

# William of Ockham: The Man Who Started the Decline of the West

In modern accounts of the decline of the West, it's become common to blame one man in particular for starting that decline:

[William of Ockham](#), a 14th-century Franciscan monk and philosopher.

Those of you who have heard of William of Ockham (1287-1347) may know him best through the concept of "Ockham's razor," which is [popularly summarized](#) as holding that, when presented with two theories that make the same predictions, the simpler one is better.

But it's Ockham's promotion of "nominalism" that has gotten him into trouble with modern intellectual historians of a conservative bent, such as [Étienne Gilson](#), [Robert Barron](#), [Brad Gregory](#), [Anthony Esolen](#), and [Rod Dreher](#). Most recently, in his book *The Benedict Option*, Rod Dreher referred to Ockham as "the theologian who did the most to topple the mighty oak of the medieval model."

So what did Ockham do that was so wrong? How did the ideas of one Franciscan monk allegedly lead to the dissolution of Christendom?

Prior to Ockham, the dominant Western understanding held that individual things ("particulars") have common natures ("universals") which dictate the purpose of each thing, and which can be known by man. Thus, for instance, if an individual was referred to as "human," it was because he *really* possessed a human nature that was ordered toward flourishing through a life of virtue (as Aristotle says) or

participation in the divine life (as Christian revelation says).

However, Ockham denied the real existence of universal natures. In Ockham's view, the universe is inhabited by a number of individual things that have no necessary connection with each other. We can call human beings "human" based on their sharing a certain resemblance with each other, but we can't infer anything about them based on their common name. We can know that one thing can cause another thing to happen only based on repeated experience, not on some abstract knowledge of a thing's nature (thus laying the groundwork for modern science). Anything theological—such as the existence of God or his attributes—can be known by faith alone (thus, apparently, laying the groundwork for the Reformation).

Most instances of scapegoating Ockham trace their origins back to Richard Weaver's influential book [\*Ideas Have Consequences\*](#) (1948). In Weaver's understanding, Ockham's (or Occam's) nominalism is the main "idea" that led to all of the unpleasant "consequences" that we in the West are suffering today:

*"Like Macbeth, Western man made an evil decision, which has become the efficient and final cause of other evil decisions. Have we forgotten our encounter with the witches on the heath? It occurred in the late fourteenth century, and what the witches said to the protagonist of this drama was that man could realize himself more fully if he would only abandon his belief in the existence of transcendentals. The powers of darkness were working subtly, as always, and they couched this proposition in the seemingly innocent form of an attack upon universals. The defeat of logical realism in the great medieval debate was the crucial event in the history of Western culture; from this flowed those acts which issue now in modern decadence.*

[...]

*For this reason I turn to William of Occam as the best representative of a change which came over man's conception of reality at this historic juncture. It was William of Occam who propounded the fateful doctrine of nominalism, which denies that universals have a real existence. His triumph tended to leave universal terms mere names serving our convenience. The issue ultimately involved is whether there is a source of truth higher than, and independent of, man; and the answer to the question is decisive for one's view of the nature and destiny of humankind. The practical result of nominalist philosophy is to banish the reality which is perceived by the intellect and to posit as reality that which is perceived by the senses. With this change in the affirmation of what is real, the whole orientation of culture takes a turn, and we are on the road to modern empiricism."*

In the pages that follow, Weaver assigns blame to Ockham's nominalism (which may more accurately be described as "conceptualism") for breaking up the intellectual harmony of the medieval Christian West and planting the seeds of relativism, secularism, materialism, skepticism, rationalism, empiricism, scientism, and just about every other supposedly harmful ideology that has shaped the modern West.

We should always be careful about assigning blame for a large movement to one individual. Yet, even [those](#) who try to moderate William of Ockham's influence can't seem to shake the idea that he *did* have a primary role, if not *the* primary role, in the creation of the modern West.

One instance is the sobering [assessment](#) of Weaver's work by *New Criterion* editor Roger Kimball, with which I'll close:

*"Ideas, [Weaver] said, was not a work of philosophy but 'an intuition of a situation,' namely, a situation in which the 'world that has lost its center.' Weaver traced that loss back to the rise of nominalism in the twelfth century, a*

*familiar pedigree that is both accurate and comical. It is accurate because the modern world—a world deeply shaped by a commitment to scientific rationality—does have a root in the disabusing speculations of nominalism. It is comical because to locate the source of our present difficulties on so distant and so elevated a plane is simply to underscore our impotence. If William of Occam is responsible for what's wrong with the world, there's not much we can do about it."*

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