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William Ockham on Universals

Ockham's First Theory: A Universal is a *Fictum*

One can plausibly say that a universal is not a real thing inherent in a subject [*habens esse subiectivum*], whether in the soul or outside the soul, but it exists only as an object of the soul [*habet esse obiectivum in anima*].[1] And it is a sort of mental image [*fictum*] that in its existence as an object of the soul [*in esse obiectivo*] is like an external thing in its real existence [*in esse subiectivo*]. And I mean this in the following sense: The intellect seeing some thing outside the soul makes up a similar one in the mind in such a way that if it had the power to make it just as it has the power to make it up, then it would produce a thing in real existence that is numerically distinct from the first one; and this would be analogous to the activity of a craftsman. For similarly to the case of a builder who, upon seeing a house or a building outside, makes up a similar one in his soul, and later builds a similar one outside that is only numerically different from the first, in the case under consideration, the figment [*fictum*] in the mind taken from the sight of the external thing would serve as a certain exemplar [a "blueprint"]; for in this way, just as the house imagined is an exemplar for the builder, so that figment would be an exemplar for the person who forms it, if he had the power to

This selection, coming from Ockham's early (and unfinished) *Commentary on the Sentences* (*Ordinatio*, d. 2, q. 8, pp. 271–4), presents Ockham's first theory of universals, which he later abandoned, convinced by the arguments of his confrere, Walter Chatton, that it is needless to posit such dubious entities to explain universal cognition.

1 The distinction is between having something in mind, as an object of the mind, i.e., as that which we are thinking of and which may not exist in reality at all, on the one hand, and the existence of a really existing thing, especially a form that really inheres in a subject, whether it is being thought of or not, on the other. The former kind of object is said to have a mere objective existence [*esse obiectivum*], while the latter kind of things are said to have real existence in a subject of inherence, or subjective existence [*esse subiectivum*]. This distinction, which is quite the reverse of the contemporary colloquial understanding of the contrast between 'objective' [mind-independent, real] and 'subjective' [mind-dependent, unreal, arbitrary] was quite commonly made already in the second half of the 13th century, and it still influenced Descartes' distinction between the mere objective reality and the formal or subjective reality of ideas.

produce it in reality. And it can be called a universal, for it is an exemplar and it relates indifferently to all external singulars. And because of this similarity in its existence as an object [of the intellect] [*in esse obiectivo*], it can refer to [*supponere pro*] the things that have a similar existence outside the intellect. And so in this way a universal does not come to be by generation, but by abstraction, which is nothing but a sort of imagination [*fictio*].

I first show that there is something that has this mere objective existence [*esse obiectivum*] in the soul, without any real existence [*esse subiectivum*].

This is clear first from the following: According to philosophers, being [*ens*] is first divided into being in the soul and being outside the soul; and beings outside the soul are sorted into the ten categories. And then I ask: How is 'being in the soul' to be taken here? It is either taken for something that has mere objective existence (and then we have what we wanted to prove) or for something that has real existence [*esse subiectivum*], but this is not possible. For something that has real existence inhering in the soul as its subject is contained precisely among the beings sorted into the ten categories, because it is some quality, since a thought and universally all accidents informing the soul are true qualities, just as are heat or whiteness, and thus these [accidents] are not contained under that member of the division that is divided against the beings that are sorted into the ten categories.[2]

Again, figments [*figmenta*] are in the soul, and not subjectively, for then they would be real things, and so a chimera or a goat-stag and the like would be real things; therefore, there are things that have mere objective existence.

Likewise, propositions, syllogisms and the similar items that logic is about do not have subjective existence; therefore, they only have objective existence, so that for them to be is for them to be cognized. Therefore, there are such things that have only objective existence.

Likewise, artifacts do not seem to have subjective existence in the mind of the craftsman, as neither do creatures in the divine mind before the creation.

Likewise, relations of reason[3] are commonly admitted by professors. Then I ask: Do these relations only have subjective existence? – If so, then they are genuine and real things [which is impossible]; or do they have mere objective existence? – If so, then we have what we wanted to prove.

[. . .]

2 So, the inherent qualities of the soul are to be understood as being among those entities that are sorted into the ten categories, but those are precisely the things that are classified as beings outside the soul, as opposed to beings in the soul. Therefore, the beings in the soul in the sense of this phrase required by the first division are not the inherent qualities of the soul, but the mere thought-objects of the soul, its *ficta*.

