CHAPTER IX

THE OCKHAMIST MOVEMENT: JOHN OF MIRECOURT AND NICHOLAS OF AUTRECOURT

The Ockhamist or nominalist movement—John of Mirecourt—Nicholas of Autrecourt—Nominalism in the universities—Concluding remarks.

1. The phrase 'Ockhamist Movement' is perhaps something of a misnomer. For it might be understood as implying that William of Ockham was the sole fountainhead of the 'modern' current of thought in the fourteenth century and that the thinkers of the movement all derived their ideas from him. Some of these thinkers, like the Franciscan Adam Wodham or Goddam (d. 1358), had indeed been pupils of Ockham, while others, like the Dominican Holkot (d. 1349), were influenced by Ockham's writings without, however, having actually been his pupils. But in some other cases it is difficult to discover how far a given philosopher owed his ideas to Ockham's influence. However, even if from one point of view it may be preferable to speak of the 'nominalist movement' rather than of the 'Ockhamist Movement', it cannot be denied that Ockham was the most influential writer of the movement; and it is only just that the movement should be associated with his name. The names 'nominalism' and 'terminism' were used synonymously to designate the *via moderna*; and the salient characteristic of terminism was the analysis of the function of the term in the proposition, namely the doctrine of *suppositio* or standing-for. As has already been indicated, the theory of *suppositio* can be found in logicians before Ockham; in the writings of Peter of Spain, for example; but it was Ockham who developed the terminist logic in that conceptualist and 'empiricist' direction which we have come to associate with nominalism. One is justified, therefore, in my opinion, in speaking of the 'Ockhamist Movement', provided that one remembers that the phrase is not meant to imply that Ockham was the direct source of all the developments of that movement.

The development of the terminist logic forms one of the aspects of the movement. In this connection one may mention Richard Swineshead and William Heytesbury, both of whom were associated with Merton College, Oxford. The latter, whose logical writings enjoyed a wide circulation, became chancellor of the University of Oxford in 1371. Another popular logician of the fourteenth century was Richard Billingham. But the technical logical studies of the nominalists and of those influenced by the nominalist movement were frequently associated, as were those of Ockham himself, with a destructive attack on the traditional metaphysics, or rather on the proofs offered in the traditional metaphysics. Sometimes these attacks were based on the view that the traditional lines of proof did not amount to more than probable arguments. Thus according to Richard Swineshead the arguments which had been employed to prove the unicity of God were not demonstrations but dialectical arguments, that is to say, arguments which did not exclude the possibility of the opposite being true or which could not, in the language of the time, be reduced to the principle of contradiction. Sometimes emphasis was placed on our supposed inability to know any substance. If we can have no knowledge of any substance, argued Richard Billingham, we cannot prove the existence of God. Monotheism is a matter of faith, not of philosophical proof.

The relegation of propositions like 'God exists', where the term 'God' is understood as denoting the supreme unique Being, to the sphere of faith does not mean that any philosopher doubted the truth of these propositions: it simply means that he did not think that such propositions can be proved. Nevertheless, this sceptical attitude in regard to metaphysical arguments was doubtless combined, in the case of different philosophers, with varying degrees of insistence on the primacy of faith. A lecturer or professor in the faculty of arts might question the validity of metaphysical arguments on purely logical grounds, while a theologian might also be concerned to emphasize the weakness of the human reason, the supremacy of faith and the transcendent character of revealed truth. Robert Holkot, for example, postulated a 'logic of faith', distinct from and superior to natural logic. He certainly denied the demonstrative character of theistic arguments. Only analytic propositions are absolutely certain. The principle of causality, employed in traditional arguments for God's existence, is not an analytic proposition. From this it follows that philosophical arguments for God's existence cannot amount to more than probable arguments. Theology, however, is superior to philosophy; and in the sphere of dogmatic theology we can see the operation
of a logic which is superior to the natural logic employed in philosophy. In particular, that the principle of contradiction is transcended in theology is clear, thought Holkot, from the doctrine of the Trinity. My point is, then, not that the theologians who were influenced by the nominalist criticism of metaphysical "demonstrations" did not support their criticism by an appeal to logic, but rather that this relative scepticism in philosophy must not be taken without more ado as involving a sceptical attitude towards theological statements considered as statements of fact or as a conscious relegation of dogmatic theology to the sphere of conjecture.

Acceptance of this or that nominalist position did not mean, of course, that a given thinker adopted all the positions maintained by William of Ockham. John of Rodington (d. 1348), for example, who became Provincial of the English Franciscans, doubted the demonstrative character of arguments for God'sunicity: but he rejected the notion that the moral law depends simply on the divine will. John of Bassolis (d. 1347), another Franciscan, also questioned the demonstrative character of metaphysical proofs for God's existence, unicity and infinity; but he combined this critical attitude with an acceptance of various Scotist positions. Scotism was naturally a powerful influence in the Franciscan Order, and it produced philosophers like Francis of Meyronnes (d. c. 1328), Antoine André (d. c. 1320), the Doctor dulcisflus, and Francis de Marcia, the Doctor succinctus. It is only to be expected, then, that we should find the Scotist and Ockhamist lines of thought meeting and mingling in thinkers like John of Ripa, who lectured at Paris in the early part of the second half of the fourteenth century, and Peter of Candia (d. 1410). Further, in some cases where a thinker was influenced both by the writings of St. Augustine and by Ockhamism, it is not always easy to judge which influence was the stronger on any given point. For example, Thomas Bradwardine (c. 1290–1349) appealed to St. Augustine in support of his doctrine of theological determinism; but it is difficult to say how far he was influenced by Augustine's writings taken by themselves and how far he was influenced in his interpretation of Augustine by the Ockhamist emphasis on the divine omnipotence and the divine will. Again, Gregory of Rimini (d. 1358), who became General of the Hermits of St. Augustine, appealed to Augustine in support of his doctrines of the primacy of intuition and the 'sign' function of universal terms. But there is difficulty in
causal relationship can, they thought, be a statement of this kind. In other words, their theory of universals led the nominalists to an empiricist analysis of the causal relation. Moreover, in so far as the inference from phenomena to substance was an inference from effect to cause, this analysis affected also the nominalist view of the substance-accident metaphysic. If, then, on the one hand only analytic propositions, in the sense of propositions reducible to the principle of contradiction, are absolutely certain, while on the other hand statements about causal relations are empirical or inductive generalizations which enjoy at best only a very high degree of probability, it follows that the traditional metaphysical arguments, resting on the employment of the principle of causality and on the substance-accident metaphysic, cannot be absolutely certain. In the case, then, of statements about God’s existence, for example, the nominalists maintained that they owed their certainty not to any philosophical arguments which could be adduced in their favour but to the fact that they were truths of faith, taught by Christian theology. This position naturally tended to introduce a sharp distinction between philosophy and theology. In one sense, of course, a sharp distinction between philosophy and theology had always been recognized, namely in the sense that a distinction had always been recognized between accepting a statement as the result simply of one’s own process of reasoning and accepting a statement on divine authority. But a thinker like Aquinas had been convinced that it is possible to prove the ‘preambles of faith’, such as the statement that a God exists who can make a revelation. Aquinas was also convinced, of course, that the act of faith involves supernatural grace; but the point is that he recognized as strictly provable certain truths which are logically presupposed by the act of faith, even if in most actual cases supernatural faith is operative long before a human being comes to understand, if he ever does advert to or understand, the proofs in question. In the nominalist philosophy, however, the ‘preambles of faith’ were not regarded as strictly provable, and the bridge between philosophy and theology (so far, that is, as one is entitled to speak of a ‘bridge’ when faith demands supernatural grace) was thus broken. But the nominalists were not concerned with ‘apologetic’ considerations. In the Christian Europe of the Middle Ages apologetics were not a matter of such concern as they became for theologians and Catholic philosophers of a later date.

