

# The Nominalist Revolution and the Origin of Modernity

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## The Theological Crisis of Late Medieval Thought

While the modern world became conscious of itself in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it would be as much a mistake to believe that modernity began at that time as it would be to believe that human life begins when one first becomes self-conscious. Modernity did not spring forth full-grown from the head of Galileo, Bacon, Descartes, or Hobbes but arose over a long period of time and as a result of the efforts of many different people in a variety of contexts. As we discussed above, it is one of the chief characteristics of modernity to conceive of itself as radically new and unprecedented. This is the consequence of a peculiarly modern understanding of human capacities and of the way in which human being unfolds in time. However, there are good reasons to doubt that this modern self-understanding is correct. As Oedipus tragically discovered, no one is “fortune’s child”; everyone and everything has an origin and is shaped in decisive ways by that origin. To begin to understand the nature of the modern world, it is thus crucial that we examine its early, “pre-conscious” development in the three hundred years between the collapse of the medieval world and the rise of modernity.

The origins of the medieval world can be traced to the synthesis of Christianity and pagan philosophy in the Hellenistic world of late antiquity. This began in Alexandria in the first and second centuries. Here various strains of Christian thought, eastern religious beliefs, Neoplatonism, and a variety of other ancient philosophical views were amalgamated in different and at times conflicting ways, reflecting the intellectual and spiritual ferment of the times. This process of amalgamation was clarified and institutionalized when Christianity was adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine. The various conflicting strains of Christianity were fused into a formalized doctrine in the series of councils [20] beginning with the Council of Nicea (323). However, despite this doctrinal consolidation enforced by imperial authority, the tensions within Christianity between revelation with its emphasis on divine omnipotence and incarnation, on one hand, and philosophy with its emphasis on rationalism and the notion of a rational cosmos, on the other, were not so easily resolved and

remained a continuing problem for Christianity throughout its long history. Indeed, much if not all of the succeeding development of Christian theology was made necessary by the continual and periodically deepening antagonism between these two elements of Christianity.

During the early medieval period, the knowledge of the impact of Greek philosophy on Christianity was largely lost in Western Europe, although Boethius provided a slim connection to this earlier intellectual tradition. The decisive event in medieval Christianity was the rediscovery of Aristotle, largely through contact with the Arab world in Spain and the Levant. This led, shortly after the millennium, to the rise of scholasticism, which was the greatest and most comprehensive theological attempt to reconcile the philosophical and scriptural elements in Christianity.

While there was considerable variety within scholasticism, its classic form was realism. Realism, as the scholastics understood it, was a belief in the extra-mental existence of universals. Drawing heavily on a Neoplatonic reading of Aristotle, scholastic realists argued that universals such as species and genera were the ultimately real things and that individual beings were merely particular instances of these universals. Moreover, these universals were thought to be nothing other than divine reason made known to man either by illumination, as Augustine had suggested, or through the investigation of nature, as Aquinas and others argued. Within this realist ontology, nature and reason reflected one another. Nature could consequently be described by a syllogistic logic that defined the rational structure of the relationships of all species to one another. Moreover, while God transcended his creation, he was reflected in it and by analogy could be understood through it. Thus, logic and natural theology could supplement or, in the minds of some, even replace revelation. For similar reasons, man did not need Scripture to inform him of his earthly moral and political duties. He was a natural being with a natural end and was governed by the laws of nature. Scripture, of course, was necessary in order to understand everything that transcended nature, including man’s supernatural destiny, but earthly life could be grasped philosophically.

For all of its magnificence, the cathedral of scholastic thought depended on the delicate counter-balancing of Christian belief and pagan rationalism, and it was the instability of this relationship that brought it down. [21] This balance was threatened both by the growing influence of reason and secularism within the church, which fostered a falling away from Christian

practices, and by the ever recurring and ever more urgent demands for a more original Christianity, based on revelation and/or an imitation of the life of Christ. The preservation of medieval Christianity depended upon a reconciliation of these two powerful and opposing impulses. Such a synthesis, however, could only be maintained in theory by the creation of an ever more elaborate theology and in practice by the ever increasing use of papal and princely power.

