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Deflecting Ockham's Razor: A Medieval Debate about Ontological Commitment

Susan Brower-Toland

William of Ockham (d. 1347) is well known for his commitment to parsimony and for his so-called 'razor' principle. But little is known about attempts among his own contemporaries to deflect his use of the razor. In this paper, I explore one such attempt. In particular, I consider a clever challenge that Ockham's younger contemporary, Walter Chatton (d. 1343) deploys against the razor. The challenge involves a kind of dilemma for Ockham. Depending on how Ockham responds to this dilemma, his razor will, Chatton argues, either prove unacceptably dull when it comes to determining ontological commitment or prove unacceptably sharp when it comes to determining commitments entailed by certain theological doctrines. While Chatton's objection is subtle and interesting in its own right, the broader significance of the debate between these thinkers lies in the light it sheds on medieval approaches to issues surrounding metaphysical methodology.

1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is a debate between two later medieval figures—William Ockham and his slightly younger colleague (and constant philosophical gadfly), Walter Chatton—over issues in metaphysical methodology. In particular, I explore differences in the way each thinker approaches questions surrounding truth and ontological commitment.

I begin (in §2) by calling attention to an important difference in the way each thinker formulates a basic commitment to common-sense metaphysical realism. I argue that Chatton, developing ideas he finds in Scotus, formulates his views in terms of a truthmaker principle very similar to that endorsed by contemporary truthmaker theorists. In short, Chatton holds that what is the case depends on what exists. Interestingly, Chatton relies on precisely this sort of truthmaker principle to defend a robust Aristotelian ontology. (Following Scotus, Chatton holds there are ten irreducibly distinct types of entity answering to each of Aristotle's ten categories.) By contrast, Ockham resists the truthmaker formulation of metaphysical realism and does so as part of his broader reductionist programme. Ockham does, however, accept a qualified version of

this principle. For Ockham, what is the case depends not only on what exists, but on *how* it exists. Ockham's alternative approach can, I suggest, be regarded as a kind of 'truthmaker razor'.

Having set the stage in this way, I turn (in §3) to consider a clever challenge that Chatton raises for Ockham's razor. The challenge involves posing a dilemma for Ockham. Chatton argues that, depending on how Ockham responds to the dilemma, either his razor will prove unacceptably dull when it comes to determining ontological commitment or it will prove unacceptably sharp when it comes to determining commitments entailed by faith. The problem with the first horn is obvious. The problem with the second horn is this. Ockham, as most philosophers of his day, is committed to the view that truths of faith must play a role in deciding questions of ontology. If it turns out that his razor principle leaves no room for authoritative teachings to play a guiding role, the razor will prove sharper than Ockham himself intended.¹

2. Explaining truth: truthmaking and ontological commitment

Before we look at the ways in which Ockham and Chatton disagree over issues in metaphysics, it will be useful to begin by considering a point of agreement between them. In particular, I want to begin by considering a common-sense metaphysical intuition that they both take for granted. The intuition is just this: truth is somehow *grounded in* or *dependent on* reality. In other words, Ockham and Chatton both assume that a true proposition is true *in virtue of* the world—what the world is like. This is, of course, not an uncommon assumption in the broad Aristotelian tradition within which they are working, but this basic intuition can be developed and articulated in different ways.² And in this regard, Ockham and Chatton are a case in point.

¹ In what follows, I adopt, with occasional, minor amendments, Freddoso and Kelly's translation of passages from Ockham's *Quodlibetal Questions*. See Ockham (1991). I have consulted Rondo Keele's (2002) translation of passages from Chatton's *Lectura* I.3.1.1, but the translations of Chatton's texts, as well as the other Latin texts, are my own.

² Consider, for example, the following passage from Aristotle's *Categories* Aristotle: 'If there is a man, the statement whereby we say that there is a man is true, and reciprocally—since if the statement whereby we say that there is a man is true, there is a man. And whereas the true statement is in no way the cause of the actual thing's existence, the actual thing does seem in some way the cause of the statement's being true; it is because the actual thing exists or does not that the statement is called true or false' (Aristotle, 1963, 14^b14-22). In a similar vein, medieval thinkers also sometime cite *Categories*, 4b 9-10: 'For it is because the actual thing exists or does not exist that the statement is said to be true or false' (trans. Ackrill).

2.1 *The truthmaker approach—Scotus and Chatton*

To get a running start at spelling out the difference between Ockham and Chatton, it will be helpful to begin by examining a key principle they each take (and adapt) from Scotus. As I see it, the best way to see the difference between Ockham and Chatton is in terms of their different reactions to the way Scotus articulates the relationship between truth and reality. As I see it, Chatton can be regarded as accepting and defending the basic approach suggested by Scotus, whereas Ockham rejects it.

The following passage is representative of Scotus's formulation of the principle in question:

There is never a transition from contradictory to contradictory apart from any change (*mutacione*). For if there were no change in anything, there would be no more reason why one contradictory should more be true than the other. (Ord. I.30.2, n. 41; ed. Vat. 4: 186)³

On first pass, what Scotus says here may not seem to go much beyond the basic realist intuition articulated just earlier. Granting that truth depends on reality, Scotus appears merely to be drawing the obvious conclusion that a change or difference in what is true (any 'transition from contradictory to contradictory') must be explained by some change or difference in the world. Understood in this way, the claim is sufficiently neutral as to be acceptable to both Ockham and Chatton.

