all things "participate." For the same reason there is no distinction between essence and existence; both signify exactly the same thing (see essence and existence). Nevertheless, the difference between God and creatures is a radical one. It is the difference between infinite and finite, necessary and contingent, *a se* and *ab alio* beings.

Cause is a positive entity, distinct from what is caused by it. Ockham retains the fourfold Aristotelian division. The exemplar can be called a cause only in a metaphorical sense. Efficient cause is that which, having been posited, the effect follows and, having been removed (all other circumstances remaining the same), the effect does not follow. Hence it is by experience that man knows that one thing is the cause of another. Nevertheless, since God can supply for the causality of any secondary cause, one cannot prove that a given effect is caused by a secondary cause and not by God alone (*In 2 sent*. 4–5).

The existence of a first efficient cause cannot be sufficiently proved from production, because the impossibility of an infinite regress is difficult to prove against the philosophers; but it can be proved from conservation, because it presupposes the simultaneous existence of all conserving causes and an infinite number of actually existing beings is impossible. To this cause nothing is prior or superior in perfection, but since one cannot prove that it is more noble and more perfect than every other being, neither God's unicity nor its opposite can be evidently and demonstratively proved (Boehner, *op. cit*. 122–126).

Theology. Theology, according to Ockham, is not a science in the Aristotelian sense of the word, because its principles are not evident but accepted from revelation. Nevertheless, it is the highest and firmest knowledge and the sciences are its handmaids. It is partly speculative, partly practical. As a theologian, Ockham rigorously applied his terminist logic to man's knowledge of God and His attributes and of the Holy Trinity (man knows nothing but propositions; man's knowledge of God is terminated in a concept that is not God, etc.). He applied also his idea of God's absolute power to grace and justification (God can forgive sin without grace, etc.), and his notion of accident to the Holy Eucharist (quantity is not a distinct entity apart from substance and qualities). It is not surprising, then, that Lutterell and the papal commission charged with the examination of his teaching felt that he was turning both theology and philosophy upside down. [For the list of the censured articles and their qualification, see J. Koch, "Neue Aktenstücke zu dem gegen Wilhelm Ockham in Avignon geführten Prozess," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* (Louvain 1929–) 7 (1935) 353–380; 8 (1936) 79–83, 168–197].

A characteristic feature of Ockham's theology is the constant recourse to the distinction between God's ordained and absolute power. By this he wished to emphasize that the present order of nature and salvation is not necessary but has been freely established by God, who could have established a different order (and acted according to it) as long as it did not involve contradiction. The ultimate foundation of the moral order and of the distinction between good and evil is also the will of God.

He considered the Church (but neither the pope nor general councils) infallible, and never intended to say or write anything contrary to its teaching. In his polemical writing, he insisted that the pope had no power in political matters, except in case of emergency. The Empire is from God through the people and not from the pope. The emperor has the right and the duty to depose a heretical pope. It was these extremely daring views (considering the circumstances) and his open rebellion (and not his philosophical or theological teaching) that brought upon him the wrath of John XXII. His doctrine has never been officially condemned by the Church. For its influence, *see* ockhamism.

Appreciation. Ockham's teaching cannot be correctly understood unless one takes into account all of the multiple and subtle distinctions he employs in defining the precise meaning of the terms he uses. Since this is extremely difficult, he usually receives a fairer treatment from those who have studied his writings thoroughly (E. Moody, L. Baudry, P. boehner, etc.) than from authors of scholastic handbooks. In the latter he has been called a skeptic, an agnostic, a fideist, etc., the one who paved the way for Luther, who professed himself an Ockhamist. It can hardly be contested that, with his critical attitude, he contributed to the disintegration of scholastic philosophy and theology as it was understood in the 13th century. But it is also true that by his interest in singulars rather than universals, intuition rather than abstraction, and induction rather than deduction, he prepared the ground for a more scientific approach to reality.

Works. Ockham was a very prolific writer. He composed his philosophical and theological works in Oxford (*c*. 1317–23) and in Avignon (1324–28), and his polemical and political treatises in Munich (1330–47). For a detailed and reasoned description of these works, *see* Boehner, *op. cit*. lii–lix. The following is a simple enumeration:

On logic: (1) *In Porphyrium,* (2) *In praedicamenta,* (3) *In perihermenias,* (4) *In duos libros elenchorum,* (5) *Summa logicae,* (6) *Compendium logicae,* (7) *Elementarium logicae.*

On physics: (1) *Expositio in libros physicorum,* (2) *Summulae in libros physicorum,* (3) *Quaestiones in libros physicorum.*

