NOMINALISM - WILLIAM OF OCCAM

NOMINALISM is the opposite to Idealism. It denies that ideas or concepts — e.g. the idea of “blue” or “triangle” — to exist as valid entities distinct from sense phenomena. www.kheper.auz.com/topics/philosophy/Nominalism.htm

Nominalism (www.utm.edu/research/iep/o/ockham.htm)

The great revival of philosophical and theological study which the thirteenth century witnessed was conditioned by the influence of Aristotle. The theory of the universe propounded by the Stagirite had to be reconciled with the traditional Platonic-Augustinian realism. This Thomas Aquinas undertook to do, following Aristotle as closely as possible. Duns Scotus, on the other hand, attempted to maintain the ancient realism, while supporting it by modern or Aristotelian methods. Interests and tendencies, however, came up in his work which drove his disciples away from his position. The growth of empirical research and psychological analysis together with the new activity of the reason in the epistemological field on the one side, and the recognition of the fact that the specific and the particular was the end of nature on the other, led to results widely divergent from those of Scotus. Here was Ockham’s work ready to his hand. He was the leader of the nominalists, the founder of the “modern” school. Science has to do, he maintains, only with propositions, not with things as such, since the object of science is not what is but what is known. Things, too, are always singular, while science has to do with general concepts, which as such exist only in the human mind. Scotus had deduced the objective existence of universals from the concepts originated under the operation of the objects. Ockham, on the other hand, asserts that “no universal is a substance existing outside of the mind,” and proves it by a variety of keen logical reasons. He rejects even the milder forms of philosophic universalism, such as the theory that the universal is something in particulars which is distinguished from them not realiter but only formaliter. He considers the universal without qualification as an “intention” of the mind, a symbol representing conventionally several objects. In respect of the theory of cognition, where Duns Scotus had placed between the perceiving subject and the object perceived a “sensible species” and an “intelligible species,” Ockham considers these as superfluous machinery. Objects call forth sense-impressions in us, which are transmuted by the active intellect into mental images. These images are thus a product of the intellect, not species which flow from the object into the intellectus possibilis. The reality of these images is thus, in the modern use of the terms, not objective but subjective. This is true not merely of the “terms of first intention” formed directly from sense-impression, but also of the “terms of second intention,” i.e., the abstract terms which take note of common attributes, or universals. These latter correspond to a tendency of the human mind, which can not perceive individuals without at the same time attempting to form a general concept. A white object simultaneously suggests abstract whiteness; an extended, related, enduring object forces the conception of extension, relation, duration. The result of this line of reasoning is the absolute subjectivity of all concepts and universals and the limitation of knowledge to the mind and its concepts—although these are real entities because of their subjective existence in the mind, reproducing the actual according to the constitution of the mind. Thus Ockham is really the pioneer of modern epistemology. The mysterious universals with their species in the sense of objective realities are abolished. Objects work upon the senses of men, and out of these operations the active intellect frames its concepts, including the so-called universals, which, while they are in themselves subjective, yet correspond to objective realities. By the statement that science has nothing to do directly with things, but only with concepts of them, the theory of knowledge assumes vital import for the progress of science, and a new method of scientific cognition is made available. Of course this increases the difficulty of the task of theology. However, Ockham was essentially of a skeptical and critical temperament, of great critical acumen, but (especially in the religious province) he was by no means equally great in constructive ability. He did not have the broad general conception of religion which guided his master Scotus through his attempts to criticize the old evidences and bring up new ones. Where Ockham shows its power at all, it is usually simply borrowed from Scotus.

Nature of God (www.utm.edu/research/iep/o/ockham.htm)

In regard to the nature and attributes of God, he applies a critical solvent to the principal proof given by Scotus for God’s existence. Ockham shows that the reality of God as the infinitus intensive can as little be demonstrated from efficientia, causalitas, eminentia, as from the divine knowledge of the infinite or from the simplicity of his nature. Nevertheless, he considers the recognition of God to proceed from the idea of causality. If not by strict syllogistic deduction, then “by authority and reason.” In the same sort of way, the infinity of God is confirmed. As to his unbounded power and absolute will, Ockham distinguishes potestas absolute and potentia ordinate, the two being, however, only different modes of considering a power which is essentially one. In practice it is always ordinate, the absolute power being merely the hypothetical
possibility of God’s doing anything whatever which does not involve a contradiction in terms. The absolute freedom of God is the characteristic trait in the theology of Ockham. The entire scheme of salvation planned by the *voluntas ordinate* is based on no inner necessity, but is determined by the fact that it pleased God. As a matter of fact, to please God and nothing else. The distinction of the two aspects of the divine power comes in here. The merits of the saints, e.g., are accepted as valid only because it pleases God to accept them — but since it has pleased God to establish this system, merit is absolutely necessary. God and his grace do all, yet only in such a way that the cooperation of man is required. The freedom of the human will cannot be, strictly speaking, demonstrated, but is recognized as true by experience. Sin consists in the violation of the will of God. By it, however, no “real” change takes place in the soul. Sin consists in individual acts; it does not take away freedom nor weaken the soul, but simply destroys the future good, the reward, ordained by God for those who do his will. Since there is no fundamental connection between sin and punishment, God could by his absolute power forgive sin and infuse grace even without repentance. In the same connection appears the relation of original sin to original righteousness. The latter is “an absolute something superadded to man as he is in a state of nature”; the former is “a certain lack of the righteousness which he ought to have.” Thus original sin is the result of the divine ordinance; God wills to consider the offender against his law as unworthy of acceptance, together with all his posterity. This explains his view of the immaculate conception of Mary. As a member of the human race, she would have been in the first instant of her conception a debtor to original righteousness. However, it is not inconceivable that God should have chosen to renounce the exaction of that righteousness from her and refused to impute its absence as a fault. By a subtle train of reasoning he concludes that she was not even for an instant in original sin.