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Ockham on Mind-World Relations: What Sort of Nominalism?

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I. Introduction

William Ockham is a leading figure in the late Medieval philosophical movement known as “nominalism.” Nominalism is associated with the claim that universals are nothing more than *nomina*—names. It is arguable that “conceptualism” is a better title for Ockham’s philosophy, however, since for him universals are not merely names in *flatus vocis*; rather, they are *mental* names or concepts (*intentiones*). Spoken and written names signify things by convention only, and thus are arbitrary; mental names, on the other hand, are supposed by Ockham to signify by nature.¹

There are a number of questions that could be raised here regarding the idea of pre- or extra-linguistic systems of concepts.² In this paper, I propose to set these aside, and inquire instead into the natural signification relation that is supposed to link concepts to groups of real particulars. Ockham’s nominalism-conceptualism receives bad press from some contemporary commentators for having stripped the universe not only of real universals, but also of any ordered structure apart from that imposed by human conceptual schemes.

William Placher, for instance, laments that Ockham’s theory of universals entails the belief that “there is no single correct way of dividing up

the world” and that the order we find in the world is a matter of our “divid[ing] things into categories for our convenience.” Nominalism, says Placher, makes the metaphysical order of things “arbitrary.”³ By contrast, some theorists who read Ockham in this way celebrate the new-found malleability of the world vis-à-vis the formative power of our concepts. Simon Blackburn congratulates Ockham and other nominalists for having introduced the “permanently attractive idea that the common features of things are some kind of creation of human responses and ideas.”⁴

Other scholars regard Ockham’s philosophy as a plausible and welcome economizer of the extravagant metaphysics purveyed by his predecessors. They wonder, however, whether Ockham’s conceptualism impedes our ability to have epistemic acquaintance with this pared-down universe. One of Ockham’s translators, Paul Vincent Spade, summarizes this attitude:

We say “All men are mortal,” thereby grouping Socrates and Plato together and calling them by the same name. If there are no universals, then what real basis can there possibly be for such a grouping? Isn’t it utterly arbitrary—perhaps pragmatically useful, a matter of cultural conditioning, but ultimately *not* a reflection of the way things really are? In short, doesn’t nominalism make all general knowledge impossible?⁵

Spade airs this question in the context of his discussion of universals without committing himself to an answer. Louis Dupré, on the other hand, is less coy about his view of the epistemological consequences of Ockham’s theory of universals. “With Ockham,” says Dupré, “the entire ontotheological synthesis began to disintegrate” since, unlike Augustine and Aquinas, “Ockham no longer takes a built-in harmony between mind and nature for granted.”⁶

Does Ockham’s theory of concepts make him guilty of the metaphysical and epistemological charges leveled by these philosophers? It is almost impossible to imagine a Medieval philosopher explicitly supporting either the proto-Kantian metaphysics that Placher and Blackburn attribute to him, or the conceptual relativity and/or skepticism of which Spade speaks. A close reading of the texts suggests that Ockham meant his theory of natural signification to establish a direct link between our concepts and the way the world is naturally ordered. Insofar as this portion of his theory is successful, I think Ockham can be considered “not guilty” of the latter-day charges that we have surveyed. So

to what extent is the theory of natural signification a success? That is the topic of the present essay.

II. Salvaging Natural Signification

What does Ockham mean by the modifier “natural” in “natural signification?” It is obviously indicative of a relation holding between a sign and a signified. But a relation of what sort? We have noted that it must differ from ordinary linguistic signification: the sign-signified relation that holds between most utterance-object⁷ pairs is a contingent causal relation based on the habits and conventions that are operative in a language community.⁸ The sequence-sets of noises or marks that constitute the utterances “les livres” and “the books” both signify a certain species of things in the world. Upon perceiving one of these utterances, those of us in the Francophone and Anglophone communities are caused by habit to think of books. But either utterance could easily have been “imposed” by (collective) human will onto the classes of stars, say, or trees, or philosophy articles. As Ockham puts it: “one person can impose the same word to signify all such and such individuals, and another can impose it to signify others.”⁹

By contrast, “it could be said that just as a word is universal and is a genus and a species, but only through institution, so too the concept so contrived and abstracted from pre-cognized singulars is universal *from its own nature*.”¹⁰ Concepts of the mind “which belong to no language,” says Ockham, have relations to classes of objects that are not made to obtain by human choice or convention. Members of a linguistic community can change the designation of the spoken or written utterance at will, but the designation of the conceptual term is not able to be changed at anybody’s will.

