

William of Ockham

(1280–1349)

1. Life

- also spelled Occam
- born in central England, died in Munich
- Franciscan, nominalist, and "doctor invincibilis"
- William of Baskerville in U. Eco's *The Name of the Rose*
- He received his bachelor's degree at Oxford, and his master's at Paris, where he taught from a date between 1315 and 1320.
- The question of poverty which so deeply agitated his order determined the later course of his life.
- Their common ground of opposition to the pope drew the extreme Franciscans together with the Emperor Louis the Bavarian, the opponent of John XXII.
- In December, 1323, he was summoned with some others to appear before the pope at Avignon, and was imprisoned there for over four years. He then escaped.
- Ockham became one of the emperor's principal advisers and literary defenders.
- The belief that John XXII was a heretic and no true pope, that the poverty of Christ and the apostles was an article of faith, were as much a part of his fixed belief as that the State and the rights of the emperor were independent of pope and Church.

- He taught that the Roman people have the right to elect their bishop (the pope).
- According to him every people has the right to elect its leader, if it wishes to.
- He went to Munich in Feb., 1330, where most of his political writings were composed.

2. Writings

- *Expositio aurea et admodum utilis super totam artem veterem*
- *Quaestiones et decisiones in quatuor libros sententiarum*
- *Centiloquium theologicum*
- *Quodlibeta septem*
- *De Sacramento altaris* and *De corpore Christi*

3. "Ockam's Razor" or "Occam's Razor"

- "Pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate" ["plurality should not be posited without necessity."]
 - another version of Occam's razor: "Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem".
 - Also called law of parsimony or principle of economy
- A rule in science and philosophy stating that entities should not be multiplied needlessly.

4. Nominalism

- the "modern" school [*via moderna*]
 - as opposed to the "realists" [*via antiqua*]

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- The only realities that exist are singulars.
 - Universal concepts exist only in the mind.
 - Even in God’s mind there exist no universals.

 - The proposition which dominates this thought is that “every positive thing existing outside of the soul is by that very fact singular”.

 - Ockham reduces the universal to the act of understanding.
 - “The intellection, by which I understand man, is the natural sign of man, just as groaning is the sign of sickness, of sadness or of pain, and such a sign can stand for men in mental propositions, just as a word can stand for things in vocal propositions.”

 - Science has to do, he maintains, only with propositions, not with things as such, since the object of science is not what is but what is known.

 - Ockham held that “no universal is a substance existing outside of the mind.”

 - Objects call forth sense-impressions in us, which are transmuted by the active intellect into mental images. These images are thus a product of the intellect, not species which flow from the object into the intellectus possibilis.

5. His Theology

- He considered natural theology to be impossible.

- All we know about God we know from revelation.

- The foundation of all theology, therefore, is faith.

- Theology is therefore not a science, because no science can rest on faith.

- He rejected proofs of God's existence and of the immortality of the soul.

- Theology consists of propositions about the concept of God.
- According to the Nominalistic hermeneutics, our concepts of God do not convey real knowledge of God in Himself, but rather serve as representatives in God's place in propositions formulated by the theologian about God.

- The requirement set down in Nominalism for a concept to be predicable of God is not that it be *true*, but merely that it be "proper to God."

- Ockham: "I say that neither the divine essence nor the divine quiddity nor anything intrinsic to God, nor anything that is really God can be known in itself by us.... Secondly, I say that the divine essence or the divine quiddity can be known by us in a concept proper to it.... What we know immediately are concepts which are not God really, but which we nevertheless use in place of God in propositions. ...Although the act of understanding attains immediately nothing other than a concept, which is not God, nevertheless, since the concept is proper to God and whatever can be predicated of God is really predicated of that concept, although not for itself but for God, God is said to be known in that concept.... Because we are not able to know God in Himself, we use in His place a concept proper to Him."¹

- Ockham distinguishes *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*.

¹ William of Occam, Commentary on the Sentences, I d. 3 q. 2 (Opera philosophica et theologica, Opera theologica vol. II, ed. S. Brown, St. Bonaventure 1970, p. 402,17-22; 413,10-12; 409,19-23.1-7).