In the foregoing summary of the positions of the nominalists we have used the word ‘nominalist’ to mean the thoroughgoing nominalist or the thinker who developed the potentialities of nominalism or the ‘ideal’ nominalist, the nominalist pur sang. To have remarked earlier that not all those thinkers who were positively affected by the Ockhamist movement and who may in certain respects be called ‘nominalists’ adopted all the positions of Ockham. But it will be of use, I hope, to give some account of the philosophical ideas of two thinkers associated with the movement, namely John of Mirecourt and Nicholas of Autrecourt, the latter of whom particularly was an extremist. Acquaintance with the philosophical ideas of Nicholas of Autrecourt is an effective means, if further means are still needed, of dispelling the illusion that there was no variety of opinions in mediaeval philosophy about important topics. After outlining the thought of these two men I shall conclude the chapter with some remarks on the influence of nominalism in the universities, especially in the new universities which were founded in the latter part of the fourteenth century and during the fifteenth.

1. John of Mirecourt, who seems to have been a Cistercian (he was called monachus albus, ‘the white monk’), lectured on the Sentences of Peter Lombard at the Cistercian College of St. Bernard in Paris. Of these lectures, which were given in 1344–5, there exist two versions. As a number of his propositions were immediately attacked, John of Mirecourt issued an explanation and justification of his position; but none the less some 41 propositions were condemned in 1347 by the chancellor of the university and the faculty of theology. This led to the publication by John of another work in defence of his position. These two ‘apologies’, the first explaining or defending 63 suspected propositions, the second doing the same for the 41 condemned propositions, have been edited by F. Stegmüller.¹

Two types of knowledge are distinguished by John of Mirecourt; and he distinguishes them according to the quality of our assent to different propositions. Sometimes our assent is ‘evident’, which means, he says, that it is given without fear, actual or potential, of error. At other times our assent is given with fear, actual or potential, of error, as, for example, in the case of suspicion or of opinion. But it is necessary to make a further distinction. Sometimes we give an assent without fear of error

¹ Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale (1933), pp. 40–79, 192–204.
because we see clearly the evident truth of the proposition to which we assent. This happens in the case of the principle of contradiction and of those principles and conclusions which are ultimately reducible to the principle of contradiction. If we see that a proposition rests upon or is reducible to the principle of contradiction, we see that the opposite of that proposition, its negation that is to say, is inconceivable and impossible. At other times, however, we give an assent without fear of error to propositions the truth of which is not intrinsically evident, though it is assured in virtue of irrefutable testimony. The revealed truths of faith are of this kind. We know, for example, only by revelation that there are three Persons in one God.

Leaving out of account the revealed truths of faith we have, then, so far, propositions to which we assent without fear of error because they are reducible to the primary self-evident principle, the principle of contradiction, and propositions to which we assent with fear of error (for example, 'I think that that object in the distance is a cow'). Assents of the first kind are called by John of Mirecourt assensus evidentis, assents of the second kind assensus inevidentes. But we must now distinguish two kinds of assensus evidentis. First of all, there are evident assents in the strictest and most proper meaning of the phrase. Assent of this kind is given to the principle of contradiction, to principles which are reducible to the principle of contradiction and to conclusions which rest upon the principle of contradiction. In the case of such propositions we have evidentia potissima. Secondly, there are assents which are indeed given without fear of error but which are not given in virtue of the proposition's intimate connection with the principle of contradiction. If I give my assent to a proposition based on experience (for example, 'there are stones') I give it without fear of error but I give it in virtue of my experience of the external world, not in virtue of the proposition's reducibility to the principle of contradiction. In the case of such proposition we have, not evidentia potissima, but evidentia naturalis. John of Mirecourt defines this 'natural evidence' as the evidence by which we give our assent to a thing's existence without any fear of error, this assent being brought about by causes which naturally necessitate our assent.