The immediate cause of the dispute that shattered this synthesis was the growth of Aristotelianism both within and outside the church. The increasing interest in Aristotle was in part an inevitable consequence of the growth of scholasticism itself, but it was decisively accelerated by the reintroduction of many Aristotelian texts to Christian Europe through the commentaries of the great Islamic philosophers Avicenna and Averroes. The most visible manifestation of this new interest in Aristotle was the development of an independent system of philosophy alongside theology and a new kind of secular Christian intellectual. This phenomenon was viewed with deep suspicion by the pious defenders of a more “original” Christianity not merely because of its pagan roots but also and perhaps more importantly because of its connection to Islam. Paganism was a known and tolerable evil; Islam, by contrast, was an ominous theological and political threat. This was especially true after the failure of the Crusades. For almost two hundred years Christianity had seemed to gain ground against Islam, especially in the East, but after the loss of all the Christian colonies in the Levant in the later thirteenth century and the rise of Islamic military power, this optimism dimmed and the suspicion of Islamic influences on Christian thought became more intense. The growth of Aristotelianism in this context was often seen by suspicious defenders of the faith as the growth of Averroism.

The church attempted to limit what it saw as a theologically subversive development by fiat. Aristotelianism was condemned first in 1270 and then more fully in 1277 by the Bishop of Paris Etienne Tempier and by Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Kilwardby. The position staked out in this Condemnation laid great emphasis on omnipotence as the cardinal characteristic of God, and in the succeeding years, this notion of omnipotent freedom came to constitute the core of a new anti-Aristotelian notion of God. This view of God was reflected in part in the work of Duns Scotus but more clearly and decisively in the work of William of Ockham and the nominalist movement his thought engendered.

[22] Ockham was born in England between 1280 and 1285. After entering the Franciscan order at an early age, he completed his studies at Oxford. He was probably not the student of his famous successor, Duns Scotus, but was certainly deeply influenced by his

thought, which remained strong at Oxford. Most of Ockham’s philosophical and theological work was completed between 1317 and 1324, when he was summoned to Avignon to answer charges of heresy. In 1326, fifty-one of his assertions were declared open to censure although none was actually condemned.

Drawing on the work of earlier proto-nominalist thinkers such as Roscelin and Abelard, and the work of Henry of Ghent and Scotus, Ockham laid out in great detail the foundations for a new metaphysics and theology that were radically at odds with scholasticism. Faith alone, Ockham argues, teaches us that God is omnipotent and that he can do everything that is possible, that is to say, everything that is not contradictory. Thus, every being exists only as a result of his willing it and it exists as it does and as long as it does only because he so wills it. Creation is thus an act of sheer grace and is comprehensible only through revelation. God creates the world and continues to act within it, bound neither by its laws nor by his previous determinations. He acts simply and solely as he pleases and, as Ockham often repeats, he is no man’s debtor. There is thus no immutable order of nature or reason that man can understand and no knowledge of God except through revelation. Ockham thus rejected the scholastic synthesis of reason and revelation and in this way undermined the metaphysical/theological foundation of the medieval world.

This notion of divine omnipotence was responsible for the demise of realism. God, Ockham argued, could not create universals because to do so would constrain his omnipotence. If a universal did exist, God would be unable to destroy any instance of it without destroying the universal itself. Thus, for example, God could not damn any one human being without damning all of humanity. If there are no real universals, every being must be radically individual, a unique creation of God himself, called forth out of nothing by his infinite power and sustained by that power alone. To be sure, God might employ secondary causes to produce or sustain an entity, but they were not necessary and were not ultimately responsible for the creation or the continued existence of the entity in question.

The only necessary being for Ockham was God himself. All other beings were contingent creations of his will. In a technical sense, the things God chooses to bring into existence already have a nature, but these natures are not themselves universal but apply only to each individual thing. Moreover, they are infinite in number and chosen freely by divine will. [23] These “natures” thus do not in any real sense constrain divine will except insofar as they exclude the impossible, that is, the logically contradictory. They are neither implied by nor are they the presupposition of anything else. In this way, Ockham’s assertion of ontological individualism undermines not only ontological realism but

also syllogistic logic and science, for in the absence of real universals, names become mere signs or signs of signs. Language thus does not reveal being but in practice often conceals the truth about being by fostering a belief in the reality of universals. In fact, all so-called universals are merely second or higher order signs that we as finite beings use to aggregate individual beings into categories. These categories, however, do not denote real things. They are only useful fictions that help us make sense out of the radically individualized world. However, they also distort reality. Thus, the guiding principle of nominalist logic for Ockham was his famous razor: do not multiply universals needlessly. While we cannot, as finite beings, make sense of the world without universals, every generalization takes us one more step away from the real. Hence, the fewer we employ the closer we remain to the truth.

Since each individual being for Ockham is contingent upon God's free will, there can be no knowledge of created beings prior to investigation. As a result, humans cannot understand nature without an investigation of the phenomena themselves. Syllogism is thus replaced by hypothesis as the foundation of science. Moreover, human knowledge can never move beyond hypothesis, for God is free in the fullest sense, that is, free even from his previous decisions. He can thus overturn anything he has established, interrupt any chain of causes, or create the world again from the beginning if he wants to. There is therefore no absolute necessity except for God's will. God, according to Ockham, did not even have to send his son in the form of a man; the savior might have been a donkey or a rock.

