

# Definition of God: the problem and Ockham's solution

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### 1. Introduction

William of Ockham,<sup>1</sup> the Franciscan school man, was a nominalist and the person behind the so-called “Ockham’s Razor”, the principle which says “*Pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate*”, that is, “Plurality (entities) should not be posited without necessity”<sup>2</sup>. This principle, as usually understood, recommends that explanations should introduce as few assumptions and postulate as few hypothetical entities as possible, eliminating, or “shaving off”, those that do not make a difference in the explanatory scheme. Ockham’s nominalism and his “razor” revolutionized scientific theorizing and, in philosophy, the approach to the problem of the existence of God. In explaining God, we have the problem of trying to account for the essence of an absolute entity using human language which is finite. How this problem was treated by Ockham and his ‘razor’ is the subject of this short paper.

### 2. Definition of “God”: the problem and Ockham’s solution

Name indicates identity, the peculiar character of the thing in itself. But the name is not itself the essence of the thing named. Essence is much more than the name of the thing. By naming a thing, we are actually reducing the essence of that thing, since human language is unable to express completely the essence of things. In this case how can we name God, His essence and existence? Finding solutions to out of this problem, Ockham focuses his investigation beginning with logic and analyze doctrine of Saint Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus.

In his *Summa of Logic*, following Aristotle’s lead, Ockham analyzes three levels of language:<sup>3</sup> written, spoken and mental (associated respectively with the activities of writing, speaking, and thinking). Each is a fully developed language in its own right, with vocabulary, syntax, and formation rules. A term in spoken or written languages is equivocal if it is subordinated to distinct concepts at one and the same time. Thus mental languages is at least a partial description of the way human minds actually functions. For Ockham, the terms of mental languages are concepts; its propositions are mental judgments, and the significations of terms (concepts) is established by nature once and for all (in English, we say *dog*, in Italian, we say *il cane*). The spoken, written and

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<sup>1</sup> Data about Ockham’s life varies. Some sources date his life circa 1280 – 1347. He received his bachelor’s degree at Oxford and his master’s at Paris, where he taught from 1315-1320. Tradition says he was a pupil of Duns Scotus, also a Franciscan. When he was 23, he began his theological training at Oxford and did the required two-year cycle of lectures by commenting on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*. In 1323, he was summoned to the papal court in Avignon to answer charges of heresy. He left Avignon without permission and was excommunicated as a result. He died in Munich in 1349.

<sup>2</sup> Bastita Mondin., *A History of mediaeval philosophy*, Pontifical Urbaniana University Press, 1991, p.383

<sup>3</sup>Peter King, “Consequence as Inferences; Mediaeval Proof Theory 1300-1350” in *Medieval Formal Logic : Obligations, Insolubles, and Consequences*, edited by Mikko Yrjönssuuri, The New Synthese Historical Library 49: Kluwer Academic Press, pp 117-129

mental languages refer to signification. There are four different kinds of signification, according to Ockham. As summarized in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:<sup>4</sup>

In the first sense, a term signifies whatever things it is truly predicable of by means of a present-tensed, assertoric copula. That is, a term *t* signifies a thing *x* if and only if ‘This is a *t*’ is true, pointing to *x*. In second sense, *t* signifies *x* if and only if ‘This is (or was, or will be, or can be) a *t*’ is true, pointing to *x*. In the third and fourth senses, terms can also be said to signify certain things they are *not* truly predicable of, no matter the tense or modality of the copula. For instance, the word ‘brave’ not only makes us think of brave people (whether presently existing or not); it also makes us think of the *bravery* in virtue of which we call them “brave.” Thus, ‘brave’ signifies and is truly predicable of brave people, but also signifies bravery, even though it is not truly predicable of bravery.

In this instance, Ockham is indicating the difference between concept (voice, *vox*) and thing (*res*) and their mutual relation. Voice, first of all, as explained by Aristotle, is the medium of the *passiones animae*, the desires of the soul (‘emotions’). However, the voice *in se* is not the same as the *passiones animae*.<sup>5</sup> The voice does not represent the entirety of *passiones animae*. Limited as it is, the voice can only represent particular expressions of the *passiones animae*. When I say, “ I love you,” these three words, while they express an expression of my *passiones animae*, do not represent completely my *passiones animae*, my desire or my will.

