THE FAILURE OF OCKHAM'S NOMINALISM*

> I do hold this, that no universal, unless perhaps it is universal by a
> voluntary agreement, is something existing outside the soul in any
> way, but all that which is of its nature universally predicable of
> many is in the mind either subjectively or objectively, and that no
> universal is of the essence or quiddity of any given substance.

This ringing declaration closes William of Ockham's lengthy discussion of
universals in *Ord.* 1 d. 2 qq. 4–8 (291–292). In his discussion in qq. 4–7, he
has offered a devastating critique of positions which hold that the universal
is somehow a real existent outside the soul, and presents his own view—that
universals are nothing but words—as the conclusion to be drawn from the
failure of these realist positions to stand up to his rigorous examination.
Thus we would expect Ockham to adopt a version of nominalism which,
while avoiding the realist commitments of his predecessors, manages to sat-
isfy the exacting demands of philosophical rigor and subtlety established in
his critique.

That isn't what happens. Instead, *Ord.* 1 d. 2 q. 8 is indecisive: alter-
native identifications of universals are presented and none clearly endorsed;
the text is heavily revised in a later redaction and a new alternative ap-
pended to the discussion; Augustine is extensively used in support of one
of the positions; good objections are not explored and bad objections are
treated at length. Ockham presents the very picture of a philosopher who,
although sure that no form of realism about universals is acceptable, is
otherwise unsure what to put in the place of such realism.

In this paper I want to explore the reasons for Ockham's surprising
vacillation—not as an historical or biographical exercise, but to uncover the
insights which nourished his positive views about nominalism and which
also cast him into such uncertainty. The results will be instructive, since
Ockham seems to have been struggling with difficulties which continue to

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  Ockham will be taken from the critical edition of his non-political writings, *Guillielmi
  de Ockham opera philosophica et theologica*, eds. Gedeon Gál, Stephen Brown, et al.,
  The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure, New York: 1967–1985. Ockham discusses
  universals at length in two places: *Ord.* 1 d. 2 qq. 4–8 (OT II), and *Summa logicae* 1.15–
  17 (OP I). Brief discussions of universals are found in the prohemium to his *Exposition
  of Porphyry's "Isagoge"* (OP II) and in *Quod.* 5.12–13 (OT IX). References to these
  works will be in standard form, and followed by the page number of the appropriate
  volume; all translations are my own.

plague philosophers who want to avoid a pure conventionalism and yet find realism about universals an unacceptable alternative. I will begin by posing the obvious problems any nominalist view must face, and then follow Ockham's attempt to develop a coherent theory of the underlying semantic mechanisms which support nominalism. Ultimately, I believe, his attempt fails, although not for any lack of ingenuity, and his failure is itself instructive about the possible forms and limits of 'nominalism'—for if Ockham is to be counted as a nominalist, then the term includes a good deal more than is customarily thought.

Nominalism, at least nominalism with regard to universals, denies the existence of any real universality, insisting that all universality is an artifact of language.[1] Universals, Ockham declares, "are not things other than names." But this traditional formulation conceals more than it reveals. Are all or only some names universal? are universals to be identified as linguistic tokens or types? if universals are linguistic tokens, then do universals come into being and pass away? if universals are linguistic types, then doesn't this presuppose the existence of abstract entities? do distinct languages have different universals? These well-worn questions all point to the need for an account of how words can play the role of universals, that is, in the mediaeval understanding, what it is for a term to be 'predicable of many.'

To avoid the most obvious difficulties which stem from a recognition of the conventionality of language, Ockham has recourse to a device inspired by Aristotle, namely to hold that there are three hierarchically-ordered levels of language, written language, spoken language, and mental language (*De interpretatione* 1 16^{a}1–14):

> Spoken words are symbols or signs or affections of the soul (*passiones animi*); written words are the signs of spoken words. As writing, so also speech is not the same for all men. But the mental affections themselves, which these words are signs of, are the same for all mankind, as are also the objects for which those affections are representations or likenesses, or images, or copies... A name or a verb by itself much resembles a concept or a thought which is neither conjoined nor disjoined.