On theology: (1) *Ordinatio* or *In 1 sententiarum,* (2) *Reportatio* or *In 2–3 sententiarum,* (3) *Quodlibeta septem,* (4) *Tractatus de corpore Christi* or *Primus tractatus de quantitate,* (5) *Tractatus de sacramento altaris* or *Secundus tractatus de quantitate,* (6) *Tractatus de praedestinatione et de praescientia Dei et de futuris contingentibus,* (7) *Quaestiones variae.*

Political and polemical writings: (1) *Opus nonaginta dierum,* (2) *De dogmatibus papae Ioannis XXII,* (3) *Contra Ioannem XXII,* (4) *Compendium errorum papae Ioannis XXII,* (5) *Tractatus ostendens (contra Benedictum XII),* (6) *Allegationes de potestate imperiali,* (7) *Octo quaestiones super potestate et dignitate papali,* (8) *An rex Angliae,* (9) *Consultatio de causa matrimoniali,* (10) *Dialogus,* (11) *Breviloquium de principatu tyrannico,* (12) *Tractatus de imperatorum et pontificum potestate.*

With few exceptions Ockham's works are available in 15th-and 16th-century editions and in facsimile reproductions, along with some recent publications. A critical edition of the philosophical and theological works is under the care of the Franciscan

Institute at St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, N.Y. Of the political and polemical treatises three volumes have appeared in a critical edition at Manchester University, viz., v. 1, ed. J. G. Sikes, 1940; v. 2, ed. R. F. Bennett and H. S. Offler, 1963; v. 3, ed. H. S. Offler, 1956.

See Also: scholasticism; nominalism; ockhamism; philosophy, history of, 3. medieval.

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William of Ockham

Encyclopedia of Religion
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WILLIAM OF OCKHAM (1280?–1349?), English philosopher and theologian. William of Ockham was born between 1280 and 1285 at Ockham in Surrey, England. He entered the Franciscan order and studied at the Franciscan house in Oxford but without taking his doctorate; hence his title of "Venerable Inceptor," which indicated that he had not received a degree.

Ockham's career is divided into two phases. During the first phase he wrote his major theological, philosophical, and logical works; the most important were his *Commentary on the Sentences* and his *Sum of Logic*. The second phase began when in 1328 he fled from the papal court at Avignon with the general of the Franciscan order, Michael of Cesena, to the German emperor Ludwig of Bavaria, at Munich. Ludwig had become the adversary of John XXII, and Ockham joined the other Franciscan dissidents there who had quarreled with the pope over his denial of the Franciscan claim to be following Christ's life of absolute poverty. Ockham, who had originally been summoned to Avignon to answer accusations of error in some of his theological and philosophical doctrines, spent the remainder of his life polemicizing against papal claims to absolute jurisdiction in temporal and spiritual matters. He died at Munich, probably in 1349.

Ockham was the most influential thinker of the later Middle Ages. Philosophically, he was the first to found his outlook upon the discrepancy between the individual nature of all created being and the universal nature of the concepts and terms constituting our proper knowledge. Since, he said, only individuals were real, all universal and general notions only had real, as opposed to conceptual or grammatical, meaning if they referred to real individual things. In contrast to the overwhelming weight of medieval tradition, Ockham held that there were no such things as universal natures or essences. Instead, therefore, of seeking to explain the individual as the particularization of the universal, as in the statement that the individual man Socrates is the expression of the essence humanity, or that a white object is the manifestation of the quality whiteness, Ockham inverted the order and sought to explain how the mind arrives at the universal concept of humanity or whiteness from exclusive experience of individual men or white objects. He did so psychologically, logically, and grammatically by seeking to show how the mind forms concepts and what their relation is to the terms and propositions in which knowledge of them is expressed. He thereby gave a new direction to philosophical inquiry, which effectively denied an independent place to meta-physics.

Theologically, the effect was to undermine the bases for a natural theology, since whatever lay outside intuitive experience of individual things lacked evidential status. Not only did that exclude proofs, as opposed to persuasions, for God's existence, but it confined theological discourse to the elucidation of the meaning of the articles of faith rather than providing rational support for their truth. Their truth was a matter of belief. And central to belief was the Christian's recognition of God's omnipotence. By Ockham's time, the affirmation of God's omnipotence had assumed a new importance, partly at least in response to the determinism of Greek and Arabic philosophy. It had come to be expressed in the distinction between God's ordained power *(potentia ordinata)*, the power by which he governed the workings of the universe he had created, and his absolute power *(potentia absoluta)*, which denoted his omnipotence taken solely in itself without relation to any order, and so is limited by nothing other than logical self-contradiction, which would have impaired it.