For Ockham, a ‘name’ has two functions. It indicates a thing (*res*), a sensible object and a mental concept, notion. A ‘name’ (*idea*) is prior to the thing. After having the concept or naming a thing, then it needs a vehicle to express itself, a symbol (a sensible image), and then a pronounced word. Therefore, we find first the name (concept or notion) and then the thing (*res*). The second indicates the first mediated by the pronounced word (*vox*, *voce*)<sup>6</sup>. This concept is close to the *Platonic Idea* which is a metaphysical notion. Plato proposed that *idea* (archetype) is a principle of being. It is the only true reality (noumenon) and the *sensible* is merely a copy (phenomenon) of the true idea. In Plato, a sensible thing (phenomenon) cannot represent precisely its original (*idea*). A triangle being described by a mathematics teacher on the blackboard is not same as the triangle in his mind. *Idea* is a universal and the sensible is particular. In the *Tractatus Logicae*, Ockham formulates his own doctrine that the universal is an intention of the mind. He said,”

*Nullum universale est substantia quomodocumque consideretur, sed quodlibet universale est intentione animae quae secundum unam opinionem probabilem ab actu intelligendi non distinguitur.*<sup>7</sup>

For Ockham, universals are the terms which we use in propositions about particulars. The actual object is individual. The general meanings of terms are intended by the mind, but they are not in

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<sup>4</sup> Spade., “William of Ockham” in Edward N.Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2006 Edition),[http:// plato.stanford.edu/entries/ockham/](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ockham/)

<sup>5</sup> Pellegrini, *Guglielmo di Occam fra Logica e Assoluto*, Edizione Giuseppe Laterza, Bari, 2002, pp.148-151.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> William Turner, *History of Philosophy*, Ginn and Company, Boston, 1929, p.405.

themselves realities. Metaphysically, these ‘universal’ concepts are singular entities like all others; they are ‘universal’ only in the sense of being “predicable of many”.<sup>8</sup>

But how can we speak of existence and essence of God as absolute thing? I will try to answer this question by referring to Ockham’s critique of Saint Thomas and Duns Scotus on the doctrine of essence and existence. Aquinas articulates his treatise on God in two parts: God’s existence and His nature. Studying of Aquinas metaphysic of being, there we saw how he reaches God from the contingency of being and through the real distinction between essence and act of being in being. The adequate causes for these phenomena can only be the *Esse ipsum*. This *Esse ipsum*, since it is the reality that is the full of being and only being is the source for every the other being<sup>9</sup>. In Aquinas essence of God is identical to His being. In his critique of Thomas, Ockham argued that Aquinas had taught that the essences exist only in the human mind, but like wise in things and in the divine mind. For Ockham, there are no essences common to various things, because in reality only individuals exist; muss less can this exist in the divine mind, because this would be an obstacle to God’s freedom. For God, to bring about something that involves a contradiction is to menace His rationality and the intelligibility of the universe<sup>10</sup>. Regarding God’s existence, Scotus declared that only causality is a valid proof. That is why he does not exclude the possibility of proving this *a priori* and affirmed that, Anselm’s ontological argument only persuasive value. For Scotus, God can be given innumerable names, but the proper one, the one which belong only to Him, and hence the one which best qualifies Him with respect to other being, is the name of “infinite being in act”<sup>11</sup>. But according to Ockham, doctrine of formal distinction (not a logical distinction, but the distinction “a parte rei”) between existence and essence will introduce many distinction to God and things<sup>12</sup>.

For Ockham only “a posteriori” argument is valid to speak of the existence of God because “a posteriori” demonstrations do not have absolute value, but only probable value. According to him, we do not have proper concepts of divine nature, but only common concepts (common to creatures and God), which do not represent the divine nature (*quid rei*). We do not have a real value, but only a nominal one (*quid nominis*)<sup>13</sup>. In Ockham, We are only indirect identifications of God, mediated by abstract understanding . But by the abstract understanding we can not identify properly God *in se*, because every understanding of God, is only an experience of all creation, it is not a God. God is being. God is He who Is. His *esse* takes the place of essence. Every being is an essence endowed with an existence, the notion of a being does not properly belong to God.

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<sup>8</sup> Radoslav A. Tsanoff, *The Great Philosophers*, II edition, Harper & Row publisher – New York, 1964, pp 217.

<sup>9</sup> Mondin., *Op.Cit.*, p.319

<sup>10</sup> Stephen and McGrade (eds), *William of Ockham- A Sort Discourse on Tyrannical Government*, Cambridge University Press, 2002 p. xv. .

<sup>11</sup> Mondin., *Op.Cit.*, p.383.

<sup>12</sup> Turner., *Op.Cit.*, p.390.

<sup>13</sup> Mondin., *Op.Cit.*, p.384.

Ockham shows that the reality of God as the *infinitus intensivo* can as little be demonstrated from *efficientia*, *causalitas*, *eminentia*, as from the divine knowledge of the infinite or from the simplicity of his nature. The entire schema of salvation planned by the *voluntas ordinata* is based on no inner necessity, but is determined by the fact that it pleased God. As a matter of fact, to please God and nothing else. We cannot really know God by naming him or by defining, because our concepts are incapable of capturing his essence, and by doing so, we are actually reducing him.

### 3. Conclusion

Since God is the pure act of being, he is infinite by his very notion. In Ockham, we find a radical expression of faith. Natural theology uses reason alone to understand God, as contrasted with revealed theology which is founded upon scriptural revelations. The idea of God in Ockham is not established by evident experiences or evident reasoning. All we know about God, we know from revelation. So the foundation of all theology is faith. Ockham in this case introduces faith (*sola fides*) in his philosophy. In Ockham we return to “*credo quia absurdum est*.”

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