One component of Ockham’s theory of natural signification is the claim that a relation of *identity* holds between a concept of a real particular and the particular itself. So, if the concept exists, then in principle the particular and the relation of identity between concept and particular exist.¹¹ I shall not discuss this relation here. For as Spade (following Aristotle) notes, most of our knowledge consists of general concepts. The relation that exists between a general concept and its objects, however, must be like a relation of identity insofar as “the existence of [the] relata is logically sufficient for the relation to

obtain.” In other words, the relation must exist in every possible world in which the relata exist and keep their same natures. Ockham’s position is that *similarity* relations operate in this way. On his view, even the omnipotent “God cannot produce two white things without producing two similar things.”¹² It is this sort of “natural” similarity relation that is supposed by Ockham to exist between a general concept of the mind and the class of objects it signifies.

Ockham indicates that similarity relations hold not only between concepts and classes of particulars, but between the particulars in those classes as well. Natural classes are not primitive entities for Ockham, since they can be analyzed into similarities between particular members of the class. These similarity relations themselves, however, *are* primitive. There is no real (less-than-numerical) unity which particulars have in common and which would allow the similarities to be further analyzed by identities. So also there is no need for two particulars to base their similarity in a mutual similarity to a third thing. If that were necessary, Ockham would have to face the dreaded “third man” arguments that plague Platonic theories. Thirdly, there is no need to account for the relation of similarity itself (or the class of such relations) in terms of other similarities and thereby start a regress, for on Ockham’s view, the relation itself is not a real thing (*res*). For Ockham, similarity is just a primitive, two-term relation.¹³

Finally, Ockham insists that although similarity relations are not real *things*, they are in an important sense *real*. That is, they are not constituted by the fact that the relata fall under the same species or genus concept in human minds:

Similarity is called a real relation because of the fact that one white thing, by the nature of the thing, is similar to another white thing, and the intellect no more brings this about than it brings it about that Socrates is white and Plato is white.¹⁴

The concept-to-things similarity relation (our topic here) is indeed a third relation; but it is in no way constitutive of the original similarity relations between things and things-in-a-class.

The preceding remarks make it clear that Ockham is more likely to be guilty on the epistemological charge of propounding conceptual relativity and/or skepticism than on charges of metaphysical anti-realism or idealism. For

Ockham, the order of things is a contingent creation of God, and is thus unaffected by changes in human conceptual schemes. But it is not easy to see how a primitive and “intrinsic” similarity relation can be used to link our general concepts to classes of those really existing and ordered things. In what sense is a concept of the mind similar to objects in the world? On this question, Ockham changed his mind in the course of his career.

A. Similarity and the Objective-Existence Theory

Initially, Ockham followed Peter Aureol, among others, in holding that a universal concept is “a kind of *fictum* having being in objective being like what the external thing has in subjective being.”¹⁵ There is then a similarity between the *fictum* and the real particulars in a class of which it is a concept. A number of factors motivate Ockham’s acceptance of this “*fictum*” theory; I haven’t the space to rehearse all of them here. The main idea is that every real cognitive act must have an object, since “it is impossible that there should be a cognition and nothing be cognized by that cognition.” Since Ockham has already argued at length that the objects of our cognitions of universals are not real common things existing in particulars,¹⁶ he concludes that concepts of non-real entities such as universals (and also things like imagined beings, impossibles, propositions, beings of reason, etc.) must have non-real intentional objects. And as Adams notes, once Ockham has arrived at this analysis of intentionality, it is “natural to extend it to thoughts about real things, so that really existent things have objective existence when they are thought of.”¹⁷

This similarity relation is supposed to be a non-trivial one: it does not consist in being similar with respect to negative or disjunctive properties. Rather, Ockham construes the similarity relation he has in mind on a sort of pictorial metaphor—a concept is similar to what falls under it in (something like) the way a picture of a rose is similar to all roses. Universals are “such in objective being as other things are in subjective being. If the intellect had a productive power, it would make them be similar in subjective being too.”¹⁸ On the “*fictum*-theory,” then, universal concepts are the “image and likeness” of what they signify.

