

Ockham /'ɒkəm/, William of (c.1285–1347) an English theologian and philosopher and a member of the Franciscan order. After studies in theology at Oxford he taught for several years in a Franciscan school, probably in England. During this time he wrote a number of philosophical works, including a *Sum of Logic*, and revised his Oxford disputations on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. In 1324 he went to the papal court at Avignon, where his Oxford disputations were examined for heresy by a committee of theologians. In 1328, at the behest of the head of his order, Michael of Cesena, he read the constitutions that Pope John XXII had issued in an attempt to settle controversies about the practice of poverty in the Franciscan order. Ockham decided that in these documents John XXII had taught heresy, and with brother Michael and a few others he left Avignon and joined Ludwig of Bavaria, who was also in conflict with the pope over his election as Emperor. Ockham lived the rest of his life in Ludwig's capital, Munich, sending out pamphlets and books to show that John XXII and later his successor Benedict XII should be removed from the papal office. Ockham's writings thus fall into two groups: academic writings produced before 1324 and polemical writings produced after 1328.

Ockham's academic work has a distinctive character and connecting themes, but it is unlikely that he set out to create a system; like other academics, he took up a

selection of the questions debated by his predecessors and contemporaries and tried to give better answers. Usual targets of his criticisms were Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus. He rejects Scotus's formal distinction (except in the Deity), maintaining that the only distinctions are between thing and thing, concept and concept, and thing and concept. He also rejects Scotus's doctrine of individuation, according to which an individual is a common nature contracted to singularity by an individuating difference formally distinct from it; according to Ockham, every existent is individual through itself and does not need to be individuated.

On universals, Ockham maintains that a universal is a sign (physical object, spoken word or concept) able to stand for any one of an indefinite number of similar objects; this is Ockham's 'nominalism' – a term that he did not himself use. But he did not hold that classification is imposed arbitrarily by the human mind: apart from any mental act, Socrates and Plato are more alike than either is like a donkey, which is why the one sign, 'man', can stand for either of them. Besides Socrates and Plato there is no third entity that is their similarity; except in the Deity, relative terms signify not relative entities, but absolute entities, connoting certain propositions about them. In fact, only terms in the categories of substance and quality name entities, and all the terms and concepts included in the other eight of Aristotle's ten categories are connotative. Ockham also rejects 'species' (in the sense of a likeness of the thing transmitted through the medium and the senses to the mind or produced in the mind as a means of knowing). Ockham's evident desire for a frugal ontology explains the ascription to him of 'Ockham's razor', although he did not invent it and rarely invoked it. He developed specific arguments against each kind of entity that he rejected.

In natural theology, Ockham rejects many of the philosophical arguments then offered as proofs of various points of Christian belief, but he does not draw the general conclusion that Christianity cannot be supported by argument. In ethics, he holds that the precepts of natural law can be overridden by a command of God, but this does not imply (as is often supposed) that morality rests on divine command. In epistemology, he seems to anticipate Descartes's 'evil demon' hypothesis in maintaining that

God, by his absolute power (that is, setting aside his goodness and will), can cause in us a false 'creditive' act indistinguishable from an intuitive cognition; however, Ockham does not assume that knowledge is impossible unless we can know whether a seeming intuition is genuine. His philosophy does not seem to lead to scepticism in any sense.

Ockham's polemical writings are usually referred to as his 'political' writings because they deal in detail with many important questions of political philosophy. On property, Ockham rejects John XXII's doctrine that property exists by divine law; according to Ockham it exists by human convention and law, established to control greed and quarrelling. He rejects John's claim that no-one can justly consume anything he does not own; their disagreement over property is referred to by Grotius, who attempts to harmonize the two sides. On Church government, although he acknowledges that the pope has 'fullness of power' in a certain sense, Ockham rejects the doctrine that a pope can do anything not immoral and not forbidden by God; popes must respect rights, including the rights of unbelievers, under human law. (Ockham seems to have been one of the first to introduce into philosophy and theology the lawyers' notion of a right.) 'Regularly', the pope cannot be judged by anyone lower in the Church, but 'on occasion' he can, for example if he is suspected of heresy. Ockham rejects the doctrine of papal infallibility. A pope suspected of heresy or serious crime can be tried by a human court; if he is guilty of heresy he has already, by that fact, ceased to be pope, and if he is guilty of crime he may be corrected or deposed. The 'regularly'/'occasionally' contrast is characteristic of Ockham's political thought: he does not believe that any constitution or other legislation can provide for every possible situation; individuals must be prepared to improvise means for dealing with unforeseen occasions. On secular government, Ockham holds that power derives from the people, not from the Church; the Emperor and other rulers do not need to have their election confirmed by the pope and cannot be deposed by the pope (except that on occasion a pope, or anyone else, acting for the people, may depose an unjust or useless ruler). Rulers must respect their subjects' rights, for example to property, though a right can be overridden for the common

good. Ockham often criticized Marsilius, whose conception of sovereignty was foreign to Ockham's thinking. He rejected, for example, Marsilius's doctrine that all coercive power must be concentrated in the hands of one ruler; in Ockham's view subjects must be able on occasion to mobilize enough power to correct or depose a ruler who has become a tyrant. Ockham supported the Empire (i.e. the Holy Roman Empire) because of the need for a world government to keep the peace; he held, however, that the Emperor must regularly respect the established independence of kingdoms and free cities. In most of these matters Ockham was reaffirming, defending and developing the ideas of older canonists and theologians; he was one of the channels through which these ideas came to later liberal thinkers. GW JK