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978-0-521-84581-6 - Ockham and Political Discourse in the Late Middle Ages

Takashi Shogimen

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## INTRODUCTION

At Whitsun in May 1334, the Franciscan theologian and Oxford philosopher William of Ockham (c.1285–1347) took shelter behind Ludwig of Bavaria, a claimant to the imperial throne, and wrote a letter to the Franciscan general chapter at Assisi. At the beginning of this letter, he explained how and why he had withdrawn obedience from Pope John XXII, fled from Avignon and joined Michael of Cesena, the Minister General of the Franciscan Order, who had been in dispute with the pope over the orthodoxy of the Franciscan doctrine of poverty. Michael of Cesena, who had himself been summoned to Avignon in December 1327, was convinced that the pope had fallen into heresy by rejecting the orthodoxy of the Franciscan doctrine, and demanded that Ockham, who was then in Avignon for an inquisition into his theological and philosophical writings, examine the papal bulls *Ad conditorem canonum*, *Cum inter nonnullos*, and *Quia quorundam*. Difficult as it was for Ockham to believe that the holder of the supreme ecclesiastical office could promulgate heretical doctrines, he studied the bulls. Contrary to his expectations, these papal decrees appeared, in the eyes of the *Venerabilis inceptor*, to be documents from the pen of a heretic: ‘In these [bulls] I found a great many things that were heretical, erroneous, silly, ridiculous, fantastic, insane, and defamatory, contrary and likewise plainly adverse to orthodox faith, good morals, natural reason, certain experience, and fraternal charity.’<sup>1</sup>

This discovery determined the course of the rest of Ockham’s life. He abandoned his philosophical and theological speculations and devoted himself to anti-papal polemics in Munich under the protection of Ludwig until his death in 1347. The purpose of this book is to offer a

<sup>1</sup> *A Letter*, pp. 3–4; *Epistola*, p. 6: ‘In quibus quamplura haereticalia, erronea, stulta, ridiculosa, fantastica, insana et diffamatoria, fidei orthodoxae, bonis moribus, rationi naturali, experientiae certae et caritati fraternae contraria pariter et adversa patenter inveni.’

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historical account of Ockham's polemical writings. It is intended to decipher Ockham's motives and theoretical solutions to the ecclesiastical and political problems that he identified in contemporary Christendom.

Had Ockham not been in Avignon in 1328, perhaps we would never have known him as a political thinker and an ecclesiastical dissenter. Until 1324, Ockham was a leading scholar at Oxford in such fields as logic, metaphysics and natural philosophy. His anti-realism, which has conventionally been described as terminism or nominalism, made his logical, metaphysical and theological enquiries innovative and idiosyncratic. Before his visit to Avignon he had not, as far as we can determine, written anything of a political nature. According to the conventional account, however, his summoning to the papal court in 1324 changed the course of his life; the orthodoxy of his theological and philosophical writings was officially questioned. John Luttrell, a Thomist who had been Chancellor of the University of Oxford until 1322, accused Ockham of heresy; and this accusation brought him to the papal court. Luttrell produced and submitted to the papacy a list of fifty-six heterodox propositions, and subsequently Ockham was summoned to the papal court and subjected to a formal inquisition. But the enquiry into Ockham's doctrinal orthodoxy coincided with the period when John XXII was engaged in a furious battle of words with the Franciscan Order. Ockham eventually fled from Avignon with Michael of Cesena and others, including the Franciscan canonist Bonagratia of Bergamo; they went first to Pisa and then to the imperial court in Munich. Ockham was excommunicated in June 1328.<sup>2</sup>

This dramatic story, however, has been subject to revision in the past two decades and its truth remains largely uncertain. Recent biographical accounts question whether Ockham was actually 'summoned' to the papal court in 1324. He may have visited Avignon as a result of a