The above account of John's doctrine on human assents comes from his first apology. He is there explaining the 44th proposition, which had been made an object of attack. The proposition runs as follows: 'It has not been demonstratively proved from propositions which are self-evident or which possess an evidence reducible by us to the certitude of the primary principle that God exists, or that there is a most perfect being, or that one thing is the cause of another thing, or that any created thing has a cause without this cause having its own cause and so on to infinity, or that a thing cannot as a total cause produce something nobler than itself, or that it is impossible for something to be produced which is nobler than anything which (now) exists.' In particular, then, the proofs of God's existence do not rest on self-evident propositions or on propositions which we are capable of reducing to the principle of contradiction, which is the primary self-evident principle. John's adversaries interpreted his doctrine as meaning that no proof of God's existence is of such a kind that it compels assent once it is understood, and that we are not certain, so far as philosophy goes, of God's existence. In answer John observes that the proofs of God's existence rest on experience and that no proposition which is the result of experience of the world is reducible by us to the principle of contradiction. It is clear from his teaching in general, however, that he made one exception to this general rule, namely in the case of the proposition which asserts the existence of the thinker or speaker. If I say that I deny or even doubt my own existence I am contradicting myself, for I cannot deny or even doubt my existence without affirming my existence. On this point John of Mirecourt followed St. Augustine. But this particular proposition stands by itself. No other proposition which is the result of sense-experience, or experience of the external world, is reducible by us to the principle of contradiction. No proposition of this kind, then, enjoys evidentia potissima. But John denied that he meant that all such propositions are doubtful. They do not enjoy evidentia potissima but they enjoy evidentia naturalis. Although propositions founded on experience of the external world are not evident in the same way as the principle of contradiction is evident, 'it does not follow from this that we must doubt about them any more than about the first principle. From this it is clear that I do not intend to deny any experience, any knowledge, any evidence. It is even clear that I hold altogether the opposite opinion to those who would say that it is not evident to them that there is a man or that there is a stone, on the ground that it might appear to them that these things are so without their being really so. I do not mean to
deny that these things are evident to us and known by us, but only that they are not known to us by the supreme kind of knowledge (scientia potissima).

Analytic propositions, that is to say propositions which are reducible by analysis to the self-evident principle of contradiction, are thus absolutely certain, and this absolute certainty attaches also to each one’s affirmation of his own existence. Apart from this last affirmation all propositions which are the result of and express experimental knowledge of the world enjoy only ‘natural evidence’. But what does John of Mirecourt mean by ‘natural evidence’? Does this mean simply that we spontaneously give our assent in virtue of a natural unavoidable propensity to assent? If so, does it or does it not follow that the propositions to which we give this kind of assent are certain? John admits that error is possible in the case of some empirical propositions: he could hardly do otherwise. On the other hand he asserts that ‘we cannot err in many things (propositions) which accord with our experiences’. Again, he could hardly say anything else, unless he were prepared to admit that his adversaries had interpreted his doctrine correctly. But it seems to be clear that John of Mirecourt accepted the Ockhamist doctrine that sensitive knowledge of the external world could be miraculously caused and conserved by God in the absence of the object. This theme was treated by him at the beginning of his commentary on the Sentences. It is probably safe to say, then, that for him ‘natural evidence’ meant that we naturally assent to the existence of what we sense, though it would be possible for us to be in error, if, that is to say, God were to work a miracle. There is no contradiction in the idea of God working such a miracle. If, therefore, we use the word ‘certain’ in the sense not only of feeling certain but also of having objective and evident certainty, we are certain of the principle of contradiction and of propositions reducible thereto and each one is certain of his own existence, the infallible character of the intuition of one’s own existence being shown by the connection of the proposition affirming one’s own existence with the principle of contradiction; but we are not certain of the existence of external objects, however certain we may feel. If we care to bring in Descartes’ hypothetical ‘evil genius’, we can say that for John of Mirecourt we are not certain of the existence of the external world, unless God assures us that it exists. All proofs, then, of God’s existence which rest upon our knowledge of the

external world are uncertain; at least they are not ‘demonstrative’, in the sense of being reducible to the principle of contradiction or to the principle of contradiction by reflection on the data of sense-experience, in which we can err, although ‘we cannot err in many things (propositions) which accord with our experiences’. Does he mean that we can err in particular empirical judgments, but that we cannot err in regard to a conclusion like the existence of God which follows on the totality of sense-experience rather than on particular empirical judgments? In this case what is the probability of our having sense-experience when no object is present? This is, no doubt, a limiting possibility and we have no reason to suppose that it is an actuality so far as the totality of sense-experience is concerned; but none the less it remains a possibility. I do not see how the traditional proofs of God’s existence can have more than moral certainty or, if you like, the highest degree of probability on John’s premises. In his apology he may make an attempt to justify his position by having it both ways; but it seems clear that for him the proofs of God’s existence cannot be demonstrative in the sense in which he understands demonstrative. Leaving out of account the question whether John was right or wrong in what he said, he would have been more consistent, I think, if he had openly admitted that for him the proofs of God’s existence, based on sense-experience, are not absolutely certain.

The principle of causality, according to John of Mirecourt, is not analytic; that is to say, it cannot be reduced to the principle of contradiction or be shown to depend upon it in such a way that the denial of the principle of causality involves a contradiction. On the other hand it does not follow that we have to doubt the truth of the principle of causality: we have ‘natural evidence’, even if we have not got evidentia potissima. Again the question arises exactly what is meant by ‘natural evidence’. It can hardly mean objectively irrefutable evidence, for if the truth of the principle of causality were objectively so clear that it could not possibly be denied and that its opposite was inconceivable, it would surely follow that its evidence is reducible to the evidence of the principle of contradiction. When John speaks of ‘causes naturally necessitating
assent’, it looks very much as though he meant that, though we can conceive the possibility of the principle of causality not being true, we are obliged by nature to think and act in the concrete as though it were true. From this it would appear to follow that for all practical purposes the proofs of God’s existence which rest on the validity of the principle of causality are ‘evident’, but that none the less we can conceive of their not being cogent. Perhaps this means little more than that the proofs of God’s existence cannot compel assent in the same way as a mathematical theorem, for example, can compel assent. John’s opponents understood him as meaning that one cannot prove God’s existence and that God’s existence is therefore uncertain; but when he denied that the proofs are demonstrative he was using the word ‘demonstrative’ in a special sense, and, if his apology represents his real teaching, he did not mean to say that we must be sceptical concerning God’s existence. There can, indeed, be little question of his having intended to teach scepticism; but on the other hand it is clear that he did not regard the proofs of God’s existence as possessing the same degree of cogency which St. Thomas would have attributed to them.

