

OCKHAM AND NOMINALISM: TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM

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This article discusses what might be called the standard picture of Ockham in 20th century Catholic thought, especially as regards his theory of knowledge. First, it explains why it is that Ockham's theory of knowledge has generally gotten bad press from Catholic philosophers. Second, it seeks to demonstrate why Ockham deserves a better reputation among Catholic thinkers.

Introduction

In the following pages, I want to discuss what we might call the standard picture of Ockham in 20th century Catholic thought, especially as regards his theory of knowledge. My aim is two-fold: I want, first, to explain why it is that Ockham's theory of knowledge has generally gotten bad press from Catholic philosophers; and second, I want to show why I think Ockham deserves better.

To make my point, I shall have not only to raise purely philosophical questions, but also to interpret some of the events of recent Catholic intellectual history. I therefore begin by discussing the rise of neo-Scholasticism and neo-Thomism as historical and cultural phenomena. Based on this analysis, I shall argue that the working ideal of Catholic thought from the period of the Modernist crisis to the Second Vatican Council - what I shall term the 'norm of Thomism' - explains the generally negative assessment of Ockham in 20th century Catholic thought, much more than the inherent weaknesses of his theory of knowledge.

I shall then turn to a discussion of Ockham's theory of knowledge from a technical philosophical standpoint. I shall argue that Ockham's purportedly "Nominalist" theory of knowledge, though assuredly different from Aquinas's, in fact shares the same realistic ideals as the Thomistic theory. In our own time, then, when Thomism does not have that same normative force it had earlier in our century, I believe it is high time we reassessed Ockham, as an interesting and important part of our own Catholic heritage.

The Neo-Scholastic Revival

It seems to me that the most characteristic trait of Catholic philosophy in the first half of last century was that it was permeated by what I call the “norm of Thomism”. To understand the nature of this norm, we need to go back a bit in history, to the 19th century revival known as the neo-Scholastic movement.¹

As is well known, that careful, scholarly study of Medieval philosophy and theology which we call neo-Scholasticism is of relatively recent origin. Several 19th century intellectual movements - in part reactions to the exaggerations of the Enlightenment - attempted to resurrect the study and the ideals of the Middle Ages, or at least what were perceived to be such. Among these movements we can count Romanticism in Germany, Traditionalism in France, and, in Italy, the neo-Scholastic movement.²

Although lack of modern historical research forces some amount of speculation, it seems that we can pick out at least some historical facts which characterize the neo-Scholastic movement. First of all, it seems that its original impulse came from the Jesuits of the Roman College, in about the middle of the 1820s.³ Indeed, the bulk of the original movement drew its inspiration not directly from Aquinas, but from a characteristically Jesuit *interpretation* of Aquinas.⁴ Second, the movement was by no means dedicated first and foremost to Scholastic *scholarship*, i.e., to historical-critical research of the Medieval and early Modern Scholastics. Though of course such research was of some importance, nonetheless the original movement aimed to use the great Scholastic texts to found a new and *systematic* philosophy.⁵

This particular aim was bound up with the great intellectual movements of the time, above all with the rise of German Idealism, with its predilection for system building.⁶ The German Idealists characteristically constructed deductive or quasi-deductive systems of thought, based on a few foundational principles. Furthermore, German Idealism understood its systems in terms of a conception of metaphysics. Thus the impulse to system was not just to any old system, but to the building up of a unified, general articulation of theoretical knowledge, resulting in a general conception of being.

It was this specific propensity for building metaphysical systems which inspired the Roman neo-Scholastics. For the neo-Scholastics thought they could reclaim Catholic thought from German Idealism, by turning to the 400-or-so-year long tradition of Scholasticism. They thought this for obvious reasons. Though they did not conceive of the original Scholastic thinkers as system builders in the modern sense, they did believe that the material was there to build up systems in the modern style. Thus, as a kind of tactical maneuver, they thought they could take material from original Scholasticism and turn it

into a basically unified picture of philosophy and theology. And given the interest in metaphysics which characterized the great Scholastic thinkers, the neo-Scholastics thought they could distill from original Scholasticism a metaphysics which could rival the German Idealistic systems. This tactical move, then, could satisfy the modern penchant for system, but provide more solid principles to build up than, say, the Hegelian philosophy of the Idea.⁷

Among those students who were part of the original Roman neo-Scholastic movement was a young man named Gioacchino Pecci, who later in life became Pope Leo XIII. Throughout his life, Leo was a leading part of this movement and much imbued with its ideals. And it was just in this spirit that Leo wrote *Aeterni Patris*, the Encyclical which later became known as the document on "Christian philosophy."

What was the meaning of this new ideal of "Christian philosophy"? I think it is safe to say that no one was quite sure, perhaps not even Leo. For indeed the thinkers he put forth as the models of Christian philosophy were, properly speaking, not philosophers, but theologians. And this is, it seems to me, an important point.