3 Relations of reason are relations that pertain to a thing only on account of some act of the mind and do not have real inherence in the thing, so their coming to be or ceasing to be in the thing does not amount to a real change in the thing. For example, Socrates's relational property of being admired by Plato is a relation of reason, because it pertains to him only on account of Plato's mental act of admiring him. And of course Socrates's coming to be admired by a modern day student does not amount to a real change in Socrates, for only an actually existing thing can undergo real change, and Socrates, being dead, does not actually exist. For more on relations of reason, and beings of reason in general in Aquinas and Ockham, see G. Klima, "The Changing Role of *Entia Rationis* in Medieval Philosophy: A Comparative Study with a Reconstruction", *Synthese* 96 (1993), pp. 25–59.

Likewise, virtually everybody distinguishes second intentions from first intentions, while not calling second intentions real qualities of the soul; therefore, since they [the second intentions] cannot really exist outside the soul, they can only exist objectively in the soul.

In the second place, I say that this mental image [*fictum*] is that which is primarily and immediately denominated by the intention of universality, has the nature of an object, and it is that which immediately terminates an act of understanding when no singular is understood, and which is such in objective existence as the singular is in subjective existence; this is why it can, on account of its nature, supposit for the singulars of which it is a sort of similitude.

And I say that just as an utterance is a universal and a genus or a species, but only by convention, so a concept thus formed [*conceptus sic fictus*] and abstracted from the singular things cognized earlier is a universal by its own nature.

Ockham's Later Theory: A Universal Is an Act of Understanding[4]

Another opinion could be that a 'passion of the soul' [that Aristotle is talking about][5] is the act of understanding itself. And since this opinion seems to me to be more probable than all the other opinions that take these passions of the soul to be subjectively inhering and really existing in the soul as its true qualities, therefore, I first explain the most plausible way of interpreting this opinion. [. . .]

I say, therefore, that someone who wants to hold this opinion can assume that the intellect apprehending a singular thing elicits in itself an act of cognition about only that singular thing, which is called a passion of the soul, and which, on account of its own nature, is capable of referring to [*supponere pro*] that singular thing. So, as the utterance 'Socrates' refers to the thing it signifies by convention, in such a manner that someone hearing the utterance 'Socrates runs' will not think that the utterance he hears, namely, 'Socrates', is running, but that the thing signified by that utterance is running, in the same way, he who would see or understand something affirmed about that singular intellection of that singular thing, would not understand that affirmation to apply to that intellection, but to the thing itself that the intellection is about; in this way, just as the utterance refers to that thing by convention, so the intellection would, by its on nature, without any convention, refer to the thing it is about.

But besides this intellection of that singular thing the intellect forms other intellections as well, which are no more about this thing than about another, just as the utterance 'man' signifies Socrates, but no more than it does Plato, and so it refers to Socrates, but no more than it does to Plato, and the same would go for this intellection, namely, that Socrates is no more understood by it than is Plato, and so on for all other men. And thus there would also be another intellection, by which this animal would be understood, but not more than that animal, and so on for the rest.

4 This is the opinion Ockham eventually settled on, abandoning his earlier *ficta* as being superfluous, and therefore eliminable by his Razor, the famous methodological principle according to which in the explanation of certain phenomena that theory is preferable which assumes the existence of fewer entities. This selection comes from Ockham's *Commentary on Aristotle's "On Interpretation"* (*Per Hermeneias*), bk. 1, proem., para. 6, pp. 351–2).

5 The phrase 'passion of the soul' derives from Aristotle's remark in his *On Interpretation*, expressing his idea of the "semantic triangle" (often referred to as such in the secondary literature) according to which meaningful words signify the passions of the soul (where 'passion' is to be taken in the broad sense of some sort of affection) and by their mediation the extramental things.

In short, it is the intellections of the soul themselves that are called the passions of the soul, and they refer by their own nature to things outside the soul or to other things in the soul, just as utterances refer to things by convention.

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On Universals: *Summa Logicae*, Part I

Chapter 14: On the universal

It is not enough for the logician to have a merely general knowledge of terms; he needs a deep understanding of the concept of a term. Therefore, after discussing some general divisions among terms we should examine in detail the various headings under these divisions.

