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The Nominalist Ontology of William of Ockham

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Introduction

"Like most philosophers in the Aristotelian tradition, Ockham distinguishes between propositions and the terms out of which they are composed. Central to Ockham's analysis of the concept of a term is his distinction between categorematic and syncategorematic terms. We can get at this dichotomy if we distinguish between expressions that do and expressions that do not yield a meaningful proposition when substituted for x in 'This x -es' or 'This is (a/an) x '. The former (including predicate-expressions, proper names, demonstratives, and pronouns) Ockham calls categorematic terms; the latter (including articles, particles, interjections, quantifiers, and truth-functional connectives) he calls syncategorematic terms.

It is among categorematic terms that Ockham locates the distinction between singular and general, or employing Ockham's own terminology, the distinction between discrete and common terms. Very roughly, this is the distinction between categorematic terms that can and categorematic terms that cannot function as predicate in subject-predicate propositions, or that at least is the way a contemporary Ockhamist would express the dichotomy. Ockham himself construes the subject-predicate nexus more broadly to include identity-statements, existential propositions, and propositions incorporating either the universal or particular quantifier. Against this broad interpretation of subject-predicate discourse, Ockham tells us that while the discrete term is predicable of just one thing, the common term is predicable of many.

I have indicated that this distinction has traditionally been associated with the distinction between universals and particulars. For the medieval, the view that these two distinctions are related was legitimized by Aristotle's claim that the universal is that which is predicable of many. In a number of medieval philosophers this relation was explicated in terms of the notion of signification. The claim was that while discrete or singular terms signify particulars, common or general terms signify universals.

In medieval semantics, 'signify' was used as a transitive verb linking categorematic terms with their non-linguistic counterparts. Underlying this usage was the notion that categorematic terms are signs of objects, and the concept of a sign at work here was interpreted in psychological terms. A categorematic term is the sign of an object in the sense that the utterance of the expression has the effect of "bringing that object before the mind" of anyone familiar with the conventions governing the language in which the expression is embedded. The fact that signification involves a word-thing relationship suggests that the medieval notion of signification corresponds to the contemporary notion of reference; but in fact, the two concepts are quite different. The contemporary view tends to be that terms refer (or are used to refer) to objects only within the context of a proposition. The medievals, however, held that the signification of a term is a property which it exhibits quite independently of its role in any particular proposition; and they claimed that, at least in the case of univocal terms, the significatum of a categorematic expression is invariant over the various referential uses to which the term is put. Although it is explicitly relational, the medieval notion of signification is probably closer to the contemporary notion of meaning. In contemporary terms, the medievals were claiming that to know the meaning of a categorematic term is to know which object is its significatum." (pp. 1-2)

From: Michael J. Loux, "The Ontology of William of Ockham", in: *William of Ockham's Theory of Terms. Part I of the Summa logicae*. Notre Dame: University of Indiana Press 1974. (Reprint: South Bend, St. Augustine's Press 1998).