<sup>2</sup> For Ockham's biography, see especially Léon Baudry, *Guillaume d'Occam: sa vie, ses œuvres, ses idées sociales et politiques* (Paris, 1949); Jürgen Miethke, *Ockhams Weg zur Sozialphilosophie* (Berlin, 1969); and Gedeon Gál, 'William of Ockham died "impenitent" in April 1347', *Franciscan Studies* 42 (1982), pp. 90–5. See also C. K. Brampton, 'Ockham, Bonagratia and the Emperor Lewis IV', *Medium Aevum* 31 (1962), pp. 81–7; Brampton, 'Personalities at the Process against Ockham at Avignon, 1324–26', *Franciscan Studies* 24 (1966), pp. 4–25; Brampton, 'Traditions Relating to the Death of William of Ockham', *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 53 (1960), pp. 442–9; C. J. Chambers, 'William Ockham, Theologian: Convicted for Lack of Evidence', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 7 (1969), pp. 381–9; G. J. Etzkorn, 'Ockham at a Provincial Chapter: 1323. A Prelude to Avignon', *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 83 (1990), pp. 557–67; R. Höhn, 'Wilhelm von Ockham in München', *Franziskanische Studien* 32 (1950), pp. 142–55; Francis E. Kelley, 'Ockham: Avignon, Before and After', in Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks, eds., *From Ockham to Wyclif*, Studies in Church History: Subsidia 5 (Oxford, 1987), pp. 1–18; George Knysh, *Ockham Perspectives* (Winnipeg, 1994); A. Pelzer, 'Les 51 articles de Guillaume d'Occam censurés, en Avignon, en 1326', *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 18 (1922), pp. 240–70.

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commission from his order to teach there, and it has been argued that he was not 'summoned' to the court until 1326.<sup>3</sup> According to another account, he knew that an enquiry awaited him at the papal court, but visited Avignon voluntarily in 1324 since he was optimistic about its outcome.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the reason why Ockham left England for Avignon is a contentious issue. But how and why he was subjected to a formal inquisition also remains puzzling. We know that John Luttrell orchestrated it; however, we are uncertain whether Ockham was the only person to be implicated. Further, Luttrell's motives for accusing Ockham of heresy are unclear. According to the traditional account, Luttrell questioned Ockham's doctrinal orthodoxy while he was still Chancellor of the University of Oxford; this resulted in Luttrell's defeat and resignation from the Chancellorship. The resentful Luttrell appealed to the papal court for a ruling in the dispute; subsequently, Ockham was summoned.<sup>5</sup> This understanding has been challenged by another view: that Luttrell's departure from Oxford had nothing to do with Ockham. According to this, Luttrell became interested in and suspicious of Ockham's speculative writings in order to win John XXII's favour. An undated letter from Stephen of Kettleburg advises Luttrell to visit Avignon and produce two theological treatises, since the pope desires able theologians to be based at the papal court.<sup>6</sup> Hence, there was no doctrinal dispute between Ockham and Luttrell while the latter was still Chancellor of the University of Oxford. In short, Ockham's Avignon period remains unclear. However, one thing is certain: Ockham departed from Avignon with his Franciscan colleagues in May 1328 and withdrew obedience from the allegedly heretical pope.

Ockham's flight to Munich, however, meant that he became embroiled in yet another conflict of a political nature. Munich was a stronghold of Ludwig of Bavaria, who was engaged in a dispute with John XXII over the imperial election. At the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the imperial throne was held by two houses: Hapsburg and Luxemburg. In 1273, Rudolph of Hapsburg was elected, and he was succeeded by his son Albert I. In 1308 the imperial throne passed to Henry VII of the house of Luxemburg. But in the election of 1314, the majority of electoral princes voted for Ludwig of Bavaria, who

<sup>3</sup> George Knysh, 'Biographical Rectifications Concerning Ockham's Avignon Period,' *Franciscan Studies* 46 (1986), pp. 61–91.