For in fact, the notion of Christian philosophy - a notion which, incidentally, is not originally in *Aeterni Patris*, but first appears only in Leo's document celebrating the first anniversary of *Aeterni Patris*⁸ - was unknown to the tradition. The great Scholastics were not themselves philosophers. As Gilson rightly points out,⁹ to the Medievals, by way of example, "philosophers" were pagans or infidels: they were thinkers who did not know Christ. Thus, though theologians use philosophy, they are not philosophers; and what they write, then, is not typically "pure philosophy", i.e., philosophy in the modern sense, but on philosophical aspects of or derivations from theological doctrines. This factor of course deeply influenced Gilson's work, who was forever railing against what he called "separated philosophy", i.e., a philosophy separated from theology.¹⁰

It should be noted, however, that this situation was in some respects unavoidable. Though some of the neo-Scholastics, such as Joseph Kleutgen - the main author of both *Dei Filius* and *Aeterni Patris* - were without doubt competent theologians, generally speaking the neo-Scholastics were basically philosophers: they generally conceived of their movement as philosophical and its essentially apologetic aims as against German Idealism suggested that the battleground for the Church was on the naturalistic plains of philosophy. Thus the essentially philosophically oriented neo-Scholasticism necessarily differs from the essentially theologically oriented Medieval Scholasticism.

Furthermore, as the usage of Leo and his conferees shows, the philosophy that Leo had in mind was a specifically *modern* philosophy.¹¹ That is to say, Leo did not want simply to resurrect Scholasticism; he wanted to resurrect it under a certain form and with a set purpose in mind: to build a

philosophy which can rival and, ultimately, surpass German Idealism. But needless to say, Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Scotus had little to say that could immediately be used against the Hegel and the others who philosophized in what has come to be known as the “Wild Years of philosophy.” Rather, it was necessary to take the Medieval and early Modern materials and transform them into a contemporary philosophy.

At this point, it becomes important to see how the 19th century movement differed from the 20th century movement which became known more properly as neo-*Thomism*. First, we need to see that the 19th century movement was not choosy concerning its Scholastics. For the neo-Scholastics, Aquinas was no doubt the supreme figure. Nonetheless, he was by no means the only master. This is especially clear in the work of Kleutgen, who spent large portions of his ten-volume work *Philosophie und Theologie der Vorzeit*, attempting to show the basic agreement among all the Scholastics. Now by ‘all’ the Scholastics,¹² I really mean all the major Scholastics, ranging from the Albert and Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure and Aquinas, right up to Suarez, and John of St. Thomas.

For, to the 19th century mind, though Aquinas was understood to be the leader of the Scholastics, the Scholastics were understood to hold basically the same positions. And this is understandable, since the concerns of the neo-Scholastics were not apologetic for *Aquinas*, but apologetic for the *Scholastics*, since it was the body of their work as a whole which was understood to have the material for dealing with the Idealist synthesis.¹³ Furthermore, it was on the basic problems of nature and grace, philosophy and theology and reason and faith which they were all held to hold that set them apart from Idealism. Thus Aquinas, though the leading light was understood to be a kind of symbol for all that was good in Scholasticism, but not understood to be the only Scholastic who was on the right track. In fact, the real primacy of Aquinas seems to have been less a *doctrinal* consideration than *practical* one. Of all the great Scholastics, Aquinas alone had written a *Summa Theologica*, a comprehensive and systematic development of the whole Christian faith, meant for seminary training. Thus the real primacy of Aquinas was associated with seminary training and the usefulness of that great text for the training of priests.

It was, therefore, the unity among the Scholastics which was thematic for the 19th century and Aquinas was both a guide to and a symbol of this unity. This of course changed in the 20th century.

What brought about the change? I would say basically two things. The first was the development in Medieval scholarship;¹⁴ the second a crisis in the Church, namely, the Modernist crisis.¹⁵

Concerning scholarship, the rise in the interest in Scholasticism of course motivated better and deeper historical researches. As a consequence, with

the advent of scholars such as Gilson, Grabmann and Fabro, a new understanding of Thomism appeared, an understanding which set Aquinas *significantly apart* from the other Scholastics. It is difficult now to appreciate what a revolution this must have been. In fact, by 20th century standards and on the assumption that we agree with the orientation of Gilson, Fabro and even Maritain (on certain occasions) that the *actus essendi* or act of being is the basic, original insight of Aquinas, it is safe to say that none of the 19th century neo-Scholastics were strict followers of Aquinas. The question of the *actus essendi* was of no great moment to these thinkers and they do not seem to have thought this a central insight of Aquinas.¹⁶ By 20th century standards, Leo himself was perhaps more a Suarezian than a Thomist - and understandably so, given the Jesuit thrust of his own training. We can see, therefore, that this was a change indeed. Whereas the 19th century vision had been one of unity among the Scholastics, the new vision of the Scholastics was one of diversity: especially the difference between Aquinas and the other Scholastics.¹⁷

Regarding the Modernist crisis, more serious things occurred. For one, the affirmation of Aquinas as the norm of Catholic thought was seen as the best practical way of dealing with the crisis.¹⁸ Here too we must see the scholarly revolution this implies. Whereas what was *common* among the Scholastics had been emphasized in the 19th century, now the *differences* among them suggested grounds of suspicion on those Scholastics who were not Thomists.

