CHAPTER 7

AFTER OCKHAM:
MARSILIUS OF INGHEN AND
PIERRE D’AILLY ON KNOWLEDGE
AND THE EXISTING SINGULAR

After Ockham

The philosophy of the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries has been the focus of increasing attention and continued reassessment. Thinkers who were once labeled, usually derisively, “nominalists,” are beginning to emerge as original, eclectic, and important thinkers in their own right. Historians and philosophers are beginning to realize that the divisions between the via antiqua and via moderna so common in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries cannot be applied accurately to the fourteenth century. Two philosophers to emerge as important in contemporary scholarship are Pierre d’Ailly and Marsilius of Inghen.

There is no doubt that Ockham’s thought continued to exert influence—both positive and negative—for generations after his death. My choice to trace the influence of Ockham’s thinking through Marsilius and d’Ailly, therefore, is in some ways arbitrary. There are two reasons why I have chosen these two, however. First, they are thinking at a distance of about a generation from Ockham. Second, they were both trained at Paris and held influential positions there. They were responsible, to a large measure, for the extension of his views beyond the English Isle. Finally, their thought exhibits a reliance on that of Ockham, but they cannot be described accurately as “Ockhamists,” for each criticizes Ockham on a number of issues and each presses his conclusions in directions not foreseen by Ockham himself. Together, they give us some idea of the medieval response to Ockham’s philosophy of the existing singular.

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Marsilius of Inghen

Marsilius was born around 1340, probably in the town of Nijmegen. Marsilius began his career as a master of arts in Paris in 1362 and was a member of the English nation there. He began his studies in theology at Paris in 1366, though he did not complete them there. Marsilius held many administrative posts at Paris, including rector (1367 and 1371) and procurator of the English nation (1363, 1373 to 1375). In 1369 and again from 1377 to 1378, he was the representative of the University at the papal court in Avignon, a prestigious post. From 1379, Marsilius is no longer mentioned in relation to the University of Paris.

Marsilius became a master of arts at the University of Heidelberg—in fact, he was a founder of this university. He continued his career of service there, serving as rector nine times. In the 1390s, Marsilius resumed his study of theology, being the first to receive a doctorate of theology from that university. His reputation, already secured at Paris, continued to spread from Heidelberg. His works were highly influential in Erfurt, Leipzig, Prague, and Cracow. In several universities, it was through his writings that the via moderna was taught—perhaps thus securing his reputation as a nominalist in the derisive sense.

Marsilius seems not to have completed his Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard at the time of his death. He lectured on the Sentences from 1392 until 1394, but there is some evidence that he actually began working on it previously, maybe even in Paris. The Commentary shows remarkable familiarity with thirteenth- and fourteenth-century theologians such as Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, Scotus, Aureoli, Ockham, as well as later fourteenth-century thinkers such as Wodeham, Gregory of Rimini, and philosophers such as Albert of Saxony and Jean Buridan.

Marsilius opens his prologue to his commentary with the typical question, “Whether theology is one science with God as its subject.” He divides the question into five parts: (1) the mode of generation of knowledge in us and the common divisions of knowledge, (2) what is theology, (3) whether theology is a science, (4) whether it is one science, and (5) whether God is its subject. In the first article he presents his theory of knowledge and treats the issue of notitia intuitiva, though he himself does not use this term in this setting.

Marsilius begins this investigation with a general definition or description of notitia: “Knowledge is the apprehension of a thing by a cognitive potency or it is an act or habit by which a cognitive potency knows formally by act or habit” [Notitia est apprehensio rei a potentia cognoscitiva. Vel sic: Est actus vel habitus, quo potentia cognoscitiva actu vel habitu formaliter cognoscit]. Marsilius then goes on to present a detailed and com-