<sup>4</sup> Volker Leppin, *Wilhelm von Ockham: Gelehrter, Streiter, Bettelmönch* (Darmstadt, 2003), p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> F. Hoffmann, *Die erste Kritik des Ockhamismus durch den Oxforder Kanzler Johannes Luttrell* (Breslau, 1941), pp. 1–8. See also R. Guelluy, *Philosophie et théologie chez Guillaume d'Ockham* (Louvain and Paris, 1947) and Miethke, *Ockhams Weg zur Sozialphilosophie*, pp. 46–74.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly, 'Ockham: Avignon, Before and After'.

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was head of the house of Wittelsbach. Two of the electors preferred a Hapsburg candidate, and civil war broke out between the imperial claimants.

In 1317, Pope John XXII declared that the imperial throne was vacant. Meanwhile, Ludwig defeated his rival at the battle of Mühldorf and invaded Italy. Pope John excommunicated Ludwig in 1324. In 1328 Ludwig occupied Rome and had himself acclaimed emperor by the Roman people. Furthermore, the imperial camp made an official declaration that the imperial authority was derived directly from God, not from the pope. Ever since the coronation of Charlemagne in 800, the emperorship had been seen as a gift of the papacy. Now it was declared that no papal approval was necessary in the process of electing the emperor. Imperial propagandists rejected the view that the papacy was the source of legitimate imperial authority.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the dissident Franciscans' withdrawal from papal obedience coincided with the height of the dispute between the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire. The circumstances in which Ockham began his polemical career are complex: the dispute between the papacy and the Franciscans, the conflict between Pope John XXII and Ludwig of Bavaria, and Ockham's own subjection to a formal inquisition all converged on the refuge of the so-called 'Michaelist' Franciscans in Munich. Mapping Ockham's polemical activities in this political and ecclesiastical matrix is a challenge that confronts every student of his political thought.

During his sojourn in Munich, Ockham's literary output was not only massive but also covered a wide range of concerns. Indeed, Ockham's interests changed over time and none of his anti-papal writings summarised the whole range of issues that he discussed. Ockham's polemical career began with the so-called poverty controversy. Perhaps after collaborating on a series of appeals against John XXII, Ockham produced *Opus nonaginta dierum* (*The Work of Ninety Days*),<sup>8</sup> probably in three months sometime in the period 1332–4. This extensive rejoinder to John XXII's bull *Quia vir reprobus* was Ockham's first independent contribution to the Franciscan poverty controversy. The Letter to the General Chapter of the Franciscan Order at Assisi, which was cited at the beginning of the present chapter, was an *apologia* for his anti-papal polemics, written in spring 1334.<sup>9</sup> Probably in the same year, he began

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, H. S. Offler, 'Empire and Papacy: the Last Struggle', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, series v, 6 (1959), pp. 21–47; G. Mollat, *The Popes at Avignon*, trans. Janet Love (New York, 1963) and F. R. H. du Boulay, *Germany in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> *Opus nonaginta dierum* (OP 1, pp. 292–368; OP 2, pp. 307–509).

<sup>9</sup> *Epistola ad fratres minores* (OP 3, pp. 6–17).

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the gigantic Part I of *Dialogus (The Dialogue)*.<sup>10</sup> This book is a systematic and comprehensive account of the idea of heresy and heretics, with an extensive discussion of papal heresy. Already at this stage, Ockham had shifted his focus from Franciscan poverty to more generic questions on heresy. In 1335–6, he wrote a shorter treatise known as *Tractatus contra Ioannem (A Treatise Against John)*,<sup>11</sup> which demonstrated that Pope John XXII was a heretic. In early 1337, he wrote *Compendium errorum Ioannis Papae XXII (A Summary of Pope John XXII's Errors)*,<sup>12</sup> which enumerated doctrinal errors in the papal bulls. In late 1337, Ockham produced another short treatise, *Tractatus contra Benedictum (A Treatise against Benedict)*,<sup>13</sup> which attacked the heresy of the new pope, Benedict XII. In this work, however, Ockham shifted his focus from Franciscan poverty to the nature of papal power.