In criticizing in this way the proofs of God’s existence John of Mirecourt showed himself to be a thinker who had his place in the Ockhamist movement. He showed the same thing by his doctrine concerning the moral law. Proposition 51, as contained in the first apology, runs as follows. ‘God can cause any act of the will in the will, even hatred of Himself; I doubt, however, whether anything which was created in the will by God alone would be hatred of God, unless the will conserved it actively and effectively.’ According to the way of speaking common among the Doctors, says John, hatred of God involves a deformity in the will, and we must not allow that God could, as total cause, cause hatred of Himself in the human will. Absolutely speaking, however, God could cause hatred of Himself in the will, and if He did so, the man in question would not hate God culpably. Again, in the second apology the 25th condemned proposition is to the effect that ‘hatred of the neighbour is not demeritorious except for the fact that it has been prohibited by God’. John proceeds to explain that he does not mean that hatred of the neighbour is not contrary to the natural law; he means that a man who hates his neighbour runs the risk of eternal punishment only because God has prohibited hatred of the neighbour. In regard to the 41st proposition of the apology John similarly observes that nothing can be ‘demeritorious’ unless it is prohibited by God. It can, however, be contrary to the moral law without being demeritorious.

Needless to say, John of Mirecourt had no intention of denying the duty to obey the moral law; his aim was to emphasize the supremacy and omnipotence of God. Similarly he seems, though extremely tentatively, to have favoured the opinion of St. Peter Damian that God could bring it about that the world should never have been, that is to say, that God could bring it about that the first should not have happened. He allows that this undoing of the fact cannot take place de potentia Dei ordinata; but, whereas he might well expect him to appeal to the principle of contradiction in order to show that the undoing of the past is absolutely impossible, he says that this absolute impossibility is not evident to him. ‘I was unwilling to lay claim to knowledge which I did not possess’ (first apology, proposition 5). He does not say that it is possible for God to bring it about that the past should not have happened; he says that the impossibility of God’s doing this is not evident to him. John of Mirecourt was always careful in his statements.

He shows a similar care in the way he hedges over those statements which appear to teach theological determinism and which may betray the influence of Thomas Bradwardine’s De Causa Dei. According to John, God is the cause of moral deformity, of sin that is to say, just as He is the cause of natural deformity. God is the cause of blindness by not supplying the power of vision; and He is the cause of moral deformity by not supplying moral rectitude. John qualifies this statement, however, by observing that it is perhaps true that while a natural defect can be the total cause of natural deformity, a moral defect is not the total cause of moral deformity because moral deformity (sin), in order to exist, must proceed from a will (first apology, proposition 50). In his commentary on the Sentences\(^1\) he first observes that it seems to him possible to concede that God is the cause of moral deformity, and then remarks that the common teaching of the Doctors is the very opposite. But they say the opposite since, in their eyes, to say that God is the cause of sin is to say that God acts sinfully, and that it is impossible for God to act sinfully is clear to John too. But it does not follow from this, he insists, that God cannot be the cause of moral deformity. God causes the moral deformity by not

\(^1\) 2, 3. concl. 3.
supplying moral rectitude; but the sin proceeds from the will, and it is the human being who is guilty. Therefore, if John says that God is not the total cause of sin, he does not mean that God causes the positive element in the act of the will while the human being causes the privation of right order: for him God can be said to cause both, though the privation of right order cannot be realized except in and through a will. The will is the 'effective' cause, not God, though God can be called the 'efficacious' cause in that He wills efficaciously that there should be no rectitude in the will. Nothing can happen unless God wills it, and if God wills it, He wills it efficaciously, for His will is always fulfilled. God causes the sinful act even in its specification as a sinful act of a certain kind; but He does not cause it sinfully.

John considered that the real distinction between accidents and substances is known only by faith. 'I think that except for the faith many would perhaps have said that everything is a substance.' Apparently he affirmed (at least he was understood as affirming) that 'it is probable, as far as the natural light of reason is concerned, that there are no accidents distinct from substance, but that everything is a substance; and except for the faith, this would be or could be probable' (43rd proposition of first apology). For example, 'it can be said with probability that thinking or willing is not something distinct from the soul, but that it is the soul itself' (proposition 42). John defends himself by saying that the reasons for affirming a distinction between substance and accident have more force than the reasons which can be given for denying a distinction; but he adds that he does not know if the arguments for affirming it can rightly be called demonstrations. It is clear that he did not think that these arguments amounted to demonstrations; he accepted the distinction as certain only on faith.

It is difficult to ascertain with any degree of certainty precisely what John of Mirecourt's personal opinions actually were, owing to the way in which he explains away in his apologies what he had said in his lectures on the Sentences. When John protests that he is simply retailing other people's opinions or when he remarks that he is merely putting forward a possible point of view without affirming that it is true, is he thoroughly sincere or is he being diplomatic? One can scarcely give any definite answer. However, I turn now to an even more extreme and thoroughgoing adherent of the new movement.

1 Sent., 19, concl. 6, ad 5.
There is further a note by John of Mirecourt about Nicholas’s doctrine on causality. 2

At the beginning of his second letter to Bernard of Arezzo Nicholas remarks that the first principle to be laid down is that ‘contradictions cannot be true at the same time’. 3 The principle of contradiction, or rather of non-contradiction, is the primary principle, and its primacy is to be accepted both in the negative sense, namely that there is no more ultimate principle, and in the positive sense, namely that the principle positively precedes and is presupposed by every other principle. Nicholas is arguing that the principle of non-contradiction is the ultimate basis of all natural certitude, and that while any other principle which is put forward as the basis of certitude is reducible to the principle of non-contradiction, the latter is not reducible to any other principle. If any principle other than the principle of non-contradiction is proposed as the basis of certitude, that is, if a principle which is not reducible to the principle of non-contradiction is proposed as the basis of certitude, the proposed principle may appear to be certain but its opposite will not involve a contradiction. But in this case the apparent certitude can never be transformed into genuine certitude. It is only the principle of non-contradiction which bears its own guarantee on its face, so to speak. The reason why we do not doubt the principle of non-contradiction is simply that it cannot be denied without contradiction. In order, then, for any other principle to be certain, its denial must involve a contradiction. But in that case it is reducible to the principle of non-contradiction, in the sense that it is certain in virtue of that principle. The principle of non-contradiction must therefore be the primary principle. It is to be remarked that it is not the truth of the principle of non-contradiction which is in question but its primacy. Nicholas tries to show that any genuine certitude rests ultimately on this principle, and he does it by showing that any principle which did not rest on, or was not reducible to, the principle of non-contradiction would not be genuinely certain.

Any certitude which we have in the light of the principle of non-contradiction is, says Nicholas, genuine certitude, and not even the divine power could deprive it of this character. Further, all genuinely certain propositions possess the same degree of evidence.