This passage links the activities of writing, speaking, and thought, and ex-

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[1] Some have taken nominalism to include a denial of the existence of any 'abstract entities,' including *e. g.* universals, relations, numbers, possible worlds or individuals, sets, propositions, and perhaps God. The clause 'nominalism with regard to universals' restricts the focus of the following discussion.

plicitly denies the conventionality of the latter.[2] Each level constitutes a complete language, with its own vocabulary, rules of syntax, and semantics. In Ockham's elaboration of this view, described in *Summa logicae* 1.1–2, the constituent elements of written language are linked piecemeal to the constituent elements of spoken language, and the constituent elements of spoken language are linked piecemeal to mental language. These semantic linkages Ockham describes as 'subordination,' which may be construed as a form of encoding: written language encodes spoken language, which in its turn encodes mental language. The constituent elements of mental language, however, are not an encoding; they are directly related to extralinguistic items, a relation Ockham calls 'signification,' which is therefore the mediaeval correlate to the modern notion of 'meaning.'[3] Terms of spoken language may be said to 'signify' whatever the mental term to which they are directly subordinated signify, and terms of written language 'signify' whatever the mental term to which they are indirectly subordinated, via spoken language, signify. Thus mental language functions as the semantics of written and spoken language. Ockham's identification of universals as 'names' is, strictly speaking, an identification of universals with concepts which can be the terms of mental language.[4] He explicitly describes and rejects the suggestion that terms of written or spoken language, independently

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[2] This passage was understood as translated by Boethius with his associated commentary; see Kretzmann [1975] for the importance of this proviso. Ockham explicitly mentions both Aristotle and Boethius in his discussion of the passage in *Summa logicae* 1.1 (7).

[3] Technically, a word has signification regardless of context, even in a freestanding occurrence. Words, or at least names, only refer or 'supposit' when they appear in sentential contexts. Our concern here is with cases of ordinary referential uses (or 'personal supposition'), in which a term "stands for what it signifies" (*Summa logicae* 1.44), *i. e.* refers to either all or some of its significates depending on the sentential context of its appearance.

[4] There is a non-trivial question about which concepts can be the terms of mental language, and which of these correspond to universals. Ockham argues that (*i*) mental language contains no synonyms; (*ii*) mental language contains only absolute terms; (*iii*) only categorematic terms, not syncategorematic terms, are candidates for universals. Given these restrictions, it is by no means evident what the class of non-complex absolute categorematic terms which are predicable of many includes. I propose to ignore the entire question, taking it as unproblematic that the concepts which correspond to natural-kind terms such as 'man' and 'animal' are universals. None of the claims I will make hangs on this point. It should also be noted that I am deliberately using the word 'concept' without any support for its introduction or discussion of what a concept is. The reasons for this will be apparent shortly.

of their connection with mental language, can be called universals.[5] Hence Ockham is sometimes called a 'conceptualist' rather than a nominalist, although, given the close connection between spoken and written language on the one hand and mental language on the other hand, both names seem equally apt.

Universals, then, are concepts which can be the terms of mental language. Given that concepts play such an important role in Ockham's account, most of the modern commentary on his positive theory of universals has centered on his uncertainty on the proper analysis of the nature of concepts. Ockham describes in some detail, and at different times seems to endorse, at least three distinct theories: (i) the concept is something 'objectively existent' in the mental act, that is, something fashioned by the mind and is the object of the mental act, called a 'fiction' (*fictum*) and closely related to the modern notion of an intentional object; (ii) the concept is to be identified as a quality of the mind, distinct from the mental act; (iii) the concept is simply the mental act itself.[6]

The most plausible interpretation of the presence of these different theories is a developmental hypothesis which leads to (iii) as Ockham's 'mature' theory. According to this developmental reconstruction, Ockham began by endorsing (i), but serious difficulties regarding the ontological status of such fictions forced him to abandon this position in favor of holding that concepts must have real existence or 'subjective being' in the soul, as (ii) and (iii) maintain, and considerations of parsimony eventually pushed Ockham to (iii).[7]