The *Contra Benedictum* was a work of transition: Ockham not only attacked a particular pope but also discussed the nature of ecclesiastical and temporal government at a conceptual level. Thereafter, Ockham's interest shifted to the latter. The major contribution at this stage was Part III of the *Dialogus*. Tract I tackled various issues concerning papal government; the unfinished Tract II conceptualised imperial government. Ockham also produced a number of shorter works. *Octo quaestiones de potestate pape (Eight Questions on the Power of the Pope)*,<sup>14</sup> written in 1340–1, was, despite its title, a systematic account of the nature of temporal government; *Breviloquium de principatu tyrannico (A Short Treatise on Tyrannical Government)*,<sup>15</sup> written in 1342, is a passionate attack on the papal misconception of the doctrine of *plenitudo potestatis* ('plenitude of power') and a defence of the independence of temporal rulership from the papacy. His 'swan song' was *De imperatorum et pontificum potestate (On the Power of Emperors and Popes)*,<sup>16</sup> which summarised his polemical contentions on a wide range of issue from Franciscan poverty to the relationship between papal and imperial government, without delving into more generic questions such as papal heresy and ideal constitutions.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>10</sup> I–III *Dialogus (Monarchia Sancti Romani Imperii*, 2, ed. Melchior Goldast [Frankfurt, 1614; Graz, 1960], pp. 392–957; *William of Ockham, Dialogus: Latin Text and English Translation*, ed. and trans. John Kilcullen, George Knysh, Volker Leppin, John Scott and Jan Ballweg [in progress; available on internet: <http://britac3.britac.ac.uk/pubs/dialogus/ockdial.html>]).

<sup>11</sup> *OP* 3, pp. 29–156.

<sup>12</sup> *OP* 4, pp. 14–77.

<sup>13</sup> *OP* 3, pp. 165–322.

<sup>14</sup> *OP* 1, pp. 15–217.

<sup>15</sup> *OP* 4, pp. 97–260; *Wilhelm von Ockham als politischer Denker und sein Breviloquium de principatu tyrannico*, intro. and ed. Richard Scholz (Stuttgart, 1944).

<sup>16</sup> *OP* 4, pp. 279–355.

<sup>17</sup> Ockham's other polemical works include *An princeps (OP* 1, pp. 228–67) and *Consultatio de causa matrimoniali (OP* 1, pp. 278–86). H. S. Offler is not entirely convinced that *Allegationes de potestate*

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These works did not attract equal attention among late medieval intellectuals. This is borne out in the manuscript tradition of the works. According to H. S. Offler, for six of Ockham's polemical works only a single manuscript is known; and three of these are incomplete. Only two of the polemical works seem to have been fairly widely circulated.<sup>18</sup> For the *Octo quaestiones de potestate pape*, over a dozen manuscripts are extant.<sup>19</sup> The *Dialogus* survives in some thirty manuscripts.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, the transmission of the majority of Ockham's political works was poor. Nonetheless, as far as the two more widely circulated works are concerned, we may discern their influence on following generations. Pierre d'Ailly drew heavily on III *Dialogus* II when he discussed infidel *dominium*, the Romans' right to elect popes and natural law.<sup>21</sup> D'Ailly also composed an abridged version of the *Dialogus*.<sup>22</sup> According to Brian Tierney, Book v of I *Dialogus* helped to shape conciliar ideas.<sup>23</sup> It has recently been discovered that Juan de Segovia also drew heavily on Ockham's discourse on heretical pertinacity.<sup>24</sup> Jacques Almain wrote a commentary on the *Octo quaestiones* in Paris circa 1512.<sup>25</sup> Although the reception of Ockham's polemical works by posterity has yet to be fully examined, it is sufficiently clear that he was considered by a number of leading intellectuals in the late Middle Ages as one of the most influential political thinkers to tackle such questions as papal heresy and the relationship between Church and State.