Ockham has a number of difficulties maintaining that *ficta* can be maximally similar to the particulars they are supposed to signify. First, *ficta*-

concepts will always be more similar to other concepts than they are to any real particulars—even those that they are supposed to be concepts of. Ockham is aware of this difficulty, and moves to set aside any similarities that result from the fact that concepts are concepts. He does so by arguing that what is important in natural signification is the similarity between concept and things that would exist if the *fictum* “could be produced in reality the way it can be imagined.”¹⁹

This move assumes a Counterfactual Principle regarding the possibility of concepts existing as realities:

CFP_{Fictum}: It is meaningful to speak of the real thing that would exist (and would no longer be a concept) if an objective-existent were produced in reality.

We measure the similarities between general concepts and things, then, by considering only those features of the concept that it *would have* in a world in which the intellect has “a productive power as it has a fictive power.”²⁰ By relying on CFP_{Fictum}, Ockham thinks the general concept of men can be considered maximally similar to each individual man, and can thus signify the class of men.

Since concepts of the second intention (the Medieval locution for meta-concepts—i.e. concepts of connotative terms, of syncategorematic terms, and of first intention concepts²¹) cannot exist as real particulars in any possible world,²² however, CFP_{Fictum} will not apply to them. Thus, this proposal requires us to separate Ockham’s general principle of natural signification into two separate ones, and to specify the universe of discourse more precisely in each case. One will be employed when dealing with concepts of the first intention, and the other when dealing with concepts of the second intention. The principle for concepts of the first intention, then, might be

P1: Letting C range over concepts, and *x* and *y* over real existents, for all *x* (C signifies *x*, iff $\sim(Ey)$ (C resembles *y* more than C resembles *x*)).

This principle implies that where the similarity between C and two particulars is *equal*, the two particulars are both members of the general class which the concept signifies. As it stands, however, P1 will only work for classes of

particulars that are actually existing. Ockham wants his classes to include all possible objects of that class as well—the concept is supposed to be maximally similar to all actual and possible objects of that class. Now on the *fictum* theory, a nonactual possible has objective existence.²³ So it initially appears that we shall have to widen the universe of discourse again so that x and y range over both real and objective existents. But Ockham can employ CFP_{Fictum} to avoid doing this, such that our adjusted principle would be

P1a: Letting C range over concepts, and x and y over real, fully determinate existents from any possible world, for all x (C signifies x , iff $\sim(Ey)$ (C resembles y more than C resembles x)).

CFP_{Fictum} allows us to speak of the real particulars that exist in the possible world in which the intellect has productive power. And again, P1a indicates that if C is equally and maximally similar to a number of objects, then it is a concept of the class of objects which includes exactly those objects. The analogous principle for concepts of the second intention is **P2**: Letting C range over concepts of the second intention, and x and y range over concepts of the first intention, for all x (C signifies x , iff $\sim(Ey)$ C resembles y more than C resembles x).

Here we can see how the concept ‘genus’ might be considered more similar to the concept ‘animal’ than it is to the concept ‘man’ (which is a species).

So at the cost of bifurcating the theory and limiting the universes of discourse in this way, it initially seems that the early Ockham is able to salvage the notion of natural signification by using similarity relations between *ficta* and particulars. I will argue against this conclusion later. For now, however, we turn to Ockham’s later view.

B. Similarity and the Mental-Act Theory

Ockham abandons the distinction between real mental acts and objectively-existent objects on account of, among other things, arguments put forward by his contemporary, William Chatton. Chatton claims that the *fictum*-theory violates the principle of parsimony when it posits *ficta* that are logically independent of real mental acts. If the mental act can exist without the *ficta*, and if all mental acts necessarily have objects, then intentionality must somehow

be explicable without reference to ficta. Ockham echoes Chatton's criticism of his earlier view in a *quodlibet* written after the *Ordinatio* we have been considering:

...whatever is preserved by appeal to a fictive entity can be preserved by appeal to an act of the understanding. For like a fictive entity, an act of understanding (i) is a likeness of an object, (ii) is able to signify and supposit for things outside the soul, (iii) is able to be the subject or the predicate in a proposition, (iv) is able to be a genus or species, etc.²⁴

We can see that despite his ontological conversion, Ockham continues to hold that there is (ii) a signification relation linking concepts and things, and that this relation consists in (i) the similarity between the concept and the objects in a class. Somehow the "contents" of the mental act are related to the things it signifies. The concept is a single mental quality in itself—but it "is universal through predication, not for itself but for the things it signifies."²⁵

