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## DOES OCKHAM'S RAZOR MATTER TO THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS?

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### ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates how Ockham's Razor can be applied to compare and evaluate solutions to the Problem of Universals. Initially, I discuss three formulations of this principle. Two kinds of parsimony emerge from this debate: ontological and ideological parsimony. Concerning the Problem of Universals, there are three groups of solutions: Realism, Nominalism, and Trope Theory. Analyzing the most parsimonious theory of each, in terms of ontological and ideological parsimony, yields a negative evaluation of the Razor. Ontological and ideological parsimony are not useful for determining whether one solution to the Problem of Universals is superior to another.

**KEYWORDS:** Ockham's Razor; the Problem of Universals; Ontological Parsimony; Ideological Parsimony; Nominalism.

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In this paper, I discuss how Ockham's Razor impacts a classical topic in Ontology: The Problem of Universals. The Razor has a long history, and several philosophers and scientists have invoked it in order to defend their theories (Sober, 2015). The classical formulation is a philosophical slogan: "Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity." This slogan is not self-evident; it involves two modalities—"should" and "necessity"—and the concept of entity. The discussion on these topics has generated different interpretations of what kind of parsimony the proponents of the Razor intend to assume.

Additionally, different formulations of this principle have emerged. The literature on Ockham's Razor is vast, and many different scientific and philosophical subjects are impacted by this discussion. Part of this literature focuses on providing a general formulation of the Razor (Schaffer, 2014; Sober, 2015); however, this issue is not addressed in this paper. My methodological approach to this debate concerns the Problem of Universals.

The Problem of Universals is a metaphysical issue involving the ontological status of properties. At first glance, the Razor is directly connected to this problem because Ockham was a nominalist. Perhaps he used this principle to support his theory about universals. Instead of admitting an ontology composed of particulars and universals, he could have argued that an ontology composed only of particulars is sufficient to solve this problem. Universals would be an example of entities postulated without necessity.

This interpretation, however, is not reasonable. According to Spade and Panaccio (2019), Ockham rejects universals because they are contradictory. His Nominalism is not grounded in his principle of parsimony. Indeed, the slogan "entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity" was not formulated by William of Ockham (Thornburn, 1918). Principles of parsimony would have a more ancient history. For example, Sober (2015, p. 6) argues that Aristotle has already formulated a principle of parsimony.

Even though Ockham's Nominalism is not based on the Razor, the question remains how this principle is connected to the Problem of Universals. In section 1, several formulations of Ockham's Razor are presented. The first problem I address in this paper consists of establishing which formulation is more suitable for the Problem of Universals; I analyze several kinds of parsimony. In section 2, different solutions to this problem are scrutinized by the Razor. However, my conclusion is not positive; philosophers sometimes overestimate the power of the Razor. It is possible to use this principle in the debate on universals, but its use is restricted. Even though several philosophers have argued against Ockham's Razor in the literature (Barnes, 2000; Chateaubriand, 2005; Huemer, 2009; Willard, 2013), the original feature of this paper is to establish the limitations of this principle regarding the Problem of Universals.

## 1. Varieties of formulations

The main goal of this section is to discuss which formulation of Ockham's Razor is most suitable for the debate about universals. Principles of parsimony are widespread in Philosophy and Science. This generates a significant difficulty in investigating how the Razor is relevant to the Problem of Universals: Ockham's Razor is formulated in manifold ways (Sober, 2015, chapter I). Depending on the field, motivations for using the Razor are different, and sometimes the same formulation of this principle can be motivated by more than one reason. I assume that there are three main types of formulations: ontological, epistemic and methodological/theoretical. This classification could elucidate the motivations for using the Razor. Three formulations appropriately exemplify each of these aspects:

- I. Principle of Epistemic Parsimony: “Wherever possible, logical constructions are to be substituted for inferred entities” (Russell, 1949, p. 155).
- II. Principle of Methodological/Theoretical Parsimony: “No more causes of natural things should be admitted than are both true and necessary to explain their phenomena” (Newton 1687, pp. 794–795).
- III. Principle of Ontological Parsimony: “Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity” (traditional formulation).