In modern scholarship on the history of European political thought, Ockham has long been considered, along with Dante, Marsilius and Wyclif, as one of the giants in the late Middle Ages, and his name has rarely failed to gain entry into textbooks on the history of political

*imperiali* (OP 4, pp. 367–444) and *De electione Caroli Quarti* (OP 4, pp. 464–86) were Ockham's works. See OP 4, p. x.

<sup>18</sup> H. S. Offler, 'The "Influence" of Ockham's Political Thinking: The First Century', in W. Vossenkuhl and R. Schönberger, eds., *Die Gegenwart Ockhams* (Weinheim, 1990), pp. 338–65.

<sup>19</sup> H. S. Offler, 'Introduction', OP 1, pp. 3–6.

<sup>20</sup> John Kilcullen and George Knysh, 'Witnesses to the Text: Sigla and Descriptions', <http://www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/dialogus/sigla.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Francis Oakley, *The Political Thought of Pierre d'Ailly: The Voluntarist Tradition* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1964), pp. 80, 141–6, 177–9, 200–9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 177–9.

<sup>23</sup> Brian Tierney, 'Ockham, the Conciliar Theory, and the Canonists', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 15 (1954), pp. 40–70.

<sup>24</sup> J. D. Mann, 'William of Ockham, Juan de Segovia, and Heretical Pertinacity', *Mediaeval Studies* 56 (1994), pp. 67–88.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Almain, *Expositio circa decisiones questionum Mag. G. Ockham super potestate summi pontificis*, in Jean Gerson, *Opera omnia*, vol. 2 (The Hague, 1728), cols. 1070–2. See Offler, 'The "Influence" of Ockham's Political Thinking', p. 349.

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thought.<sup>26</sup> However, there is no such thing as the ‘standard’ view of Ockham as a political thinker. General surveys of the history of medieval political thought have mirrored the changes and divisions in modern scholarship on Ockham’s political thought. In the 1930s Charles Howard McIlwain’s *The Growth of Political Thought in the West from the Greeks to the End of the Middle Ages* portrayed Ockham as a radical critic of the papacy, more radical than Marsilius.<sup>27</sup> R. W. Carlyle and A. J. Carlyle’s *A History of Mediaeval Political Theory in the West*, by contrast, described Ockham as a defender of secular power, just like Marsilius.<sup>28</sup> The contrasting views of McIlwain and of the Carlyle brothers were determined largely by the particular works of Ockham they read; neither of them examined all Ockham’s works. McIlwain relied solely on the *De imperatorum et pontificum potestate* because he considered that it ‘gives in small compass the conclusions defended at such portentous length in his longer works, the *Dialogus* especially’.<sup>29</sup> The Carlyles, on the other hand, represented Ockham’s view by using the *Octo quaestiones de potestate papae*. Clearly, these presentations of Ockham as a political thinker were no more than partial sketches and no comprehensive monograph on his political thought had yet appeared.

Examining all of Ockham’s polemical works is daunting enough; exploring their relationship to his speculative writings is still more difficult. After the Second World War historians were divided over the issue of the relationship between Ockham’s philosophical and theological thought and his political thought. Walter Ullmann avoided discussing Ockham in his *A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages* on the grounds that one must be familiar with Ockham’s nominalism and his theology in order to appreciate his political thought.<sup>30</sup>

Since the publication of a few substantial monographs in the 1960s and 1970s, the interpretation of Ockham in the textbooks has undergone a transformation. Nonetheless, Ockham as a political thinker remains elusive. Antony Black’s *Political Thought in Europe, 1250–1450* (1992) describes Ockham as an upholder of the dualism of spiritual and temporal government,<sup>31</sup> but suggests that his dualism may allow for mutual

<sup>26</sup> For example, see George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 3rd edn (London, 1951), pp. 250–70; M. Judd Harmon, *Political Thought from Plato to the Present* (New York, 1964), pp. 144–7; Jean Touchard, *Histoire des idées politiques*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1959), 1, pp. 200–7.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Howard McIlwain, *The Growth of Political Thought in the West from the Greeks to the End of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1932), pp. 293–6.