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[5] In *Ord.* 1 d. 2 q. 8 (271), Ockham writes: "Fourth, there could be a position that nothing is universal of its nature but only by agreement (*institutio*), in the way in which a word is universal, since no thing of its nature has to supposit for another thing, nor be truly predicated of another thing, just as no word does [of its nature] but only through a voluntary agreement; and so, just as words are universals, and predicable of things, by agreement, so too all universals. But this [position] does not seem true, since then nothing would be a genus or species of its nature, nor conversely, and then God and substance outside the soul could equally be as universal as anything in the soul, which doesn't seem true." The latter part of the objection is obscure, but I take it the complaint that 'nothing would be a genus or species of its nature' is meant to reject a purely conventional nominalism.

[6] Ockham discusses these various theories in *Ord.* 1 d. 2 q. 8 (in each redaction), the prohemium to his *Exposition of Aristotle's "De interpretatione"*, the first seven questions of his *Questions on Aristotle's "Physics"*, and *Quod.* 4.35.

[7] The story is more complex than I have suggested here, involving a debate between Walter Chatton and Ockham. See especially Boehner [1946], Corvino [1955], Gál [1967], and Adams [1977]. My comments in the next paragraph should not be taken

This explanation strikes me as fundamentally sound, and I am happy to adopt it. However, it seems to me to address an issue in the ontological foundations of the philosophy of mind which is only tangentially related to Ockham's nominalist account of universals. Whether we allow that there are objectively existent fictions or not, any successful account of concepts has to accommodate something equivalent to such fictions, that is, has to allow that the mind can fashion ideas of objects, some of which, like the chimaera, may not be capable of existence. Thus there must be an equivalent translation of any such claim in terminology which respects the ontological foundations of each of (i)–(iii). Ockham himself gives an example of such an equivalent translation from (i) to (iii) in the prohemium of his *Exposition of Aristotle's "De interpretatione"* 1.9 (366–367):[8]

> It can be said that when someone fashions a castle or [something] of this sort [to himself] he 'fashions' it only in that he elicits such-and-so acts of understandings (*intellectiones*), just as when someone speaking fashions many [things], namely because he utters many lies, and yet there is absolutely nothing here but a word or words— yet it is still called 'fashioning,' since he says something by which it is implied to be otherwise than it is. Hence just as the one fashioning [something] vocally utters genuine words, to which nevertheless neither does there correspond something as such in reality nor is there anything genuinely 'fashioned' (*fictum*) other than words, so too the one fashioning [something] mentally causes genuine acts of understanding, or other qualities according to another view, to which nevertheless nothing corresponds [in reality] although something is implied to correspond [to it]; hence it is called a fiction.

The analogy is rather tortuous, but its main lines are clear: the mere vocabulary of (i) can equally well be accommodated in (iii). Therefore, Ockham's claims about fictions are independent of the particular foundations adopted, and henceforth I will use this terminology freely, without any particular ontological commitments.

Regardless of which theory about the nature of concepts is ultimately

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to denigrate any of the scholarly, historical, and philosophical work which has gone into constructing the developmental hypothesis, an impressive accomplishment which is a testament to the abilities of its creators.

[8]   Ockham also suggests an equivalent translation from (i) to (ii) in the prohemium of his *Exposition of Aristotle's "De interpretatione"* 1.4 (349): "the quality [which is the concept] is the genuine likeness of an external thing, according to which it represents that external thing and refers (*supponit*) to it by its nature, just as a word refers to things by convention."

adopted, universals are concepts which can be the terms of mental language. More accurately, universals are concepts which are predicable of many, and therefore must be apt to signify many. Hence it is the signification of a mental term which determines whether that term is a universal or not. In keeping with the denial of conventionality for mental language, Ockham holds that concepts are non-conventional signs of what they signify—to use his terminology, a concept 'naturally signifies' its significates.[9] Thus natural signification is basic to Ockham's version of nominalism, and deserves a closer examination.

