William of Ockham on the Reality of Universals:

A Biblical Evidence for the Existence and Relationships

Between Particulars and Universals with a

Brief Critique to Ockham's Nominalism

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Submitted to:

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In May 2019

In Attendance of Those Requirements For

The ST504 History of Philosophy and Christian Thought Course

As the Assigned Research Paper

At the Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC.

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Perhaps, the first question to be answered when engaging in philosophical discourse is a metaphysical one: What is it out there? Or, to restate it, what does exist? Immediately we can come with all sort of answers. Humans exist, horses exist, or maybe plants or rocks exist. This would be a way to respond to that question. However, someone could also say, John exists, John's horse, named Bucephalus exists, and John's backyard apple tree exists together with the different rocks therein. Is there any difference between this kind of answers? Yes. The difference may be stated as the notion of the reality of universals.

Universals may be understood as those things or kind of things which bring *particular* objects together by way of grouping them objectively in light of the existing relationships between them, and at the same time, distinguish them from others. Hence, let us say, as an example, that if John and Peter share something between them which, at the same time, they do not share with Bucephalus, then, we could rightly state that John and Peter share a universal, in this case, *humanity,* which Bucephalus do not share with them.

Those who sustain as truth the reality, or the existence, of those universals are called *realists.*[1] However, there is another side to this story. Throughout the history of human thought, there have been those who ultimately deny the reality of universals. William of Ockham may be the most important figure in this other system of thought. Then, the purpose of this research paper is to present, as fairly and brief as possible, Ockham's position in the issue of the reality of universals, and, after having

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[1] Etienne Gilson, *History of Chrisrian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York, NY: Random House, 1955), 487.

analyzed his propositions, proof that his *nominalism* is ultimately logically untenable, and biblically at odds with what God has revealed in Scripture; therefore, falling into this system of thought should be avoided by Christians.

It will be both fair and useful, first, to comprehend what was happening in the world William of Ockham lived in to understand how it was, in the first place, that he came with such a system as nominalism.

There are few documents that can help us rebuild the historical facts about Ockham's life, particularly in its early stages. Nevertheless, this is what is known: William of Ockham was born probably at Ockham somewhere between 1280 and 1290. He probably studied at Oxford between 1309 and 1315, and then remain there giving lectures on the Bible and Peter Lombard's *Sentences*.[2]

It is importance to notice three major contextual factors by the time Ockham was doing his philosophical work. In the first place, medieval philosophy and theology, since the appearance of St. Tomas Aquinas, had basically been Aristotelian in its metaphysics. Therefore, the concept of universals was broadly accepted among scholars and few (though some,) such as Roscellinus, opposed to that realism.[3] Secondly, philosophy was regarded as a specialized and highly technical academic discipline,[4] thus, Ockham was very well trained in subjects such as logic, which is clear from his writings and the way in which he develops his argumentation. Thirdly, a thinker and theologian called Duns Scotus has entered the philosophical scene, with this idea which we now call *voluntarism*. This upholds that the will has primacy over the intellect.[5] In this case, God's will have primacy over his

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[2] Philotheus Boehner, ed., "Ockham's Life," in *Philosophical Writings: A Selection* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co, 1990), xi–xii.

[3] S.E. Frost, Jr., *Enseñanzas Básicas de los Grandes Filósofos [Basic Teachings of the Great Philosophers]*, trans. Francisco Perea (México D.F.: Editorial Diana, 2005), 19.

[4] Paul Vincent Spade, "Introduction," in *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals: Porphyry, Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Ockham* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994), xi.

[5] Donald K. McKim, "Voluntarism," *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 300.

own intellect. This means that for God to create anything, he did not first know the object of creation, and then, according to that ideal, he wills it into existence, but that he first wills the object into existence, and then gets an idea of it.[6] This has many implications, for instance, God is free as to will whatever he wanted with no restriction,[7] but that of clear contradiction. That is to say, he could have created a world in which adultery was good and not evil, or where plants grow humans instead of the opposite, but he could not have created a world in which a rock could be and not be in the same place at the same time in the same manner. This might sound rather strange and as nothing to do with universals, but the reality was that this teaching played a major role in Ockham's thinking about the nature of those universals.