### 1.1 Principle of epistemic parsimony

Principle (I) is labeled “epistemic” because of two topics: reduction and justification. This principle is formulated in the context of Russell’s philosophy. In his epistemology, knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description are distinguished. The former is a direct way of knowing—entities accessed by it are non-inferred—and Russell called them “sense-data.” The latter generates inferred entities. In Russell’s system, non-inferred entities are preferred to inferred ones because they are epistemologically guaranteed. Inferred entities should be eliminated through logical constructions that are ontologically committed only to non-inferred entities.

Russell interprets Ockham’s Razor as a justification for eliminating inferred entities. He defends that a smaller ontology yields less risk of error (Russell, 2007, p. 221–222). Even though Russell uses the Razor to decide ontological matters, there are criticisms against his approach. An evident issue concerns the distinction between inferred and non-inferred entities. He could use the Razor because he asserts that a class of entities is basic. However, in a rival ontological system, perhaps another class of entities is chosen as ontologically fundamental. Ockham’s Razor should be neutral with respect to which ontological category is fundamental; it should not assume a particular argument in favor of a specific ontological system.

Reduction is not a univocal concept. The standard use of it occurs in Philosophy of Science. In the literature on scientific reduction three types are distinguished: semantic reduction, methodological reduction, and ontological reduction. Consider scientific theories A and B. B could be reduced to A in three ways: the language used to formulate B would be expressed through theory A; theory B would have the same methodology as A; and entities that B postulates would be reduced to A.

Through the concept of reduction, philosophers such as Carnap defended the thesis of the unity of science: “... science is a unity, [such] that all empirical statements can be expressed in a single language, all states of affairs are of a kind and are known by the same method” (Carnap, 1934, p. 32). In his initial project, Carnap defended a phenomenalist thesis: the ontology of science is composed of sensory experiences. In this context, applying Russell’s principle of parsimony is reasonable. If we admit that sensory experiences are non-inferred entities, it seems that admitting inferred entities should be avoided.

Although there is a clear analogy between the ontological reduction in Science and Metaphysics, I argue that the notion of reduction is not adequate to formulate the Razor to analyze solutions to the Problem of Universals. Establishing a hierarchy in terms of universality and ontological dependence is a simple task in sciences. Consider a sociological category such as social action. Without living organisms, there are no social actions. They occur through a living organism, but not every living organism generates social actions. Biological categories are more universal than sociological categories. While latter categories ontologically depend on the former, biological categories ontologically depend on categories of physics. Although ontological

dependence and greater universality do not yield a commitment to reduction, if a reduction was possible, it would have a clear direction in sciences: from sociology to physics. Positivists such as Carnap might argue that biological theories could be reduced to physical theories<sup>2</sup>.

When considering solutions to the Problem of Universals, there is not a direction of reduction. The analogy with the concept of reduction in Philosophy of Science may not be adequate. In Science, theories with different scopes are investigated in terms of reduction. A physical theory does not compete with a biological theory for the explanation of a set of phenomena—each theory is regarded as true. However, the debate about universals cannot use the concept of reduction. Theories of properties compete about which explanation is correct for the problem of resemblance. The core issue in this debate is: given concrete particulars, universals or tropes, which ontological category is fundamental? If you are a nominalist, universals must be reduced to concrete particulars. If Nominalism is the correct perspective on properties, then theories that postulate universals are false.

Even if biological theories could be reduced to physical theories, of course, this does not imply that biological theories are false. Reduction is an epistemological device—it preserves the content of a reduced theory. Defending the concept of reduction as applied to solutions to the Problem of Universals is an artificial maneuver. Ontological theories disagree on the nature of properties. While realists postulate universals to explain properties, nominalists argue that particular entities are sufficient to account for them. Reduction is not useful in the context of the Problem of Universals. Therefore, the principle (I) is not appropriate to evaluate solutions to this problem.