There is a difference with respect to concepts of single particulars on this theory. The mental act is no longer directed towards a fictum, but rather toward the subjective existent itself. As Adams puts it, "the concept of Socrates *is* the apprehension of Socrates." However, the elimination of ficta from Ockham's ontology does not change the fact that with respect to universals and nonreal objects, a workable notion of similarity between concepts and things is required in order to safeguard the theory of natural signification. Again we can suggest

P3: Letting C range over concepts and x and y over actual and possible really existent things, for all x , (C signifies x , iff there does not exist a y such that C resembles y more than C resembles x , leaving aside any similarity between x and C and y and C that results from the fact that C is a mental quality).

Marilyn Adams criticizes this kind of formulation because she finds it implausible to suppose that "my thought of a green house is similar to a green house and more similar to a green house than to Socrates in the required way."²⁶ For a concept is a mental quality, and a mental quality cannot have color, shape, or extension. Recall, however, that mental qualities are thought by Chatton (and, following him, Ockham) to have certain "contents" which direct it towards certain particulars rather than others.²⁷ A general concept on the mental-act theory is a "confused intellection" whose contents necessarily refer it to a class containing an infinity of possible and actual particulars.²⁸ We can

(following D.C. Williams) call these “content” features of the mental act *tropes*, so as not to confuse Ockham’s nominalism with theories that conceive of properties as universals.²⁹

So a mental quality will possess tropes like “being of something green,” “being of something extended,” “being of something that people live in,” etc. Now it is plausible to think that a mental-act theorist could use a revised version of the Counterfactual Principle to make an analysis of natural signification successful.

CFP_{Mental Act}: It is meaningful to speak of the real thing that would exist if an object possessing all and only the tropes of a certain mental quality were produced in reality.

If CFP_{Mental Act} is sound, then we can speak about the (counterfactual) object which possesses all and only the tropes of my general concept of green houses; this object would by hypothesis be maximally similar to all green houses. By way of using similarity relations in this manner, mental acts initially seem able to naturally signify particular classes of objects.

III. The Demise of the CFP

We have seen how Ockham’s account of natural signification can be salvaged by using a version of the Counterfactual Principle (CFP) suggested in his work.

Heretofore we have simply allowed him this principle; it is time now to examine it. It will help to have a few of the relevant passages before us, though some of them have been referred to previously: At the end of *Ordinatio* I, d. 2, q. 8, Ockham introduces both the fictum-theory and the mental-act theory of mental names. With respect to the former, he says that the a concept is:

a kind of fictum having being in objective being like what the external thing has in subjective being. This happens as follows: The intellect, seeing some thing outside the soul, fashions a similar thing in the mind in such a way that, if it had a productive power as it has a fictive power, it would produce such a thing externally, numerically distinct from the former thing.³⁰

Ockham goes on to construe CFP_{Fictum} on analogy with the way an artisan sees a house or a class of houses, fashions a concept of a house in his mind, and then produces a similar house externally.

(i) So Ockham's conceptualism is first of all an *empiricist* conceptualism: the mind always "fashions such ficta from things known beforehand." This prior knowledge can be knowledge of sensibles, or it can be spiritual knowledge (of the soul, for instance).³¹

(ii) Second, for Ockham a concept of a class with more than one member "can be called a universal, because it is an exemplar and indifferently related to all external singulars." By "indifferently" here I have taken Ockham to mean both "equally" and "maximally." He makes this more explicit where, speaking in terms of the mental act theory, he claims that:

one and the same cognition refers to an infinite number of singulars without being a cognition proper to any one of them, and this is so because of some specific likeness between these individuals that does not exist between others.³²

These passages raise a pressing question regarding Ockham's Counterfactual Principles: given that a concept (on either ontology) is (i) formed by the mind from knowledge of pre-existent singulars and (ii) supposed to be maximally similar to an infinite number of possible and actual particulars in the class of which it is a concept, is it really meaningful to speak of (CFP_{Fictum}), the real thing that would exist if an objective-existent were produced in reality, or of (CFP_{Mental Act}), the real thing that would exist if an object possessing all and only the particular tropes of a certain mental quality were produced in reality?