With all this in mind, Ockham, a great thinker as he was, wanted to free Christian philosophy and theology from the bondage of Aristotelianism. On Ockham's mind, there were no valid reasons as to merely presuppose Aristotelian categories as true. Alongside with this, Tomist scholars where fascinated with *Natural Theology* to the point of almost neglecting the truths found in the Word of God. This was intolerable for Ockham. These realities led him to question out loud the whole system of Aristotelian Thinking (and Theology) proposing that, if anything could not be proved, then it should not be used as a base for building a whole system of thought. This way of thinking led him to two things. The first, the development of his famous Razor, which, in short, is the argument that defends the idea that nothing should be multiplied beyond necessity, or, to rephrase it in simpler terms, that the simpler an argument is (as long as it is consistent and logical) the better. The second, it led him to question the reality if universals. It is now time to bring every single piece to the table. Ockham was a well-educated man learned in logic, who wanted to rescue theology from which, in his sight, was a system built over sand, and that begin to question everything which could not be proven beyond the

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[6] Harry R. Klocker, *William of Ockham and the Divine Freedom* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1992), 108.
[7] Hans Boersma, "Theology as Queen of Hospitality," *Evangelical Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (October 2007): 302.

shadow of a doubt. Add to all these the fact that Scotus' voluntarism teaches that things could have been otherwise if God would willed them to be otherwise, which is to say that, things did not have essences in and of themselves, nor those essences came from an ideal in God's mind (which was the Platonic-Aristotelian view), but they could actually have been anything God would have will them to be.

About the difference or lack thereof between essence and being, he writes the following in his *Summa totius logicae,* III, II, C. xxvii:

> *We have to say, therefore, that essence (entitas) and existence (existentia) are not two things. On the contrary, the words 'thing' and 'to be' (esse) signify one and the same thing, but the one on the manner of a noun and the other in the manner of a verb.[8]*

Thus, Ockham came to the conclusion that, since things have no essences in and of themselves, and Aristotelian categories have already been rejected, universals were, in fact, nothing more than mere concepts or names (*nomine,* in Latin, thus the title 'nominalism') which the mind use to group particular objects, but that they did not have any real existence. It might seem fair to say that Ockham is not rejecting universals completely, insofar he continues to use them in his arguments (as we shall proceed to observe latter in this paper,) but he is clear as to reject their existence in reality.

In his *Ordinatio,* which is a commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences, Ockham assesses this issue of the reality of universals in questions four through eight. Her, an excerpt of question five:

1. *Secondly, I ask whether the univocal universal is a true thing outside the soul, really distinct from the individual yet really existing in it, really multiplied and varied.*

2. *Yes it is:*

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[8] William of Ockham, *Philosophical Writings: A Selection*, ed. Philotheus Boehner (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co, 1990), 93.

3. *First, that it is a thig outside the soul, really distinct from individuals. For according to the Commentator, Metaphysics VII. Comm. 46,: "A universal does not signify just any substance, but a substance that a part signifies." Therefore, the thing signified by a universal is a part. But a part is really distinguished from the whole. Therefore, etc. Now it is clear from the same Commentator that universal is multiplied and varied, because a part is varied according to the variation of the whole it is a part of. (This is so if it is a part of many wholes at once.)*

4. *For the opposite:*

5. *Every thing outside the soul, really distinct from an individual but really existing in it, really multiplied and varied, is either an essential part of it or else an accident of it. But between the whole and part, and likewise between a subject and its accident, there is such relation that if the one is singular the other will be singular too. Therefore, every such thing is truly singular and consequently is not universal.[9]*

This all may seem confusing but, as Kaye and Martin rightly summarize for us, *Ockham maintains that [Aristotelian] forms are absolutely particular characteristics, and that there is no such reality as universals outside the mind.[10]*

Now, what are we to respond to this kind of reasoning? Let me place an argument as follows:

Critique No.1

Given the statement:

Nominalism is the belief that both,

    A. Only particulars exist in reality.

And,

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[9] Paul Vincent Spade, ed., *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals: Porphyry, Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Ockham*, trans. Paul Vincent Spade (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994), 148.
[10] Sharon M. Kaye and Robert M. Martin, *On Ockham*, Wadsworth Philosophers Series (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), 9.