## 1.2 Principle of methodological/theoretical parsimony

Version (II) is a common formulation for scientific theories. It does not seem to apply to philosophical theories; they do not explain the world in terms of causality. However, methodological parsimony is an appeal to simplicity: the simplest theory should be chosen in relation to its adversaries. If a theory has fewer postulates (like causes) than its competitors and has the same explanatory power, then the simplest theory is the best one.

The main problem with simplicity is establishing why a simpler theory describes the world appropriately. A classical justification is using the confirmation principle: “...simpler theories are more likely to be confirmed than complex theories” (Willard, 2013, p. 170). As metaphysical theories cannot be confirmed by facts, the topic of empirical confirmation is relevant to science.

Quine (1951) distinguished two ways to evaluate a theory in terms of epistemic virtue: ontology and ideology. Every theory has ontological commitments with entities. In addition, a theory must postulate primitive or undefined predicates—this is the ideology of a theory. Metaphysical theories, including solutions to the Problem of Universals, have both features. Ideological parsimony can characterize simplicity in metaphysical theories. The central aspect of it is the quantity of primitive predicates (Oliver, 1996, p. 3).

A relevant topic is the issue of explanatory power. If more than one theory is at the same epistemological level, to accept the theory with fewer undefined predicates is a consequence of the Razor. However, it is difficult to find two theories with the same explanatory power. When theories A and B are compared in terms of ideology, we should analyze more than just the undefined predicates. The main problem is investigating which theory has more explanatory power.

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<sup>2</sup> Physicalism originally asserts that only entities postulated by Physics exist. This thesis has been subject to many criticisms. My explanation of this theory is hypothetical. The consequence of my argument does not depend on any kind of physicalism.

Of course, characterizing this aspect in scientific theories is different from characterizing it in metaphysical theories. In the debate about universals, several problems can be used as criteria to evaluate how successful metaphysical theories are. For example, solutions to the Problem of Universals have to account for properties. Consider that properties are classified by order and arity. Perhaps solution A can appropriately analyze unary first-order properties, but A could have difficulties analyzing relations and/or high-order properties. If theory B is successful in providing a correct analysis for relational and unary first-order properties, then, hypothetically, this theory is better than A.

Solutions to the Problem of Universals can generate collateral effects. For example, Class Nominalism is criticized because, to solve this problem, it introduces the coextensionality problem. If a solution to the Problem of Universals generates an additional issue, is this a criterion for a negative evaluation of the ideology of this theory? The relevance of ideological parsimony is investigated in section 2.

In the best possible scenario, every philosopher would like to construct a theory with a complete explanation of an issue—and without collateral effects. However, if theories were perfect, it would not be necessary to evaluate them. Consider the following reformulation of principle (II):

(II\*) Principle of Theoretical Parsimony: Undefined predicates should be postulated if they are necessary for an explanatory task.

This version is not sufficiently precise. The notion of an explanatory task needs to be defined in the first place. However, as my goal in this paper is to evaluate the Ockham's Razor for the Problem of Universals, a general account of metaphysical explanation will not be provided. I attempt to clarify this use of (II\*) in section 2. For now, I acknowledge some positive uses of (II\*).

### 1.3 Principle of ontological parsimony

When philosophers appeal to Ockham's Razor, they are mainly referring to the principle of ontological parsimony: "Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity". The Razor can be applied to analyze metaphysical theories in two ways (Oliver, 1996, p. 6). A particular theory can be scrutinized to determine whether its ontological commitments are necessary. Considering solutions to the Problem of Universals, it must be evaluated how successful they are in accounting for properties. For example, nominalists try to solve this problem without universals. However, Armstrong (1978, 1989) argued that this type of ontology—postulating only concrete particulars—generates several criticisms. After all, he asserted that the Razor cannot eliminate universals because they are necessary to the ontological inventory of the world.

In addition, Ockham's Razor can be applied to compare several theories. If they appropriately explain the same problem, these theories can be evaluated. Hence, the ontological commitments of these theories could be compared, and the Razor indicates that we should choose the theory that postulates fewer entities.