To explicate the natural signification of universal terms, Ockham has recourse to a fairly common analogy: concepts 'picture' that of which they are concepts—as Aristotle suggests, concepts are "representations or likenesses, or images, or copies" of their significates. Ockham puts forward two suggestions, not mutually exclusive, for a theoretical reconstruction of picturing. The first suggestion is that the concept which the mind fashions to itself is objectively similar to extralinguistic entities, or possesses features which are objectively similar to extralinguistic entities or the characteristics of extralinguistic entities; picturing would then be explicated in part by the notion of resemblance. The second suggestion is that an extralinguistic entity plays an objective causal role in the mind's fashioning of a concept to itself; picturing would then be explicated in part by this causal role, or, more exactly, by the converse of the causal relation. In short, Ockham seems to rely on a combination of what might be termed intrinsic and genetic features in his account of natural signification as a kind of picturing.

While it seems unproblematic that the causal relation or its converse is in fact objective, i.e. that it obtains regardless of any (non-divine) mental activity, it is less clear that resemblance or similarity is objective rather than being in the eye of the beholder. However, in *Ord.* 1 d. 30 q. 5 (385–386) Ockham explicitly describes similarity as a 'real' relation:

> For similarity is called a 'real relation' in that (*i*) one white [thing] is similar to another white [thing] by its nature, and (*ii*) the intellect no more makes it be the case that one is similar to the other, any more than it makes it to be the case that Socrates is white or that Plato is white... When a thing is such as it is indicated to be by a relation or a concrete relative [term] without any activity of

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9   See *Summa logicae* 1.1: "a term [which is] a concept is an intention or affection of the soul naturally signifying or consignifying something, apt to be part of a mental sentence and to refer (*supponere*) to its significate" (7). This notion is discussed in Adams [1978], to whose discussion I am indebted.

the intellect, such that intellectual activity does not make it to be
[so related], then it can be called a 'real relation' in the manner
described before.

A real relation is one for which no intellectual activity is required, which
must be present given the nature of the relata. Two items are similar (or
dissimilar) by their nature, regardless of anyone's thinking so. Hence if
picturing is a matter of resemblance then it must be a real relation, and the
signification of a term will thereby be independent of cognitive states.

Is the interpretation of picturing as resemblance, even as a real relation
of resemblance, compatible with Ockham's nominalism? If Socrates is white
and Plato is white, then the correct description of this situation seems to
be that Socrates resembles Plato in respect of whiteness. The locutions
'x resembles y' or 'x is similar to y' are sometimes held to be incomplete
contexts, properly filled out as $e.\,g.$ 'x resembles y with regard to φ-ness.'
Resemblance is then taken to be a triadic relation which essentially involves
an abstract entity, the respect in which two items can be said to resemble
each other.[10] To avoid such a hypostasization, Ockham rejects this line of
reasoning, concluding instead that resemblance is a dyadic relation and that
at least some claims of the form 'x resembles y' are complete, having the
sense of 'x is globally similar to y' (*Ord.* 1 d. 2 q. 6 211–212; see also *Summa
logicae* 1.17 58):

> If it were objected that Socrates and Plato really agree more than
> Socrates and an ass, and so Socrates and Plato agree in something
> real in which Socrates and an ass do not really agree, but not in
> Socrates nor in Plato; therefore, [they agree] in something distinct
> in some other way which is common to each—I reply that literally
> it should not be granted that Socrates and Plato agree in something
> or [that they agree] in some [things], but that they agree with some
> [things], since [they agree] of themselves, and [it should be granted]
> that Socrates agrees with Plato not 'in something' but 'with some-
> thing', since [they agree] of themselves.

