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**WILLIAM OF OCKHAM AND THOMAS HOBBS  
– ON THE NATURE OF GENERAL CONCEPTS**

William of Ockham and Thomas Hobbes are three centuries away, each of them created in different social and political situation, and based on different paradigms and scientific standards. Ockham times is the end of the Middle Ages, the period when religion ruled every domain of life, the ages of the scholastic rule. The period when Hobbes lived, the great crisis of 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the fundamentals of the old order collapsed, new science was in creation and the struggle with scholastic methods was the anthem of many thinkers.

It seems however that the two philosophers have a lot in common – nationality and studies at Oxford – great polemic temperament and engagement in politics. They were both contestants of contemporary social order, they did not hesitate to speak their disagreement and both had a lot of trouble because of unpopular views they propagated (Ockham was judged at the pontifical Court at Avignon from where he resorted to flight, Hobbes almost perished at the stake).

Common to both philosophers is their attitude in the argument over universals which engaged the greatest thinkers of all ages, starting with Plato and lasting until today<sup>1</sup> especially on the grounds of philosophy of mathematics. From the classical point of view the argument divides philosophers into partisans of realism recognizing the existence of generalities<sup>2</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> See *Spór o uniwersalia a nauka współczesna*, (ed.) M. Heller, W. Skoczny, J. Życiński, Cracow, 1991

<sup>2</sup> Plato, architect of theory of ideas – forms existing beyond time and space, saw in generalities the elements of the real world, the only object of knowledge. Some modern partisans of the existence of generalities consider them the ideas forming the ‘field of potentiality’ which delimits the range of possible beings and which reality is disclosed in formulation of the laws of nature. The role of this ‘field of potentiality’ is especially underlined, by discoveries related to heredity, gravitation effect, physical fields or artificial intelligence. See J. Życiński, *Poza granicami konkretności. Spór o powszechniki w kontekście rozwoju nauki nowożytnej*, in: *Spór o uniwersalia a nauka współczesna*, p. 56–57.

conceptualists accepting the generality of concepts (and their equivalents – general appellations) as the abstraction of features vested in various objects and existing in the mind<sup>3</sup>, and also nominalists, who prove that general appellations relate only to substantial objects that they indicate. In the argument from a dichotomic point of view the conceptualism is treated as a reasonable form of nominalism<sup>4</sup>.

Both Ockham and Hobbes were declared antirealists and this is what determined their respective philosophies. The aim of this report is to present the nominalist doctrine in versions proposed by Ockham and Hobbes as well as to make a thorough study of direct implications of nominalist assumptions in the sphere of socio-political phenomena and to point out the similarity in philosophical decisions accepted as consequences of ‘thinking in accordance to nominalism’.

Logic occupies a specific place in Ockham’s hierarchy of sciences and it is not understood the way Aristotle did, as a tool helpful in the process of gaining knowledge. Complying with scholastic method of complex and scrupulous description of a given domain, Ockham included his views on logic in *Summa logicae*. In the introduction to *Summa...*, relating to Aristotle and Boecius (what he does repeatedly), he underlines the role of terms – signs that designate objects (for this reason his logic is called ‘terminative logic’<sup>5</sup>), he also draws an important differentiation between term and concept. *‘Now certain differences are found among these (kinds of) terms. One is that a concept or passion of the soul signifies naturally whatever it signifies. But a spoken or written term signifies nothing except according to arbitrary institution. From this there follows another difference, namely that a spoken or written term can change its significate at (the user’s) will, but a conceived term does not change its significate for anyone’s will.’*<sup>6</sup>

Hence concepts are natural signs, whereas terms (in a more narrow meaning) are arbitrarily established conventional signs. Concepts are in Ockham’s opinion common to all people, the same thing produces the same concept in the mind of every human; so it is a sense, a logical meaning of a conventional sign. Concepts are created as a result of a natural influence of objects on the mind and the only ‘place of their existence’ are minds<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Mały słownik terminów i pojęć filozoficznych*, Warsaw 1983, p. 183.

<sup>4</sup> See T. Kotarbiński, *Wykłady z dziejów logiki*, Warsaw 1985, pp. 52, 55.

<sup>5</sup> A. Heinz, *Dzieje językoznawstwa w zarysie*, Warsaw 1978, p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> W. Ockham, *Summa logicae*, displayed at: <http://pvspade.com/Logic/docs/ockham.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

The concepts by nature cannot be equivocal, only conventional signs can be, and they are if they relate to several concepts<sup>8</sup>.