In defending such a radical notion of omnipotence, Ockham and his followers came very close to denying the truth of revelation. They sought to avoid this heretical conclusion by distinguishing between God's *potentia absoluta* and his *potentia ordinata*, between his absolute and his ordained power, between what God could do and what he determined that he would do. This distinction, however, was difficult to maintain because God was under no obligation to keep his promises or to act consistently. For nominalism God is, to use a technical term, "indifferent," that is, he recognizes no natural or rational standards of good and evil that guide or constrain his will. What is good is good not in itself but simply because he wills it. Thus, while today God may save the saints and damn the sinners, tomorrow he may do the reverse, recreating the world from its very [24] beginning if necessary. To be fair, neither Ockham nor most of his followers believed that God was likely to do this. They were for the most part probabilists, that is to say, they believed that in all likelihood God could be relied upon to keep his promises. They thus did not really believe that God would damn the saints or save the sinners, but they insisted

that such a possibility could not be dismissed without denying God's divinity.

Most nominalists were convinced that human beings could know little about God and his intentions beyond what he reveals to them in Scripture. Natural theology, for example, can prove God's existence, infinity, and supremacy, according to Ockham, but it cannot even demonstrate that there is only one God.<sup>15</sup> Such a radical rejection of scholastic theology clearly grew out of a deep distrust not merely of Aristotle and his Islamic interpreters but of philosophic reason itself. In this sense, Ockham's thought strengthened the role of revelation in Christian life.

Ockham also rejected the scholastic understanding of nature. Scholasticism imagined nature to be teleological, a realm in which divine purposes were repeatedly realized. Particular entities became what they already potentially were in attaining their special end. They thus saw motion as directed toward the good. The nominalist rejection of universals was thus a rejection not merely of formal but also of final causes. If there were no universals, there could be no universal ends to be actualized. Nature, thus, does not direct human beings to the good. Or to put the matter more positively, nominalism opens up the possibility of a radically new understanding of human freedom.

The fact that human beings have no defined natural ends does not mean that they have no moral duties. The moral law continues to set limits on human action. However, the nominalists believe that this law is known only by revelation. Moreover, there is no natural or soteriological motive to obey the moral law. God is no man's debtor and does not respond to man. Therefore, he does not save or damn them because of what they do or don't do. There is no utilitarian motive to act morally; the only reason for moral action is gratitude. For nominalism, human beings owe their existence solely and simply to God. He has already given them the gift of life, and for this humans should be grateful. To some few he will give a second good, eternal life, but he is neither just nor unjust in his choice since his giving is solely an act of grace.<sup>16</sup> To complain about one's fate would be irrational because no one deserves existence, let alone eternal existence.

As this short sketch makes clear, the God that nominalism revealed was no longer the beneficent and reasonably predictable God of scholasticism. The gap between man and God had been greatly increased. God could no [25] longer be understood or influenced by human beings – he acted simply out of freedom and was indifferent to the consequences of his acts. He laid down rules for human conduct, but he might change them at any moment. Some were saved and some were damned, but there was only an accidental relation between salvation and saintliness, and damnation and sin. It is not even clear that this God loves man. The

world this God created was thus a radical chaos of utterly diverse things in which humans could find no point of certainty or security. [...] [27] [...]

The church attempted to suppress nominalism, but these efforts had little impact. Ockham's thought was censured in 1326 and repeatedly condemned from 1339 to 1347, but his influence continued to grow, and in the one hundred and fifty years after his death nominalism became one of the most powerful intellectual movements in Europe. There was a strong Ockhamist tradition in England that began in the first half of the fourteenth century under the leadership of Thomas Bradwardine (the archbishop of Canterbury), Robert Holcot, and Adam Woodham. The Ockhamists in Paris during the fourteenth century were also strong and included Nicholas of Autrecourt, John Buridan, John of Mirecourt, and later Peter D'Ailly, Jean Gerson, and Marsilius of Inghen (who was also active in Heidelberg). In Germany there was a powerful nominalist tradition, especially in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that culminated in Gabriel Biel. In fact, outside of Spain and Italy the influence of nominalist thought grew to such an extent that by the time of Luther there was only one university in Germany that was not dominated by the nominalists.