Global similarity is a matter of the characteristics of each of the relata,

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[10] This claim is often advanced on two independent grounds. First, it is sometimes
taken to be a corollary of the metaphysical claim that any two entities will resemble
each other in an infinite, or indefinitely large, number of ways. While this does
not, strictly speaking, entail the claim that resemblance is triadic, but only that
any resemblance-claim is trivially true, that conclusion vitiates much of the point of
making any resemblance-claim. Second, it is sometimes held that the meaning of
'resemblance' is incomplete or necessarily triadic.

and immediately obtains given the relata.[11] But Ockham's recourse to this move just points up the difficulty: how are such claims of global similarity judged true or false? If everything that exists is individual, and individuals are completely discrete entities with nothing in common, it isn't clear how Ockham can maintain that Socrates and Plato are globally similar in a way in which Socrates and an ass are not. The difficulty is even more acute by Ockham's insistence that there must be grades or degrees of global similarity. For Socrates and an ass are globally similar, since they are both animals, but they are somehow 'less' globally similar than Socrates and Plato. Without an account of the truth-conditions of resemblance-claims, the attempt to explicate natural signification in terms of resemblance seems bound to fail.

Ockham recognizes that similarity, even global similarity, is not and cannot be the whole story. In *Ord.* 1 d. 2 q. 8, Ockham approvingly cites Augustine, who emphasizes the lack of similarity between the picture and what it is said to depict—indeed, Augustine emphasizes the arbitrariness of the picture. For example, Augustine describes imagining the city of Alexandria, which he had never seen, and notes that it would be miraculous if it were anything like Alexandria; equally, when reading the Bible, one can fashion mental images of the Apostles and of Christ which are probably quite unlike their actual appearance. Ockham draws the following conclusion (278):

> It is clear that, although due to the diversity in shape and color and other accidents in diverse men we can fashion diverse [fictions] which are not similar to every man (or perhaps [are similar to] no man), nevertheless, we can have a notion of some fiction which is equally related to all men, according to which we are able to judge of anything whether it is a man or not.

A moment's reflection on pictures will illustrate why this conclusion is correct. A photograph by itself will not determine whether it is a picture of Socrates or a picture of Socrates's twin brother. Indeed, a picture of one person, if executed with little talent or under conditions of bad lighting, may resemble another person more than the one who posed or sat for the

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[11] There is an obvious difficulty: how can concepts, which are (at least) mental qualities, be said to 'globally resemble' extramental individual substances? Indeed, how can immaterial accidents 'resemble' material substances? Ockham raises this objection in *Ord.* 1 d. 2 q. 8 (282) only to dismiss it, saying that such fictions "are in objective being as others are in subjective being; and the intellect, from its nature, has the ability to fashion such [fictions] of what it knows to be external" (284).

picture. Any picture of a man will clearly resemble some men more than others. What is more, there can be pictures which of themselves do not exactly resemble anyone. A composite drawing, in which the eyes are drawn from one model, the nose from another, and so on, will not exactly resemble any of these models, and if it should happen to exactly resemble some other person, that seems to be purely accidental or fortuitous.

Such cases might lead one to the conclusion that pictures are general of their nature, and that the examples which deal with the difficulties inherent in picturing an individual are the root cause of the problem. But such a conclusion, while tempting, would be hasty, since the same difficulties could be raised with 'general pictures,' pictures which are meant to be pictures of not a single individual but of a class of individuals. Does a photograph of Socrates globally resemble the individual man Socrates, the class of humans of which he is a member, all animals, all living beings, all material substances, all beings? does a photograph of Socrates globally resemble all animals, or only all two-legged animals? An argument could be made for each of these choices. Nor does it help matters any to move to comparative resemblance-claims, since it is not clear whether a photograph of Socrates is 'more' globally similar to all animals rather than the two-legged animals, or to all beings rather than all animate beings. Pictures of themselves do not make such distinctions, whether resemblance, global resemblance, or comparative global resemblance is the issue. The intrinsic features of pictures are no guide to what they picture.