In fact, however, the principle Scotus is advancing is more substantive—and, for the same reason, more controversial. For, what Scotus actually says is that there is no change in what is true apart from *mutation* (*mutatio*) where this latter expression signals a specific kind change, namely, generation or corruption—that is, the production or destruction—of some entity.⁴ Thus, what Scotus is actually claiming is that there can be no change in truth, without a corresponding change *in being*. And this is precisely how both Ockham and Chatton understand Scotus's principle. Indeed, Ockham glosses the principle in a way that makes this reading quite explicit:

³ See also Lect. I.39.3, n. 6 (ed. Vat. 17: 482): 'There is no passage from contradictory to contradictory without change (*mutacione*) since there would be no reason why [one contradictory proposition] is now true whereas before it was false unless something has been changed (*mutaretur*)'. All references to Scotus's texts are to the critical edition found in Scotus (1950–2013).

⁴ Thus, Scotus claims that 'there cannot be change (*mutatio*) unless in relation to what comes into being for the first time (*capit esse de novo*)' (Lect. I.17.2.3, n. 193; ed. Vat. 17: 242). And, elsewhere, he notes that *mutatio* 'requires the introduction of some new reality that did not exist before' (Lect. I.17.2.4, n. 208 (ed. Vat. 17: 248)).

There cannot be a transition from contradictory to contradictory without any change (*mutatione*), namely, a change which is the corruption or production of something. (Ockham, Ord. I.30.1; OTh IV: 282)⁵

Taken properly, then, Scotus's claim is that a change in truth will be explained by a change in what exists; a difference in truth entails a difference in being.

This, I take it, is the guiding idea behind what nowadays goes by the label 'truthmaker theory'. Truthmaker theorists hold that there is an explanatory link not only between truth and reality, but also between what is the case and *what there is*. In this sense, truthmaker theory goes beyond the common-sense metaphysical intuition we started with—in no small part because it carries substantive implications for questions of ontological commitment. In particular, it implies—at very least—a commitment to the 'truthmakers'—namely, to the entities that must exist if a given proposition is true. As Ross Cameron (a leading contemporary proponent of truthmaker theory) puts it: '[T]he ontological commitments of a sentence are those entities needed as truthmakers for the sentence: those entities that must number among the ontology of the world if the world is to provide adequate grounding for the truth of a sentence' (Cameron 2010, p. 250).

Now Chatton (as is his wont) follows Scotus in thinking about the dependence of truth on reality in just this way. That is, like Scotus, he holds that truth depends on *what there is*—that is, on what entities or what things (*res*) exist. Indeed, Chatton develops and defends a much more precise formulation of this idea.⁶ Consider, for example, Chatton's remarks in the following text:⁷

⁵ Cf. Ord. I.30.2 (OTh IV: 320): '[T]here cannot be a transition from contradictory to contradictory without any change (*mutatione*) whether production or corruption'. In this latter passage, as the editors of the critical edition note, Ockham appears to be reporting Scotus's reliance on such a principle in defending a non-reductionist account of relations. All citations of Ockham's works are to Ockham (1967–1988).

⁶ Among the most notable developments Chatton introduces is to articulate the principle as an expressly semantic principle. Scouts phrases it ambiguously, sometimes as a semantic principle (where the contradictories in question are propositions) and sometimes as a kind of physical principle (where the contradictories in question are contrary states of a given subject).

⁷ All References to Chatton's *Reportatio super Sententias* (= *Rep.*) are to Chatton (2002). References to his *Lectura super Sententias* (= *Lect.*) are to Chatton (2008). Finally, references to the *Prologue* (= *Prol.*) to these works can be found in Chatton (1989).

Consider an affirmative proposition, which, when it is made true, is made true only by things:⁸ in such a case, if three things (*res*) do not suffice for its being made true, we must posit a fourth, and so on [until we have entities sufficient for its truth]. (Rep. I.30.1.4; eds Wey and Etzkorn: 237)

Here, we find Chatton not only articulating the core idea behind truthmaking theory (namely, that for a proposition to be true, there must be some thing, or things, *in virtue of which* it is true), but also explicitly embracing its implications for ontological commitment. For, as Chatton here insists, if we take it as given that a proposition is made true by things, then we must include in our ontology just as many things as are required for its truth.⁹ Given this, it follows that, on his view, as on Scotus's, any difference in what is true entails a difference in what exists.

The principle we find in the foregoing text is, in fact, an early statement of Chatton's principle. While (as we'll see) he revises it in the course of debates with Ockham, it retains this basic form. Because Chatton uses this principle as a kind of antidote to Ockham's razor, some scholars have labelled it 'Chatton's anti-razor'.¹⁰ For my part, I'll continue to refer to it as Chatton's 'Truthmaker' principle and understand it as follows:

Truthmaker: if an atomic, affirmative, present-tense proposition is true, it is true in virtue of some *thing*, or things, whose existence is sufficient to explain the truth of the proposition.¹¹

2.2. *Explaining truths without multiplying truthmakers—Ockham*

As I've already indicated, Ockham shares a commitment to the basic idea that truth depends on reality, and he also accepts the basic Scotistic claim that where there is a change or difference in truth value, this

⁸ In other statements of the principle, Chatton formulates it so as to restrict its application to propositions that are made true by 'actually existing' things. This formulation is apparently intended to rule out propositions about the future, which, on his view, are not 'made true by actually existing things' (*verificatur pro rebus actualiter existentibus*). See Chatton Lect. I.3.1.1, nn. 57, 77 (eds Wey and Etzkorn: 18, 24).

⁹ For an account of just what entities Chatton does include in his ontology, at least in relation to Aristotle's ten categories, see Pelletier (2016).

¹⁰ See, for example, Maurer (1984).

