OCKHAM: A NOTE ON KNOWLEDGE AND CERTITUDE

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I. The Philosopher

William of Ockham (d. ca. 1349) has often been characterized by historians of philosophy as the predecessor of a decadent scholasticism, a nominalist, who managed to cast doubt on what earlier medieval theologians had been convinced could be philosophically demonstrated.[1] Although a more moderate and even favorable appraisal has emerged of late, there is reason enough for the earlier one. Ockham had questioned, for example, whether any real knowledge of God was possible and had concluded that what could be known about God was not God Himself, even by way of analogy, but a composite concept taken from things. This concept as containing multiple finite perfections could stand for God but could provide no knowledge at all of the Divine Essence.

> I say that neither the unity of God nor His primacy nor His Infinity nor His power nor His goodness nor His perfection are able to be known in themselves. That which we immediately know are some concepts, which are not really God, but which we use in propositions in place of God.[2]

Such a unity of concepts became the subject of all predication about God and "supposed" or substituted for God Himself.

Secondly, Ockham had questioned whether or not it could be proved that God existed. In his discussion of a proof from efficient causality he was never

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[1]Cf, for example, Gilson, E., *The Unity of Philosophical Experience,* ch. 3, pp. 61-91. (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1937.)

De Wulf, M. *Histoire de La Philosophie Medieval,* T. III (6th ed., Paris: J. Vrin, 1947.)

Abbagnano, N., *Guglielmo di Occam,* (Lanciano, 1931). Masner, G., "Drei Zweifler am Kausalprinzip," *Jahrbuch fur Philosophie,* 1912.

G. Leff in his latest work, *William of Ockham,* (Manchester University Press, Rowman and Littlefield, 1975) writes more favorably of Ockham and attempts to mitigate the harsher judgments of earlier authors.

[2]*I Sent.,* 2, 9M., Lyons, 1495. Reprinted in 1966.

certain that a series of efficient causes would ever lead to a first cause.[3] Nor was he certain of secondary causality, since God could also at any time do what any secondary cause does.

> From this it follows that it cannot be demonstrated that any effect is produced by a secondary cause; it may always happen that when fire is brought near to the combustible, combustion occurs, still it is possible that the fire is not the cause of the combustion, because God could have ordained that whenever fire is present He Himself could have caused the combustion.[4]

Even if one could establish something as an effect, it would only lead to the affirmation of a cause in general, not to a knowledge of what that cause might be in particular.[5]

A proof from final causality fared no better. In the first place such causality is only rationally distinct from efficient causality.[6] Secondly, it cannot be established that natural operations are intended by some agent.

> It cannot be proved from per se evident propositions or from experience that any effect has a final cause distinct from an efficient cause, because it cannot be sufficiently proved that any effect has any sort of final cause.[7]

Such natural operations follow a set pattern and would do so by reason of their intrinsic natures whether an outside agent existed or not. Finality only shows up clearly in activity flowing from goals freely chosen by rational agents. But such freely chosen ends never necessarily include God. In fact,

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[3] "Secundo dicit (Scotus) quod Deus est causa prima primitate illimitationis et primitate durationis primo modo dicta. Patet quod Deus est perfectior omnibus, concurrit etiam ad omnem effectum, quod non facit quaecumque alia causa. *Negativa etiam patet,* quia quamvis Deus possit causare aliquem effectum et postea permittere aliam causam secundam conservare et per consequens agere, non tamen hoc est universaliter verum, imo raro vel nunquam accidit." *I Sent.,* 45 H. Here Ockham admits the possibility of a causal line ending at a secondary cause instead of the First Cause, even though this might happen rarely or not at all.

[4] *II Sent.,* 5R.

[5] "Quocumque causato cognito potest cognosci quaelibet causa in universali, puta quod habet finem et efficientem, et multae conditiones illarum causarum possunt ex illa re cognosci. Sed illud quod est causa non potest ex quocumque causato in particulari cognosci vel cognitione propria sive equivalenti." *I Sent.,* 1, 4.

[6] "Causalitas finis non est aliud nisi esse amatum et desideratum ab agente efficienter propter quod amatum fit effectus. Sicut causalitas materiae non est nisi informari, et causalitas formae non est nisi informare, ita causalitas finis non est aliud nisi amari et desiderari efficienter, sine quo amore et disiderio non fieret effectus. Ex his patet quod causa finalis et efficiens ratione distinguuntur..." *Quodlibet IV,* 1., Argentine Edition, 1491.

