



## William of Ockham and the Terminist School Maurice de Wulf

### The Terminist School.

(1) *Excessive Simplicity.* — The terminism of the fourteenth century was a reaction against the formalism of Duns Scotus. The subtle doctor had peopled his philosophy with chimerical entities, and his immediate disciples had multiplied these still more. It was inevitable that this tendency to “realize” abstractions should meet with opposition. The first opposition came from the Thomists; but another group of scholastics carried the reaction too far: these were the terminists. Taking as its motto, *pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate*, terminism made a veritable hecatomb of metaphysical notions; and in doing so it often merely disfigured what it thought to simplify. At the same time, nevertheless, the terminists are indebted to Scotism for many of their scholastic theories, and — what is more important — for a characteristic turn of thought, namely, scepticism.

(2) *Scepticism.* — There is no question here of the deceptive theory which proclaims all certitude illusory: terminism, like all other scholastic systems, was essentially dogmatic in its teaching about certitude. “Scepticism” here denotes an anxiety to restrict the sphere of those truths that can be demonstrated by reason, a tendency to depress fallible reason and exalt infallible faith. The ambit of indemonstrable truths kept steadily widening. Those waverings about the power of reason are not in themselves anti-scholastic, but they fostered an unwholesome attitude of thought, a distrust that was dangerous and unwarrantable: they excited among students in the following period the suspicion that scholasticism was wholly and entirely unsound and that its teachings ought to be rejected *in globo*.

(3) *Encroachment of Logic.* — The study of Ockham’s system will show how the terminists mutilated metaphysics. And after destroying this, they used the debris for the decoration of logic. What they declared illusory in the world of realities they subjected to excessive analysis in the world of mental representations. And so terminism gradually developed the tendency to exaggerate the role of dialectic. William of Ockham himself made much of such logico-grammatical notions as *suppositia*, *significatio*, etc. but he observed some moderation. His disciples, however, seizing on the *Summulae* of Petrus Hispanus, abandoned themselves to an orgy of quibbling and sophism which the Paris Faculty of Arts was powerless to remedy. And with all the logician’s fondness for terminology, the Ockamists multiplied endlessly new words, barbarisms and classifications.

William of Ockham is the real founder of terminism, although he had precursors in the new theory (§ 2). After his time terminism was all the fashion, but many of its exponents exaggerated the theories and teachings of its founder (§ 3).

### William of Ockham: His Life and Works.

WILLIAM OF OCKHAM, born at Ockham in the County of Surrey in England, earned a great

reputation towards 1320 in the University of Paris, where he had followed the lectures of Duns Scotus, his brother in religion. It is likely that William also taught in England. The early portion of his career was devoted mainly to science. From this period date those great works in which he formulated his new theories: the *Super IV. L. Sentent.*, the *Quodlibeta*, the commentaries on Aristotle (*Expositio Aurea super Totam Artem Veterem*) and the *Tractatus Logices*. He resigned his chair in 1323 to devote himself to politics and to religious and ecclesiastical polemics. He defended the disciplinary reforms advocated by the “spirituals”; he conducted a campaign against Boniface VIII. and John XXII. and refused to recognize the temporal power of the Popes.

The fourteenth century was marked by events of grave import for Christianity: in the bosom of the Church itself the struggles of the Great Schism; in the world the insurrection of the Empire against the Papacy. It was realized, little by little, that the great intellectual and social organization of the West was being severely shaken. While in the scientific order philosophy sought to rid itself of the protection of theology, in the political order the modern nationalities were slowly emerging and shaking off the supremacy of the popes. Into the details of these latter long-drawn-out hostilities it is not our business here to enter. In the order of ideas, William of Ockam led the campaign, publishing pamphlets and manifestoes in quick succession: the *Dialogus*, the *Opus nonaginta dierum*, the *Compendium Errorum Joannis Papae XXII.*, the *Quaestiones octo de Auctoritate Summi Pontificis*. Cited to appear before the ecclesiastical court, he managed to escape from Avignon where he had been detained prisoner (1328). With his friends, Michael Cesena and Bona Gratia of Bergamo, he reached the court of Louis of Bavaria, where two years previously John of Jandun and Marsilius of Padua had taken refuge. All historians register William’s salute to the haughty monarch: *Tu me defendas gladio, ego te defendam calamo*. And when the latter wanted to have his son’s adulterous marriage declared valid, in opposition to the laws of the Church, William defended the absolute omnipotence of the State in this as a political matter. He died probably about 1347.