¹¹ For the sake of simplicity, I restrict the principle to affirmative propositions. Chatton does not, in fact, always restrict the principle in this way. See, for example, Chatton, Lect. I.3.1.1, n. 7 (eds Wey and Etzkorn: 3).

difference will be explained by a corresponding difference in the world. But that is where his agreement with Chatton and Scotus ends. In particular, Ockham rejects the more robust claim that the relevant worldly difference is always a difference in *what entities exist*. Instead, Ockham prefers a less committal version of the realist intuition. His preferred formulation runs as follows:

It is impossible for contradictory [propositions] to be successively true of something unless this is on account of the locomotion of something, the passage of time, or the production or destruction of something. (Ord. I.30.4; OTh IV: 369)

As Ockham's remarks here make clear, he thinks that truth depends not only on *what things exist*, but also on *how they exist*.¹² In particular, a change in what is true may be a function merely of a change in some existing entity's location (which is 'locomotion') or in the duration of its existence (a change which is just, as he puts it, the 'passage of time'). But it is worth emphasizing that, unlike Scotus and Chatton, Ockham holds that an entity's location and its temporal duration are nothing in addition to (that is, nothing *ontologically* in addition to) the entity itself (or perhaps the entity and its qualities). Hence, for him, changes in location and duration do not amount to any difference in what *things* exist—these are merely differences in *how* such things are spatiotemporally arranged.¹³

In light of this, we might think of Ockham's famed razor as a response to the demand that we posit a difference in what exists wherever there is

¹² To be sure, Ockham owes us some account of exactly what this notion (of 'how things are') amounts to. While I take up this issue elsewhere, here and in what follows, we can treat this expression as a placeholder for whatever Ockham's theory is. As we will see, however, Chatton's objection does not depend on the details of this aspect of Ockham's theory.

¹³ Like most of his contemporaries, Ockham understands a body's being located in terms of its being surrounded by, and hence in contact with, other bodies. But unlike many of his contemporaries, Ockham insists that truths about a body's location require *nothing more* than the existence of the bodies in contact. On his view, bodies are intrinsically extended, and their being in contact requires nothing other than the absence of any extended object—that is, absence of any other body—between them. In this sense, truths about location follow from truths about the existence and extension of individual bodies. For the same reason, *changes* in what's true about a body's location do not require any change in what exists. A body's acquiring a new location (that is, its undergoing locomotion) is just a matter of its coming to be surrounded by different bodies. Moreover, for Ockham, as for many scholastic Aristotelians, time is the measure of motion or change. Plausibly, therefore, changes involving the passage of time are not fundamental, since the passage of time will be a function of (and so explained in terms of) either locomotion or qualitative change.

a difference in truth.¹⁴ We might, in other words, understand his famous slogan, ‘Plurality should never be posited without necessity’ as opposition to multiplying *truthmakers* beyond necessity.¹⁵

In this way, Ockham explicitly rejects the sort of principle endorsed by Scotus and Chatton. Not only that, but his doing so is motivated precisely by considerations of parsimony. This is evident, for example, from Ockham’s rejoinder to the following realist objection to his reduction-ism about quantity and extension:

It is claimed that a new extension can exist in a substance without any new thing [namely, without any new accident of quantity]. Yet there cannot be a change from contradictory to contradictory without generation or corruption. However, matter can now exist un-extended (as is the case with the matter of Christ’s body in the Eucharist) but later exist extended. And it is possible that this happen with nothing being corrupted or lost. Therefore, something is acquired—whether something absolute or relative. (Rep IV.4; OTh VII: 81)

Ockham’s realist opponent objects to his reductionism about accidents in the category of Quantity on the grounds that such a stance violates the Scotistic truthmaking principle articulated above. In particular, the objector argues that truths regarding the extension of a body must (like any other truths) be true in virtue of what exists. Thus, a change in what is true regarding the extension of a body entails *some* change in what entities exist (‘whether something absolute or relative’). In response to this objection, however, Ockham simply denies the principle on which the argument rests. A change in truth, he insists, *does not* require a change in what exists. Rather:

sometimes there can be a change from contradictory to contradictory just on account of an actual or potential change in time or on account of locomotion. (Rep IV.4; OTh VII: 85)

As the foregoing makes clear, Ockham’s rejection of the sort of truth-maker principle Scotus and Chatton endorse is motivated expressly by his desire to secure a more restrictive ontology.

¹⁴ There is, of course, a vast literature on Ockham’s razor. For a survey of some of this literature, plus an approach very different than the one presented here, see Roques (2014).

¹⁵ Representative statements of the principle include: Ord. I.30.2 (OTh IV: 322) and Rep. II.18 (OTh V: 404). It is worth noting that ‘Ockham’s’ principle of parsimony can be found in (in roughly this same formulation) thinkers before him. For example, even Scotus invokes the principle and, at one point, does so while attributing it to Aristotle. See Scotus, In Metaphys. I.4, n. 41 (OPh III, 108).

In light of this, we might frame Ockham's razor, as a 'Truthmaker Razor' along these lines:

Ockham's Truthmaker Razor: there can be a change in the truth value of a given proposition without any change in what exists.

This is the razor that Chatton means to challenge and deflect. Before turning back to Chatton, however, I want to note one final feature of Ockham's razor—as it will be relevant to Chatton's arguments against it. In a number of places, Ockham formulates his commitment to parsimony more carefully than the familiar no-plurality-without-necessity slogan.¹⁶ The following is an example of Ockham's more careful formulation:¹⁷

No plurality should be posited unless it can be established by reason or experience or by the authority of one who can neither err nor be deceived. (De Corpore Christi c. 29; OTh X: 157-158)¹⁸

While not as concise or pithy, this version of Ockham's principle of parsimony has the advantage of spelling out a bit more fully when, by Ockham's lights, it is in fact 'necessary' to admit a plurality.