It was Ockham who more than anyone gave this distinction the currency which it acquired in the middle of the fourteenth century. He applied it to restate the accepted Christian truth that God could do directly (or indeed differently or not at all) what, ordinarily, by his ordained power, he did by secondary causes. Ockham was thereby reaffirming God's role as the direct ruler as well as creator of the universe. What was novel was the range and frequency of Ockham's application of God's omnipotence to virtually every aspect of creation: nature, knowledge, and matters of belief. Thus God himself could directly cause or conserve an effect that normally had a natural cause: the Eucharist, for example, where the appearance of the elements of the bread and wine could remain after consecration without any longer existing as physical substances. Similarly, absolutely, God could cause direct intuitive knowledge of an object that was not immediately present to the knower. He could do so, not by creating an illusion that what appeared to exist did not really exist, but by himself directly conserving knowledge of an object that was real but not present, such as someone seen in Oxford who was at Rome. Theologically, the implications were perhaps most far-reaching of all—and here Ockham was following Duns Scotus—by substituting God's immediate agency for the agency of the church, above all in directly accepting individuals for eternal life without the requisites of sacramental grace. God was thereby rewarding an individual action or will and not the preceding grace that ordinarily an individual had first to receive as the condition of the reward. Although neither Duns Scotus nor Ockham went beyond stating such a conclusion as the consequence of God's freedom from created forms, many of their successors gave the notion much wider application, which virtually denuded sacramental grace of its intrinsic efficacy. The effect was to reinforce the tendency in the religious outlook of the later Middle Ages to make God's will the sole arbiter in individual justification and predestination. It had as its accompaniment a corresponding stress upon individual religious experience based upon faith as the foundation of all theological discourse and alone bringing certainty in a contingent universe.

The extent of Ockham's influence during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries can be seen in the dominance of the so-called nominalist school that developed first at Paris University and then spread to the new universities founded throughout the German-speaking lands. Its hallmarks were precisely an emphasis upon God's absolute power and therefore on the immediacy of God's will in deciding whom to justify and accept for eternal life. With Ockham's attack upon the concept of the pope's plenitude of power, and his insistence upon the sole authority of faith residing in every believer to decide questions of doctrine, he did perhaps more than any other single thinker to transform the philosophical and theological outlook of the later Middle Ages.

See Also

Nominalism.

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William of Ockham

1285–1347

Franciscan friar
Teacher
Political polemicist

The Venerable Inceptor.

Few philosophers of the Middle Ages have proved to be as divisive in their own age or since as the Franciscan friar, William of Ockham. Born about 1285 in the town of Ockham in Surrey, a quiet shire south of London, William joined the Order of Friars Minor at the tender age of twelve. Following his novitiate and philosophical studies at the Franciscan convent in London, he began his study of theology at Oxford around 1306. His lectures on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* came in 1317–1319, at which time he was recognized as an "inceptor," or bachelor of theology. With another two years of study he completed the requirements for the degree of Master and had even delivered his inaugural lecture. Owing to a restriction on the number of mendicants allowed to become masters, however, Ockham did not assume the chair in theology at this time, and circumstances later intervened so that he never in fact lectured in theology as a master; his title thus became the Venerable Inceptor.

A Forcible Stay at Avignon.

Instead Ockham was posted to the Franciscan house of studies in London where for the next several years he lectured and wrote extensively. It was writings from this period that make up the bulk of Ockham's philosophical output. In 1324, however, the chancellor of Oxford, John Lutterell, charged Ockham with heresy, and he was forced to travel to Avignon in France (where the pope had taken up residence) to defend himself. For four years the investigation into his teachings dragged on, but in the end none of the suspect teachings was formally condemned. Notwithstanding, his academic career was at an end. He would never hold a chair. While Ockham was biding his time in Avignon, however, he encountered his superior, Michael of Cessena, also summoned to Avignon because he had opposed the pope's condemnation of absolute poverty—that is, the

surrender of any right to property both on the part of the individual friar and also on the part of the Order. The Minister General had given Ockham the charge of examining three papal documents and rendering a verdict. Ockham's judgment was clearly not tailored to endear him to the pope. The papal assertions were in his words, "heretical, erroneous, foolish, ridiculous, fantastic, senseless, defamatory, and equally contrary and obviously adverse to the orthodox faith, sound morality, natural reason, certain experience, and fraternal charity." Burning their final bridges, Michael and William fled Avignon, taking a boat to Pisa, where they caught up with the Holy Roman Emperor, Ludwig of Bavaria. The story told about the meeting is probably apocryphal, but it is colorful: the friar knelt before the emperor and said, "Defend me with your sword and I will defend you with my pen."

Imperial Apologist.

Defend the emperor Ockham did, and for the final seventeen years of his life he abandoned philosophy and theology entirely and wrote polemical works exclusively, analyzing the nature of the Christian Church, the relationship between church and state, and the role of natural law. Death came in 1347, and he was buried in the Franciscan church in Munich. Today the Bavarian National Theater occupies that site. At the bottom of the stairs leading to the parking garage can be found a modest plaque marking the probable burial site of one of the most revolutionary thinkers of the medieval period.

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