However, pictures, or at least many pictures, also have genetic features. Ockham also notes this point in *Ord.* 1 d. 2 q. 8 (277):

> All things consimilar to what was previously seen are, as it were, suggested and signified by a fiction [fashioned] from something seen. This is nothing else than to affirm or deny something of such a fiction, not for itself but for the thing from which it is fashioned or can be fashioned.

The relevant factor is that from which the picture is or can be fashioned, that is, the extralinguistic entity which plays or can play a causal role in the production of the picture. (Strictly speaking, it is only a partial cause, along with that which does the picturing—the camera, the mind, the artist—but for our purposes we may ignore this complication.)

The same conclusion is drawn more explicitly in *Rep.* 2 qq. 12–13 (287–289):[12]

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[12] The same point is made more sharply in *Quod.* 1.13, in which Ockham takes up the

> I say, then, that the act of understanding (*intellectio*) is the simil-
> itude of the object, just as if the species were posited, and it is no
> more the similitude of one than of another. And hence the simili-
> tude is not the precise cause whence one understands one and not
> the other... although the intellect is assimilated to all individuals
> equally, nevertheless it can determinately know one and not the
> other. Yet this is not according to assimilation, but the reason is
> because every naturally producible effect from its nature determines
> to itself that it is produced by one efficient cause and not another,
> just as it determines to itself that it is produced in one matter and
> not another... although the [concept] would be equally assimilated
> to many individuals, nevertheless from its nature it determines to
> itself that it leads the intellect into the cognition of that object by
> which it is partially caused, since it determines to itself to be caused
> by that object such that it cannot be caused by some other [object].
> And so it leads into the cognition of it such that it does not lead
> into the cognition of another.

The central claim of this passage, namely that "every naturally producible
effect from its nature determines to itself that it is produced by one efficient
cause and not another," is not very clearly stated, allowing for a variety
of interpretations. Presumably, Ockham intended to say that the kind of
cause it takes to produce an effect is part of the nature of that effect. Thus
it is part of the nature of being human that humans are produced by two
partial co-causes, the mother and father, while it is the nature of, say, a
footprint, that it is produced by the kind of foot in question. Further, it
is a necessary truth about any particular effect that it was produced by a
particular cause, so that a particular child is produced by a definite pair of
human parents and no other, and this footprint by that foot and no other.
(This doesn't rule out divine intervention, nor does Ockham intend that it
should.) Thus a particular concept, such as the concept of Socrates, may
in fact resemble Plato more than anyone else, nevertheless if the concept of
Socrates is originally acquired from causal interaction with Socrates himself
then the concept will be a concept 'of' Socrates in some sense. In normal
circumstances, the picture will closely resemble that of which it is a picture,
that is, its intrinsic features which determine resemblance will be tightly

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objection that an intuitive cognition resembles two extremely similar objects equally
well. Ockham's response is short and to the point: "the intuitive [cognition] is the
cognition proper to the singular, yet not according to the greater assimilation of one
than of the other, but because it is naturally caused by the one and not the other, nor
can it be caused by the other" (76).

linked to the actual features which the object figuring in its formation possesses, and so there need be no reason for sharply distinguishing intrinsic and genetic features of the picture.

Ockham seems to explicitly describe the intrinsic and genetic features involved in picturing in *Ord.* 1 d. 3 q. 9 (547):

> A 'trace' (*vestigium*) and an 'image' (*imago*) differ in this regard, namely that it is part of the definition of a trace that it is caused by that of which it is the trace, which is clear by example, since it is said to be left behind by another. However, it is not part of the definition of an image that it is caused by that of which it is an image, as for example it is sufficient for the image of Hercules to be caused by someone other than Hercules.

Both 'traces' and 'images' (in Ockham's technical sense) are general, and may resemble distinct things equally well (546). A picture may function as both a trace and an image; a photograph is equally an image of Socrates and of Socrates's twin brother, but only one of the two will figure in its genetic features as its cause.