Specifically, he identifies two cases in which ontological commitment is required. The first is when natural reason demands it—that is, when explaining truths known to us through unaided reason or experience requires the postulation of additional entities. The second is when faith demands it—that is, when truths known to us through revelation or ecclesiastical authority require such entities. Of course, as we've already noted, Ockham thinks we must countenance just as many entities as are required to explain truth. What he adds here, however, is that, among the truths we must explain are those known to us through faith—that is, through authoritative teachings such as those found in scripture and church doctrine. Such authoritative teachings must, Ockham thinks, serve to guide ontological commitment. Thus, if the ontological commitments given by

¹⁶ Indeed, Ockham states the principle in various ways at various points in his works. Adams (1987, pp. 157-9) provides a brief survey of Ockham's various formulations of the principle.

¹⁷ Cf. Ord. I.30.1 (OTh IV: 290), Rep. III.9 (OTh VI: 281).

¹⁸ 'Nulla pluralitas est ponenda nisi per rationem vel per experientiam vel per auctoritatem illius ^{qui} non potest falli nec errare potest [nec] convinci'. My own translation of this passage involves an alternative punctuation of this passage to that proposed in the critical edition (which I have left off in the foregoing quotation). Likewise, as my translation makes clear, I think the editors incorrectly interpolate the second 'nec' into the text.

natural reason are too sparse to accommodate articles of Christian faith, then one must expand one's ontology accordingly.¹⁹

3. Deflecting Ockham's razor

As I've been framing it, Ockham's razor is a means of avoiding the unnecessary proliferation of truthmakers. So understood, we can think of Ockham as agreeing with Scotus and Chatton when they say that we should posit just as many entities (and types of entity) as are needed in order to explain the truth of any and every true (affirmative, atomic) proposition. Where he disagrees with them is on the question of what entities are, in fact, needed to secure such truth. As is well known, Ockham defends a reductionist account of the Aristotelian categories: he admits only individuals in Aristotle's category of Substance and Quality.²⁰ These alone suffice as truthmakers for all true propositions (at least when it comes to truths in the domain of natural reason). And since we should not multiply truthmakers beyond necessity, we should not posit more than these.

3.1 *Explanation as necessitation*

Chatton, by contrast, thinks that truthmaking requires far more by way of ontological commitment. In order to show that Ockham's ontology is insufficient to the task of explaining truth, Chatton does two things: first, he revises his formulation of his truthmaker principle in a way that he thinks will make it perfectly acceptable to Ockham; then he goes on to make explicit what this principle (so formulated) presupposes about the nature of truthmaking. If Ockham accepts both the revised version of the principle, and the requirements on truthmaking, Chatton has, he thinks, all he needs to deflect Ockham's razor.

So, let's begin by looking at how Chatton modifies his principle.

¹⁹ To take one well-known example: Ockham argues—throughout his works—against the introduction of categorical relations. That is, against the existence of entities corresponding to the Aristotelian category of Relation. As is well known, however, Ockham's reductionism about relations is qualified in an important sense. He allows that when it comes to the domain of theology—that is, to the domain of revealed truths—there are certain articles of faith the truth of which is best explained by appeal to the existence of some relational entities. Thus, Ockham appeals to (irreducibly) real relations of Paternity, Filiation, and Spiration in explaining the distinctions among persons of the Trinity. But there are other examples too. In addition to relations among the divine persons, Ockham also thinks we must countenance the existence of relations of union and inherence to explain certain truths involving the union of the second person of the Trinity with a human suppositum.

²⁰ For detailed study of Ockham's metaphysics and ontology, see Adams (1987, chs 1-9).

Concessive Truthmaker: ‘Wherever an affirmative proposition is apt to be made true by actually existing things, if two things—*however they are present according to arrangement and duration*—will not suffice for making the proposition true so long as another thing is lacking, then one must posit another thing.’ (Lect. I.3.1.1, n. 4; ed. Wey: 2, emphasis added)

As is perhaps perfectly clear, this formulation of the principle is deliberately concessive (the concession being contained in the italicized part). As Chatton well knows, Ockham denies that a change in the truth value of a given proposition is always explained by a corresponding change in what exists. For, as we’ve seen, on Ockham’s view, a mere alteration in the spatiotemporal arrangements of existing things can, in some cases, suffice to explain a change in what is true.²¹ Chatton’s new formulation of the principle simply concedes this point. Thus, Chatton is willing to grant, for dialectical reasons, that for any true affirmative proposition there exists some thing (or set of things) existing in some spatiotemporal arrangement such that its existing in that way explains that proposition’s truth. And he is even willing to grant, again for dialectical purposes, that spatiotemporal arrangements are nothing in addition to the things so arranged. Chatton thinks he can grant Ockham both of these things and still show that the demands of truthmaking require the introduction of entities beyond those that Ockham is prepared to countenance.

