Ockham

William Ockham (c. 1285-1347 C.E.) was born in England. He was a student at the University of Oxford and became a member of the Franciscan Order. He failed to obtain the Chair of Philosophy at the University, and in 1324 he was summoned by Pope John XXII to Avignon to have his doctrines examined following accusations that he had been holding heretical views. The inquiry lasted three years, and Ockham refused to retract his views. With Michael of Cesena, General of the Franciscan Order, Ockham took himself off to the protection of Louis of Bavaria. The result was that Ockham was excommunicated from the Catholic Church and his Order. Following the death of Louis, Ockham attempted a rapprochement with the Church, but died, probably of the Black Death, before anything could be settled.

A guiding principle of Ockham's thought is the absolute power of God. Consequently reality, with the exception of God, is fundamentally contingent in its nature and in its existence.

Central to Ockham's metaphysical concerns is the problem of universals: what, if anything, universal terms such as "horse" stand for. The issue problem arises in the following way. Terms are, in their most precise sense, elements of propositions whose significative function is as either subject or predicate. It appears that we cannot fix the meaning of the term "horse" by referring to particular horses since particular horses vary from one another. On the supposition that the meaning of a term is determined by that to which it refers, it is argued that in order for the meaning of such a term to be fixed it must refer to something unchanging. It is thus supposed that in order to fix the meaning of the term "horse" by referring the term to something unchanging we must look beyond particular horses; we must refer to something fixed so that the meaning of the term "horse" is fixed. Only in this way can it be the case that what counts as a horse is not a product of arbitrary linguistic convention. This is secured by the reference of the term "horse" to something that involves all and only those features in virtue of which something is a horse and not any other sort of thing: the essence of a horse.

The extreme realist view is to say, as did Plato, that essences exist as eternal, unchanging entities which are ontologically independent of the particulars that exemplify these essences. The moderate realist tradition is derived from Aristotle, and is brought to fruition and alignment with Christian doctrine in the work of Aquinas; it holds that although essences do not exist independently of particulars, they can nevertheless be separated from particulars in thought as the common nature that all individuals of a certain sort share; they are the necessary and sufficient features that make a thing the *sort* of thing it is (as opposed to the fact *that* it is) and not any other sort of thing. Ockham rejects both varieties of realism. He holds that the positing of a distinct system of essences, over and above particulars, is unnecessary in order to account for the fact that things fall into determinate kinds. Moreover, Ockham holds that essences would constitute a restriction on God's freedom to create a world as he sees fit - if He chooses to create at all - God's freedom must be unconstrained by pre-existing essences defining the features a thing has to have to be of a certain sort.

Ockham replaces the reality of essences with the claim that universality, that is, reference to non-individuals, is primarily a property of thoughts, and secondarily of the linguistic expression of thoughts. The term "horse" designates a concept that exists in

the mind. Thus there is no such thing as a universal except as it exists as a thought framed in the mind to which universal terms are attached by convention. Strictly speaking the only thing that all horses have in common is that they fall under the same concept. There is no literally common essence which fixes the kind under which a thing falls; rather it is the perceived similarity or resemblance between individuals which leads us to classify, by forming concepts in the mind, various individuals as being of the same kind. Only individuals exist, by which is meant substances and their qualities: individual existing things are identical with, and are nothing over and above, their collection of qualities. The logical problem that remains for Ockham is to show how universal terms can be reduced to talk about particulars and their features; the epistemological problem is to say how we form universal concepts out of our experience of individuals.

Ockham is often characterized as a nominalist, but he is perhaps more accurately called a conceptualist since he allows a capacity to form general mental concepts which form the basis for the explanation of our ability to apply universal terms.

His doctrine of *suppositio*, or "standing for", makes it clear that the prime carriers of meaning are mental concepts which become associated by convention with linguistic expressions; the mental signs are the same for all persons, even if their linguistic expression may vary. "Cheval" and "horse" are conventional terms for the same mental sign or concept. Ockham distinguishes between terms of the "first intention" and terms of the "second intention". Terms of the "first intention" stand as signs for individual entities in the world, although they may be concepts in the mind as well. A term such as "Socrates" stands for the individual Socrates in the world. However, the term "man" can stand for an individual in the world, but it may also refer to many men. To accommodate this complication Ockham introduces terms of the "second intention", such as "species", which do not stand as signs for entities in the world, but only for concepts in the mind. In the expression "Man is a species" the term "species" stands for a concept in the mind and says of the term "man" that it can stand for many individuals. The belief in the reality of universal essences, to which universal terms appear to refer, is partly a confusion of these levels of intention; we are thus tempted to think that terms of the second intention refer not to concepts in the mind, but to a strange sort of entity.