This strategy seems designed to cope with concepts of individuals, or, in its linguistic version, to account for the referential function of proper names. Can it be generalized to apply to common names, that is, to concepts of kinds of individuals? In *Quod.* 1.13, Ockham states that "the concept of a genus is never abstracted from one individual"; rather, general concepts are fashioned from several cases by comparison.[13] But this seems to block the move to considering the genetic features of a general concept, since 'comparison,' by its very nature, is a matter of similarity or resemblance. One suggestion, with some foundation in the text, would be to alter the story slightly, and suppose that the memory of distinct individuals of the same kind can act as partial co-causes to automatically produce a general concept as an effect; this would allow a unified causal account of its ge-

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[13] This needs to be qualified. The story Ockham proposes in *Ord.* prologue q. 1, *Rep.* 2 qq. 12–13, and *Summa logicae* 3-2.29 is more complex, and proceeds roughly as follows: beginning with an intuitive cognition in the sensitive soul of an individual material substance or quality, this cognition together with the object 'naturally causes' an intellectual intuitive cognition of the same object; such acts of intuitive cognition are accompanied by acts of abstractive cognition, and the latter either remain in memory directly or through a 'recordative' act. Once at least two abstractive cognitions of the same kind of thing are present in memory (Ockham seems to ignore the case of multiple cognitions of the same thing), the intellect compares them and constructs an abstractive general concept based on their global similarities and differences.

netic features.[14]   The individuals would then be reasonably close partial
co-causes of the general concept, much as it must be part of the nature of
a human being that he or she is produced by four grandparents (with some
intermediate steps).

An obvious difficulty with the suggested account, even as amended, is
that the 'general concept' which is thereby produced will be genetically
linked to the particular individuals which played a causal role in its produc-
tion, and not cover cases of individuals with which one is not acquainted,
or individuals with which one is acquainted but which do not play a role
in the formation of the general concept. Rather, what is required is for the
general concept to be genetically linked with all individuals which are apt
to cause such an effect, or which would produce such an effect of their very
nature. But that is to move in a very small circle indeed, since there seems
to be no way to specify what the 'effect' would be without specifying the
class of individuals which would produce it, which is the very difficulty in
the case at hand. More exactly, an individual will have the causal power to
produce a given concept in combination with other individuals of the same
kind—but then the causal power is defined by reference to both the 'given'
concept and 'individuals of the same kind,' which is circular.

There is a more general difficulty with the genetic approach. Take two
individuals, say Socrates and a tomcat. Even if we grant that such individ-
uals may concur to produce a general concept, why should the concept they
produce be the concept of animal, rather than the concept of male? Even
if we accept the aristotelian notion that general terms fall into a rigidly
structured hierarchical pattern, the division of living beings into male and
female, and then each of these into correlated sub-kinds such as human and
feline, fits the pattern as well as the division of living beings into human and
feline, and then each of these into correlated sub-kinds such as male and
female. Even if we grant Ockham's claim that individuals have the causal

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[14] In *Rep.* 2 qq. 12–13 Ockham endorses the general claim that "given a sufficient agent
and patient in proximity, the effect can be posited without anything else." Applied to
ordinary cases of cognition, the 'agent' is identified as both the external object and the
intellective disposition, as material and immaterial partial co-causes, and the 'patient'
is the intellect; the effect is the occurrent act of understanding. For the formation
of the intellective disposition, the 'agent' is the external object and the 'patient' the
sensitive and intellective souls. Hence Ockham simply declares it to be the nature
of the sensitive and intellective souls that an object is both sensed and understood
when it is present or "in proximity," with no need to postulate intermediary mental
activity; sensing and understanding are distinct effects of the same cause, the former
proximate and the latter remote.

power to produce general concepts, there is no reason why the 'general concepts' which are produced should match the standard aristotelian division into natural kinds. This difficulty is the result of Ockham's failure to distinguish between criteria which specify what it is for a term to be general, criteria which a term like 'male' would satisfy, and a more stringent set of criteria which single out a privileged class of general terms, those normally counted as 'natural-kind terms.'[15] Without such a distinction, it seems impossible to guarantee the possession of one set of concepts rather than another, which is the very reason Ockham has recourse to mental language in the first place.