This question is particularly difficult to answer on Ockham's behalf, since he gives no detailed account of counterfactuals in his fat handbook to logic. I think there are good reasons, however, to think that the answer will be in the negative. First, Ockham's description of the way general concepts are (i) formed by the mind from knowledge of pre-existent particulars seems, when combined with a consistent empiricism, to belie the idea that (ii) the counterfactual counterparts of these concepts can be equally and maximally similar to all particular members of the natural class. As we have seen, Ockham's empiricist conceptualism stipulates that concepts are fashioned by abstracting from particulars previously sensed and/or cognized. We get a detailed description of this process with respect to the general concept of "men" in *Reportatio* II, q. 12-13:

This is the process: first, a man is cognized by some particular sense. Then the same man is cognized by the intellect. Given this [intellectual] cognition of that man, [the intellect] comes to have a cognition that is general and common to every man. That cognition which is common to every man is called a concept, intention, or affection (*passio*).³³

It is ambiguous in Ockham's texts whether the abstraction of a general concept requires cognition of more than one particular. In this text it seems that only one man must be apprehended in order for the intellect to produce a general concept of the class of all men.³⁴ Elsewhere he says that "the cognition of any universal presupposes the cognition of some particular or particulars."³⁵ In any case, Ockham is explicit about the fact that a cognition of all men, or of any one man in particular, is not necessary:

But in different human beings it is sometimes not the cognition of the same particulars that precedes, but of different ones, although the universal concept (*ratio*) known is the same.³⁶

If this is the case, though, how is a particular person's intellect able to form a proper species concept—i.e. a concept that is maximally similar to all particular men? Upon "cognizing" the white, bearded, middle-aged professor—or even two white, bearded, middle-aged professors—it seems plausible to think that I will possess the general concept of "white, bearded, middle-aged men." Or perhaps, in the process of abstraction, I can come up with the concepts of "white men," "bearded men," "middle-aged men," and "professing men." Finally, I may be able to abstract the most general concept "men" from these pre-existing cognitions of particulars. But since Ockham's philosophy dictates that there is no real form or common nature which the intellect abstracts from accidental features of particulars, what reason is there to think that the concept of "men" that I derive from these cognitions will really be maximally similar to *all* men? Ockham does not here defend his claim about the intellect's capacity to "come to have a cognition that is general and common to every man." He simply posits it.³⁷

In fact, it is more plausible to think that the *fictum* (or the tropes of the mental act) that I generate will include features that are in fact accidental to the species "man," but which I have no way of knowing are accidental. Perhaps in our hypothetical example, my concept of men will include the features *having*

white skin or having a beard. Now, we are not unfamiliar with cases of children who have been brought up in monolithically Caucasian environments being confounded by their first apprehension of a black man. The author himself has had the experience of going as a pale, freckled teen to isolated villages in China and having people stare at him uncomprehendingly and even try to wipe the freckles off his face. In such a case, the stranger is not recognizably a member of the class of humans to the locals, since the locals' concept of humans had been abstracted from their experience of Asian humans. An accidental feature is understandably included in their abstract general concept. Having experienced the stranger, the locals can no doubt revise their concept of "men" such that it comprehends this new sort of man. The situation becomes even more difficult for Ockham, since he holds that a concept must be maximally similar to all *possible* members of the class or species. My concept of "men" must be equally similar to all men that have existed and will exist in this world, and any that exist in the vast array of possible worlds. Now it seems to me that even our best attempts to abstract from experience a species-concept general enough to apply to all men would not be adequate to this task. For it is not impossible to imagine that there are men in other possible worlds that lack the properties of, say, *being rational, being risible, or having a mother.*

Even if this is not the case, however, and even if a certain set of properties really is constitutive of the essence of humanity (*having a certain DNA configuration* is a modern example that comes to mind), it will require experience of many particular men, and probably many particular men from many cultures before one is able to abstract a concept that is equally proper to all possible men. A consistently empiricist theory about concept-production makes it extremely implausible to think that one or two cognitions of particulars will allow us to produce a concept that is suitably general, and yet still maximally similar to all possible members of the species or class. This is particularly true when the essential features we are considering are by and large inaccessible to everyday sensuous and intellectual apprehension. For these reasons, even if the *fictum* or the bundle of tropes that make up the contents of a given mental act could be produced in "subjective being," the result would probably not have the characteristics requisite for Ockham's account of natural signification to go through.