Perhaps one sign of this change can also be found outside of the realm of scholarship. Duns Scotus, who has been honored in Cologne from the time of his death and whose liturgy was continuously celebrated from that time on was considered *ipso facto* beatified, precisely because the celebration of his feast had continued from time immemorial. In 1908 five hundred prelates requested of the Holy See that his beatification be extended to the Universal Church, in honor of the six hundredth anniversary of this death. It was refused. Though the 19th century had not found Scotus objectionable, the new norm of Thomism suddenly made even the great defender of the Immaculate Conception suspicious.

As a consequence of the Modernist crisis, then, Aquinas's thought seems to become the norm for Catholic philosophy. Once the canon law of 1917 includes the canons it does, this norm becomes solidified into a law (though of course other religious orders did not interpret these canons in the exclusive sense).²⁰

Ockham's "Nominalism"

The relevance of these historical considerations is that they may explain the generally bad press Ockham has received during the last century. This bad

press was not always so. The research of the last forty years or so seems to show not only that Ockham was one of the most influential thinkers of the 14th century, but that his, along with Scotus's thought, dominated the Medieval Universities in the 14th and 15th centuries.²¹ Indeed, it seems that these two traditions formed the bulk of university thinkers for some 250 years (1300-1550). The fact that a tradition could be so dominant for so much time, suggests at the outset that there is probably more to Ockham than first meets the eye.

What did the 19th century neo-Scholastics think of Ockham? There seems to be no indication that, until the end of the last century, anyone thought him anything out of the ordinary. So thorough a scholar as William Courtenay, in discussing the changing conceptions of Ockham, begins his excellent study with Werner and Denifle, the latter being by far the more important of the two. His work on Ockham, which was generally critical, flourishes in the first decade of the 20th century, right at the time that the Modernist crisis begins.²² I suggest that the new opposition to Ockham did not arise from a better picture of Ockham, but from a purely historical factor: the rise of Modernism and the consequent transformation of neo-Scholasticism into neo-Thomism. The presumed norm of Thomism seems to have left the other Scholastics in bad repute, unless they could somehow be connected to Aquinas in some positive way.

With this change comes some legends about Ockham (and Scotus) which have been disproved in the last several decades, but which nonetheless form the popular Catholic imagination. For example, there is the idea that the 13th century represents not only the high point of Scholasticism but the realization of ideals of unity in Church, Empire, culture and thought. The interpretation, basically the last gasp of 19th century Romantic history assumes, first, that there was some clear-cut unity, including some single Medieval theological synthesis, as well as some destruction of this synthesis through the efforts of Ockham (or even Scotus). Both theses are quite questionable.²³ As great as Aquinas was, we must not forget that he was surrounded by thinkers of the same caliber, including two other Doctors of the Church, St. Albert the Great and St. Bonaventure. Their various systems, though all Scholastic, are by no means of a piece with each other and are, in some ways, incompatible, even on the deepest theological issues.²⁴ Aquinas probably did not stick out that much in such a brilliant and fruitful era. But if it is also true that there was no single, unified picture of the world, then it is more than a little questionable that Ockham - or Scotus before him - broke up any such unity which might have been there.²⁵

Concomitant with this idea is a second one, namely, the long regnant myth that both Scotus and Ockham were somehow 'anti-Thomistic'. I do not have the time to discuss this in detail now, but permit me to mention that

Scotus and Ockham could hardly be understood to be anti-Thomistic, simply because they had very little interest in Aquinas at all. Both Scotus and Ockham were trained at Oxford and the Oxford tradition was proudly independent of significant influence from Paris, including from Aquinas. When Scotus was flourishing in Oxford, the established logic and methodology had been there for most of the century. And unlike Aquinas and many of the Parisian masters, Oxford was never strongly influenced by Averroes or the modistic logic and methodology which characterized Aquinas and the Parisian school (from about 1250-90). It is safe to say, I think, that by the time Scotus was a Master at Paris he was already at the zenith of his career and not likely to be concerned about other Masters dead already 25 years. After all, the Dominicans themselves only required the study of Aquinas in 1307, the year before Scotus died. And during the following 25 years, they had to reiterate this requirement four more times, because even the Dominicans were not listening!²⁶ If this was true at the time of Scotus, it was all the more so by the time Ockham flourishes, some 15 years later.