[7] *Ibid.*

there is no desire in the human will by nature which leads such a will toward Infinite Good.[8]

The situation gets no better when we turn toward the self. The question here is whether or not we know we possess an immaterial soul. Ockham's answer could not be more clear.

> If we understand by the intellectual soul an immaterial and incorruptible form which is totally in the whole and totally in each part, we cannot know either through reason or experience that we possess such a form.[9]

The reason is that, while we may have an intuitive knowledge of our acts of intellect and will,[10] such knowledge cannot lead beyond itself to an affirmation of an immaterial substantial form in which they inhere. From the knowledge of one reality directly experienced we can never argue to the existence of another. From what is directly intuited one can only affirm the reality of the object of that intuition. This is the activity, and our knowledge cannot proceed certainly beyond activity to a substantial source. However probable or persuasive such an inference might be, the reality of the human soul is held only by faith.

The conclusions are startling, especially when one looks back to Ockham's great predecessors: Bonaventure, Aquinas, and Scotus. Yet Ockham was convinced that all of them had gone too far in the range of certitude they granted to human reason. The ascent from the finite to the Infinite was much more difficult than had been supposed, especially if one held the doctrine of a free creation. Such a creation manifested only a limited way in which God had decreed to operate outside Himself. There was an infinite number of other ways in which He could have manifested Himself. The Christian God is no Greek Demiurge looking toward the Forms, nor an Unmoved Mover determined by the necessity of His own Divine Essence. If creation is totally free, then it can only tell us of a given mode of the divine action and nothing at all of what God is in Himself. Further, if God is free, it follows that He can at any time act within His creation in other ways than He has ordinarily decreed. The distinction between the absolute power of God and His ordinate power is given much more emphasis by Ockham than had previously been the case.

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[8] "Teneo oppositum. Non est in voluntate natura appetitus in bonum infinitum." *Quodlibet VII,* 20.

[9] "Dico quod intelligendo per animam intellectivam formam immaterialem incorruptibilem quae tota est in tota et tota in qualibet parte, non potest sciri evidenter per rationem vel experientiam quod talis forma sit in nobis, neque intelligere talem substantiam propriam sit in nobis, nec quod talis anima sit forma corporis. Quidquid de hoc senserit Aristoteles non curo, quia ubique dubitative videtur loqui. Sed ista tria sola fide tenemus." *Quodlibet I,* 10.

[10] *Ibid.,* I., 14.

To make this possible Ockham had also done something just short of violence to the metaphysical doctrine of the Divine Ideas. All theologians including St. Augustine had held the doctrine, and Ockham could scarcely deny it. But he could interpret it, and he did. He refused to place such Ideas in the Divine Essence Itself. His problem here was the absolute unity of God and the further difficulty that such Ideas were a threat to the freedom of the Divine Will. Hence Ockham concluded that the Ideas were synonymous with the possibility of creatures.

> The Ideas are not subjectively and really in God, but they are in Him only objectively, that is, as what is known by Him. The Ideas are the creatures themselves as producible by God.[11]

They are not realities or exemplars within God but connotative terms which signify the creature directly and indirectly its producibility by God.[12] If, then, one should ask how it is possible for God to know the world which He created, the answer is not available. There are some things which remain a mystery for us. But there is no doubt that God knows the world.

> From the very fact that He is God, God knows everything.[13]

In the light of all this one cannot be too surprised, when historians of philosophy attribute a scepticism to the English Franciscan which cast into doubt much of the certitude affirmed by Bonaventure and Aquinas. Yet one must go cautiously here. In the first place Ockham was not just a philosopher. Like all the medieval doctors he was primarily a theologian. And also like them it would never have occurred to Ockham that truth lay only in the realm of philosophical speculation. Secondly, for all of his Aristotelianism Ockham was part of a tradition which was deeply imbued with the teaching of Augustine. And while he rejected some Augustinian doctrines, as others had done before him, he remained basically committed to an Augustinian approach which saw truth and certitude as radically one, involving both reason and revelation. It was that conviction which at least mitigates and ultimately salvages whatever lack of certitude shows up on the purely philosophical level. Truth for Ockham was broader than philosophy, and certitude was not once and for all tied to demonstrative argument. Knowledge might well end in mystery and proof become impossible, but certitude still remained available to the wayfarer.

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[11] *I Sent.*, 25, 5 G.