While nominalism undermined the view of a harmonious Christian world that scholasticism had developed (often in the face of the less than harmonious political and religious realities) and thus worked a revolution in Christianity, it was not merely destructive. Nominalism presented not only a new vision of God but also a new view of what it meant to be human that placed much greater emphasis on the importance of human will. As Antony Levi has pointed out, scholasticism from the thirteenth century on never had at its disposal a psychology that could explain action as both rational and willful. For scholasticism the will both in God and man could therefore either do everything or nothing. Aquinas effectively argued for the latter. Scotus (building on Bonaventure's emphasis on God's independence of his contingent creation) and then Ockham asserted the radical freedom of divine will. In emphasizing the centrality of divine [28] will, however, they both also gave a new prominence to and justification of the human will. Humans were made in the image of God, and like God were principally willful rather than rational beings. Such a capacity for free choice had always been imagined to play a role in mundane matters, but orthodox Christianity had denied that humans were free to accept or reject justificatory grace. Still, if humans were truly free, as many nominalists believed, then it was at least conceivable that they could choose to act in ways that would increase their chances of salvation.

While this position is reasonable, by the standards of the time such a view was highly questionable since

it came perilously close to the Pelagianism that had been condemned by Augustine and by almost every orthodox theologian after him. Despite the repeated claims by Ockham and many of his followers that God did not in any way respond to man and thus could not be influenced by any act of the human will, however free, nominalists were thus continually attacked as Pelagians. In part this had to do with their interpretation of man as a willing rather than a rational being, but it was also certainly due to the fact that a number of nominalists simply found it difficult to countenance a God who was so terrifying and merciless, arguing not on the basis of theology but simply as a practical matter that God would not deny salvation to anyone who gave his all or did everything that was in him to do: "*Facientibus quod in se est, deus non denegat gratiam*" ("If you do what is in you, God will not deny grace"). This was the so-called *Facientibus* principle. Such a view seemed to imply that there were standards for salvation, but that the standards were completely idiosyncratic to each individual. One man's all might be quite different than that of another. The determination of sanctity and sinfulness was thus taken out of the hands of the church. No habit of charity was necessary for salvation, for God in his absolute power could recognize any meretricious act as sufficient, and more importantly could recognize any act as meretricious. The *Facientibus* principle thus not only undermined the spiritual (and moral) authority of the church, it defended a notion of salvation that was perilously close to Pelagianism.

Appearances notwithstanding, this view of nominalism as thoroughly Pelagian is mistaken. While later nominalists such as Gabriel Biel did in fact promote at least a semi-Pelagian idea of salvation, Ockham and his fourteenth- and fifteenth-century followers did not. Their emphasis on divine omnipotence simply left too little room to attribute any efficacy to the human will. It is true that their recognition of the importance of the human will seemed to suggest that human beings could win their own salvation, but this was mitigated by their assertion that all events and choices [29] were absolutely predestined by God. While their doctrine seemed to open up space for human freedom, this was negated by their commitment to a divine power that determined everything absolutely but did so in an utterly arbitrary and therefore unpredictable way.

With this emphasis on divine determinism, nominalism was able to avoid Pelagianism, but the price was high, for the notion of predestination not only relieved humans of all moral responsibility, it also made God responsible for all evil. John of Mirecourt saw this conclusion as the unavoidable consequence of his own nominalism, admitting that God determined what would count as sin and who would act sinfully. Nicholas d'Autrecourt went even further, declaring

that God himself was the cause of sin. While this conclusion for good reason was not emphasized by most nominalists, it was too important to remain submerged for long, and it emerged in all of its distinctive power in the period of the Reformation.

Nominalism sought to tear the rationalistic veil from the face of God in order to found a true Christianity, but in doing so it revealed a capricious God, fearsome in his power, unknowable, unpredictable, unconstrained by nature and reason, and indifferent to good and evil. This vision of God turned the order of nature into a chaos of individual beings and the order of logic into a mere concatenation of names. Man himself was dethroned from his exalted place in the natural order of things and cast adrift in an infinite universe with no natural law to guide him and no certain path to salvation. It is thus not surprising that for all but the most extreme ascetics and mystics, this dark

God of nominalism proved to be a profound source of anxiety and insecurity.

While the influence of this new vision of God derived much of its force from the power of the idea itself and from its scriptural foundation, the concrete conditions of life in the second half of the fourteenth century and early fifteenth centuries played an essential role in its success. During this period, three momentous events, the Black Death, the Great Schism, and the Hundred Years War, shook the foundations of medieval civilization that had been weakened by the failure of the Crusades, the invention of gunpowder, and the severe blow that the Little Ice Age dealt to the agrarian economy that was the foundation of feudal life. While such a vision of God might have been regarded as an absurdity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the catastrophes of the succeeding period helped make such a God believable.