Indeed, the real conflict between Thomists and Ockhamists arises only in the 15th century, when Thomism finally becomes a force in the Universities. This is when Ockham's thought first is called 'Nominalism' and the rising tide of Thomists and Albertists begin to insist on the radical difference between what *they* termed the *via antiqua* and the *via moderna*.²⁷

I suggest, therefore, that it Ockham (and Scotus) both were *not* anti-Thomistic nor were they responsible for some alleged breakdown in Medieval unity. It seems that this interpretation of their thought arises not so much from sound historical research as from a Romantic view of history, rooted in an anachronistically applied norm of Thomism.

I want to argue that this is *also* true of the accusation against Ockham that he is a *Nominalist*, in any straightforward sense. What then is this "Nominalism" of which Ockham is accused by the 15th century Thomists and Albertists?

Nominalism as a philosophical position seems to begin basically in the 12th century. Authors such as Roscelin, William of Champeux, and Abelard all seem to have held to some version of what became known as Nominalism. The Nominalism of authors like this, however, is decidedly different from that which Ockham is accused of.²⁸ For these 12th century authors, there are no "universals", in the sense of universal *concepts*. There are only universal *terms*. And yes: I really mean *terms*. For philosophers such as these, what is universal is the fact that we can use one and the same term for many. It is not a "conceptualism" in any sense, since it is concerned not with the *meaning* of the term but its *use*.²⁹

The 15th-century Thomists and Albertists seem to have wanted to associate Ockham directly with that earlier movement by suggesting he was a 'Nominalist'. But this seems an unjust move. One reason for this is that Ockham was no doubt aware of 12th century Nominalism - as most Scholastics of the time were - and, yet, does not see himself as a part of that movement. Indeed, there can be little doubt that Ockham understood his position not only to be different from Nominalism but to be *explicitly opposed* to it. Ockham is not the philosophical revolutionary he is sometimes assumed to be, at least not in intent.

Nonetheless, it seems that after the Modernist crisis and with the new norm of Thomism in place, it again seemed plausible (after more than four hundred years) that Ockham was a Nominalist.

What in Ockham's position motivates the accusation of Nominalism? First, it is important to realize that what is typically rejected in his position is *not* so much the doctrine of logical universals as the theory of our universal knowledge. In other words, the problem here is not a logical problem but an epistemic one. We can boil this problem down, I think, to two different theses: first, the primacy of the real individual; second, the notion of intuitive cognition. Let us look at each.

The Metaphysics of Individuals

A characteristic feature of later Franciscan philosophy - from Duns Scotus onward - is the significance of *real individuals*. Now I say this is characteristic of Franciscan thought though, in a sense, it is characteristic of Christianity itself. Whereas for both Plato and Aristotle, there is an assumption that universal knowledge is nobler than the knowledge of the individual, Christianity, as Cardinal Schoenborn recently pointed out,³⁰ turned this notion on its head. For being in its most proper sense is the Trinitarian God, who is in no sense universal, and whose single nature is not multiplied in the individuals. St. Gregory of Nyssa, conscious of the apparent oxymoron calls Christ the 'concrete universal', precisely because his absolute reality makes him wholly concrete and such that his 'universality' is not that of an *Idea*, but that of the one, living *God*, in whom all beings participate.

In the early Middle Ages, by which I mean the 11th, 12th and early 13th century - prior to the new influence of Aristotle - this Patristic assumption was taken for granted. But with the dramatic entrance of the metaphysical works of Aristotle into the West, a tendency to emphasize the universal over the particular, the abstract over the concrete and real, came with it. Naturally, this tendency did not utterly overshadow the Christian view, at least not in Albert, Bonaventure or Aquinas; but it did, nevertheless, manifest itself, even if in small degrees, in their work.

Scotus and Ockham, then, in one sense, hearken back to the earlier Christian tradition. Unlike Aristotle and Aquinas, both of whom tend to interpret individuals chiefly as exemplifications of essences, thereby placing the dignity and value of things in their general, common structure, the Franciscan thinkers emphasized the dignity individual beings have as *individuals*.

Not only do Scotus and Ockham stress the importance of the individual: also their *notion* of individuality is much more wide-ranging than, say, in Aquinas, in Godfrey of Fontaines, or in Giles of Rome. For in Aquinas, individuality is not a transcendental trait, i.e., not an attribute which is constitutive of all real being. Rather, only *material* beings are individuals properly speaking, since the notion of individuality correlates to the idea of dividing the perfections of a species among many examples. For Aquinas, by way of example, angels are not properly speaking *individuals*, since they do not divide the perfections of a single species among many. Rather, they are each a “pure species”, i.e., beings who *are* their own species. This suggests that, for Aquinas, to be an individual is rather what the tradition called a *mixed perfection*, a perfection restricted to finite being.³¹

In contradistinction to this, for Ockham, individuality is an *absolute* concept, not a *relative* one. It is something said of real beings *simply in virtue of their being*, not in virtue of their relative relation to a general kind or species. For Ockham, then, individuality would be closer to what Anselm or Scotus would call a ‘pure perfection’, something which is a perfection said of all being, whether finite or infinite.