What exactly are the demands of truthmaking? That is, what, on Chatton’s view, is required in order for some portion of the world to make a given proposition true? His answer comes in the following passage:

Which things are sufficient for the purpose of making a proposition true, and which are not? [By way of answer] we must posit a second principle ... and it is this: those things are not sufficient to account for the fact that a proposition is true with which it is consistent that, in whatever way they are present according to arrangement and duration and without a new thing, the proposition could be false. (Lect. I.3.1.1, n. 17; ed. Wey: 7)

Chatton is here advancing the following thesis (call it ‘Necessitation’): if some portion of reality *explains* the truth of a true proposition, then it

²¹ In fact, in the course of discussing and defending this (concessive) truthmaker principle, Chatton explicitly references Ockham’s own (truthmaker razor) principle. See Chatton, *Lect. I.3.1.1*; nn. 15, 22 (eds Wey and Etkorn: 6, 8).

must be the case that it *necessitates* the truth of that proposition. Or, to put it more precisely:

Necessitation: if some entities, together with their spatiotemporal arrangements, *explain* the truth of some proposition, P, it must be the case that P is true in any world in which those entities exist so arranged.

3.2 Ockham's insufficiency problem: counter examples

If Ockham accepts both the concessive version of Chatton's Truthmaker principle (and why wouldn't he?) as well as his further Necessitation principle, it is—Chatton thinks—fairly easy to generate counter examples to his claims about the sufficiency of substances and qualities as truthmakers for all truths. While Chatton provides a number of examples, we may start with the following:

Assume that the following proposition (which is affirmative and is made true by things) is in fact true: 'the soul efficiently causes its own volition'. God can make it the case that the soul exists and that a volition exists in the soul while, nevertheless, this proposition may be false. (As, for example, it would be if God were to fill in for the action of the secondary cause [that is, the soul].) Therefore, the soul and the volition do not suffice for the truth of this proposition. Consequently, a third thing is required, but not an absolute thing... therefore, a relative entity must be posited. (*Coll. et Prol.*, 6.3; ed. Wey: 342)

In broadest terms, the issue at stake here is about whether, in order to explain truths about causation, we must include in our ontology relational entities answering to Aristotle's category of Action. The specific case under discussion in the passage, however, involves a question about what is required for the truth of this proposition: 'the soul efficiently causes its volition'. Suppose this proposition is true of some soul in the actual world. Is it the case, as Ockham supposes, that the existence of the soul (an entity in the category of Substance) and its act of volition (an item in the category of Quality) suffice to explain its truth?

Clearly not, Chatton argues. After all, there is a possible world (call it 'Miracle World') in which the soul and that very act of volition both exist, but it is nevertheless false that the soul acted so as to *cause* or *produce* the volition. And this is so because God could suspend the soul's causal activity and instead insert the volition in the soul directly (and, we can assume, God can do this apart from any change in the spatiotemporal

arrangement among created things). But, given Necessitation, it follows that if the existence of the soul and its volition are compatible with the falsity of the proposition, they are insufficient to explain its truth. Hence, something further (in addition to the substance, quality, and their arrangement) is needed.²² According to Chatton, this further thing can only be some relational entity—namely, a relation of action.

3.3 *Things in circumstances?*

Is there any way Ockham can avoid this result? One avenue of reply is suggested by Chatton himself:

A third objection might be to say that [the Necessitation] principle is false, since this proposition, ‘A ray [of light] is from the sun’ is true of things, and nevertheless with these things equally present (without another thing) it is possible that the proposition is false due to the fact that God does not concur such that the ray arises from the sun. Therefore the proposition is false, not because some thing is lacking, but because it is required that God concur, and he does not. (*Lect.* I.3.1.1, n. 25; eds Wey and Etkorn: 9)

This passage comes from a context in which Chatton is considering and responding to various possible objections to his truthmaker principle and to the counterexamples it generates. While the particular example under consideration in this passage is not one involving the soul and its volition, the line of reply applies equally to that case (or to any counter-example involving miracle worlds). The basic idea is just to argue that the miracle case does not, in fact, force us to add further truthmakers. What’s lacking in Miracle World, Ockham might say, is not some additional thing (a relative entity of action, say) but a certain *supernatural condition* or *circumstance*. So long as God does not withhold concurrence, the mere existence of the soul and its volition are, in fact, all that is required for the truth of the proposition ‘the soul efficiently causes its volition’. In other words, on the condition that God concurs, whenever there exists an act of willing in the soul it will be true that the soul is the cause of that act.²³ So, *of course*, this proposition is not true in Miracle World, but this is ‘not because some *thing* is lacking, but because it is

²² In fact, Chatton has chosen his case well. Given that both the soul and its volitions are immaterial, questions about spatial location do not bear on the case.

²³ Of course, for this response to succeed we are owed some account of what the condition or circumstance of divine concurrence amounts to metaphysically. This is a point to which I return below.

required that God concur, and he does not'. Which is just to say: there is a difference in what is true without a difference in what there is.

While this is an objection that Chatton is raising on behalf of his opponent, there is perhaps some reason for thinking that this is precisely the sort of thing Ockham himself wants to say, namely, that worlds in which God is suspending the activity of an agent (by withholding concurrence) are not worlds in which some *thing* fails to exist: they are just worlds in which God does not cooperate with existing things.²⁴ I will therefore speak of it as 'Ockham's rejoinder'.²⁵

3.4 A dilemma for Ockham

On the face of it, this rejoinder provides an intuitive case for the razor—that is, for there being a difference in what is true at Miracle World and what is true at the actual world, but without any difference in what exists at each. But what *exactly* does the proposal on offer amount to? There are, on Chatton's view, only two possible ways of understanding this response: either Ockham means to be rejecting Necessitation or he does not. If, on the one hand, Ockham does *not* intend to reject Necessitation, the appeal to circumstances will be of no avail when it comes to avoiding commitment to additional truthmakers. In that case, the razor proves fairly dull. If, on the other hand, the proposal *does* amount to a rejection of Necessitation, Ockham's razor may prove sharper than he intended. On Chatton's view, then, Ockham faces a kind of dilemma.