The well-known notion of "Ockham's razor" is associated with Ockham's name because it evokes his ontological parsimony. It is taken to involve saying that if it is unnecessary to posit real universal essences independent of individuals in order to explain how we operate with universal terms, then such entities should be rejected as superfluous. Generally it holds that the simplest explanation, involving the positing of the minimum number of entities to get the job of explanation done, should be chosen. Ockham himself, although he may have agreed with such a view, does not use the famous expression "Entities must not be multiplied without necessity" precisely in this sense. His meaning, in this and similarly phrased maxims, is epistemological, not ontological: one is not entitled to affirm the existence of a thing unless forced to do so by its existence being one of the following: self-evident, revealed by revelation, verified by experience, or a deductive consequence of one of these.

Ockham's epistemology contains some intriguing anticipations of empiricism. He distinguishes between the mental acts of cognitive awareness and the intellectual assent to the truth or falsity of that of which one is aware. He further contrasts intuitive cognition, on the basis of which one is in a position to make a judgement which is evident (fully grounded), and abstract cognition, on the basis of which a judgement is not evident (merely probable). Two sorts of cognition give rise to judgements that are evident: first, the apprehension of any proposition that is self-evident and that is known

to be true merely by understanding its terms, and second, immediate sense experience that involves no inference beyond what one is immediately aware of. The latter gives rise to the evident knowledge of contingent propositions: if I am immediately aware of a red object I can intuitively know that an object that is red exists and assent to the proposition asserting this. It is important to note that even in the case of contingent existential intuitive cognition, the cognition is an *intellectual* awareness which relates directly to the object, although it requires, in the natural order, sensory cognition to be part of such awareness. In the natural course of events we are justified in thinking that our intuitive cognitions reflect the way things really are, what actually exists; but it must be allowed that an omnipotent God if he chose could produce in us just those cognitions directly without the necessity for any intervening objects. This view is a product of Ockham's belief in the requirement that God has absolute power. God must be supremely unnecessitated in that He is capable of accomplishing anything that is not logically contradictory. The world is radically contingent in that anything that is not logically impossible can be actual. This leads Ockham to hold that knowledge of the natural world is not possible through deductive *a priori* reasoning alone; rather knowledge of existents is only possible when based on that which enables one to have immediate apprehension of existent things, that is, intuitive knowledge. In this case one's apprehension of an object and the object apprehended are linked is such a way that one is entitled to assert evident knowledge of the existence of the object. This amounts to the object of which one has intuitive knowledge being the natural cause of one's apprehension of it.

Ockham's denies that there are necessary causal connections between events and holds that it is by experience, and not by *a priori* deductive reasoning, that we discover the natural order of the world. Such a view has affinity with those of Hume. However, in Ockham's case part of his motivation is that God must not be restricted in His freedom to order the world in whatever way he chooses. Thus in the natural world, logically speaking, anything can follow anything else as a causal consequence, but in fact we can be confident, owing to God's nature, that he will, apart from miracles, maintain the natural sequence of events so as to make it possible for us to discern order and survive.

<div style="text-align: right">

John Shand
The Open University

</div>

Bibliography

Writings

Commentary on the sentences (Lyon 1495) in *Opera plurima*, III (London: Gregg, 1962).
Summa logicae, ed. Philotheus Boehner (St Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute
      Publication, 1957)
Quodiletal Questions, ed. A. J. Freddoso and F. E. Kelly (New Haven: Yale University
      Press, 1991)
Boehner, Philotheus and Brown, Stephen F., eds.: *Ockham: philosophical writings*
      (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990).

Further reading

Leff, Gordon, *William of Ockham* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975).

McCord Adams, Marilyn, *William Ockham*, 2 vols. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).

Moody, Ernest A., *The Logic of William of Ockham*, 2nd ed. (London: Russell and Russell, 1965).

Moody, Ernest A., "William of Ockham," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (London: Collier Macmillan, 1967).

Saw, Ruth, "Ockham," *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, ed. D. J. O'Connor (London: Macmillan, 1964)

Copleston, Frederick, *Ockham to Suarez*, *A history of western philosophy*, vol. III, (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Search Press, 1953).

Marenbon, John (ed.), *Medieval Philosophy*, *Routledge History of Philosophy*, vol. III (London: Routledge, 1997).