Intuitive Cognition

Correlating to the stress on individuality is the importance of *intuitive cognition*. What is intuitive cognition? It is the opposite of abstractive cognition. What is characteristic of abstractive cognition is that knowledge is not immediately of an object, but is mediated through an *abstracted essence* or *concept*. In other words, we do not cognize the being in original experience. Rather, our mind must abstract from the individual characteristics in order to understand the genus and species which, in turn, is used to know the individual being.

Now what this theory does, in practice, is put the burden of knowledge on the abstracted universal and concept. This means that knowledge proper does not consist in the knowledge of the individual *as* individual, but consists in the capacity of the mind to place the object in question within the general category of its proper genus and species.

But unlike this strongly Aristotelian doctrine of knowledge through abstraction, Ockham defended that the mind knows individuals *immediately*. In other words, abstracted universals are not original parts of the act of cognition:

they arise *after* we have attained the knowledge of the individual thing. Indeed, all of our universal knowledge must be traceable back - in principle, at least - to original, intuitive cognitions, in which the being as an individual is given.

This theory was no doubt an important contribution to the theory of knowledge, both for its own sake and for the sake of the ideals of Francis. If the theory of abstraction were true and if the individuality of the being is not something known directly in knowledge but only reflectively, can we make sense out of Francis's love of individual beings? St. Francis' own love for nature, for the individual differences between things, would be implausible if not impossible were the abstraction theory true, since knowledge through abstract essences cannot account for the knowledge of individuality or of individual preciousness.³² Ockham is admittedly not following the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition here. But the reason is not that he is being revolutionary. It is that he is being a Franciscan.

Nominalism and "Logical Realism"

What is it, then, that causes the dispute between Nominalism and the neo-Thomist picture of knowledge? It is, I think, two-fold:³³ it is first the assumption that, since Ockham denies that concepts either are abstracted essences or are founded in such, he must deny any universal knowledge. In other words, it is assumed that, since Ockham thinks we have direct knowledge of material singulars, we cannot have any general knowledge of beings, especially concerning their genus and species.

The second part of the objection hinges on this somewhat mysterious point of Ockham: that universal concepts have not specific reference to essences, but are "universal" only insofar as they are mental entities, i.e., general mental terms referring to individual things. Glibly put: universals *as universals*, do not correspond to reality.

These two points seem to justify the accusation of Nominalism. Put somewhat crudely, the objection runs like this: if we never experience objects which are even virtually universal, what universals we might claim to know in any case correspond to nothing in reality. We are left with the idea that universals are simply mental constructs and, so it seems, all forms of objective knowledge - especially scientific knowledge - are rendered impossible.

This objection falls short of the truth, however, in that it fails to take what Ockham actually teaches on its own terms. Rather, it seems that this objection arises less from Ockham's actual claims than from certain assumptions, arising from the norm of Thomism. And that this is the case becomes clear if we try to grasp the point of Ockham's thought, without assuming Thomistic premises.

For Ockham, at issue is not whether or not we have a *universal concept* but whether we have a universal *knowledge*. Now I separate those two ideas - of universal concept and universal knowledge - precisely because for Ockham, *they really are separate*. For the neo-Thomist, in contrast, the possession of the universal is, as we saw, essentially what knowledge consists in; hence the failure to possess a universal concept is understood to be equivalent to not having knowledge.

But Ockham, though he holds that we can have such universal concepts, does not think that the possession of the universal concept is *what knowledge consists in*. And this is because, as Ockham maintains, knowledge is *prior to concept formation*. In other words, whereas the neo-Thomist will typically think that knowledge comes when we can express the general essence of the being in a concept, Ockham will hold that knowledge is prior to concept formation. How then do we know the nature of a thing? As we saw: through immediate, intuitive cognition. It is not through an abstraction: abstraction is unnecessary, in Ockham's theory. In knowing the object perceptually, I have the knowledge of its nature and I can, if I wish, also relate it by similarity to other beings of the same genus and species. But this latter is not necessary for *knowledge*: abstraction and concepts are not the conditions of knowledge but rather knowledge is the condition of abstraction and concepts.³⁴

Indeed, Ockham holds that genus and species are founded in the reality of beings. What he denies is not the metaphysical similarity which justifies such categories, but the claim that any aspect of an individual is anything but individual - such as the claim that there is a nature which is in any sense *shared or common*.