1 Mediaeval Studies, vol. 1, 1939, pp. 179-280. References to the Exigit in the following pages are references to this edition.
2 Lappe, p. 4.
3 Ibid., 6*, 33.
that I perceive a colour are one and the same act: I do not perceive a colour and then have to find some guarantee that I actually do perceive a colour. Immediate cognition is its own guarantee. A contradiction would be involved in saying that a colour appears and at the same time that it does not appear. In his first letter to Bernard, Nicholas says, therefore, that in his opinion ‘I am evidently certain of the objects of the five senses and of my acts.’ Against what he regarded as scepticism, then, Nicholas maintained that immediate cognition, whether it takes the form of sense-perception or of perception of our interior acts, is certain and evident; and he explained the certitude of this knowledge by identifying the direct act of perception and the self-conscious awareness of this act of perception. In this case a contradiction would be involved in affirming that I have an act of perception and in denying that I am aware that I have an act of perception. The act of perceiving a colour is the same as the appearing of the colour to me, and the act of perceiving the colour is identical with the act of being aware that I perceive a colour. To say that I perceive a colour and to say that the colour does not exist or that I am not aware that I perceive a colour would involve me in a contradiction.

Nicholas thus admitted as certain and evident not only analytic propositions but also immediate perception. But he did not think that from the existence of one thing we can infer with certainty the existence of another thing. The reason why we cannot do this is that in the case of two things which are really different from one another it is possible without logical contradiction to affirm the existence of the one thing and deny the existence of the other. If $B$ is identical either with the whole of $A$ or with part of $A$, it is not possible without contradiction to affirm the existence of $A$ and deny that of $B$; and if the existence of $A$ is certain the existence of $B$ is also certain. But if $B$ is really distinct from $A$ no contradiction is involved in affirming $A$'s existence and yet at the same time denying the existence of $B$. In the second letter to Bernard of Arezzo Nicholas makes the following assertion. ‘From the fact that something is known to exist it cannot be inferred evidently, with, that is, evidence reducible to the first principle or to the certitude of the first principle, that another thing exists.’

1 Lappe, 6*, 15–16.  
3 Cf. Exigit, p. 235.
which comes from reducibility to the first principle. Yet this, as
has been agreed, is the only certitude.
From this position of Nicholas, that the existence of one thing
cannot with certainty be inferred from that of another, it follows
that no proposition which asserts that because A happens B will
happen or that because B exists A exists, where A and B are
distinct things, is or can be certain. Apart, then, from the im-
mediate perception of sense-data (colours, for example) and of our
acts no empirical knowledge is or can be certain. No causal
argument can be certain. We doubtless believe in necessary
connections in nature; but logic cannot detect them, and pro-
positions which state them cannot be certain. What, then, is the
reason of our belief in causal connections? Nicholas apparently
explained this in terms of the experience of repeated sequences
which gives rise to the expectation that if B has followed A in the
past it will do so again in the future. Nicholas, it is true, affirmed
that we cannot have probable knowledge that B will follow A in the
future, unless we have evident certitude that at some time in the
past B has followed A; but he did not mean that we cannot
have probable knowledge that B will follow A in the future, unless
we have evident certitude in the past of a necessary causal con-
nection between A and B. What he meant, in terms of his own
element in his second letter to Bernard, was that I cannot have
probable knowledge that if I put my hand to the fire it will become
warm, unless I have evident certitude of warmth in my hand
having followed my putting my hand to the fire in the past. If it
was once evident to me when I put my hand to the fire that I
became warm, it is now probable to me that if I put my hand
to the fire I should become warm.1 Nicholas considered that
repeated experience of the coexistence of two things or of the
regular sequence of distinct events increases the probability, from
the subjective point of view, of similar experiences in the future;
but repeated experience does not add anything to the objective
evidence.2
It is clear that Nicholas considered that the possibility of God
acting immediately as a causal agent, without, that is, using any
secondary cause, rendered it impossible to argue with absolute
certainty from the existence of one created thing to the existence
of another created thing. He also argued against Bernard that
on the principles enunciated by the latter it would be equally

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1 Lappe, 13*, 9–12. 2 Exigit, p. 237.
which had already been subjected to criticism by William of Ockham, for example. But the *Exigit* seems to imply, though it does not say so clearly, that we have no direct awareness of the soul. And in this case it would appear to follow, on Nicholas’s premisses, that we have no natural knowledge of the soul’s existence as a substance. The statement that Aristotle had no certain knowledge of any substance other than his own soul may be analogous to the assertion in the fifth letter to Bernard of Arezzo that we do not know with certainty that there is any efficient cause other than God. For his general position shows that in Nicholas’s opinion we have no natural or philosophical certain knowledge that even God is an efficient cause. It is true that if the parallel between the two statements is pushed, it would seem to follow that Aristotle, according to Nicholas, enjoyed the certainty of faith about the existence of his soul as a spiritual substance; and Nicholas cannot possibly have meant to say this. But it is not necessary to interpret his remarks so strictly. However, it is difficult to be sure whether he did or not make an exception in favour of our knowledge of our own souls from his general view that we have no certain knowledge of the existence of substances considered as distinct from phenomena.

It is evident that in his critique of causality and substance Nicholas anticipated the position of Hume; and the similarity is all the more striking if he did in fact deny that we have any certain knowledge of the existence of any substance, material or spiritual. But Dr. Weinberg is undoubtedly right, I think, in pointing out that Nicholas was not a phenomenalist. Nicholas thought that one cannot infer with certainty the existence of a non-apparent entity from the existence of phenomena; but he certainly did not think this means that one can infer its non-existence. In the sixth letter to Bernard he laid it down that ‘from the fact that one thing exists, it cannot be inferred with certainty that another thing does not exist’¹ Nicholas did not say that only phenomena exist or that affirmations of the existence of metaphenomenal entities are nonsensical. All he said was that the existence of phenomena does not enable us to infer with certainty the existence of the metaphenomenal or non-apparent. It is one thing to say, for example, that we are unable to prove that there is anything in a material object other than what appears to the senses, and it is another thing to say that there actually is no substance. Nicholas was not a dogmatic phenomenalist. I do not mean to imply by this that Hume was a dogmatic phenomenalist, for he was not, whatever objections his (and Nicholas’s) critical analyses of causality and substance may be open to. My point is simply that one must not conclude from Nicholas’s denial of the demonstrability of the existence of substances that he actually denied the existence of all substances or said that their non-existence could be proved.