The expression "fewer entities" should be elucidated. Consider two classical solutions to the Problem of Universals: Realism and Nominalism. Even if both theories were able to solve this problem appropriately, deciding which one postulates fewer entities is not a platitude. Occasionally, Realism can be a more economical theory than Nominalism (Imaguire 2008, pp. 141–142). Consider a realist theory that solely postulates universals to solve the Problem of Universals. Perhaps this solution has fewer ontological commitments.

Counting the number of entities postulated by an ontological theory is misleading. The Razor should be formulated more appropriately. In the context of defending his approach to

possible worlds, Lewis (1973, p. 87) argued that two types of economies should be differentiated in ontological parsimony: quantitative parsimony and qualitative parsimony. Consider two theories: T1 and T2. T1 is quantitatively more economical than T2 if and only if T1 postulates a smaller number of entities than T2; T1 is qualitatively more economical than T2 if and only if T1 postulates a smaller number of *types* of entities than T2.

Lewis (1973, p. 87) advocated that, for Philosophy and Science, only qualitative parsimony is relevant. According to him, Realism about possible worlds exhibits qualitative parsimony. It introduces more concrete particulars, but it does not introduce more kinds of entities. However, the importance of quantitative parsimony has been discussed in the literature. Nolan (1997) defended that this kind of parsimony is an epistemic virtue. He indicates how relevant episodes of scientific knowledge—such as the postulation of the neutrino and Avogadro’s hypothesis—benefited from this virtue.

It is a difficult task to construct a general formulation for Ockham’s Razor because the real practice of science yields counterexamples to any formulation. Therefore, the focus of this work is on solutions to the Problem of Universals. Even though the problems put forward by Nolan are relevant for a better comprehension of the Razor, Lewis seems to be right: Only qualitative economy is important in Ontology. Solutions to the Problem of Universals assert that manifold ontological categories are fundamental. By definition, an ontological category is a type of entity. Considering the debate about properties, the Razor could be reformulated in the following way: ontological categories should not be postulated beyond necessity.

The modal notions of “should” and “necessity,” however, should not be taken for granted. In the three formulations investigated in this paper, it is emphasized that theories should postulate entities with some explanatory function. In an ontological discussion, establishing when an ontological category should be postulated is a central problem. What is the criterion for an ontological category to be fundamental? This question is not simple to answer. There are no “ontological lenses” through which we can observe reality in its most fundamental aspect and thus determine which categories are ontologically fundamental. Perhaps Ockham’s Razor could be one criterion for deciding if an ontological category is fundamental; ontological categories should be postulated only if they have an explanatory function.

## 2. Parsimony and the problem of universals

The central aim of the last section was to investigate three formulations of Ockham’s Razor in the context of the Problem of Universals. Two kinds of parsimony have emerged from this discussion: ideological parsimony and ontological qualitative parsimony. Even though it is consistent to state that some solutions to the Problem of Universals could be more parsimonious (ideologically and ontological qualitatively) than others, I argue, in this section, that the use of the Razor is very restrictive for comparing solutions to this problem.

### 2.1 Ontological parsimony

Considering the entities postulated by solutions to the Problem of Universals, there are three types of theories: Realism, Nominalism, and Trope Theory. Every form of Realism must postulate the ontological category of universals. Of course, realist theories may posit other ontological categories, and they could be exhibited hierarchically in terms of parsimony. As the topic investigated is parsimony, the most economical forms of Realism, Nominalism, and Trope Theory should be investigated.

The most parsimonious form of Realism is Pure Immanent Realism—formulated, for example, by O’Leary-Hawthorne and Cover (1998)—it only postulates immanent universals. Properties are accounted for through these entities, and concrete particulars are bundles of universals. It postulates one undefined predicate: “instantiates” (Rodríguez-Pereyra, 2002, p. 203). Considering that every solution to the Problem of Universals must postulate at least one ontological category as fundamental—hence, at least one undefined predicate—Pure Immanent Realism is an economical theory. Indeed, it is not possible to formulate a more ontologically parsimonious theory.