A term can occur in various suppositions – this feature is observable when a term is entangled in a sentence<sup>9</sup>. Ockham distinguishes personal, ordinary and material suppositions. An important achievement of Ockham's logic is interrelated with the theory of suppositions – indication of the levels of language. He observes that among signs there are 'terms of first intension', which relate to objects and which are elements of objective language and terms that relate to signs, namely, to the 'terms of second intention'<sup>10</sup>. These terms are employed in logic, definitions in logic are metalinguistic definitions. Scientific knowledge, unlike logic refers to objects<sup>11</sup>.

Ockham underlines that relations between the denotations of names do not have to be connected with relations characterizing the structure of a given object<sup>12</sup>, there is no parallelism between the linguistic form and reality – such a statement is a consequence of his antirealism.

Observation is the necessary condition of knowledge of the surrounding reality, without it even the most advanced logical research is solely a vain speculation. Observation of the world is the one of singular objects, common objects according to Ockham do not exist. (Names are singular too – a name becomes a sign for various objects through convention). Specific objects are identified in an intuitional experience, in other words, experimental, or perceptive<sup>13</sup>. Only terms and concepts, that denominate other terms and concepts have a universal character<sup>14</sup>. Generalities – are terms only, they are signs common to several objects, brought into being by creative intellectual effort and nominalism (in general) is conceptualism in Ockham's version.

Disciplines of knowledge such as mathematics or physics, basing on abstract cognition need general concepts generated by minds. The knowledge develops thanks to general terms<sup>15</sup> and – according to Stanisław Kamiński, researcher of Ockham's philosophy – absolutely definite knowledge is the analytical one, and one achieved through experiment is deprived of the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> W. Ockham, *Wstęp do wykładu VIII ksiąg Fizyki Arystotelesa*, translated by R. Palacz, in: Idem, *Ockham*, Warsaw 1982, p. 263.

<sup>12</sup> See R. Palacz, *Ockham*, op. cit., p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> S. Kamiński, *Ockhama koncepcja wiedzy przyrodniczej*, (in:) *Metoda i język. Studia z semiotyki i metodologii nauk*, Lublin 1994, pp. 259–261.

<sup>14</sup> W. Ockham, *Summa logice*, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> W. Ockham, *Wstęp do wykładu VIII ksiąg Fizyki Arystotelesa*, op. cit., pp. 261–263.

attribute of objective certainty – it is a probable knowledge, even though subjectively sure<sup>16</sup>.

To sum up, Ockham's logic by employing general concepts combined into sequences of correct syllogistic proofs shows how to achieve knowledge which occurs on the conceptual path and is the synthesis of syllogistic inference and the experience of the senses<sup>17</sup>. Ockham especially concentrates on semantic functions performed by a term and on the ways of rational presentation of objects, he is interested in relation combining objects and minds.

Ockham's logical views, it seems, became the foundation of his philosophy. He postulated care in formulating new concepts, in accordance with the professed methodological principle, which went down to posterity known as 'Ockham's razor'. The ground for creation of concepts is delimited by the reality – and the reality only. Ockham argued, for instance with the differentiation of being and existence done by Thomas of Aquinas – in his opinion being of every object is identical with its existence. If Thomas's point of view was true, creation of existence without the being – for example creation of an angel deprived of its angelic nature or of a being without existence – would lie in God's hands<sup>18</sup>.

Accepted methodological assumptions and consistent antirealism constituted, apart from logical discipline of not frequent occurrence, Ockham's antlers in the struggle with numerous hipostases in scholastic metaphysics. It should be highlighted that the philosopher recognized the contest with the hipostases the aim of his actions on all polemical fronts. Treating abstract as real, existing objects is in his opinion, the cause of many errors in science.

Ockham reproaches unacquaintance with logic to those who took the wrong path on their way to knowledge. He is strikingly consistent when defending the primacy of laws of reason, identified with the laws of logic, over the whole of humanity. This consistency often leads to the situation unparalleled in the middle ages – the negation of authority<sup>19</sup>. Ockham writes: *I believe, that it is a very dangerous and daring to put in irons any mind and to force anybody to accept what his own mind recognizes as false...*<sup>20</sup> Of course, the above declaration is secured by a condition – what the Bible

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<sup>16</sup> S. Kamiński, *Ockhama koncepcja wiedzy przyrodniczej*, op. cit., p. 260.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>18</sup> See R. Palacz, *Ockham*, op. cit., p. 128.