First, we should deal with terms of second intention and afterwards with terms of first intention. I have said that "universal," "genus," and "species" are examples of terms of second intention. We must discuss those terms of second intention which are called the five universals, but first we should consider the common term "universal." It is predicated of every universal and is opposed to the notion of a particular.

First, it should be noted that the term "particular" has two senses. In the first sense a particular is that which is one and not many. Those who hold that a universal is a certain quality residing in the mind which is predicable of many (not suppositing for itself, of course, but for the many of which it is predicated) must grant that, in this sense of the word, every universal is a particular. Just as a word, even if convention makes it common, is a particular, the intention of the soul signifying many is numerically one thing a particular; for although it signifies many things it is nonetheless one thing and not many.

In another sense of the word we use "particular" to mean that which is one and not many and which cannot function as a sign of many. Taking "particular" in this sense no universal is a particular, since every universal is capable of signifying many and of being predicated of many. Thus, if we take the term "universal" to mean that which is not one in number, as many do, then, I want to say that nothing is a universal. One could, of course, abuse the expression and say that a population constitutes a single universal because it is not one but many. But that would be puerile.

Therefore, it ought to be said that every universal is one particular thing and that it is not a universal except in its signification, in its signifying many things. This is what Avicenna means to say in his commentary on the fifth book of the *Metaphysics*. He says, "One form in the intellect is related to many things, and in this respect it is a universal; for it is an intention of the intellect which has an invariant relationship to anything you choose." He then continues, "Although this form is a universal in its relationship to individuals, it is a particular in its relationship to the particular soul in which it resides; for it is just one form among many in the intellect." He means to say that a universal is an intention of a particular soul. Insofar as it can be predicated of many things not for itself but for these many, it is said to be a universal; but insofar as it is a particular form actually existing in the intellect, it is said to be a particular. Thus "particular" is predicated of a universal in the first sense but not in the second. In the same way we say that the sun is a universal cause and, nevertheless, that it is really and truly a particular or individual cause. For the sun is said to be a universal cause because it is the cause of many things (i.e., every object that is generable and corruptible), but it is said to be a particular cause because it is one cause and not many. In the same way the intention of the soul is said to be a universal because it is a sign predicable of many things, but it is said to be a particular because it is one thing and not many.

But it should be noted that there are two kinds of universals. Some things are universal by nature; that is, by nature they are signs predicable of many in the same way that the smoke is by nature a sign of fire; weeping, a sign of grief; and laughter, a sign of internal joy. The intention of the soul, of course, is a universal by nature. Thus, no substance outside the soul, nor any accident outside the soul is a universal of this sort. It is of this kind of universal that I shall speak in the following chapters.

Other things are universals by convention. Thus, a spoken word, which is numerically one quality, is a universal; it is a sign conventionally appointed for the signification of many things. Thus, since the word is said to be common, it can be called a universal. But notice it is not by nature, but only by convention, that this label applies.

Chapter 15: That the universal is not a thing outside the mind

But it is not enough just to state one's position; one must defend it by philosophical arguments. Therefore, I shall set forth some arguments for my view, and then corroborate it by an appeal to the authorities.

That no universal is a substance existing outside the mind can be proved in a number of ways:

No universal is a particular substance, numerically one; for if this were the case, then it would follow that Socrates is a universal; for there is no good reason why one substance should be a universal rather than another. Therefore no particular substance is a universal; every substance is numerically one and a particular. For every substance is either one thing and not many or it is many things. Now, if a substance is one thing and not many, then it is numerically one; for that is what we mean by "numerically one." But if, on the other hand, some substance is several things, it is either several particular things or several universal things. If the first alternative is chosen, then it follows that some substance would be several particular substances; and consequently that some substance would be several men. But although the universal would be distinguished from a single particular, it would not be distinguished from several particulars. If, however, some substance were to be several universal entities, I take one of those universal entities and ask, "Is it many things or is it one and not many?" If the second is the case then it follows that the thing is particular. If the first is the case then I ask, "Is it several particular things or several universal things?" Thus, either an infinite regress will follow or it will be granted that no substance is a universal in a way that would be incompatible with its also being a particular. From this it follows that no substance is a universal.

Again, if some universal were to be one substance existing in particular substances, yet distinct from them, it would follow that it could exist without them; for everything that is naturally prior to something else can, by God's power, exist without that thing; but the consequence is absurd.