We can further question the soundness of CFP by considering what exactly would be produced in the possible world in which the intellect has productive, rather than just fictive and/or abstractive, power. What characteristics would a universal that is produced in that alternate reality have? Presumably those characteristics that the fictum or mental quality have, plus real existence. And on Ockham's view, these characteristics (apart from existence, of course) will be proper to all possible members of the class of which the concept is a concept.

With respect to the concept of *men*, then: what characteristics would the concept produced in reality have? We might think that it would have skin, but what color would this skin be? Not white, presumably, since then it would be more similar to certain men than to others. But not black skin, or any other shade C for the same reason. We might think that our actualized universal man would have hands. But then there are some men that do not have hands. Perhaps they have lost them in an industrial accident, or perhaps they were born without them. So if the universal man has hands, he would be more similar to some men than to others. But conversely, if he does not have hands, he would be more similar to those men who lack hands than to the vast majority who still have them. It seems that in the possible world where the intellect has productive power, the concept of men must both have hands, and not have hands. And this contradictory result could be produced with respect to almost any characteristic we might mention.³⁸

The Ockhamist may try to circumvent this difficulty by maintaining that the universal concept of men would only have those characteristics that all possible members of the class possess. That would leave us with very few characteristics: perhaps properties like *having a soul*, *being risible*, *having DNA* would be on the list. But produce this image in real existence with only these properties, and we would have a very strange being indeed. Even if we could conceive of a real, risible, ensouled man with DNA, he would hardly be a man "of absolutely the same kind as the others."

When we look at concepts of things other than sensible particulars, the difficulties multiply. For presumably we have concepts of such things as virtues as well. But what would a fictum that was maximally similar to all "wisdoms" look like? And what would it look like when produced in reality according to our Counterfactual Principle? The same question could be asked

regarding our concept of addresses, of numbers, of emotions, of songs, and so forth. Each of these could perhaps be attributed a list of essential properties, but it does not seem possible for them to be actualized according to CFP in such a way that it would be both a fully determinate particular and maximally similar to all others.³⁹

Finally, Ockham would have to develop a way to make his theory work for impossibles, which he does think we have concepts of. Again, features of ficta or tropes could be used to pick out the class of square circles, but how would the concept of this impossible class be given reality in subjective being like it has in objective being? And how would it then be maximally similar to the class of impossible objects that are both square and circular? Talk of similarity here just doesn't seem to make sense. But since Ockham's theory of natural signification rests on notions of maximal similarity, and of what a fictum or bundle of tropes would look like if produced in reality, these difficulties call into question CFP, and *a fortiori*, the entire theory.

IV. Conclusion

We can now make some conclusions about Ockham's theory of the nature of general concepts and their relation to the world, and we can do so by way of answering some of the charges leveled against Ockham by contemporary commentators. William Placher is obviously in error to say that Ockhamist theories imply that "there is no single correct way of dividing up the world... We divide things into categories for our own convenience, and there's no right or wrong to it." If, by the ambiguous notion of "dividing up the world," Placher is hinting at some kind of metaphysical anti-realism on the order of contemporary post-Kantian theories, he is doubly in error. For Ockham's insistence that only particulars exist in reality does not mean that human minds are able "arbitrarily" to order these particulars into classes. As we have seen, the world and its objects exist independently of us, our minds, and our language; the similarity relations that exist between particulars in classes have nothing to do with our conceptual activity.⁴⁰ So Placher's claim, that on Ockham's view "those three things in the sky are all 'clouds' simply because we have decided to give them the same name," is incorrect. Likewise, Blackburn is not justified in claiming that Ockham introduced the (good) idea that "the

common features of things are some kind of creation of human responses and ideas.”

Things are what they are, and have similarity relations to other things, whether we like it or not. Of course, what things are *called* by English speakers is determined partly by convention, and thus somewhat arbitrarily. But no one disputes that. On the other hand, our survey of the difficulties suffered by Ockham's theory of natural signification suggests that which entities fall under *our* general concepts is not free from the slight skewing that results from our concepts having been formed at a particular time and place. In other words, because Ockham's theory of natural signification is a failure, he will have a hard time showing that the world is ordered and classed in exactly the way we take it to be ordered and classed. As Spade points out, most of our knowledge consists of general concepts, and Ockham has not succeeded in showing that general concepts are uninfluenced by cultural conditioning. On the contrary, his empiricist account of the way concepts are acquired seems to favor a sort of situated epistemology. This does not mean, however, that the sort of objection Spade articulates is correct—i.e., it is not the case that taking universals out of reality makes “all general knowledge impossible” by way of making all grouping under concepts “utterly arbitrary.” For Ockham's idea is that concepts are acquired by way of the intellect abstracting from real particulars which have been encountered in intuition. As we have more intuitional experience, our general concepts will be fine-tuned. Because we live in a certain time and place and cannot experience (or imagine) all possible objects of that class, our concepts will never be perfect i.e., they will never be maximally similar to all possible particular objects in that class. But they can certainly get better, and can provide us with a modicum of justified belief about the way the world is. So this aspect of Ockham's epistemology, at least, does not provide grounds for thinking that complete relativity or skepticism are live options.