[12] "Idea importat ipsammet creaturam in recto et etiam ipsammet in obliquo; et ideo de ipsamet creatura est predicabilis ut ipsa sit idea, sed non est praedicabilis de agente cognoscente, quia nec cognitio nec cognoscens est idea, sicut nec exemplar." *Ibid.*, E.

[13] "Ex hoc ipso quod Deus est Deus cognoscit omnia." *Ibid.*, R.

II. The Theologian

Ockham rejected philosophical certitude beyond the intuition of the singular and reflection and demonstration based thereon. But he was far from rejecting all certain conclusions which transcended the empirical. In the *Summa Logicae,* where he discussed topical syllogisms, those based on only probable premisses, he was quite willing to admit that such arguments can lead to full certitude.

> Not every topical syllogism always makes for doubt and fear, but it frequently happens that such arguments lead to a firm faith without any doubt, and we adhere to probable conclusions just as if we had certain knowledge of them.[14]

It is clear, I think, that Ockham's view of probable conclusions is quite different from that of Hume and others who followed Hume. Ockham calls the arguments for the existence of God, for example, persuasive, even though they are not demonstrative. And he means by demonstration an argument which is logically exact and metaphysically valid. Most arguments will fall short of such natural certitude, but they remain arguments which are reasonable and persuasive and upon which one could rely for meaningful activity. In the last analysis, however, such "probable" conclusions obtain their full certitude not from demonstration but from faith. And it is the area of theology which treats of faith and the truth which faith adheres to.

In his treatment of the nature of theology Ockham objected to most of what his predecessors had to say. He disagreed with Aquinas, for example, who thought that theology provided certain knowledge, even though it was based on revealed premisses known only to God and the blessed. From non-evident premisses Ockham thought one could draw only probable conclusions. Hence he had to find theological certitude elsewhere.[15]

The subject of theology is not God in His Divine Nature. We cannot know that. As we have seen, we can only formulate a concept which stands for God, which is taken from things, and which represents only the way God has freely chosen to manifest Himself in this particular created order. It is with God so manifesting Himself that theology deals. Furthermore, theology is not knowledge in any purely natural sense of the term.

> Everything which is evidently known is either known per se, or is known through what is known per se, or it is known experientially by means of intuitive knowledge, and this mediately or immediate-

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[14] *Summa Logicae,* III, 1, c. 1., Venice, 1506.

[15] *I Sent.,* Prol., Q. VII, Guillelmi De Ockham, *Opera Philosophica et Theologica,* vol. 1, ed. Gedeon Gal, O.F.M. Universitatis Sancti Bonaventurae, St. Bonaventure, N.Y., 1967.

> ly. But in none of these ways are the *credibilia* able to be known. That they are not per se known is clear, for then they would be known to infidels. Nor are they known through what is known per se, for then any infidel rightly questioned would assent to them, according to the blessed Augustine *I. Retract.*, c VIII. Nor are they known through experience by a mediate or immediate intuition, because all intuitive knowledge which a believer has can also be had by an infidel...Thus an infidel would be able to have evident knowledge of the *credibilia.*[16]

Knowledge is always of what can be known per se or of what can be demonstrated from such per se propositions. Theology is rather grounded in faith, and this faith is of two kinds. There is the *fides infusa,* the gift given in baptism, and the *fides adquisita,* the developing insights into revelation as one becomes more and more aware of what is contained in the faith. The *fides infusa* provides a general orientation to whatever is revealed. In this sense theology is a unified habit or *scientia.* But theology is also a collection of multiple habits differing among themselves as one assents to different propositions which have been revealed.[17] It is in this latter area that theology finds its special task. And it is meant to and can only perform this task within the confines of faith itself. Hence it follows that a non-believer cannot engage in theology.

> Therefore I say that theology with respect to the *credibilia* increases the habit of acquired faith when this habit precedes its study; when, however, it does not precede it, then the habit of acquired faith is acquired, if one is a believer. There is no such habit in a non-believer.[18]

A theological endeavor on the part of a non-believer would arrive at best at only probable conclusions based on only probable premisses, or on premisses beyond the possibility of all certain knowledge. For the unbeliever has to assume such premisses and then proceed logically to reach conclusions derived from them. But the unbeliever's assumption does not make the premisses any more certain in themselves. They remain probable, and the best an unbeliever can do is to recognize that the conclusion arrived at would follow certainly, only if the premisses had been accepted as certain.

