For much of the High Middle Ages, the conflict between Plato and Aristotle took the form of lengthy debates over the nature of universals. Philosophers of a Platonic bent came to be known as “Realists” because they argued that universals had a real existence apart from the specific objects in which they dwelled. For example, we observe birds of many different shapes, sizes, and colors, but still recognize them as belonging to the species “bird.” Realists argue that we recognize the species bird because all of the individual birds reflect a common “birdness” in which they participate. This “birdness” exists as a reality which is greater than and apart from any individual bird.

The Aristotelian opponents of the Realists are called “Nominalists” from the Latin word *nomina* which means “name.” Nominalists argue that universals exist only because the human mind observes the natural world and creates categories (names) for the many individual objects it sees. None of these ideas, concepts, categories, or “names” exist apart from the specific objects to which they are attached. They are not a separate reality. They are only a creation of the human mind. Thus, when we observe birds we ignore the differences such as size, shape, color, or mating habits, and concentrate on what we believe are the similarities. We create the species “birds” which helps us bring order to our world. There is no separate “birdness” in which the variety of individual objects we label “birds” participate.

Another illustration may help to clear up this difficult point. In the eighteenth century, scientists discovered dinosaur bones and realized that these were creatures which had not existed within recorded history. At the same time, techniques were developed which allowed them to date the bones as coming from animals living millions or hundreds of millions of years ago. The question then arose, “what living species of animals most closely resembles ancient dinosaurs?” The answer to this question would help scientists understand the common ancestor from which both the modern species and dinosaurs evolved.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most people believed that dinosaurs evolved from a cold blooded ancestor which also resulted in modern reptiles such as snakes and lizards. In short, dinosaurs were “reptiles.” New discoveries in the twentieth century changed this thinking. Most scientists now believe that dinosaurs evolved from the common ancestor of birds. In short, dinosaurs were “birds.” This change is consistent with Nominalism in that the similarities which led to label dinosaurs “reptiles” and others to name them “birds” were more in the mind of the observer than in reality. In fact, dinosaurs may have little in common with either reptiles or birds but may belong to an entirely different species yet to be identified and named by [158] scientists. Or, the many animals we now place in the category called dinosaurs may be found to have nothing in common after all!

**Implications of the Realist–Nominalist Debates**

The debates between the Realists and Nominalists were not just so much “theological hair-splitting.” They have critical implications for church doctrine, morality, political theory, and where truth is to be found, among many other areas. These differences become most obvious when the positions of the Realists and Nominalists are taken to the extremes.

If universals exist apart from the objects in which they dwell and this world reflects to some extent the realm of universals, the church may gain greater insight into these universals through revelation from God, study, prayer, and moral discipline. Because of this, the church may claim the right to be the teacher of the rest of society and to require adherence to the special truths of its doctrine.

If universals are merely the creation of finite human minds, then there is no real connection between the material world and spiritual realms. This earth along with its social and religious arrangements are human creations not reflections of a greater “heavenly” reality. Because of this, the church has no right to claim special authority to teach and direct the rest of society. Its doctrines could be just as flawed as any other human creation. For instance, if there is no connection between doctrine and “heavenly” reality, there is little reason to believe in Transubstantiation. In the communion service, it is obvious to the eye that the bread and wine physically stay bread and wine. They do not appear to be transformed into the body and blood of Christ. Church leaders could have “made up” this idea.
Similarly, if the Nominalists are correct, human ideas of morality including our concepts of virtues and vices are not anchored in the spiritual realm. They too are creations of the human mind. When observation teaches us that cultural standards vary among human societies, what is the basis for determining moral and immoral behavior? According to the Nominalist position, we can not [sic] really say that love, compassion, and gentleness are superior to hate, greed, and violence? [Sic]

The Realist-Nominalist debates also had significant implications for the question of where government gets its authority to rule. If earthly institutions reflect the Divine heavenly realm, then governments are legitimate to the degree that they follow self-existing universal standards. This idea underlies the medieval contention that kings must be Christians who govern “according to the principles of Christ.” To do otherwise undermines the authority of government. On the other hand, the Nominalist position means that any political [159] arrangement that people consider legitimate is all right. Ultimately, this led to the rise of democracy, a system of politics in which the government derives its authority from the consent of the governed.

Finally, if as Realists believe there is a connection between the material world and the realm of universals, then it is possible by revelation, reason, moral discipline, or other means to have insight into the truth found in the universals. The focus of the search for truth is the universals themselves. The senses can not [sic] be trusted to gain insight into universals because their gaze is limited strictly to the material world. On the other hand, if the Nominalists are correct that universals do not exist apart from the particulars in which they reside, then truth is to be found in studying those particulars. The senses themselves are the instruments we use to observe the material world. Because of this, the senses become the source of truth.

*Triumph of Aristotle and Nominalism*

During the early Middle Ages most Western Christian philosophers and theologians were Platonic. The doctrines of the church were firmly grounded in Plato and Realism. The introduction of Aristotle into Europe in the twelfth century began a gradual shift in the basis for theology, church practice, society, and the quest for knowledge. To their credit, most medieval theologians were not radical Nominalists. While accepting many of the precepts of Nominalism, they still believed in the spiritual realm and revelation. Many like St. Thomas [Aquinas] sought some kind of combination of Plato and Aristotle. For instance, Thomas believed that reason and observation could teach us much about morality, truth, and God. But he also felt that saving knowledge of God and perfected truth could come only through he activity of God’s grace. In other words, he taught that nature could be perfected only through grace.

The great synthesis which Thomas had created soon began to crumble. Through such Aristotelian theologians as Johannes Duns Scotus (ca. 1265–1308), Nominalism began to carry the day. By the time of William of Ockham (ca. 1285–1347), the Nominalist position had become dominant. In addition, Ockham’s (also spelled Occam) Nominalism was much more radical. In his thought faith and reason were completely separated. Even basic ideas like the existence of God and immortality of the soul had to be accepted because the church taught them and they were found in the Bible. These tenets can not [sic] be proven. They must be accepted in faith [belief or hope]. With Ockham, there is a complete divorce between grace and nature. Nature alone became the focus of the search for truth. Although Platonic ideas have not completely disappeared, more and more religious, political, social, and philosophical systems emerged which are based on Aristotle. [160]

The triumph of Aristotle and Nominalism had a profound impact across the board. In the short run, it spelled the end of Scholasticism. It undermined the whole goal of the Schoolmen to demonstrate by reason alone the validity of Christian doctrines. It also set the stage for the Renaissance which focused on nature apart from faith or grace. In many ways, this shift was responsible for the Protestant Reformation. Many of the Reformers were Nominalists. Nominalism is the foundation from which science emerged. Modern science arose out of Aristotelian inductive reasoning, not Platonic deductive thought. The new stress of the importance of the material world gave rise to the idea that humans should take control and make conditions better in this life. The eternal world became less important. In the long run, Aristotle contributed to secularization (the removal of human institutions from religious domination), which is characteristic of the modern world.