It is obvious enough that Nicholas’s critique of causality and substance had important repercussions in regard to his attitude towards the traditional philosophical theology. Although Nicholas does not say so in clear and explicit terms, it would seem to follow from his general principles that it is not possible to prove the existence of God as efficient cause. In the fifth letter to Bernard he remarks that God may be the sole efficient cause, since one cannot prove that there is any natural efficient cause. But to say that God may be the sole efficient cause is not to say that He is the sole efficient cause or, indeed, that He can be proved to be an efficient cause at all. Nicholas meant merely that for all we know or can establish to the contrary God may be the sole efficient cause. As to our being able to prove that God actually is efficient cause, this is excluded by the general principle that we cannot infer with certainty the existence of one thing from the existence of another thing.

The causal or cosmological argument for God’s existence could not, then, be a demonstrative argument on Nicholas’s premisses. Nor could St. Thomas’s fourth or fifth arguments be admitted as proofs yielding certain conclusions. We cannot, says Nicholas in the fifth letter to Bernard, prove that one thing is or is not nobler than another thing. Neither inspection of one thing nor comparison of two or more things is able to prove a hierarchy of degrees of being from the point of view of value. ‘If anything whatever is pointed out, nobody knows evidently that it may not exceed all other things in value.’¹¹ And Nicholas does not hesitate to draw the conclusion that if by the term ‘God’ we understand the noblest being, nobody knows with certainty whether any given thing may not be God. If, then, we cannot establish with certainty an objective scale of perfection, St. Thomas’s fourth argument obviously cannot be considered a demonstrative argument. As to the argument from finality, St. Thomas’s fifth argument, this is ruled out by Nicholas’s statement in the same letter that ‘no one

¹ p. 225.
² Lappe, 31*, 16–17.
³ Lappe, 33*, 12–14.
knows evidently that one thing is the end (that is, final cause) of another.\footnote{Lappe, 33\textsuperscript{*}, 18–19.} One cannot establish by inspection or analysis of any one thing that it is the final cause of another thing, nor is there any way of demonstrating it with certainty. We see a certain series of events, but final causality is not demonstrable.

Nicholas did, however, admit a probable argument for God’s existence. Assuming as probable that we have an idea of the good as a standard for judging about the contingent relations between things,\footnote{Exigit, p. 185.} and assuming that the order of the universe is such that it would satisfy a mind operating with the criterion of goodness and fitness, we can argue first that all things are so interconnected that one thing can be said to exist for the sake of another and secondly that this relationship between things is intelligible only in the light of the hypothesis that all things are subjected to an ultimate end, the supreme good or God. It might well appear that an argument of this kind would be no more than an entirely unfounded hypothesis, and that it could not, on Nicholas’s own principles, amount to a probable argument. But Nicholas did not deny that we can have some sort of evidence enabling us to form a conjectural hypothesis which may be more or less probable, though it may not be certain as far as we are concerned. It might be true; it might even be a necessary truth; but we could not know that it was true, though we could believe it to be true. Besides theological belief, that is, faith in revealed truths, there is room for a belief which rests on arguments that are more or less probable.

Nicholas’s probable argument for God’s existence was part of the positive philosophy which he put forward as probable. It is not, in my opinion, worth while going into this philosophy in any detail. Apart from the fact that it was proposed as a probable hypothesis, its various parts are by no means always consistent with one another. One may mention, however, that for Nicholas the corruptibility of things is probably inconsistent with the goodness of the universe. Positively expressed this means that things are probably eternal. In order to show that this supposition cannot be ruled out by observation Nicholas argued that the fact that we see $B$ succeeding $A$ does not warrant our concluding that $A$ has ceased to exist. We may not see $A$ any more, but we do not see that $A$ does not exist any more. And we cannot establish by reasoning that it does not any longer exist. If we could, we could establish by reasoning that nothing exists which is not observed,

and this we cannot do. The Aristotelian doctrine of change is by means certain. Moreover, the corruption of substances can be explained much better on an atomistic hypothesis than on Aristotelian principles. Substantial change may mean simply that the collocation of atoms is succeeded by another, while accidental change may mean the addition of fresh atoms to an atomic complex or the subtraction of some atoms from that complex. It is probable that the atoms are eternal and that precisely the same combinations occur in the periodic cycles which eternally recur.

As to the human soul, Nicholas maintained the hypothesis of immortality. But his suggestions on this matter are closely connected with a curious explanation of knowledge. As all things are eternal, it may be supposed that in knowledge the soul or mind enters into a temporary union with the object of knowledge. And the same can be said of imagination. The soul enters into a state of conjunction with images, but the images themselves are eternal. This hypothesis throws light, in Nicholas’s opinion, on the nature of immortality. We may suppose that to good souls noble thoughts come after death, while to bad souls come evil thoughts. Or we may suppose that good souls enter into union with a better collection of atoms and are disposed to better experiences than they received in their previous embodied states, while evil souls enter into union with worse atoms and are disposed to receive more evil experiences and thoughts than in their previous embodied states. Nicholas claimed that this hypothesis allowed for the Christian doctrine of rewards and punishments after death; but he added a prudential qualification. His statements were, he said, more probable than the statements which had for a long time seemed probable. None the less, someone might turn up who would deprive his own statements of probability; and in view of this possibility the best thing to do is to adhere to the Biblical teaching on rewards and punishments. This line of argument was called in the Articles of Cardinal Curti a ‘foxy excuse’ (excusatio vulpina).\footnote{Lappe, 39\textsuperscript{*}, 8.}