Dupré's comments turn out to be the most interesting. He notes that for Aquinas and other moderate realists, the real form of a species exists in things and is simply “abstracted” from the “phantasm” produced in the mind by sensation of particulars (*conversio ad phantasmata*). We can know the real order of things by way of becoming acquainted with the real species and genera in particulars.⁴¹ (I am assuming that this is part of the “ontotheological synthesis” of which Dupré writes.) Now although Ockham thinks species and

genera are only concepts in the mind, vestiges of this earlier view are evident in his confidence that the intellect is able to abstract the essential features of a species after apprehending only one or two particulars. So while Dupré is wrong to say that “Ockham no longer takes a built-in harmony between mind and nature for granted,” he is correct to claim that the existence of such a harmony does not follow from Ockham’s theory.⁴² For as we have seen, Ockham’s conceptual empiricism implies only that we undertake a continual fine-tuning of our general concepts as we have further experience of particulars. In this way, Ockham and the nominalists that follow him might be credited with emphasizing experience of particulars in a way that encouraged the developing empirical sciences.

If my reading is correct, Ockham’s theory of natural signification is unsuccessful, not because the extensional semantics of the similarity relation between concepts and classes of objects are superficially unworkable, but because the counterfactual principle on which these semantics rely is not coherent. This deficiency in Ockham’s theory, however, should not be taken to commit him unwittingly (and unwillingly) to metaphysical anti-realism, skepticism, or radical conceptual relativity. There may be other reasons for arguing that his nominalist-conceptualist theory is so committed.⁴³ But the account of the mind’s relationship to the world that we have surveyed leaves us with an ontology that posits a real world whose order is unaffected by the processes of human minds, and a situated epistemology that is optimistic about our ability to have intuitive and scientific knowledge of this natural order.⁴⁴

NOTES

1. L.M. de Rijk claims that the natural signification of concepts is “a common presupposition of Ancient and Medieval thought.” See “Logic and Ontology in Ockham,” in *Ockham and Ockhamists*. Ed. E.P. Bos and H.A. Krop. Nijmegen: Ingenium Publishers, 1987, pp. 25-39.
2. These issues are taken up at great length and sophistication by Cyrille Michon in his *Nominalisme: La théorie de la signification d’Occam*. Paris: J. Vrin, 1994. Michon argues that Ockham’s distinction between propositions in natural languages and propositions in the pre-linguistic, mental “language” of concepts is not a coherent one. “Pense,” says Michon, “c’est parler.” See especially Ch. 4.
3. Placher, William C. *A History of Christian Theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983. 162-167.
4. Blackburn, Simon. *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. New York: Oxford Press, 1996. See “Nominalism” and “Ockham, William.”
5. Spade, Paul Vincent. Introduction to *Five Texts on the Medieval Problem of Universals*. Trans. and ed. by Paul Vincent Spade. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994, pp. viii.