<sup>19</sup> See Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>20</sup> W. Ockham, *De Corpore Christi*, I, 6, quoted by R. Palacz, *Ockham*, op. cit., p. 74.

says and what results from the statements of the Church or from the declarations of 'eminent doctors' should be accepted. Limitations concerning the Bible result certainly from Ockham's orthodoxy, quoting 'eminent doctors' is as it seems the effect of his prudence – yet he did not hesitate, away from Avignon, and under the protection of the Emperor, to make interpellations regarding recognizing heretical of certain theses of the Pope John XXII. He did not spare other authorities, responsible, in his opinion, for distortion of the doctrine of the Church.

The consequence of accepting the experience as a necessary element of the process leading to knowledge is the exclusion of theology from the domains accessible to cognizance. Revealed truths could be objects of faith solely. Observation of accidental facts permits the formulation of certain regularities occurring in the world, they are however not absolute – this thesis harmonizes with Ockham's antirealism. The God is not limited by already created ideas, He is totally free and unrestricted by any rules, He is therefore omnipotent and what seems to be unchangeable law of nature, might be transformed freely by God and changed or cancelled at any time. The fact that morality – established by God's unlimited will – is compulsory, is the result of this establishment and not of a whatever necessity. God's command is compulsory for it is His command, and not because of what it proclaims, it is good autonomously – such a statement is the correlate of Ockham's nominalistic assumptions<sup>21</sup>.

The conception of the law – the command the essence of which is the fact that it is compulsory, that is, it has legal force, will be the foundation of legal positivism hundreds of years later. It seems there is some anticipation of this doctrine in the work of Ockham (remembering that his considerations concern unlike positivist research the God's law).

Ockham's antirealism is also noticeable in his attitude towards the matter of infallibility of the pope – if generalities do not exist, the pope cannot be the symbol of the Church as a whole, and his interpretation of the Bible cannot be recognized as the only one possible. The philosopher propagating the priority of a particular being, an entity, over what is by nature general, pronounced univocally for the superiority of conciliar decisions, or of an aggregation of individuals over the decisions of the pope – being the embodiment of the Church<sup>22</sup>.

The postulate of the separation of theology from the scientific knowledge was in keeping with another one proclaiming the separation of secular autho-

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<sup>21</sup> G. L. Seidler, *Myśl polityczna średniowiecza*, Cracow 1961, pp. 334–335.

<sup>22</sup> See Z. Kuksewicz, *Zarys filozofii średniowiecznej*, Warsaw 1973, pp. 470–473.

rity from the one of the church. Ockham in conflict both with John XXII and his successors Benedict XII and Clemens VI and hiding from the judgment at the court of Louis the Bavarian<sup>23</sup>, was a declared advocate of the autonomy of imperial authority. He presents his attitude in several works of political character, the most important one, written between 1338–1342 is entitled *Dialogus inter magistrum et discipulum de imperatorum et pontificum potestate*. One of the main reasons for his political conceptions is conviction about the human free will, the conviction having its source in several observations – man, as an intelligent being, is able to make decisions freely<sup>24</sup>. The emperor's authority is not derivative of papal authority, it is the result of the will of the nation understood as the sum of individuals (at the same time the will of the nation can be expressed by the will of the electors). The theory advocated by Ockham can be explained according to the spirit of nominalism: individuals agree on the authority of the sovereign, who thereafter acts as their representative. The fact of agreeing is essential here, for it is the realization of natural right to choose a ruler. The election itself and succession of authority is a question of convention, that is to say of national law<sup>25</sup>.

Ockham a fourteenth century theologian, formed on scholastic writings had philosophical views which seem to be surprisingly modern. Many of the trends of his thoughts, having their origins in his philosophy of language, are to revive in 17<sup>th</sup> century. That is why, the thesis that 14<sup>th</sup> century was the first decisive phase of scientific revolution, which rise occurs three centuries later, is probably not unfounded. Researchers, who are the partisans of the above thesis, highlight a startlingly sudden and stormy character of seventeenth century changes in science and their firm direction<sup>26</sup>. It is possible that this first revolutionary wave did not gain sufficient durability to produce a new paradigm, only because of the external limitations – the relations

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<sup>23</sup> See G. L. Seidler, *Myśl polityczna średniowiecza*, op. cit., pp. 336–337.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 339.

<sup>25</sup> The sovereign's authority, to whom state laws are subordinated is according to Ockham one of the necessary elements of a state, and this subordination of the laws to an arbitrary will is secured by one condition; it cannot be contradictory to natural right or to the good of the citizens. In case of illegitimate violation of freedom of subordinates, they have the right to overthrow the tyrant. Among the functions of the state the philosopher enumerates legislation and preservation of justice. Execution of these is the duty of the sovereign. In the light of Ockham's ontological assumptions crucial is the fact that even though authority and property belong to the laws of nature, God's laws – the realization of these laws is the result of a substantial, positive law formed by a sovereign. See G. L. Seidler, *Myśl polityczna średniowiecza*, op. cit., pp. 336–337.