Nominalists have appealed to principles of parsimony throughout the history of philosophy. The most parsimonious form of Nominalism is Ostrich Nominalism—formulated by Devitt (2010) from an interpretation of Quine. It solely postulates concrete particulars. The analysis of properties is not relational because it regards *being F* as a primitive aspect of the world. Therefore, these nominalists postulate one undefined predicate: “x is a property.”

Pure Trope Theory is the standard formulation of Trope Theory. Keith Campbell (1990) presents the classic approach to this version. Pure Trope Theory solely postulates one fundamental ontological category to solve the Problem of Universals: tropes. Because it provides a relational analysis of properties, Trope Theory postulates two undefined predicates: “x is resemblance to y” and “x is compresent with y.”<sup>3</sup>

According to ontological qualitative parsimony, theories that postulate fewer ontological categories should be preferred. Unfortunately, this principle cannot be applied to evaluate these solutions to the Problem of Universals. Pure Immanent Realism, Ostrich Nominalism, and Pure Trope Theory likewise admit only one fundamental ontological category. Choosing one of them as the correct solution to the Problem of Universals is not a subject for the Razor. Immanent universals, concrete particulars and tropes are fundamental for each one of these theories, respectively. They are postulated to solve theoretical demands such as the Problem of Universals—these ontological categories are necessary for each theory. In addition, as these theories are sufficiently parsimonious, ontological qualitative parsimony does not seem to be a reliable guide to decide ontological issues.

One hypothesis to be considered is if the Razor could be used in more specific cases. Solutions to the Problem of Universals could be ranked considering the entities postulated by the same group. Considering the scope of nominalist theories, it makes sense to argue that a theory is more economical than the other in terms of ontological qualitative parsimony. Traditional Nominalism is a heterogenous position. Even though nominalists assume concrete particulars as fundamental, there are different approaches.

Class Nominalism postulates classes to account for properties. If classes are abstract particulars, this theory assumes another ontological category as fundamental (besides concrete particulars). Some nominalist approaches must admit Realism about possible worlds in order to solve specific problems such as the coextensionality problem (Rodríguez-Pereyra, 2002). Assuming *possibilia* is an ontological cost. Certainly, ostrich nominalists can defend that their theory is more parsimonious than Class Nominalism and Resemblance Nominalism.

Even in this case, Ockham’s Razor has a strict application. Only in a hypothetical situation could these theories be compared through ontological parsimony: each theory must overcome many criticisms. They are not at the same epistemological level. Choosing one because it is more economical is misleading. There are other parameters to analyze them. The Razor seems to be a poor strategy for comparing and selecting these theories.

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the undefined predicate “x is compresent with y” is necessary not because of the Problem of Universals, but in order to explain the problem of unity of concrete particulars.

This consequence is unexpected because nominalist theories usually appeal to the Razor more than other solutions to the Problem of Universals. Concrete particulars constitute a special ontological category for traditional nominalists. Some philosophers present reasons to postulate an ontology of concrete particulars:

My awareness of the original coloured object is perceptual, but my awareness of the abstract universal redness cannot be since redness is not in space or time (Quinton, 1973, p. 258).

For the main reason to believe in the existence of concrete particulars is not that they help to solve the Problem of Universals. On the contrary, that they exist is a presupposition of the Problem of Universals (Rodriguez-Pereyra, 2002, p. 211).

Traditional nominalists consider that concrete particulars have a special status. According to Quinton, unlike universals, whose apprehension would occur in a mysterious way, concrete particulars are objects given to our perception. Two criticisms could be formulated against this argument. Firstly, perception is a complicated topic in Epistemology. Quinton assumes two theses: (i) a realist point of view about perception and (ii) that the objects of perception are concrete particulars. According to a realistic theory of perception, objects are given to our perception. Even if we assume this theory uncritically, thesis (ii) could be rejected. Depending on the ontological theory, tropes, events, or processes could be postulated as objects of perception. The special epistemic status of concrete particulars could easily be challenged. Secondly, this debate is not connected with Ockham's Razor. This theory should not be committed to a particular theory of perception.

