

WILLIAM OF OCKHAM



Occam's razor is a principle of parsimony, economy, or succinctness used in logic and problem-solving. It states that among competing hypotheses, the hypothesis with the fewest assumptions should be selected. The application of the principle often shifts the burden of proof in a discussion. The razor states that one should proceed to simpler theories until simplicity can be traded for greater explanatory power. The simplest available theory need not be most accurate.

One important contribution that he made to modern science and modern intellectual culture was efficient reasoning with the principle of parsimony in explanation and theory building that came to be known as Occam's Razor. This maxim, as interpreted by Bertrand Russell,^[14] states that if one can explain a phenomenon without assuming this or that hypothetical entity, there is no ground for assuming it, i.e. that one should always opt for an explanation in terms of the fewest possible causes, factors, or variables. He turned this into a concern for ontological parsimony; the principle says that one should not multiply entities beyond necessity

He was one of the first medieval authors to advocate a form of church/state separation, and was important for the early development of the notion of property rights. His political ideas are regarded as "natural" or "secular", holding for a secular absolutism. The views on monarchical accountability espoused in his *Dialogus* (written between 1332 and 1347) greatly influenced the Conciliar movement and assisted in the emergence of liberal democratic ideologies.

The theory of supposition was the centerpiece of late medieval semantic theory. Supposition is not the same as signification. First of all, terms signify wherever we encounter them, whereas they have supposition only in the context of a proposition. But the differences go beyond that. Whereas signification is a psychological, cognitive relation, the theory of supposition is, at least in part, a theory of reference. For Ockham, there are three main kinds of supposition:

- Personal supposition, in which a term supposits for (refers to) what it signifies (in either of the first two senses of signification described above). For example, in 'Every dog is a mammal', both 'dog' and 'mammal' have personal supposition.
- Simple supposition, in which a term supposits for a concept it does not signify. Thus, in 'Dog is a species' or 'Dog is a universal', the subject 'dog' has simple supposition. For Ockham the nominalist, the only real universals are universal concepts in the mind and, derivatively, universal spoken or written terms expressing those concepts.
- Material supposition, in which a term supposits for a spoken or written expression it does not signify. Thus, in 'Dog has three letters', the subject 'dog' has material supposition

Like most medieval accounts of knowledge, Ockham's is not much concerned with answering skeptical doubts. He takes it for granted that humans not only can but frequently do know things, and focuses his attention instead on the "mechanisms" by which this knowledge comes about

For Ockham, the only truly necessary entity is God; everything else is contingent. He thus does not accept the principle of sufficient reason, rejects the distinction between essence and existence, and advocates against the Thomistic doctrine of active and passive intellect. His scepticism to which his ontological parsimony request leads appears in his doctrine that human reason can prove neither the immortality of the soul nor the existence, unity, and infinity of God. These truths, he teaches, are known to us by revelation alone.

Ockham was a pioneer of nominalism (pertains to existence), and some consider him the father of modern epistemology, because of his strongly argued position that only individuals exist, rather than supra-individual universals, essences, or forms, and that universals are the products of abstraction from individuals by the human mind and have no extra-mental existence. He denied the real existence of metaphysical universals and advocated the reduction of ontology (study of nature, reality and being)

William of Ockham himself was a theist. He believed in God, and in some validity of scripture; he writes that "nothing ought to be posited without a reason given, unless it is self-evident (literally, known through itself) or known by experience or proved by the authority of Sacred Scripture

In his early work, *On the Connection of the Virtues*, Ockham distinguishes five grades or stages of moral virtue, which have been the topic of considerable speculation in the secondary literature.^[48]

1. The first and lowest stage is found when someone wills to act in accordance with "right reason"—i.e., because it is "the right thing to do."
2. The second stage adds moral "seriousness" to the picture. The agent is willing to act in accordance with right reason even in the face of contrary considerations, even—if necessary—at the cost of death.
3. The third stage adds a certain exclusivity to the motivation; one wills to act in this way *only* because right reason requires it. It is not enough to will to act in accordance with right reason, even heroically, if one does so on the basis of extraneous, non-moral motives.
4. At the fourth stage of moral virtue, one wills to act in this way "precisely for the love of God." This stage "alone is the true and perfect moral virtue of which the Saints speak."
5. The fifth and final stage can be built immediately on either the third or the fourth stage; thus one can have the fifth without the fourth stage. The fifth stage adds an element of extraordinary moral heroism that goes beyond even the "seriousness" of stage two.