B. Universals do not have real existence.

Then,

1. For nominalism to be true, both *A* and *B* must be true.

2. If *B* is true, then,

3. No universals exist in reality.

4. However, the concept of *particularity* is a universal.

5. Then, if 3. is true, the universal or *particularity*, does not exist in reality.

6. Then, we cannot say *A* is true since,

7. A basic element in *A* proposition*, particularity,* does not exist in reality.

8. However,

9. We cannot say *A* is false either since,

10. A basic element in *A* proposition*, particularity,* does not exist in reality

11. Since the universal of *particularity* must exist in reality for *A* to be meaningful,

12. Then, if *B* is true *A* is not even meaningful.

13. And since both *A* and *B* are needed to be true for nominalism to be true,

14. Then, nominalism is not true.

Now, this might not be that easy as basically Ockham deals, above all, with physical objects and not statements. By this it is meant that he will say that, besides the concept of the mind, there is no such thing as humanity, but there are such things as particular humans. As we can see, Ockham deals with beings, not statements. However, at the mere moment nominalism is stated in such a way as to deny the whole existence of universals, the previous argument can be made, since it is dealing not only beings in the world, but universal concepts such as *particularity* and *universality.*

Herein lays the next critique on nominalism. Critique No. 2. Nominalism doesn't seem to share a convincing account for universals abstractions beyond those that speak of kind, or genre of things. Nominalism does not give account of universals such as numbers, colors, or virtues.

Critique No.3

If we use Ockham's Razor, this is, the prohibition to multiply being (or arguments) beyond necessity *"Pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate"*[11] we could say that,

If the Trinity exists,

1. God the Father is a particular person of the Trinity.

2. God the Son is a particular person of the Trinity.

3. God the Holy Spirit is a particular person od the Trinity.

4. God is many in person.

5. God is one in being.

6. God is, both, ultimately one and many.

7. If this is so, given Ockham's Razor,

8. Then, no further argumentation either for the ultimacy of the *one*, or the ultimacy of the *many*, is needed.

9. Thus, no argument for *nominalism* is needed.

However, this reasoning ought not to be the ultimate basis for rejecting nominalism. Let us now analyze the use of *universals* and *particulars* as well as the assessment of the *one* and the *many* issue by Scripture.

Evidence 1.

*And a voice came from heaven, "**You are my beloved Son***; with **you** *I am well pleased."*

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[11] Sharon M. Kaye and Robert M. Martin, *On Ockham*, Wadsworth Philosophers Series (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), 6.

Let us here notice the use of the particular. When God the Father is speaking this words, it is clear that they are not to be taken as true for anyone hearing them then, or reading them now, but that they aim to express the particular love of God the Father for his Son in that time in history. Here, the Bible seems to acknowledge the reality of particulars, to what Ockham will surely assent without reproach.

Evidence 2.

Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

1 John 4:8

In this passage, however, by asserting that God is the virtue of love, a universal, it seems that the author of the text is implying that, at least, the universal of love not only exists, but finds its ultimate existence within the being of God. Before commenting what Ockham will say to this, let us move forward to the third and last text.

Evidence 3.

For if, because of one man's [Adam's] trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Romans 5:17-19

It is quite interesting in this text, the relationship that is to be found between particulars and universals. As both and each, Adam and Christ are spoken thereof as particular individuals. Nevertheless, each of this particular individuals, each of this *ones* engage in an action which reflects upon *many,* truly upon the universal of *humanity.* In the light of this passage, Adam's disobedience carried consequences on the whole human race. Also, Christ's righteousness had consequences upon the many people that

conform his church. So, we can see from this passage not only that both particulars, like Adam or Christ, and universals, like the humankind and the church actually exist, but that actions of particulars can and may have consequences upon universals.

Evidence 4.

But he was pierced for our transgressions;

  he was crushed for our iniquities;

upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,

  and with his wounds we are healed.

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Isaiah 53:5

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From this text we can see just the opposite. While the past text show how the actions of particulars may reflect in the reality of universals, here we might see how the actions of the many who belong to the universal *sinner* affected the particular of Christ.

Now Ockham could not be oblivious to the overabundance of evidence shown in Scripture about universals. He does not deny even the hardest doctrines such as that of the Trinity. But he does say that we ought to separate theology from reason. Perhaps, again, because of the effect of Aquina's reasoning over theology. Nevertheless, at least in basic beliefs, Ockham seeks to remain true to Scripture. There is one other thing worthy to be mentioned about William of Ockham, such was this dualist attitude between theology and reasoning that he goes on to state that theology must be built out of the pages of Scripture alone and only apprehended through faith.[12] Which paved the way for characters such as Martin Luther and movements as the Reformation.

On a personal level, I do not ascribe nor to realism nor to nominalism. I do believe that true and real being needs to possess aseity. Therefore, God is the ultimate being in the fulness of the term.