Rodriguez-Pereyra considers that, unlike tropes and universals, which are postulated in an *ad hoc* maneuver to solve the Problem of Universals, concrete particulars must be postulated by every solution to this problem. This is only true in a vague sense. Concrete particulars are also present in Trope Theory and Realism, but their ontological role differs from that assumed by traditional nominalists. Considering bundle theory, a concrete particular is analyzed as compresent tropes or compresent universals. The nominalist claim that concrete particulars are fundamental entities is not established by this argument<sup>4</sup>.

## 2.2 Theoretical/ideological parsimony

In section 1.2, an intuitive principle of theoretical parsimony was formulated: undefined predicates should be postulated if they are necessary for an explanatory task. This formulation seems to be a platitude. Why does a theory postulate undefined predicates without any explanatory function? The central motivation for this principle is to maintain a minimal theoretical apparatus. Consider theories A and B: if they have the same explanatory power, then the theory that postulates fewer undefined predicates should be preferred.

In section 1.2, problems involving this formulation were discussed. However, even if we accept this formulation, it would not be suitable as a criterion to decide which ontological theory is right. Consider the predicates postulated by three solutions to the Problem of Universals. Pure Immanent Realism postulates one undefined predicate: "instantiates"; Ostrich Nominalism postulates one undefined predicate: "x is a property;" and Pure Trope Theory postulates two undefined predicates: "x is resemblance to y" and "x is compresent with y."

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<sup>4</sup> Rodriguez-Pereyra is, of course, aware that bundle theories are ontologically economical. In fact, he does not use Ockham's Razor to justify the superiority of his theory. My point here is not to deny this, but to point out that the privileged ontological status of concrete particulars in Nominalism is not a platitude; the arguments of Quinton and Rodriguez-Pereyra are not sufficient to establish this privileged status.

Should Ostrich Nominalism and Pure Immanent Realism be accepted because they postulate fewer undefined predicates than Pure Trope Theory? Comparing these theories through ideological parsimony would be possible if undefined predicates postulated by a theory were a subclass of another. For example, if trope theory would postulate the undefined predicates “a,” “b,” and “c” and Ostrich Nominalism would postulate “a” and “b,” then it would make sense to defend that Ostrich Nominalism has more ideological parsimony than Pure Trope Theory.

Nevertheless, this scenario does not happen in solutions to the Problem of Universals. Ontological theories cannot usually be measured because the fundamental ontological categories and undefined predicates postulated by one theory are entirely different from another. Therefore, ideological parsimony is not a useful guide for determining whether one ontological theory should be preferred over another. The main motivation for this type of parsimony is the assumption that simplicity is an epistemic virtue. Even though solutions to the Problem of Universals postulate different numbers of undefined predicates, it is incorrect to assert that one solution is simpler than its competitor.

### 3 Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Ockham’s Razor is not an important device for comparing solutions to the Problem of Universals. Even though I refute specific uses of the Razor, this does not imply that this principle has no role in Ontology. Indeed, it seems that admitting a solution to the Problem that postulates concrete particulars, universals and tropes as fundamental entities merely to solve this problem is redundant. Formulating a superfluous theory should be avoided. Although this could be considered an application of the Razor, it is a very indeterminate use. No single theory has benefited from this device; it does not help in solving the Problem of Universals.

Perhaps Ockham’s Razor is important in science or other areas of Philosophy. However, formulations of this principle investigated in this paper are ontologically neutral concerning solutions to the Problem of Universals. Only when a similar group of ontological theories (nominalist solutions, for example) is compared can ontological and ideological parsimony be useful for analyzing them. However, even in this case, there is an additional unrealistic assumption when using the Razor: those theories would have the same explanatory power. Hence, Ockham’s Razor has a very restricted use in evaluating solutions to the Problem of Universals; it does not really matter to this problem.

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