Let's explore the first horn. Chatton contends that if Ockham does not intend to reject Necessitation, the appeal to circumstances of divine concurrence will be to no avail in avoiding additional ontological commitment. Here's why. To accept Necessitation is to accept the idea that one has not explained the truth of a true proposition until one has identified entities sufficient for its truth—that is, entities such that their existence is incompatible with its falsity. But saying that the soul and its volition suffice for its being true that the soul causes its volition *in circumstances in which God concurs* is not the same as saying the soul and its volition suffice *tout court*. Rather what's required is the soul, the volition, *and* the circumstances. But then, as Chatton points out, it is fair to ask:

²⁴ For example, Ockham's remark at Rep. IV.9 (OTh VII: 168): 'God's suspension of the actions of an agent is nothing other than his *not willing to concur* with the agent'. (Emphasis added.)

²⁵ While my interest is solely in the dialectic between Chatton and Ockham, it is worth noting that the target of Chatton's critique is clearly not restricted *just* to Ockham and, for the same reason, the source of the objections he entertains against his position include other thinkers as well.

When it is said that it is required that God concur [with an agent], I ask, what things are required for the truth of this proposition: ‘God concurs with this thing?’ (*Lect.* 3.1.1, n. 48; ed. Wey: 14)²⁶

In essence, Chatton is pressing Ockham to give an account of the ontological implications of this appeal to circumstances involving divine concurrence. He does so here by insisting that Ockham specify what is required for the truth of a proposition about concurrence. If Ockham remains committed to the demands placed on him by Necessitation, he is obligated to identify those entities whose existence (and spatiotemporal arrangement) is sufficient for the truth of the proposition ‘God concurs with the soul’. But, whatever is required for the truth of *that* proposition will also be part of the truthmaker for the original proposition: ‘the soul causes its volition.’ Which is just to say, if Ockham remains committed to Necessitation he must introduce further truthmakers. After all, as Chatton’s counter example makes clear, the entities Ockham already countenances do not suffice for the truth of either of these propositions. God, the soul, and its volition all exist in Miracle World, and yet it is false that God concurs with the soul and hence that the soul causes its volition.²⁷ Hence, further entities are required. The razor fails.

So, then, perhaps the appeal to circumstances is actually meant as a rejection of Necessitation. For, appealing to circumstances (while at the same time insisting that such circumstances aren’t any additional thing) could be understood as a way of motivating the claim that entities can be *contingently* sufficient for truth: in some worlds they are sufficient for making true propositions true, but in others they are not. There is, in fact, some evidence for thinking Ockham’s final position lies in the

²⁶ The fuller passage, containing the whole argument, runs as follows:

When it is said, therefore, that it is required that God concur [with an agent], I ask, what things are required for the truth of this proposition ‘God concurs with this thing’? Either it requires as many *things* as are such that it is not consistent for proposition to be false when they are thus present without any other thing—and then I have my case. Or else it is not required to have however many *things* as are inconsistent with the proposition’s being false, when they are so present without another. But in that case some *condition* is lacking. Again, I concede that some condition is required, but I still maintain that for the truth of the condition itself it is required to have as many things with which it is not consistent that, when they are so present without another, the ray is from the sun. (Chatton, *Lect.* I.3.1.1, n. 48; eds Wey and Etzkorn: 14-15; emphasis added)

²⁷ And, of course, insofar as God, the soul, and its act of volition are all immaterial entities, spatiotemporal arrangements have no bearing on the case. Accordingly, Chatton thinks Ockham is obliged to add some further entity—namely, a relation of action on the part of the soul.

neighbourhood of this second alternative. Indeed, in his most mature writings, Ockham responds to one of Chatton's counterexamples by saying:

Sometimes two things are sufficient for the truth of a proposition and sometimes neither two nor three are sufficient. In the proposed example, two things [namely, soul and its act] are sufficient when they come to exist naturally and without a miracle. However, when the intellect and the act come to exist not naturally, but miraculously, then a hundred things are not sufficient for the truth of the statement in question. (Ockham, Quodl. 6.12; OTh IX: 633)

Here it is pretty obvious that Ockham means to be rejecting Necessitation—at least as Chatton formulates and understands the principle.

Although it is not clear that Chatton had access to the text in which Ockham makes this reply, he is clearly aware that Ockham could respond to his counterexamples by denying the principle that gives rise to them in the first place. That is, he is fully cognizant that it is open to Ockham to reject Necessitation. But, Chatton wants to maintain, this strategy comes at a high price. And this brings us to the second horn of Chatton's dilemma. Chatton argues that seizing this horn requires Ockham to abandon one of the precepts of his own razor principle.

To see this, notice that to abandon Necessitation leaves one with no very clear account of what explanation in the context of truth amounts to. After all, Necessitation expresses a deeply intuitive way of thinking about this sort of explanation. If, say, two things are all that is needed to *make* a true proposition true, it seems odd then to add that, nevertheless, they do not always suffice to make it true. And yet it appears that embracing this counter-intuitive result is a price Ockham is willing to pay in the interest of avoiding further ontological commitment.