This being the case, we should not be surprised that the second point is not a solid objection against Ockham either. Ockham does indeed hold that universals are not rooted in the essence. But why does he think this? Well, for one: because many universal concepts are not that way. "Red things" is a universal concept, because it can be said of many. But presumably not arising from essences, at least not substantial forms. Similarly, the proposition 'All those things on the right of this chair are brown' includes universal concepts. But presumably, the subject - "those things on the right of this chair" - though universal since it can be said of many, is not a concept rooted in essences. (In what might the essences of "right", "chair", "things" and the expressed relations among these notions consist?) We could add to Ockham's point that we can also invent concepts which are in some sense universal. If I invent the concept of the "two-chair" which I define as "the combination of two actual chairs within a certain distance of each other, and which are not paired off with another chair", I have a universal, since it is said of many. But it is not founded in an essence, but is a purely constructed concept. At the same time, it is both a possible

predicate and, presumably, on some level, contains some real knowledge. So, for example, if I know the number of 'two-chairs' in the room, I can infer to the number of chairs in the room, or at least have an accurate estimate within one. This suggests that concepts may not have necessary and close connection to essences which Aquinas takes for granted. The concept, on this understanding, is much more flexible, than it is in Aquinas.

Does this flexibility in concepts imply arbitrariness? Does this relative flexibility of concepts, as Ockham (and perhaps common sense?) suggest, result in a kind of skepticism? Of course not. Since for Ockham, knowledge does not depend on concepts, the fact that there is some limited flexibility in concepts, does not suggest that we do not have knowledge, universal or otherwise. Recall that whereas for Aquinas, there is a real sense in which knowledge of material singulars is dependent on concepts, for Ockham, to the contrary, concepts of material singulars are dependent on knowledge of them. The order of knowledge and concepts is *inverted*. Hence the loss of perfect correlation between concept and essence in no way undermines the objectivity of knowledge.

Otherwise put, according to Ockham, *universal knowledge* is not the same as the *knowledge of universals*. The fact that, for Ockham, one cannot say 'there are universals' does not mean that we do not have a knowledge which can be said of all beings of a kind. Rather, we have concepts which give expression to a universal knowledge, for concepts are those things in which many beings are said to participate.³⁵

If what I say is true of Ockham, I believe he is not in any sense a Nominalist - especially if that means that he denies universal knowledge - even if it is *true* that there is no special status to universal concepts or abstracted essences. But this latter thesis too is no surprise for Ockham. A concept is a purely logical entity for Ockham, precisely because it is not necessary for cognition. Whereas the concept is a key *epistemic* element for Aquinas, for Ockham it plays no such epistemic role, because he does not need to explain knowledge in terms of concepts.

Therefore, for Ockham, when we raise the question of universal knowledge, at issue is not whether or not we have concepts which correlate to objects, but whether their character *as universal* correlates to objects. And since all real beings are singular - a thesis which Aquinas, Albert, Bonaventure and Scotus, for example, would all hold - Ockham thinks it obvious that, *in this respect*, there is no correspondence. But this is not because we do not have universal knowledge or concepts. It is because in their universality, such abstractions and concepts do not correspond to *individuals*, i.e., to those real beings which, by definition, are not universal.³⁶

Though there is no doubt that this doctrine is *terminologically* different from Aquinas, one might wonder just how different it really is in substance. In order to retain the idea that *there is* some correspondence between universal ideas and the actual forms in things, Aquinas posits a virtual, but not real universality in things. But what is this virtual but not actual universality? And how do, for example, the *actual* universality of concepts correspond with the *virtual* universality of material beings? Might this not just be another way of expressing the same point as Ockham, namely, that from the standpoint of *content*, our concepts are in some sense ‘the same’ as the essence in things, but *in their universality*, they are not? I suggest that indeed this *is* the same point, expressed differently, according to other philosophical and terminological commitments inherent to their two systems.

Conclusion

Now my point in all this has not been to *defend* Ockham’s position: I am not an Ockhamist or, still less, am I an apologist for the truth of his teaching. But *I am* claiming that a reconsideration of Ockham is in order. I believe that once we consider Ockham in his own terms, i.e., not assuming the norm of Thomism, his position is much stronger and more intelligible than it may seem at first glance.

Ockham’s position is definitely one of epistemological and metaphysical realism, one in which he insists both on the reality of objects and the genuineness of our cognitions of them. At the same time, he does indeed think we can have a universal knowledge. But he thinks, first, that such knowledge is grasped through direct, intuitive cognition of individuals and, second, that such knowledge does not consist in the possession of a universal concept but rather is prior to that concept: he will not identify universal knowledge with the knowledge of universals.

Given the shared ideals of realism and given the fact that the norm of Thomism is no longer the working norm of the Church,³⁷ perhaps it is time we took a second look at Ockham. I might add that those of us who take seriously a genuine Ressourcement of the tradition, cannot turn our eyes away from a tradition which dominated the Church’s life for some 250 years and was such an important force at the Council of Trent.³⁸

Will we find that Ockham is better than Aquinas? Perhaps - even probably - not. But though we may not find that Ockham is better or more useful than Aquinas, I suggest that we might find we Catholics have nonetheless given him worse press than he deserves. And once we start looking more carefully at his work, we might even find that we can learn a little something from him.