<sup>26</sup> See S. Kamiński, *Ockhama koncepcja wiedzy przyrodniczej*, op. cit., p. 225.

between science, philosophy and theology and the lack of print<sup>27</sup>. When external limitations binding the development of science came to an end, the second phase of scientific revolution exploded, transforming the thinking about the world. The opinion about its two phases is supported by an unusual convergence of certain trends of Ockham's thoughts and the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes.

It appears that the views of the two philosophers were shaped to a significant extent by antirealist attitude. They were both convinced that paying special attention to language, its structure, and semantics could be helpful in revision of hitherto philosophical methods (scientific cognizance).

Hobbes much the same as Ockham defines constituent parts of a language – language is composed of artificial signs – names, it is a creation of convention, and the diversity of national languages is the best proof<sup>28</sup>. The birth of a national language is preceded by a state in which everybody creates their own, private language, free from ambiguity, but inaccessible to others. This inaccessibility, and impossibility of transmission of knowledge, drives people – probably through convention – to accept signs common to several of them namely 'indications' – in Hobbes terminology<sup>29</sup>. The feature of the first rank of names is the fact that they awaken in minds a thought similar to bygone thought and allow to reason. A derivative function and equally important is that names arranged in a sentence become the indications, that is signs legible to all members of a given society<sup>30</sup>.

The names are in Hobbes opinion signs (indications) of concepts – thoughts about a given object are not the signs of objects<sup>31</sup> (sense, the meaning of a name is according to Hobbes a subjectively understood concept). The philosopher draws the following conclusion: '*...notorious dispute as to whether names signify matter, form, or a compound of both, and other such disputes of the metaphysicians, are disputes of muddled thinkers who do not even understand the words they are arguing about*'<sup>32</sup>.

The goals of Hobbes and Ockham are convergent when it comes to the struggle with 'with scholastics' jargon', Hobbes fights with unauthorized – in his opinion – misuse or abuse of words with a particular passion; in philosophy which leads to knowledge there is no room for metaphorical expressions

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>28</sup> T. Hobbes, *De corpore*, displayed at: <http://www.philosophy.leeds.ac.uk/GMR/hmp/texts/modern/hobbes/decorpore/decorp1.html>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

and considerations on the nature of imaginary beings. Such words as ‘*hypostatical*’, ‘*transsubstantiate*’, ‘*consubstantiate*’, ‘*eternal-now*’<sup>33</sup> or ‘*immaterial substance*’<sup>34</sup> were absurd for him – ‘...words whereby we conceive nothing but the sound are those we call absurd, insignificant, and nonsense’<sup>35</sup>. Hobbes postulated a clear and lucid language believing that it is genetically interconnected with an order of thoughts. Liberation of language from the ballast of ambiguous metaphors will bring profits not only to science but it will contribute to establishment of harmony in socio-political sphere.

Not all names are the names of objects<sup>36</sup> – even such words as ‘man’, ‘tree’, ‘stone’ relating to objects could indicate fiction of the objects in dreams, in language there are also names evidently related to fiction – e.g. ‘nothing’, ‘less than nothing’ or ‘what is improbable’. In connection with the fact that ‘*name is related to something named*’ Hobbes proposes to recognize what is named as an object for cohesion of theoretical considerations<sup>37</sup>. Being close to indicating the differentiation of subjective language and metalanguage (this differentiation was introduced and justified by Ockham three centuries before) he is ready to recognize that words are objects<sup>38</sup> too. And even though he writes about the names of the primary and secondary intentions, the reasons for the introduced division are not clear to him – he supposes only, that the first ones are connected to everyday life while the other ones relate to knowledge<sup>39</sup>.

The names of the names, that is to say ‘the names of secondary intention’ are generalities, general names, common to several things – they are distinguished by the fact that they do not indicate objects existing in nature, ideas or images of the imagination. The philosopher maintains that there are no general objects, this feature is vested only in names<sup>40</sup>. Concepts corresponding to these names are images of substantial, singular objects in the mind<sup>41</sup> – this is how Hobbes nominalistic credo sounds.

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<sup>33</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, displayed at: <http://socserv.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/hobbes/Leviathan.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> It concerns the denotation of a name, its designates. Hobbes not consistently enough differentiated name and its meaning.

