

## WILLIAM OF OCKHAM

- born between 1290 and 1300 (Thomas Aquinas: b. 1224, d. 1274).
- entered Franciscan order (and was later assaulted by the pope for his defense of evangelical poverty.)
- began studying theology at Oxford in 1310.
- lectured on the bible 1315-1317; on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* 1317-19.
- 1319-1324: studied, wrote, and engaged in Scholastic disputations, one result of which was his philosophizing around the problem of universals.
- died in Munich, of the Black Death, in 1349.

Ockham knew Aristotle thoroughly (like Aquinas), but wanted to "correct" Aristotle wherever A's phil. limited in any way the **freedom** and **power** of God. To this end he attacked A's "realism" w.r.t. universals.

Recall:

- the theory of divine ideas looms large in Christian thought from Augustine to Aquinas.
- Plato had spoken of eternal Forms or Ideas, distinct from God, that were the patterns or models of the created order, *especially w.r.t. its intelligible structure*.
- later Greek philosophers (e.g., Plotinus) located these Ideas in the divine mind.
- then are these Ideas a "given" for God, *in terms of which* he *must* create? Aquinas argued that the Ideas are not distinct from God's essence but rather are ontologically identical with God's essence. While they are identical with God's essence ontologically, they are known by us "as if" they weren't; i.e., as if their givenness were necessary to distinguish creation from purely spontaneous production.

Also, it was thought that this use of Forms or Ideas or universals preserved a *natural* moral law.

Explanation: Since God creates humankind according to God's universal idea of human nature, therefore the moral law governing humankind isn't an arbitrary exercise of God's will but is rather "natural" in the sense that it is one with humankind's nature or essence.

-our universal ideas derive from the universals in God. (E.g., if "humankind" -- the word -- is devoid of any objective reference, there'd be no such thing as human nature; and no such thing as *natural* moral law.)

Ock. thought that the Platonic/Aristotelian carryover of universals limited the freedom and power of God.

Ock. maintained that the connexion between natural moral law and divine ideas affronted God's freedom. The moral "law" depends on God's will/choice, not on any essence.

Accordingly, Ock. attacks all forms of realism. (We must be sure to note the theological motive of his argument: God is properly honoured only as the notion of universals is trashed *philosophically*.)

conventional sign: what the word "piece" means in English; i.e., "piece" is a sign in English that signifies a fragment. *Morceau* (French) and *Stueck* (German) are similar conventional signs.  
natural sign: the concept of "piece", regardless of what language is used.

Ock. insists that the natural sign is always the material of our reasoning. He ascribes universals to the concept, but denies any extra-mental referent; i.e., universals are terms that stand for individual things in propositions. But only individuals exist: anything that exists is individual.

There is no common *reality* existing at the same time in two individuals of the same species.

E.g., if person *x* is eliminated, person *y* is not.

However, if *x* and *y* shared in an essence common to both, then the elimination of *x* would entail the elimination of the essence, and hence the elimination of *y*.

The universal of the concept *is* only as an act of the understanding; there is no *universal reality* corresponding to the concept.

The concept or universal stands for *individual* realities, but not for a *universal* reality; i.e., a concept is a way of knowing (and discussing) individual things.

There is no need to postulate anything beyond the mind and individual things in order to explain the universal.

The universal concept arises inasmuch as there are varying degrees of similarity between individual things.

E.g., Victor and Bill don't *share in* a common human nature.

Victor and Bill are *alike* in some respects; i.e., there is no nature or essence *in which* Victor and Bill share; rather, *the nature/essence that V. is* and *the nature/essence that B. is* are alike.

The above illustrates the famous mediaeval dictum of "using Ockham's razor to trim Plato's beard."

(Note: Ockham is often spoken of as a nominalist. He is such only to the extent that he is an anti-realist w.r.t. universals. He is *not* a nominalist in the strictest sense of the term; *viz.*, that there are no universal concepts but mere "naming"; "bird" never refers to more than a particular. [Some philosophers insist that nominalism in this sense fails to distinguish intellect radically from the senses, and in fact is self-refuting.])

Question: When Ockham thought himself to be defending God's freedom and power, were his understandings of freedom and power those of scripture? If not, where did he differ?

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