### **William’s Philosophical Teaching. Relations of Philosophy to Theology.**

Following Scotus he separates altogether the *material object* of philosophy from that of theology. Like him, he forbids reason to explore the truths of faith; while he enlarges, to the detriment of philosophy, this forbidden region wherein he believes the intellect to be incapable of reaching certitude. Thus the disciple emphasizes the scepticism of the master: Between the two systems there is in this matter a difference of *degree*, but not of *kind*. STÖCKL points out how in matters purely theological Ockam propounds anti-rational theories, *e.g.*, that God could have become incarnate in an ox or in a stone. In this way Ockam and his successors gave the opponents of Catholic theology a pretext for saying that not only must reason refrain from attempting to demonstrate the truths of theology, but that the latter are represented as actually contrary to reason.

### **Kinds of Composition in Contingent Being.**

William of Ockam admits composition of matter and form; but he denies the distinction between the universal and the individual. Not only is “the individual . . . the true substance, while the universal gets its characteristic, independent form from the action of the intellect”, but furthermore, the universal has no reality at all outside us, for it does not exist *in any shape or form* in Nature. This extreme thesis, directed as it is against the *common* essences of Duns Scotus, also strikes St. Thomas’s theory of *similar* essences. The problem of individuation has

therefore of course no sense in metaphysics. So too he denies all distinction between essence and existence. The universal is in fact entirely banished from metaphysics and transported into psychology and logic. We shall understand his system better when we see his treatment of the psychological aspect of the Universals question.

### **Theodicy.**

The very first page of Ockam's theodicy contains a bold application of his scepticism: the Existence, Unity and Infinity of God are indemonstrable by reason and must derive all their certitude from revelation. The attributes of God are in no way distinct from His essence: they are merely different names arbitrarily applied by us to the same identical reality: the *virtual* distinction of the Thomists has no more *real* foundation for it than the *formal* distinction of the Scotists. The same terminist influences colour his teaching on the Divine Ideas.

### **Psychology.**

The originality of Ockamism is best seen in the domain of psychology. In accordance with William's simplifying tendencies, all the psychical faculties are regarded as identical with one another and with the substance of the soul.

Three new theories characterize his psychology: the theory of the sign; terminism; and his criticism of the *species intentionales*. Every cognitive representation is essentially a sign (*signum*), which, as such, holds the place (*supponere*) of the object signified. This sign, also called a term (*terminus*), is *natural*, in opposition to artificial signs (*secundum institutionem voluntariam*) such as language and writing. There are three distinct cognitions or natural signs of things: (intuitive) sense cognition, intuitive intellectual cognition and abstract intellectual cognition. Here we find the dual division — into sense and intellect — fundamental in all scholastic ideology. But between sensation, which has for object the sensible qualities of things, and the abstract concept which signifies some note or attribute referable to an indefinite multitude of the things of sense, or else seizes on some determination irrespective of its existence or non-existence, Ockam inserts an intermediate cognition, the intuitive concept, which grasps the concrete existence or non-existence of singular things and serves as basis for the knowledge of contingent truths....

We have next to consider *terminism* as an answer to the question: What relation is there between the signs and the things signified, between those various cognitions and the objective reality? Here we must distinguish. Every intuitive cognition, whether by sense or by intellect, attains to the real thing, as it exists outside us. Let us note this admission: it will protect William of Ockam against the undue suspicion of subjectivism. But have our abstract concepts the same *real* objectivity? No. They have no value, William teaches, outside us; for the abstract and universal, to which they lead us, has no existence in the world of reality. The universal concept (*intentio secunda*) has for its direct term mere mental, internal representations, fabricated entirely by the understanding; and we have no right to transport into the *real* world of *Nature* the laws which regulate the ideal world of the phenomena of *Mind*. But if so, what use are Universals, or why does the mind have recourse to such artificial forms? Here is Ockam's answer: The universal holds the place (*supponit*), in the mind, of the multitude of things to which the mind attributes it. By the universal, we conceive realities *as if* they were common to many things; and the products of those universal conceptions serve as predicates in our judgments.