Notes

1. The history of 19th century neo-Scholasticism is still being written. Nonetheless, our understanding of that period took a great leap forward with the publication of Gerald McCool's books, especially *Nineteenth Century Scholasticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), originally published under the title *Catholic Theology in Nineteenth Century*, Seabury Press, 1977. See also his *The Neo-Thomists* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1994)
2. See McCool *Nineteenth Century Scholasticism*: cc. 1-6.
3. McCool, *Nineteenth Century Scholasticism*: 81 ff. and *The Neo-Thomists*: 29-34. Both the fact that Roman College was returned to the Jesuits and that it was the great neo-Scholastic Taparelli d'Azeglio who was named Rector play an important role in the rise of neo-Scholasticism. One of Taparelli's first students was Gioacchino Pecci, the future Leo XIII. Taparelli also become the founder and editor of *Civiltà Cattolica*, the most important of the early neo-Scholastic journals.
4. There was also a Dominican movement, beginning in Naples at about the same time. But they tended not to see Scholasticism as a unified picture, according to McCool. See *Nineteenth Century Scholasticism*: 81 ff. and *The Neo-Thomists*: 27-9.
5. This point is developed in detail in cc. 6-9 of McCool, *Nineteenth Century Scholasticism*, as well as *The Neo-Thomists*: 36-8. Joseph Owens also speaks of the systematic aims of neo-Scholasticism in "Neo-Thomism and Christian Philosophy," *Thomistic Papers*, vol. 6:36-8.
6. German Idealism is a catch-all term not only for the philosophical movement, but also for German theologies in some way founded on it. See McCool *Nineteenth Century Scholasticism*: cc. 1, 3, 4.
7. What made this philosophy sounder? Basically, it was sounder because, as the neo-Scholastics saw it, the Scholastics generally got it right concerning three pairs of concepts: nature and grace, reason and faith, philosophy and theology. And it was just these three which were not right in Idealist thought. By way of example, anyone who knows Hegel's thought can see that, for him, any talk of these three concepts must invert their proper order. Theology, grace, faith, find their fulfillment in philosophy, nature imbued with the idea, and in reason and "absolute knowledge." Thus, by virtue of its soundness on these three issues, the neo-Scholastics thought they could build a system of thought which could rival the German, Idealistic systems.
8. Owens: 33.
9. Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, (New York: Doubleday, 1960): 12-3
10. It is worth noting that de Lubac spends a good deal of time showing that the 'separated' philosophy of the post-Tridentine period arose from an original

separated theology, i.e., from a theology which did not understand the nature-grace problematic correctly. See *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*, trans. by Lancelot Chapman (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969).

11. This is also confirmed by Leo's deeds. For example, Gilson mentions the founding of the *Institut superieur de philosophie at Louvain*, under Leo. "In the spirit of Scholasticism," in *Modern Philosophy* (co-authored with Langan and Maurer), (New York: Random House, 1962): 346-7. Leo supported Fr. (later Cardinal) Desire Mercier wholeheartedly, even though the school was very much in tune with and concerned about modern and contemporary philosophy and was constantly in dialogue with it. On the other hand, in the same text, Gilson writes: "What Leo XIII had asked for was a revival of Thomism; what he was given instead seems to be something very much like Thomism, but not exactly it": 345. But perhaps what Gilson did not understand was that the 19th century simply did not mean by "Thomism" what we mean in the 20th century, in part due to Gilson's own work.

12. McCool *The Neo-Thomists*: 31 ff.

13. McCool *The Neo-Thomists*: 33.

14. McCool *From Unity to Pluralism*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 34-5; 161-99. The latter section is on Gilson's scholarship and the changes it wrought.

15. McCool *Nineteenth Century Scholasticism*: 242-51.

16. Nor indeed was this insight understood to be central to Aquinas by his immediate followers or the broader Thomistic tradition. The importance of this insight seems really to have been resurrected for the first time by Gilson, Fabro and the Thomists of this century. This is indicative of the fine thinking and originality of the thinkers in question.

17. This point is McCool's, and I believe it stands, independently of whether or not one agrees with McCool's assessment of Transcendental Thomism as the real heir to the older tradition. See McCool's *From Unity to Pluralism*, *passim*.

18. McCool notes: "Three years after the publication of his strong condemnation of Modernism in the encyclical *Pascendi*, Pius X issued the motu proprio *Doctoris Anglici*, dated 1 September 1910. *Doctor Angelici* again recommended the philosophy and theology of the Angelic Doctor. On 17 October 1914 the Congregation of Seminaries and Universities issued its famous 24 Thomist these as safe guided for the philosophical education of future priests. The new Code of Canon Law (1917) prescribed that teachers 'shall adhere religiously to the methods, doctrine and principles' of St. Thomas (canon 1366, sec. 2)." *Nineteenth Century Scholasticism*: 290.