What Chatton wants to call attention to, however, is that there is a further cost to rejecting Necessitation—a cost we would not expect Ockham to be so cavalier about. In particular, Chatton argues that rejecting Necessitation undermines a precept of Ockham's own razor principle—at least in its more cautious formulation. Recall that, in his more careful moments, Ockham formulates the razor principle so as to ensure that revealed and doctrinal teachings can appropriately guide and constrain the appeal to parsimony. Chatton's contention, however, is that if Ockham rejects Necessitation, it will be impossible for authoritative teachings to play any such guiding or constraining role. As he explains:

But [if Necessitation is false] it would not be possible to argue on the basis of such sources for any plurality of things whatsoever. For [if Necessitation is false] one might say that it is not required, on the basis of that authority, to posit so-and-so many things. After all, [if Necessitation is false,] any number of things would be enough [for making the authoritative statement true] even if, when they are present in whatever way (without another thing) it is possible that the authoritative proposition is false. (Lect. I.3.1.1, n. 9; eds Wey and Etzkorn: 4)²⁸

If revealed or doctrinal teachings are to play a meaningful role in metaphysical theorizing, it must be the case that such teachings could, at least in principle, serve to generate positive ontological commitment. As Chatton says here, it should at least ‘be possible to argue on the basis of such [authoritative] sources for a plurality of things’. Barring a commitment to Necessitation, however, it is hard to see how this will ever be possible. For, if any number of entities, *however sparse*, may be said *to suffice* for the truth of a given authoritative proposition—despite the fact that their existence does not necessitate its truth—then no such proposition can serve to induce further ontological commitment.

To see Chatton’s point, notice that it is not one’s mere acceptance of the truth of doctrinal teachings that generates ontological commitment. Rather, such commitment is determined by one’s views about what is required *to explain* their truth. But, says Chatton, if one denies necessitation, there is nothing to prevent one’s explaining the relevant authoritative truth reductively. Hence, without Necessitation, there appears to be no way to argue from truths of faith to a plurality of entities. If this is the case, then authoritative teachings can play no role in constraining parsimony. For such teachings can be true regardless of the number of entities in existence.

By way of illustration, Chatton cites a debate surrounding the doctrine of divine grace. On orthodox Catholic teaching, no human being can merit salvation—that is, merit divine acceptance and eternal life—apart from God’s grace. To claim otherwise is to fall prey to the Pelagian heresy. (So, for convenience, let’s refer to this as the ‘Anti-Pelagian doctrine.’) On the orthodox view, post-fall human beings enter the world in a state of sin, a state which, while it remains, precludes not only any kind of union with God, but any kind of action that would merit such union.

²⁸ Cf. Chatton, Lect. I.3.1.1, n. 62 (eds Wey and Etzkorn: 19).

According to Church teaching, however, sacraments serve as a means of divine grace. Thus, at baptism, the soul of the wayfarer receives the grace of divine charity and is thereby rendered acceptable to God and capable of meritorious action.

It goes without saying that all parties to the debate in question accept the church's Anti-Pelagian teaching on grace as authoritative. Even so, there is significant disagreement over its proper *metaphysical* interpretation. For, even taking the truth of Anti-Pelagian doctrine as given, it remains an open question what is required ontologically to explain its truth. What, for example, is the nature and ontological status of grace? Or, more precisely, what comes to exist (or ceases to exist) at the moment of baptism such that the proposition, 'The soul is acceptable to God' is now true whereas before it was false?

The dominant view on this question, and the view that Chatton himself regards as the best interpretation of the Church's position, holds that the truth of this proposition is explained by the generation (via supernatural infusion) of a new form or quality in the soul upon its baptism.²⁹ Thus, according to Chatton, 'the Church says that charity is a certain thing (*res*) in the wayfarer's soul that is really distinct from the soul'. On this view, then, grace is a certain quality—namely, the infused habit of charity—that serves (along with God and the soul itself) as part of the truthmaker for the proposition 'The soul is acceptable to God'. But, says Chatton, absent a commitment to Necessitation, there is no way to defend this view of charity against a more reductionist interpretation. As he explains:

[The one who denies Necessitation] would say that the authority of the Church does not require us to suppose that there are such distinct things—despite the fact that when such things [namely, infused qualities] are present without anything else it is not possible for the Church's authoritative teaching [about baptized souls being acceptable] to be false. Rather, [on the reductionist view] it is enough to suppose that charity is just the soul *when God accepts it*, and that it is not the soul when God does not accept it, so that the Church understands only that it is not necessary that the soul is charity. (Lect. I.3.1.1, n. 10; eds Wey and Etkorn: 4-5)

²⁹ Thus, in addition to authorities such as Anselm and Augustine, Chatton also cites the *Constitutiones Clementinae* as evidence of explicit ecclesiastical support of this position. See Chatton, Lect. I.17.1; n. 6 (eds Wey and Etkorn: 288). There is, however, at least one important theological authority—Peter Lombard—who advances the reductionist reading.

The reductionist about charity denies that any entity distinct from God and the soul of the baptized is required to explain truths involving grace and divine acceptance. Instead, the reductionist maintains that what makes it true, upon baptism, that the soul is acceptable to God is simply that God has (freely, but from eternity) ordained to adopt a stance of charity and acceptance toward the soul upon its baptism. Hence, while there is a difference in what is true at the moment of baptism, there is no corresponding difference in *what exists* at baptism. For, *sans* Necessitation, it is open to the reductionist to insist that God and the soul alone are jointly—albeit contingently—sufficient to explain the soul’s being in a state of grace.³⁰ Thus, absent a commitment to Necessitation, nothing in Anti-Pelagian doctrine itself requires the introduction of entities other than God and the soul to explain truths about divine grace and acceptance. But, recall: Ockham’s razor demands that, unless unerring authority requires it, plurality is not to be posited. Hence, if Ockham rejects Necessitation, his own razor principle commits him to a reductionist account of charity.