This body of doctrine constitutes what we have already described as *conceptualism*; and it certainly does violence to the thought of Ockam to represent him as a *nominalist*. He himself protested in advance against the absurd theory that would deny to the understanding the power of abstracting and thus identify sensation with intellectual thought. If the abstract concept has no *real* value, it cannot be denied at least an *ideal* value:<sup>1</sup> *in our understanding* there are objects that are common, general, universal. The universal, therefore, is not a mere word (*vox, nomen*) devoid of thought-content, an empty sound (*flatus vocis*), a verbal label, but a conceived object (*intentio, terminus*), a mental substitute (*suppositio*) for a greater or less number of individual realities, according to the degree of its universality. We therefore reject the common classification which places Ockam's philosophy among nominalist systems; and, adopting his own terminology, we will apply to the conceptualism inaugurated by him the title of *terminism* or *intentionalism*.

As might be anticipated, the objection was raised against Ockam's system, that it made all science an illusion, since science is concerned with the universal, that is to say, with a figment, a non-entity! Yes, he replied, science is about the universal, in this sense, however, that the object of science is not a chimerical universal *reality*, but rather the universal *term* (or *intentio*) in the mind. But this mental term is referred to a greater or less number of individual real beings, independent of one another; it has therefore *extrinsic* relations with the outer world, and so science keeps its hold on reality.

Thirdly, we have to note in connection with the terminist theory of *the genesis of our knowledge* William's bitter *criticism of the scholastic teaching about "species intentionales"*. Cognition is not the intussusception of an image (*species*) resembling the thing known, but an immanent act (*actus intelligendi*) which becomes the sign of the thing. Hence the *species intentionalis*, whether sensible or intellectual, is a useless fiction which should be banished from psychology. . . . And since the function of abstracting such species is illusory, so also is the *intellectus agens* to which that function is attributed.

But William of Ockam understood the *species* in an incorrect sense, to which we have already called attention; and of course he demolished the crude conception of the cognitive process involved in that erroneous view. But his criticisms leave intact the *true* notion of the *species intentionalis*; in fact his own conception of the genesis of our ideas differs in no way from that of St. Thomas, since he admits with the Angelic Doctor an action of the outer reality on the intelligence: for both masters alike, the terms passive and active intellect denote the passive and active states of the mind in reference to the known object.<sup>2</sup>

Following Scotus, William of Ockam professes the most absolute *voluntarism*. The will intervenes even in the discursive operations of the understanding — with which, in any case, it is identical, according to the general theory of the psychical faculties. William also teaches the most entire self-determination of volition; confounding merely spontaneous, with deliberately free, action. He remarks, moreover, that since will is identical with the essence of the soul, and the essence of a thing is incompatible with increase or diminution, there can be no such thing as variation in the degree of liberty. Another corollary from the same principle is that the question of the primacy of volition over cognition is idle and meaningless. Applied to the Deity, this absolute autonomy of volition makes the Free Will of God the sovereign arbiter of moral good and evil. But if nothing is *of itself* morally good or evil, the study of nature can teach us nothing about morality: intelligence is powerless to instruct us on the requirements of the Divine Law. Thus, by another new breach, Ockam exposes psychology to the assaults of "scepticism". On the main questions regarding the *nature of the soul* Scotus is closely followed. Besides the intellectual soul, man possesses a *forma corporeitatis* and a sentient soul. And of the intellectual

soul, human reason left to its own unaided powers, can establish neither the spirituality nor the immortality.

**Logic.**

Ockam gave logic a renewal of popularity, adopting all the prolix divisions of the *Summulae* of Petrus Hispanus. He ignored the metaphysics of all questions concerning the Universals and transferred the latter to formal logic, which he described as *omnium artium aptissimum instrumentum*. Logic deals with the propositions of science; it regulates the mental judgments by which we compare abstract concepts that have no reality corresponding to them.

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Maurice de Wulf. *History of Medieval Philosophy*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907.

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