19. One might point out anecdotally that one can see this clearly when looking into older scholarship of Scholastic authors. One sees that in the 1890s and the first decade of the 20th century, there is a good deal of scholarship on different

Scholastic authors; but in the second decade, scholarship seems to dwindle to Thomistic scholarship.

20. One way the canon 1366 was read, for example, by Franciscans was that, if one were teaching Aquinas, one had to adhere rigorously to his arguments, and not impose one's own ideas on the text. Hence this was not read as saying one could only teach or study Aquinas.

21. It is in doubt whether there were any chairs held by thoroughgoing Thomists in the years between about 1320 and 1450. See Knowles *The evolution of Medieval thought* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1962) Furthermore, recent research suggests that the old interpretation of Trent as a "Thomistic Council" is not true (See e.g. Oberman "Duns Scotus, Nominalism and the Council of Trent", in *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992): 204-233. It was rather a Council in which there were at least three major theological forces, Thomism, Ockhamism and Scotism (rather than just the first two). And if anything, it was the Thomists allying themselves with the Scotists that dominated the Ockhamists.

22. Courtenay, "Nominalism and Late Medieval Religion", in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1974):

23. See Oberman, "Fourteenth century religious thought: a premature profile," in *The Dawn of the Reformation: 4-5*

24. Consider for example, Bonaventure's critical stance against Aristotle, based not on philosophical grounds, but on its *inconsistency with the doctrine of the Trinity*. See his *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity*, St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute, 1994).

25. I might point out that the criteria used for judging the 13th century the great flourishing of Catholicism are themselves at times questionable. For example, it is sometimes pointed out that it was the time of the apotheosis of papal power. But is that necessarily a criteria for a flourishing Catholicism? Couldn't one just as well argue that when the papacy relies on secular power for its authority that indicates a weakness in spiritual power? (cf. Lk 22:24-27). I do not say that this is necessarily so either: but it does seem to me to be at least debatable!

26. Oberman, "Fourteenth Century Religious Thought": 4.

27. This terminology, introduced especially by the Albertists, is deceptive. As I pointed out above, the logic and methodology of Scotus, Ockham, and their respective followers was not 'modern', but harkened back to a time prior to the logic and methodology of Aquinas, which is to be associated with the rise of Averroism. It would therefore be more proper to call *Aquinas's* teaching the *via moderna* and the Scotistic and Ockhamist teachings, which continue the tradition prior to Aquinas, the *via antiqua*.

28. Kristeller, perhaps, does not fully appreciate the fact that being a 'terminist'

with regard to nature of terms is not the same as being a ‘terminist’ with respect to the role universals play in knowledge. See his slight exasperation in his response to Courtenay in *Pursuit of Holiness*, entitled “The validity of the term: ‘Nominalism’”: 65-6.

29. See Boehner “In propria causa”, in *Collected Articles on Ockham*, ed. Eligius Buytaert (St. Bonaventure NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1958): 317-8.

30. *God’s Human Face* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994): 21-2.

31. See my “Aquinas on Individuation,” as yet unpublished.

32. Scotus also thought the Aristotelian-Thomistic abstraction theory was heretical, since it would make the knowledge of God, the infinite individual, impossible. Hence the Aristotelian-Thomistic theory seemed to him incoherent with the Christian idea of a beatific vision.

33. This objection is posed very broadly, in order to express several different versions of it. We can find versions of it in Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, (New York: Scribner’s, 1947): c. 3 and *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955); Maurer, *Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1962): 251 ff. Indeed, the assumption is so widespread that nearly any Catholic author who speaks on Ockham or the period in some way affirms this reading.

34. See Boehner “The Realistic Conceptualism of William Ockham”, in *Collected Articles on Ockham*:156-174. See also Matthew Menges, *The Concept of Univocity*, (St. Bonaventure NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1952): 16-26.

35. See Menges: 24.

36. See Boehner “The Realistic Conceptualism of William Ockham.”

37. Think, for example, of the deletion of the canons on Aquinas from the 1983 Code or of the statements from the present Pope like the following from *Splendor Veritatis*: “Certainly the Church’s Magisterium does not intend to impose upon the faithful any particular theological system, still less a philosophical one,” *The Splendor of Truth Shines*, encyclical letter of John Paul II, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993: section 29, p. 39. Several passages in the new encyclical *Fides et ratio* similarly hold Aquinas up as a model, not as a necessary doctrinal source.

38. It must be confessed, however, that either knowledge or fairness to the Ockhamist tradition (and even to the Scotistic tradition) are not virtues of the theologians typically associated *Ressourcement*, such as Congar, Balthasar, or de Lubac. De Lubac is much better than the others, recognizing the extent to which, for example, the nature-grace problem was still correctly understood in Ockham and his early tradition. Congar and Balthasar, on the contrary, seem to lack even sufficient sympathy to appreciate their work, let alone draw something from it.