<sup>28</sup> R. W. Carlyle and A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Mediaeval Political Theory in the West*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh and London, 1903–36; last reprint, 1970), 6, pp. 44–51.

<sup>29</sup> McIlwain, *The Growth of Political Thought*, p. 294.

<sup>30</sup> Walter Ullmann, *A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages* (London, 1965), p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> Antony Black, *Political Thought in Europe, 1250–1450* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 74.

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intervention by the two spheres in exceptional circumstances, such as when the pope, a general council or other ecclesiastical authority errs, or when kings or princes fail to execute justice. Black asks: how is it decided when such a breakdown of ecclesiastical or secular rulership occurs? And who is to take the extraordinary course of action required when such a breakdown occurs? Black observes that, for Ockham, ‘right and wrong will be obvious to any sincere, well-intentioned person’, and comments that ‘Ockham threw the whole liability for judgement and political decision-making back on to the individual conscience.’<sup>32</sup> Black’s Ockham is thus ‘an anti-political thinker, an anarchist individualist, a meticulous deconstructor of church and polity’.<sup>33</sup>

Joseph Canning’s *A History of Medieval Political Thought, 300–1450* (1997) also describes Ockham as ‘a non-political or even anti-political writer’, but not for the same reasons as Black.<sup>34</sup> For Canning, Marsilius is ‘a political theorist concerned with issues of peace and power’, whereas Ockham is concerned far more with truth than human authority.<sup>35</sup> According to Canning, Ockham’s polemics are primarily ecclesiological. Indeed he hardly mentions Ockham’s contribution to secular political ideas, whilst he stresses Ockham’s radical critique of the contemporary view of papal *plenitudo potestatis* and his rejection of conciliarism.

Black and Canning agree that Ockham was a non-political or even an anti-political thinker. This understanding is dismissed by Janet Coleman as anachronistic. Her recent work, *A History of Political Thought from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, portrays him primarily as a logician engaged in a logical search for Catholic truths.<sup>36</sup> She derives this interpretation by revisiting the issue of the relationship between Ockham’s speculative thought and his political thought. Unlike some scholars of previous generations, however, Coleman does not look into Ockham’s nominalist metaphysics or his theological doctrine of *potentia Dei absoluta*. Rather she identifies the epistemological foundations of his political thought in his speculative writings. Coleman shows in detail how Ockham’s appeal to experience, natural reason and infallible scriptural tradition in his polemical works was anchored in his intuitive cognition theory. Consequently, Coleman’s Ockham emerges as a ‘rational voluntarist’, who was ‘not sceptical about human knowing but about our willing what we know’.<sup>37</sup> Individuals according to Ockham were

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.<sup>34</sup> Joseph Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought, 300–1450* (London, 1997), p. 160.<sup>35</sup> Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought*, p. 160.<sup>36</sup> Janet Coleman, *A History of Political Thought from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2000), p. 169.<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.



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therefore ‘social, rational voluntary moral agents’. This epistemological outlook, Coleman argues, explains Ockham’s view that any authority that denied individual liberty would be illegitimate.<sup>38</sup>

Black, Canning and Coleman no longer present Ockham as a sceptical critic of the papacy or a Marsilian defender of the empire. But at the turn of the twenty-first century Ockham still remains elusive. Black emphasises that Ockham’s political thought was inherently destructive of the Church and secular polities. Canning, on the other hand, merely stresses the critical nature of Ockham’s polemical discourse. Canning highlights Ockham’s non-political motivations in his involvement in political debates. Unlike these two commentators, Coleman emphasises Ockham’s methodological innovation in political theorising, and presents him rather as a philosophical defender of individual liberty.