Chatton’s example is well chosen. For, as it turns out, Ockham himself wants to resist applying the razor in the case of infused charity.³¹ Indeed, while he is aware of and even sympathetic to the reductionist interpretation of divine acceptance, Ockham nevertheless expressly sides with the realist view so as to avoid—at least on this occasion—opposing prevailing theological winds.³² Even so, his willing concession to realism about charity goes no distance toward blunting the force of Chatton’s challenge to his razor principle. For, even if Ockham wants to withhold the razor in this case, he has no principled, theological basis for doing so. After all, his concession to the realist interpretation cannot

³⁰ One might think that the relevant worldly change could be a difference on the side of God since what appears to have changed is God’s willingness to accept the soul of the newly baptized. This is not, however, a strategy most—including Ockham—would be willing to adopt. Like most scholastics who adhere to the doctrine of divine simplicity, Ockham does not think that God undergoes any intrinsic change when he acts. Hence, Ockham cannot say that the soul’s coming to be accepted by God consists in any change *in God*.

³¹ See Ockham’s discussion of infused charity at Rep. III.9 (OTH VI: 281) and Ord. I.17.3 (OTH III:476-478). For a nice summary of Ockham’s account see Wood (1999) and Adams (1987, ch. 30).

³² There are cases in which Ockham is quite willing to resist dominant interpretations of theological doctrines. For example, on the interpretation dominant in Ockham’s day, the doctrine of the Eucharist requires the introduction of entities answering to the category of Quantity. Nonetheless, Ockham is unwilling either to countenance quantitative entities or to acknowledge the prevailing interpretation as authoritative. For recent discussion of Ockham’s attitude toward authority in connection with the doctrine of Eucharist see Hagedorn (2022) and Levy (2012).

be justified on the grounds that authoritative teaching *requires* it.³³ And, of course, this is Chatton's basic point. Indeed, so long as Ockham denies Necessitation, it is far from clear how such teaching *ever could* require it. For, without Necessitation, there is no principled basis for ruling out a reductionist explanation of any given authoritative truth. Chatton puts the point this way:

It follows [from the denial of Necessitation] that God, by His absolute power, cannot make a human certain concerning any plurality of things, since it is not possible to do this except by revealing some propositional truth to him; but a person is not going to be made certain through such propositions, since [if Necessitation is false] he might just say that fewer things are sufficient. (Lect. I.3.1.1, n. 11; eds Wey and Etkorn: 5)

But, if all this is right, then there is no meaningful sense in which revealed truths can ever serve *to constrain* the application of Ockham's razor. And this, Chatton insists, leaves us with a razor far sharper than even Ockham wants.

4. Conclusion

We began by noting the difference in the way in which Ockham and Chatton each develop the common-sense intuition that truth depends on, and is explained by, reality. Chatton, following Scotus, holds that what is true depends on what things exist. Ockham, by contrast, accepts only a qualified version of such a principle: what is true depends not only on what entities exist, but also on how they are arranged spatiotemporally.

³³ Admittedly, Ockham stops short of endorsing the reductionist interpretation precisely because such an interpretation runs against the 'sayings of the saints' (Ord. I.17.3; OTh III:476-478). It is far from clear, however, that he actually regards the 'sayings of the saints' as carrying authority sufficient to *require* a commitment to infused charity. For, elsewhere he insists that 'it cannot be sufficiently proved, either by argument or by the authority of the Church, that the theological virtues [that is, Faith, Hope, and Charity] are infused at baptism. For while the Church considers the view which holds that these virtues are infused as more probable, nevertheless it does not condemn the opposite view' (Rep. IV.3-5; OTh VII: 55-56). The fact that, on some occasions, Ockham cedes realist interpretations of theological doctrine on grounds of authority while on other occasions he insists that no authority can establish a realist interpretation seems to signal some instability in his views about authority. Indeed (and this is partly to Chatton's point) Ockham appears to have no stable or principled basis for determining when authority does or does not require the introduction of a given (or given type of) entity. One possible explanation for this instability is that his views about ecclesiastical and theological authority change over time. For an interesting defence of this hypothesis, see Hagedorn (2022).

In this way, I claim, Ockham's razor can be understood as an attempt to avoid the unnecessary proliferation of truthmakers.

Endeavouring to deflect Ockham's razor, Chatton does two things. First, he introduces a concessive version of his own truthmaker principle, one that simply grants the role that Ockham thinks spatiotemporal structure plays in explaining truth. Second, he advances a certain thesis (viz., 'Necessitation') about the nature of truthmaking itself. In doing so, he brings the focus of debate to a question about the nature of metaphysical explanation—or, more precisely, to a question about the way in which truth *depends* on reality. Is the dependence relation one of necessitation or not? As we've seen, Chatton thinks that, in answering this question, Ockham faces a kind of dilemma. If he grants that explanation requires necessitation, then his razor principle is too dull; if he denies that explanation requires necessitation, his razor is too sharp.

It may well be that there is a way for Ockham to avoid the horns of this dilemma. Nonetheless, Chatton's question is a pressing one for Ockham. And the challenge it poses is, I think, sufficiently forceful to require *some* response from Ockham. Determining just what that response might be, however, is a project for a different paper.³⁴

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³⁴ In writing this paper I've benefited immensely from discussion with Jeff Brower, Jordan Lavender, and Jonathan Jacobs. I presented earlier drafts of this paper at the Morris Colloquium in Medieval Philosophy, at the SCP 40th Anniversary Conference, and to faculty and graduate students at Notre Dame University. I'm grateful to audience members on these occasions for their valuable feedback. Thanks also go to anonymous reviewers whose comments proved very helpful in bringing the paper to its final form.

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