Again, if the view in question were true, no individual would be able to be created. Something of the individual would pre-exist it, for the whole individual would not take its existence from nothing if the universal which is in it were already in something else. For the same reason it would follow that God could not annihilate an individual substance without destroying the other individuals of the same kind. If He were to annihilate some individual, he would destroy the whole which is essentially that individual and, consequently, He would destroy the universal which is in that thing and in others of the same essence. Consequently, other things of the same essence would not remain, for they could not continue to exist without the universal which constitutes a part of them.

Again, such a universal could not be construed as something completely extrinsic to the essence of an individual; therefore, it would belong to the essence of the individual; and, consequently, an individual would be composed of universals, so that the individual would not be any more a particular than a universal.

Again, it follows that something of the essence of Christ would be miserable and damned, since that common nature really existing in Christ would be damned in the damned individual; for surely that essence is also in Judas. But this is absurd.

Many other arguments could be brought forth, but in the interests of brevity, I shall dispense with them. Instead, I shall corroborate my account by an appeal to authorities.

First, in the seventh book of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle is treating the question of whether a universal is a substance. He shows that no universal is a substance. Thus, he says, "It is impossible that substance be something that can be predicated universally."

Again, in the tenth book of the *Metaphysics*, he says, "Thus, if, as we argued in the discussions on substance and being, no universal can be a substance, it is not possible that a universal be a substance in the sense of a one over and against the many."

From these remarks it is clear that, in Aristotle's view, although universals can supposit for substances, no universal is a substance.

Again, the Commentator in his forty-fourth comment on the seventh book of the *Metaphysics* says, "In the individual, the only substance is the particular form and matter out of which the individual is composed."

Again, in the forty-fifth comment, he says, "Let us say, therefore, that it is impossible that one of those things we call universals be the substance of anything, although they do express the substances of things."

And, again, in the forty-seventh comment, "It is impossible that they (universals) be parts of substances existing of and by themselves."

Again, in the second comment on the eighth book of the *Metaphysics*, he says, "No universal is either a substance or a genus."

Again, in the sixth comment on the tenth book, he says, "Since universals are not substances, it is clear that the common notion of being is not a substance existing outside the mind."

Using these and many other authorities, the general point emerges: no universal is a substance regardless of the viewpoint from which we consider the matter. Thus, the viewpoint from which we consider the matter is irrelevant to the question of whether something is a substance. Nevertheless, the meaning of a term is relevant to the question of whether the expression "substance" can be predicated of the term. Thus, if the term "dog" in the proposition "The dog is an animal" is used to stand for the barking animal, the proposition is true; but if it is used for the celestial body which goes by that name, the proposition is false. But it is impossible that one and the same thing should be a substance from one viewpoint and not a substance from another.

Therefore, it ought to be granted that no universal is a substance regardless of how it is considered. On the contrary, every universal is an intention of the mind which, on the most probable account, is identical with the act of understanding. Thus, it is said that the act of understanding by which I grasp men is a natural sign of men in the same way that weeping is a natural sign of grief. It is a natural sign such that it can stand for men in mental propositions in the same way that a spoken word can stand for things in spoken propositions.

That the universal is an intention of the soul is clearly expressed by Avicenna in the fifth book of the *Metaphysics*, in which he comments, "I say, therefore, that there are three senses

of 'universal.' For we say that something is a universal if (like 'man') it is actually predicated of many things; and we also call an intention a universal if it could be predicated of many." Then follows the remark, "An intention is also called a universal if there is nothing inconceivable in its being predicated of many."

From these remarks it is clear that the universal is an intention of the soul capable of being predicated of many. The claim can be corroborated by argument. For every one agrees that a universal is something predicable of many, but only an intention of the soul or a conventional sign is predicated. No substance is ever predicated of anything. Therefore, only an intention of the soul or a conventional sign is a universal; but I am not here using the term "universal" for conventional signs, but only for signs that are universals by nature. That substance is not capable of functioning as predicate is clear; for if it were, it would follow that a proposition would be composed of particular substances; and, consequently, the subject would be in Rome and the predicate in England which is absurd.

Furthermore, propositions occur only in the mind, in speech, or in writing; therefore, their parts can exist only in the mind, in speech, and in writing. Particular substances, however, cannot themselves exist in the mind, in speech, or in writing. Thus, no proposition can be composed of particular substances. Propositions are, however, composed of universal; therefore, universals cannot conceivably be substances.