Nicholas’s positive philosophy was obviously at variance on some points with Catholic theology. And indeed Nicholas did not hesitate to say that his statements were more probable than the contradictory assertions. But one must interpret this attitude with some care. Nicholas did not state that his doctrines were true and the opposite doctrines false: he said that if the propositions which
were contradictory to his own were considered simply in regard to their probability, that is, as probable conclusions of reason, they were less probable than his own statements. For example, the theological doctrine that the world has not existed from eternity is for him certainly true, if it is considered as a revealed truth. But if one attends simply to the philosophical arguments which can be adduced in favour of its truth, one must admit, according to Nicholas, that they are less probable than the philosophical arguments which can be adduced in favour of the contradictory proposition. One is not entitled, however, to conclude that the contradictory proposition is not true. For all we know it may even be a necessary truth. Probability has to be interpreted in terms of the natural evidence available to us at any given moment, and a proposition may be for us more probable than its contradictory even though it is in fact false and its contradictory true. Nicholas did not propose a double-truth theory; nor did he deny any defined doctrines of the Church. What his subjective attitude was is a matter about which we cannot be sure. Pierre d'Ailly asserted that a number of Nicholas's propositions were condemned out of envy or ill-will; and Nicholas himself maintained that some statements were attributed to him which he did not hold at all or which he did not hold in the sense in which they were condemned. It is difficult to judge how far one is justified in taking his protestations at their face-value and how far one should assume that his critics were justified in dismissing these protestations as 'foxy' excuses. There can be little doubt, I think, that he was sincere in saying that the philosophy which he put forward as 'probable' was untrue in so far as it conflicted with the teaching of the Church. At least there is no real difficulty in accepting his sincerity on this point, since apart from any other consideration it would have been quite inconsistent with the critical side of his philosophy if he had regarded the conclusions of his positive philosophy as certain. On the other hand, it is not so easy to accept Nicholas's protestation that the critical views expounded in his correspondence with Bernard of Arezzo were put forward as a kind of experiment in reasoning. His letters to Bernard hardly give that impression, even if the possibility cannot be excluded that the explanation which he offered to his judges represented his real mind. After all, he was by no means the only philosopher of his time to adopt a critical attitude towards the traditional metaphysics, even if he went further than most.

It is, however, quite clear that Nicholas meant to attack the philosophy of Aristotle and that he considered his own positive philosophy to be a more probable hypothesis than the Aristotelian system. He declared that he was himself very astonished that some people study Aristotle and the Commentator (Averroes) up to a decrepit old age and forsake moral matters and the care of the common good in favour of the study of Aristotle. They do this to such an extent that when the friend of truth rises up and sounds the trumpet to rouse the sleepers from slumber they are greatly afflicted and rush upon him like armed men to deadly combat. 1

Mention of 'moral matters' and of the 'common good' leads one to inquire what Nicholas's ethical and political teaching was. We have not much to go upon here. But it seems clear that he maintained the Ockhamist theory of the arbitrary character of the moral law. There is a condemned proposition of his to the effect that 'God can order a rational creature to hate Him, and that the rational creature merits more by obeying this precept than by obeying God in obedience to a precept. For he would do so (that is, hate God) with greater effort and more against his inclination.' 2

As to politics, Nicholas is said to have issued a proclamation that whoever wanted to hear lectures on Aristotle's Politics together with certain discussions about justice and injustice which would enable a man to make new laws or to correct laws already in existence, should repair to a certain place where he would find Master Nicholas of Autrecourt, who would teach him all these things. 3 How far this proclamation constitutes evidence of Nicholas's serious concern for the common welfare and how far it is the expression of a love of notoriety it is difficult to say.

I have given an account of the philosophical ideas of John of Mirecourt and Nicholas of Autrecourt in a chapter on the 'Ockhamist Movement'. Is this procedure justified? Nicholas's positive philosophy, which he put forward as probable, was certainly not the philosophy of William of Ockham; and in this respect it would be quite wrong to call him an 'Ockhamist'. As to his critical philosophy, it was not the same as that of Ockham, and Nicholas cannot be properly called an 'Ockhamist', if by this term is meant a disciple of Ockham. Moreover, the tone of Nicholas's writing is different from that of the Franciscan theologian. None the less, Nicholas was an extreme representative of that critical movement of thought which was a prominent feature of fourteenth-century

3 Ibid., 40*, 26–33.
philosophy and which finds expression in one aspect of Ockhamism. I have indicated earlier that I use the term ‘Ockhamist Movement’ to denote a philosophical movement which was characterized, in part, by a critical attitude towards the presuppositions and arguments of the traditional metaphysics, and if the term is used in this sense, one can, I think, justifiably speak of John of Mirecourt and Nicholas of Autrecourt as belonging to the Ockhamist movement.

Nicholas of Autrecourt was not a sceptic, if by this term we mean a philosopher who denies or questions the possibility of attaining any certain knowledge. He maintained that certainty is obtainable in logic and in mathematics and in immediate perception. In modern terms he recognized as certain both analytic propositions (the propositions which are now sometimes called ‘tautologies’) and basic empirical statements, though one must add the proviso that for Nicholas we can have evident immediate knowledge without that knowledge being expressed in a proposition. On the other hand, propositions involving the assertion of a causal relation in the metaphysical sense or propositions based on an inference from one existent to another he regarded not as certain propositions but rather as empirical hypotheses. One must not, however, turn Nicholas into a ‘logical positivist’. He did not deny the significance of metaphysical or theological statements: on the contrary, he presupposed the certitude of faith and admitted revelation as a source of absolute certainty.

4. I announced my intention of concluding this chapter with some remarks on the influence of the new movement in the universities, especially in the universities which were founded in the latter part of the fourteenth century and during the fifteenth.

In 1389 a statute was passed at the university of Vienna requiring of students in the faculty of arts that they should attend lectures on the logical works of Peter of Spain, while later statutes imposed a similar obligation in regard to the logical works of Ockhamist authors like William Heytesbury. Nominalism was also strongly represented in the German universities of Heidelberg (founded in 1386), Erfurt (1392) and Leipzig (1409) and in the Polish university of Cracow (1397). The university of Leipzig is said to have owed its origin to the exodus of nominalists from Prague, where John Hus and Jerome of Prague taught the Scotist realism which they had learnt from John Wycliffe (c. 1320–84). Indeed, when the Council of Constance condemned the theocological...
Moreover, they could boast of some eminent names. Chief among them was John Capreolus (c. 1380-1444), a Dominican who lectured for a time at Paris and later at Toulouse. He set out to defend the doctrines of St. Thomas against the contrary opinions of Scotus, Durandus, Henry of Ghent and all adversaries in general, including the nominalists. His great work, which was completed shortly before his death at Rodez and which earned for him the title of Princeps Thomistarum, was the Libri IV defensionum theologiae divi Thomae de Aquino. Capreolus was the first of the line of distinguished Dominican Thomists and commentators on St. Thomas, which included at a later period men like Cajetan (d. 1534) and John of St. Thomas (d. 1644).