Ockham explicitly holds that the intellect and the external object function as partial co-causes of the cognition of the object. It might be possible to maintain that the intellect itself is structured so as to 'classify' all perceived objects into a set of privileged concepts, those which correspond to natural-kind terms. These concepts would then be innate, or innate in potency such that they are 'triggered' through causal interaction with the right sort of object. Hence the intellect would be pre-disposed, presumably by God, to ideate in determinate ways in the presence of different kinds of objects. As attractive as this suggestion may be in some ways, it cannot be an explanation of natural signification: it assumes that the appropriate genetic connection obtains between individuals and concepts, and so cannot explain such a connection.

No matter which route is taken, emphasizing the intrinsic or the genetic features of pictures, there are difficulties for a nominalist semantics. In fact, the problems each has may be symptomatic of a deeper problem, namely that 'picturing' cannot of itself provide an explanation of signification because picturing is as much an intentional activity as signifying: pictures are of themselves inert, and only succeed in picturing when treated as signs. Yet this is precisely the aspect of signifying which the move to mental language and picturing was supposed to explain. A picture in which Socrates is depicted might equally be a portrait of Socrates, and so to 'picture' Socrates, or it might stand for humans, or animals, or substances, or beings. The picture in itself gives no clue which interpretation is the intended one, and so no account of a picture solely in terms of resemblance can be satisfactory.

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[15] Ockham does recognize the distinction between 'merely' general terms and natural-kind terms; he takes the former as the class of 'connotative' terms and the latter as 'absolute' terms (*Summa logicae* 1.10). However, the difference between the two classes of terms is explained their signification, through the doctrine of real and nominal definition, and so cannot be used to explain signification itself.

Equally, the genetic features of the picture give no clue, because again it is unclear whether Socrates should be construed as the cause of the picture as an individual, or as a human, or an animal, and so on. In either case, there must be an act of stipulation which specifies how the picture is to be taken. But to require such a stipulative act is just to require further intentional activity to explain picturing. What is more, such further stipulation certainly makes mental language far less 'objective' than Ockham initially supposed; there could be distinct stipulations in distinct communities, or between distinct individuals, and so the move to mental language cannot succeed in avoiding the conventionalism it was introduced to avoid.

There are special difficulties in combining the intrinsic and genetic accounts of picturing. Given that a picture need not resemble that which causally figured in its production, which feature determines what the picture is a picture of? Ockham doesn't give any determinate answer to this question. One possible answer is that which feature predominates in determining the signification of a term is a function of the term's use. Thus when a term appears in a sentence, that is, when it is used referentially, the genetic features predominate, while in a freestanding occurrence the intrinsic features predominate. Thus in a sentence, a term may "stand for what it signifies," i.e. have an ordinary referential use, while considered in isolation a term may simply "bring something to mind," *i. e.* resemble distinct individuals. Of course, then there will be no simple answer to the question what a term signifies, since it may signify disjoint classes of individuals depending upon its use.

If, as I have argued, Ockham cannot develop a coherent theory of the underlying semantic mechanism of signification, then his attempt to produce a rigorous and consistent nominalism has failed. But the failure of his attempt is instructive, for it points up a difficulty any version of nominalism, mediaeval or modern, must face: an explanation of semantic generality which does not rely on any real metaphysical generality. Perhaps his deepest error is to treat terms as having semantic properties which are not themselves derivative from their use in sentential contexts—an error based in his conviction that concepts are somehow in themselves intrinsically meaningful and can function as an independent language. The conviction that there are real natural classes and that we are somehow structured in such a way as to grasp these classes, without any metaphysical basis for the assortment into classes or for our general terms to pick them out, seems no more than an empty refusal to take into account the evident difficulties such a conviction entails. The failure of Ockham's nominalism points the way towards a more robust nominalism, one that can learn from and avoid Ockham's mistakes.

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