<sup>37</sup> T. Hobbes, *De corpore*, displayed at: <http://www.philosophy.leeds.ac.uk/GMR/hmp/texts/modern/hobbes/decorpore/decorp1.html>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> See S. Kamiński, *Hobbesa teoria definicji*, op. cit., p. 35–36.

<sup>40</sup> T. Hobbes, *De corpore*, displayed at: <http://www.philosophy.leeds.ac.uk/GMR/hmp/texts/modern/hobbes/decorpore/decorp1.html>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Explorers of Hobbes thoughts do not agree on the estimation of his nominalism – some write about radical and firm nominalism<sup>42</sup>, quoting the significant Hobbes' statement: '*...there being nothing in world universal but names; for the things named are every one of them individual and singular.*'<sup>43</sup> Others demonstrate that in spite of the above declaration he was a temperate nominalist<sup>44</sup>; he notices that common names are employed in relation to many objects with regard to similarity bringing them together<sup>45</sup>. In the opinion of some, similarity understood that way – as a relation permitting to determine the denotation of a given name – allows to maintain the thesis on his limited or temperate nominalism.

Although any object in nature corresponds to general names – they remain important, since they allow to think and reason without the need to identify the object every time<sup>46</sup>. Reasoning is particularly understood by Hobbes – it is the execution of arithmetic rules on names<sup>47</sup> (his manual of logic had a symptomatic title '*Computatio sive logica*'). General names express human knowledge of universal character.

As Ockham, Hobbes makes the experience of the senses the necessary though not sufficient condition of cognizance. In his view: '*there is no conception in a man's mind which hath not at first, totally or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense*'<sup>48</sup>. Fundamental knowledge on the external world in accordance with mechanistic view of the philosopher is based on images provoked by external objects in people's minds. And even though a real philosophical knowledge is the result of reasoning, that is operation on general names, the sensorial data remains a starting point.

According to Hobbes the appreciation of deductive method coexists with the above empiristic trend. He devotes a lot of space to the deductive method in his considerations, convinced that it presents a certain method of collecting and processing the knowledge. Euclid's method of explaining the terms should apply in all domains of science, in the study of state as well. Rejecting the Aristotelian conception of definition understood as discovering the essence of defined matter, Hobbes admitted definition to

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<sup>42</sup> See e.g. B. Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, Warsaw 2000, p. 632, R. Tokarczyk, *Hobbes*, Warsaw 1987, pp. 72–73.

<sup>43</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> See K. Lee, *The Legal – Rational State*, Avebury 1993, pp. 15–20, J. W. N. Watkins, *Hobbes' system of ideas*, London 1965, pp. 147–149.

<sup>45</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, op. cit.

<sup>46</sup> R. Tokarczyk, *Hobbes*, op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>47</sup> See T. Hobbes, *De corpore*, op. cit. and T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, op. cit.

<sup>48</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, op. cit.

be a manipulation executed on the language, and concerning names<sup>49</sup>. The term 'definition' is for Hobbes a designation of the sense of words. Hobbes has a particular attitude towards the problem of the existence of the defined object; as mentioned above, he was inclined to treat every designate of a name as an object, as if the creation of a definition was connected with existence of a defined object<sup>50</sup>. In connection with such formulation of the problem a question about the relation of scientific statements and the real world arises, the question to which Hobbes does not answer univocally.

Defining is also present in Hobbes' state science; moral categories such as right and wrong depend on the will of legislator who ought to define them in the prime of life of the state – Hobbes repeats Ockham's thought here as well, yet in his system the place of the God – legislator is taken by sovereign – legislator.

The state is according to Hobbes a construct of a man, law is also a convention understood as the ruler's order. Though the philosopher assumes that a sovereign acting in accordance to the instructions of the reason will incorporate the laws of nature within the legal order still sovereign's will has a decisive meaning in the process of constitution of laws. Hobbes cognitive nominalistic universalism, inherent in his state science, assumes the existence of a great number of 'correct' legal orders.

Ockham's attitude in the argument over the generalities described above and (only outlined here) the implications of his nominalistic ontology allow to claim, that he anticipated essential trends of Hobbes' thought. And even though versions of Ockham's and Hobbes' antirealism differ (Ockham recognizes the existence of general concepts, Hobbes recognizes only the universality of names) its consequences are similar when it comes to the opinion on the nature of scientific knowledge, the essence of law and morality.

*Translated by Marta Głowacka*

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<sup>49</sup> See T. Hobbes, *De corpore*, op. cit.

<sup>50</sup> S. Kamiński, *Hobbesa teoria definicji*, op. cit., p. 36.