In the Italian universities a current of Averroistic Aristotelianism was represented at Bologna in the first half of the fourteenth century by thinkers like Thaddaeus of Parma and Angelo of Arezzo and passed to Padua and Venice where it was represented by Paul of Venice (d. 1429), Cajetan of Thiene (d. 1465), Alexander Achillini (d. 1512) and Agostino Nipho (d. 1546). The first printed edition of Averroes appeared at Padua in 1472. Something will be said later, in connection with the philosophy of the Renaissance, about the controversy between those who followed Averroes’ interpretation of Aristotle and those who adhered to the interpretation given by Alexander of Aphrodisias, and about the condemnation of 1513. The Averroists have been mentioned here simply as an illustration of the fact that the via moderna should not be regarded as having swept all before it in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Nevertheless, nominalism possessed that attraction which comes from modernity and freshness, and it spread widely, as we have seen. A notable figure among fifteenth-century nominalists was Gabriel Biel (c. 1425-95), who taught at Tübingen and composed an epitome of Ockham's commentaries on the Sentences of Peter Lombard. Biel's work was a methodical and clear exposition of Ockhamism, and though he did not pretend to be more than a follower and exponent of Ockham he exercised a considerable influence. Indeed, the Ockhamists at the universities of Erfurt and Wittenberg were known as Gabriellistae. It is perhaps interesting to note that Biel did not interpret Ockham's moral theory as meaning that there is no natural moral order. There are objects or ends besides God which can be chosen in accordance with right reason, and pagan philosophers like Aristotle, Cicero and Seneca were able to accomplish morally good and virtuous acts. In virtue of his 'absolute power' God could, indeed, command acts opposed to the dictates of the natural reason; but this does not alter the fact that these dictates can be recognized without revelation.

Finally one may recall that the Ockhamist Movement or nominalism had various aspects. On the purely logical side it was partly a development of the logic of terms and of the theory of suppositio as found in pre-Ockhamist logicians like Peter of Spain. This terminist logic was used by William of Ockham in order to exclude all forms of realism. The problem of universals was treated from a logical rather than an ontological point of view. The universal is the abstract term considered according to its logical content, and this term stands in the proposition for individual things, which are the only things which exist.

This terminist logic had not of itself any sceptical consequences in regard to knowledge, nor did Ockham regard it as having any such consequences. But together with the logical aspect of nominalism one must take into account the analysis of causality and the consequences of this analysis in regard to the epistemological status of empirical hypotheses. In the philosophy of a man like Nicholas of Autrecourt we have seen a sharp distinction drawn between analytic or formal propositions, which are certain, and empirical hypotheses, which are not and cannot be certain. With Ockham this view, so far as he held it, was closely connected with his insistence on the divine omnipotence: with Nicholas of Autrecourt the theological background was very much less in evidence.

We have seen, too, how the nominalists (some more than others) tended to adopt a critical attitude towards the metaphysical arguments of the older philosophers. This attitude was fully explicit in an extremist like Nicholas of Autrecourt, since it was made to rest on his general position that one cannot infer with certainty the existence of one thing from the existence of another thing. Metaphysical arguments are probable rather than demonstrative.

But, whatever one may be inclined to think on one or two cases, this critical attitude in regard to metaphysical speculation was practically always combined with a firm theological faith and a firm belief in revelation as a source of certain knowledge. This firm belief is particularly striking in the case of Ockham himself. His view that it is possible to have what would be, from the psychological point of view, intuition of a non-existent thing and his
theory about the ultimate dependence of the moral law on the divine choice were not expressions of scepticism but of the tremendous emphasis he placed on the divine omnipotence. If one attempts to turn the nominalists into rationalists or even sceptics in the modern sense, one is taking them out of their historical setting and severing them from their mental background. In the course of time nominalism became one of the regular currents in Scholastic thought; and a theological chair of nominalism was erected even in the university of Salamanca.

But nominalism suffered the fate of most philosophical schools of thought. It obviously began as something new; and whatever one's opinion concerning the various tenets of the nominalists may be, it can hardly be denied that they had something to say. They helped to develop logical studies and they raised important problems. But in the course of time a tendency to 'logic-chopping' showed itself, and this can perhaps be connected with their reserved attitude towards metaphysics. Logical refinements and exaggerated subtlety tended to drain off the energies of the later nominalists; and when philosophy received a fresh impetus at the time of the Renaissance this impetus did not come from the nominalists.

CHAPTER X
THE SCIENTIFIC MOVEMENT

Physical science in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—The problem of motion; impetus and gravity—Nicholas Oresme; the hypothesis of the earth's rotation—The possibility of other worlds—Some scientific implications of nominalism; and implications of the impetus theory.

For a long time it was widely supposed that there was no respect for experience in the Middle Ages and that the only ideas on science which the mediaevals possessed were adopted uncritically from Aristotle and other non-Christian writers. Science was assumed to have started again, after centuries of almost complete quiescence, at the time of the Renaissance. Then it was found that a considerable interest had been taken in scientific matters during the fourteenth century, that some important discoveries had been made at that time, that various theories had been fairly widely held which did not derive from Aristotle and that certain hypotheses which were usually associated with the Renaissance scientists had been proposed in the late Middle Ages. At the same time a better knowledge of late mediaeval philosophy suggested that the scientific movement of the fourteenth century should be connected with Ockhamism or nominalism, largely on the ground that Ockham and those who belonged more or less to the same movement of thought insisted on the primacy of intuition or of immediate experience in the acquisition of factual knowledge. It was not that Ockham himself was thought to have shown much interest in scientific matters; but his insistence on intuition as the only basis of factual knowledge and the empiricist side of his philosophy were thought to have given a powerful impetus to scientific interests and investigations. This view of the matter could be fitted into the traditional outlook inasmuch as Ockham and the nominalists were supposed to have been resolute anti-Aristotelians.

It is not at all my intention to attempt to deny that there is truth in this interpretation of the facts. Although Ockham cannot possibly be called simply 'anti-Aristotelian' without qualification, since in some matters he regarded himself as the true interpreter