What, then, distinguishes the theological habit grounded in faith from the probable conclusions of the non-believer? It is the certitude which is grounded

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[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *I Sent.*, Prol., Q. VIII.

[18] *Ibid.*, Q. VII.

in faith, the firm adherence to what is revealed, which because of faith transcends all probability and all fear of error. In asking the question whether the same truth can be the subject matter of more than one science Ockham replied as follows:

> ...granted that this is not possible in sciences naturally acquired, still the same truth can pertain to a science properly so called and to another more loosely defined. But this latter science will generate a certitude based on adherence, as is the case with theology for the most part.[19]

Quoting Augustine, he speaks further about this certitude generated by faith.

> Faith is the presence of things absent; faith is the interior possession of what is external; faith is the internal vision of what is not seen. From Augustine's authority it is clear that, although some things are not intuited but known only abstractively, nevertheless the faith by which they are believed is intuited and not just known abstractively.[20]

This certitude in faith includes both necessary and contingent propositions. This is true since the certitude comes neither from the necessary connection of subject and predicate, nor by any deductive process. There is no evidence shining out of the revealed proposition leading to a demonstrative conclusion. Nor are contingent propositions any less capable of being held with certitude; for they, too, as revealed and accepted in faith partake in the certitude provided by faith, probable as they may be in themselves. It must be noted also that propositions taken from other areas of knowledge may be appropriated by theology, but in this case the guarantee for the truth of the proposition is faith, not evidence.

But Ockham was still not finished. He had simply separated demonstrative knowledge from faith. But he had not separated faith from certitude. And on his own terms he was willing to reunite them. There can be no faith in demonstrative or evident knowledge. But on the other hand theology can open itself to all areas of knowledge, elevate those areas to a certitude which they could never have of themselves. In a sense, all natural knowledge is assumed by theology, clarified by it, related to an end far beyond it. Hence, all other areas of knowledge become in truth the handmaidens of theology. As G. Leff puts it,

> Ockham's uncompromising refusal to allow theology any dependence upon evident knowledge shows a Christian awareness

[19] *I Sent.*, Prol., Q. I.

[20] *Ibid.*

> as great as any of the scholastics and a rigour greater than all of them: he repeatedly reduces previous attempts to establish a bridge between theology and knowledge by the argument that theology would then be open to the unbeliever and believer alike. This does not however lead him to reduce theology to a mere act of belief. Which brings us to the second conclusion: that if on the one hand faith makes theology inaccessible to natural knowledge, on the other hand it makes natural knowledge accessible to theology. ...Theology can therefore draw upon all the sciences and every kind of knowledge, necessary, contingent, complex, incomplex to increase faith, just because assent to all theological truth is from pre-existing faith.[21]

It is here finally in theology that whatever is doubtful or uncertain on the purely natural level—and especially in many of the conclusions of the metaphysicians—is given a surety and a certitude which go beyond all natural certitude or the lack thereof. In a world of limited insight and limited evidence, a world freely created by a God Who may have manifested something of His *potentia ordinata,* but Whose *potentia absoluta* is infinite, Ockham can well afford to doubt many a metaphysical conclusion. What he could never doubt were propositions flowing out of infused and acquired faith, even when they repeated the same doubtful conclusions drawn from the merely natural order of things. Ockham is in the long run a much more thoroughgoing Augustinian than he is an Aristotelian. He never made the strict distinction which some of his predecessors had between an order of natural truth achievable by human reason and an order of strictly supernatural truth accessible only through faith. He never denied that human reason could naturally acquire truth, but it was a limited truth restricted to an empirical base. And the range of the natural human intellect was limited for its certitude to that order. That intellect could speculate about non-empirical truths, but the conclusions reached were probable based on persuasive reasons.

That sort of limit placed on the human intellect did not particularly bother Ockham. That was the way a freely creating God had willed it to be. And if that same God freely chose to manifest to man another order of truth beyond the capability of human resource and guarantee it with His own truth, then we could only be grateful for the gift and accept the certitude which went with it. At this point there is a fusion of the natural and the supernatural with the higher truth elevating all purely natural truth and infusing it with a certitude it could not have of itself. Ockham was primarily a Christian theologian, not just a logician or a metaphysician. In this, too, be was quite medieval. But he was never a medieval forerunner of David Hume.

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[21]Leff, G., *William of Ockham,* (Manchester University Press, Rowman and Littlefield, 1975), pp. 358-59.