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[12] Ulrich Gottfried Leinsle, *Introduction to Scholastic Theology* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 222–225.

Thus, I find no problem to confess that in him we are to find, along with that ultimate essence, or being, both ultimate *oneness* or *universality*, and *manyness* or *particularity*. This becomes even clearer as we contemplate the mystery of his trinitarian nature. And then, since it is in him that we live, and move and have our being(s), it seems therefore natural that, in some regards we could be referred to as *particulars*, as Alberto, as John, as Bruce, yet in other ways as *universals*, humans, sinners, the church. This is the main reason why I do believe in the reality of both.

However, I also find that *nominalism* specifically, if we are to stay consistent and avoid engage in a dualist view of faith and reason, may bring with it some theological problems. This problems are to be found each and every time we are dealing with relationships between universals and particulars. Hence, *nominalism* will stand at odds with the most basic beliefs of the Christian doctrine such a Trinitarian Theology, Covenant Theology, Substitutionary Atonement, etc. For, if universals do not exist, what are we to do when the Bible is telling us that some things pertaining to particular individuals are to be predicated to universal groups? Worst, if *nominalism* is embraced, how can we be sure that God will keep his promises? After all, if he can will today that to be faithful is good and tomorrow that breaking promises is good, what can assure me of my salvation, or anyone's salvation? Also, there is no objective basis to uphold real moral values.[13]

Let us see how this works and its implications for Christianity. Let us analyze, for instance, Covenant Theology. At the heart of covenant theology is the promise that Yahweh will be our God and we will be his people. Nevertheless, the promise is given to particular individuals. Abraham, for example, it is true that the promise is for Abraham and it's children, but the reality is that Israel took every covenant promise as made with the whole nation. This people, the nation, is a universal. The people of Israel with whom God have made promises is not a particular individual but a group of

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[13] Eugene Rathbone Fairweather, ed., *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, Ichthus ed., The Library of Christian classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 373.

them. Thus, what are we to say? That the promise has no grounds because of the universality of the promise? Furthermore, how will God fulfil a promise he has done with something that does not have real existence?

Let us move forward to the concept of the trinity. If we sustain, as nominalism does, that only particulars exist, then to say that the Father is God, that the Son is God and that the Spirit is God will lead us inevitable to polytheism. We would have three particular Gods which, in reality, do not share any kind of universal.

Substitutionary atonement isn't to far from the dangers of nominalism. As at the mere center of this doctrine there in an exchange between one and many. As analyzed in previous given passages, for it to work, both universals and particulars need to be real. Or, are we to say, that when Paul writes to the Ephesians that Christ gave his live for the church, that church, does not really has existence?

Finally (theologically), since nominalism, alongside with voluntarism, prevents us to be certain about the security of our salvation, two option follow, even we sink on despair and doubt with no hope of assurance whatsoever, or we try to gain our own salvation by means of works since, yes God has said that it is by grace, but tomorrow he could will different and that would not be evil. And still, assurance in this second model response is nowhere to be found.

In a more natural realm, if nominalism is true, how can true knowledge be even possible? Since most of it is built over this 'concepts' that our mind creates, but which do not exist. At the end, as Frame comments, *nominalism* leads to empiricism.[14] If the only things that exist are those particulars which can be immediately be perceived through our senses, then, *empiricism*, and then *solipsism* follows. Also, for a medieval Christian, as I interpret it, *nominalism* could have led to a kind of *existentialism* characterized by doubt and despair such as the one Kierkegaard talks about centuries later. None of these options is good for Christendom.

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[14] John M Frame, *History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2015), 158.

To sum up, we do need to recognize and praise Ockham outstanding logical capacity for reasoning and building arguments. We also need to acknowledge his intentions on liberating the Church from, the Aristotelian Captivity, and, purposefully or not, his conclusions on his approach to the gaining of theological knowledge, which ought to come from no place else than the Bible, and should be apprehended by nothing else than by faith, in a way, opened the door for the reformation. However, at the same time, there are flaws found in trying to deny the existence of universals. Even when you can try to build a system of thought in which where universals are just names in the mind, or concepts in the mind, the biggest trouble will come when trying to approach Scripture, which is full of particular-universal interactions. Also, not so important, yet, present, is the fact that the central proposition in *nominalism* ends up being a self-defeating one. At the end of the day, *nominalism* reveals that autonomous human reasoning apart from God's revelation, will end in folly, or at least will not be able of giving a true account of the vital questions about reality.

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