6. Dupré, Louis. *Path to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. pp. 39.
7. I use "utterance" here to refer to both spoken and written signs in a natural language.
8. Although it might be objected that certain of these relations do not seem completely contingent C spoken words that are characterized by onomatopoeia, for instance.
9. *Ord. d. 2, q.8* (80). Spade, 228. This is not quite correct C for it is not usually individuals that do the imposing, but rather collections of people in specific communities. It is also not usually a self-conscious imposition. But these are matters that cannot be discussed further here.
10. *Ord. d.2, q.8* (38f). Spade, 220f.
11. The relation is not, however, a real thing (*res*). See n13.
12. Adams, Marilyn McCord. "Ockham's Theory of Natural Signification." *Monist*. 61, July 1978. 444-459. These quotes are from 445-446.
13. Ockham's basic ontology of relations is this: Unless theological authority dictates otherwise, relations are not to be considered things (*res*) really or formally distinct from absolute things. Relation terms like "identity," "similarity," etc. (personally) supposit for the real relata, and (simply) supposit for the non-real concept of the relation (to *supposit for* means "to stand in for in a proposition"). Concepts of such relations can be called "relations" because of the way they (connotatively) signify the way the relata exist; but these concepts would be concepts only, and not real things. Cf. Adams, *William Ockham*, Notre Dame, Ind. : University of Notre Dame Press, 1987. Ch. 7
14. *Ord. I, d.30, q. 5*. Qtd. in Adams, *William Ockham*, 113.
15. *Ord. I, d.2, q.8*
16. *Ord. I, d.2 q.4-7*.
17. Adams, *William Ockham*, 77.
18. *Ord. I, d.2, q.8* (48, 50). Spade, 222-3.
19. *Expositio in Perihermenias Aristotelis*, Prologue (Bologna, 1496). qtd. in Adams, "Ockham's Theory of Natural Signification" p. 449.
20. *Ord. I., d.2, q.8* (22). Spade, 218.
21. A second intention like the concept *species* is a concept which groups first intention concepts like *cows* and *horses* together.
22. Cf. *Ord. I., d.2, q.8* (32). Spade, 219.
23. Actually, these non-actuals only have objective-existence *when someone is thinking of them*. But this does not affect the overall point. Moreover, it may be the case that the divine mind is always thinking of them. I am indebted to Paul Spade here.
24. Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions*, trans. Alfred Freddoso. IV q. 35, a.2
25. *Ord. I, d.2, q.8* (88). Spade, 230.
26. Adams, "Ockham's Theory of Natural Signification," 451.
27. Cf. Adams, *William Ockham*, 103-105 and Gedeon G<l, "Gualteri de Chatton et Guillelmi de Ockham: Controversia de natura conceptus universalis." *Franciscan Studies* N.S. XXVII (1967): 191-212.
28. *Expositio super librum Perihermenias*. Qtd. in Boehner, Philotheus. *Ockham: Philosophical Writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990, 44
29. Cf. D. C. Williams, "The Elements of Being," in D. C. Williams, *The Principles of Empirical Realism*, Charles Thomas, 1966.
30. *Ord. I, d.2, q.8* (22). Spade, 218.
31. *Ibid.*, (50-53). Spade, 223.
32. *Expositio super librum Perihermenias*. Qtd. in Boehner, 45
33. qtd. in Adams, *William Ockham*, 526.
34. In this section, I will use the words "man" and "men" only to maintain continuity with the quoted passages, and without intending to slight the other half of the human species.
35. *Ord. I, d.3, q.6*. qtd. in Adams, *William Ockham*. 528.
36. *Ibid.*

37. Perhaps this confidence in the intellect's abstracting, compounding, and dividing abilities is one of the vestiges of moderate realism in Ockham. Alternatively, there is precedent in Henry of Harclay for the insistence that the intellect just does have such powers upon being confronted with a limited number of particulars. I cannot see any obvious justification for such confidence.
38. These ideas were suggested to me, in part, by Nicholas Wolterstorff. See his *On Universals*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970. Ch. 8.
39. Paul Spade suggests (in his review of this article for this journal) that if we were to actualize one of Ockham's universal concepts, we would have a real universal of the sort the realists argue for. But Ockham can't allow that this is possible, since he has other reasons for thinking that every real thing is fully determinate.
40. See Adams, *William Ockham*. Chapters 4 and 9, for a full defense of the claim in this sentence. Also, I am not suggesting that the nominalist who grounds his grouping of natural classes on similarity relations between members of the class will not face other difficulties. I do not have the space (or expertise!) to canvass those difficulties here. See D. M. Armstrong, *Universals*. Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1989. Chapter 3.
41. Cf. *Summa Theologica* I, 85, 1-2.
42. Dupré, p. 39. As for causing "the entire ontotheological synthesis" to disintegrate, I am not sure what to say, except that it may not have been an unmitigated evil insofar as it encouraged modern empirical science.
43. For a critical assessment of some of the other reasons for thinking that Ockhamism leads to skepticism, see Adams, *William Ockham*, ch. 14.
44. Thanks to M. M. Adams, P. V. Spade, and B. D. O. Chaltman for comments on earlier drafts.