Interestingly, both Black and Canning, like Walter Ullmann, note the difficulty of assessing Ockham as a political thinker. Black writes that Ockham is ‘probably the most difficult medieval theorist’.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, for Canning, ‘it is particularly difficult to assess Ockham’s political ideas’.<sup>40</sup> Both commentators attribute that difficulty to Ockham’s writing techniques. His works may be categorised into two kinds: personal and impersonal works. ‘Personal’ works are relatively short, with a narrowly defined subject-matter. They may be regarded as political pamphlets for the purposes of propaganda or agitation. In these works, Ockham’s views are clearly and explicitly expressed and therefore readily identifiable, though they are not always thoroughly argued. Such works as *Contra Ioannem*, *Contra Benedictum*, *Breviloquium*, and *De imperatorum et pontificum potestate* belong to this category. The ‘impersonal’ works, on the other hand, are massive in volume and wide-ranging in scope. In these works, Ockham deliberately refrains from expressing his own position because he aims more at promoting discussion over the issues he is addressing than at persuading his audience. Hence he details several different arguments and counter-arguments on each question, without clarifying which view is his own. To be sure, in the light of the structure of the work, and the views he expressed in the ‘personal’ works, it is not always impossible to identify Ockham’s own position. However, to read through such massive works as the *Dialogus* and *Opus nonaginta dierum* is taxing enough; it is still more so to decipher Ockham’s own view amidst the morass of different views contained therein. These ‘impersonal’ works have puzzled students of Ockham’s political thought. In the face of his encyclopaedic presentation of various views, E. F. Jacob was

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.<sup>39</sup> Black, *Political Thought*, p. 71.<sup>40</sup> Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought*, p. 159.

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stunned by Ockham's intellectual vigour.<sup>41</sup> J. B. Morrall abandoned any attempt to determine Ockham's own position.<sup>42</sup>

However, the assessment of Ockham's political thought is hindered not only by his stylistic approach in his 'impersonal' works. All of his political works are the product of his polemical activities. Ockham never wrote anything like a *summa* on ecclesiology or political theory. Instead he produced an array of works, long and short, whose focuses vary greatly. As we said earlier,<sup>43</sup> at the first stage of his polemical career Ockham was a contributor to the dispute over apostolic poverty between Pope John XXII and the Franciscans. Then he shifted his interests to ideas of heresy and heretics, with special reference to papal heresy. Later still, he explored the principles of government in both the spiritual and the temporal sphere. Why did he change his interest so often? Is there any overarching theme that runs through all his political works? These problems make the appraisal of Ockham's political thought even more difficult and complex.

## THREE CLASSIC INTERPRETATIONS

From the 1940s to the 1960s, research into Ockham's political thought produced three broad interpretations: Ockham as an innovative destroyer of the Church and defender of the Empire; Ockham as a traditional, constitutional liberal; and Ockham as a non-political theologian. These three visions resulted from different reactions to the single question whether there is a link between Ockham's theology and/or philosophy and his political thought. The reduction of Ockham's political thought to his nominalist philosophy produced the image of an innovative destroyer of the Church. Conversely, reduction of Ockham's political thought to his theology resulted in the figure of a non-political theologian. The rejection of any attempt to reduce Ockham's political thought to either a philosophical or a theological paradigm generated the vision of Ockham as a traditional constitutional liberal.

Georges de Lagarde's monumental study, *La Naissance de l'esprit laïque au déclin du Moyen Age*, focused scholarly attention on the relationship between Ockham's innovative philosophy, which arguably undermined the foundations of scholastic philosophy, and the dissolution of the

<sup>41</sup> E. F. Jacob, 'Ockham as a Political Thinker', in Jacob, *Essays in the Conciliar Epoch*, 2nd edn (Manchester, 1953), pp. 85–105, at p. 105.

<sup>42</sup> J. B. Morrall, 'Some Notes on a Recent Interpretation of William of Ockham's Political Philosophy', *Franciscan Studies* 9 (1949), pp. 335–69, at p. 351.

<sup>43</sup> See above pp. 4–5.