Chapter 16: Against Scotus' account of the universal

It may be clear to many that a universal is not a substance outside the mind which exists in, but is distinct from, particulars. Nevertheless, some want to claim that the universal is, in some way, outside the soul and in particulars; and while they do not want to say that a universal is really distinct from particulars, they say that it is formally distinct from particulars. Thus, they say that in Socrates there is human nature which is contracted to Socrates by an individual difference which is not really, but only formally, distinct from that nature. Thus, while there are not two things, one is not formally the other.

I do not find this view tenable:

First, in creatures there can never be any distinction outside the mind unless there are distinct things; if, therefore, there is any distinction between the nature and the difference, it is necessary that they really be distinct things. I prove my premise by the following syllogism: the nature is not formally distinct from itself; this individual difference is formally distinct from this nature; therefore, this individual difference is not this nature.

Again, the same entity is not both common and proper, but in their view the individual difference is proper and the universal is common; therefore, no universal is identical with an individual difference.

Again, opposites cannot be attributed to one and the same created thing, but *common* and *proper* are opposites; therefore, the same thing is not both common and proper. Nevertheless, that conclusion would follow if an individual difference and a common nature were the same thing.

Again, if a common nature were the same thing as an individual difference, there would be as many common natures as there are individual differences; and, consequently, none of those natures would be common, but each would be peculiar to the difference with which it is identical.

Again, whenever one thing is distinct from another it is distinguished from that thing either of and by itself or by something intrinsic to itself. Now, the humanity of Socrates is

something different from the humanity of Plato; therefore, they are distinguished of and by themselves and not by differences that are added to them.

Again, according to Aristotle things differing in species also differ in number, but the nature of a man and the nature of a donkey differ in species of and by themselves; therefore, they are numerically distinguished of and by themselves; therefore, each of them is numerically one of and by itself.

Again, that which cannot belong to many cannot be predicated of many; but such a nature, if it really is the same thing as the individual difference, cannot belong to many since it cannot belong to any other particular. Thus, it cannot be predicable of many; but, then, it cannot be a universal.

Again, take an individual difference and the nature which it contracts. Either the difference between these two things is greater or less than the difference between two particulars. It is not greater because they do not differ really; particulars, however, do differ really. But neither is it less because then they would admit of one and the same definition, since two particulars, can admit of the same definition. Consequently, if one of them is, by itself, one in number, the other will also be.

Again, either the nature is the individual difference or it is not. If it is the difference I argue as follows: this individual difference is proper and not common; this individual difference is this nature; therefore this nature is proper and not common, but that is what I set out to prove. Likewise, I argue as follows: the individual difference is not formally distinct from the individual difference; the individual difference is the nature; therefore, the nature is not formally distinct from the individual difference. But if it be said that the individual difference is not the nature, my point has been proved; for it follows that if the individual difference is not the nature, the individual difference is not really the nature; for from the opposite of the consequent follows the opposite of the antecedent. Thus, if it is true that the individual difference really is the nature, then the individual difference is the nature. The inference is valid, for from a determinable taken with its determination (where the determination does not detract from or diminish the determinable) one can infer the determinable taken by itself; but "really" does not express a determination that detracts or diminishes. Therefore, it follows that if the individual difference is really the nature, the individual difference is the nature.

Therefore, one should grant that in created things there is no such thing as a formal distinction. All things which are distinct in creatures are really distinct and, therefore, different things. In regard to creatures modes of argument like the following ought never be denied: this is *A*; this is *B*; therefore, *B* is *A*; and this is not *A*; this is *B*; therefore, *B* is not *A*. Likewise, one ought never deny that, as regards creatures, there are distinct things where contradictory notions hold. The only exception would be the case where contradictory notions hold true because of some syncategorematic element or similar determination, but in the same present case this is not so.

Therefore, we ought to say with the philosophers that in a particular substance there is nothing substantial except the particular form, the particular matter, or the composite of the two. And, therefore, no one ought to think that in Socrates there is a humanity or a human nature which is distinct from Socrates and to which there is added an individual difference which contracts that nature. The only thing in Socrates which can be construed as substantial is this particular matter, this particular form, or the composite of the two. And, therefore, every essence and quiddity and whatever belongs to substance, if it is really outside the soul, is just matter, form, or the composite of these or, following the doctrine of the Peripatetics, a separated and immaterial substance.