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A note on William of Occam

by Aimé Michel

When re-reading the literature on the Valensole case, I came across a comment by our friend René Fouéré(1) on a phrase of mine in my first Valensole report, where I said that M. Masse's account of the disappearance of the machine **on the spot**... "suggested a manipulation of Space-Time far beyond our most advanced knowledge in matters of Physics at the present time", and that such sightings... "would perhaps explain the fact that the Minitrack optical networks have never photographed the approach of a UFO in circumterrestrial space. The UFOs would accordingly be capable of non-linear movements"(2). Here is Fouéré's comment:

"Although having no *a priori* reason for denying that a Physics far in advance of our own could perform this *Space-Time manipulation* of which Aimé Michel speaks, we think that, for reasons of methodology, it should only be considered as a last resort. William of Occam wisely held that the number of hypotheses ought not to be multiplied unnecessarily. We would say, so far as we are concerned, that one should only have recourse to the most complex and most uncertain possibilities after exhausting all the simplest and most verifiable ones."

Well, of course, I have much respect for the English monk who, away back in those early days of the XIVth century, dared to revolt against Thomas Aquinas, against Aristotle, against the Pope, and who made profound studies in the *quodlibet septem* of (among other weighty questions) those..." of knowing whether an angel can move from place to place in the void", or... "whether one angel can speak with another angel", and who nevertheless declared: "*Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitate*" ("entities should not be multiplied beyond what is necessary"). Note that it is *entities* and not *hypotheses*.

Naturally of course I will abandon to M. Fouéré, without discussion, the hypothesis of a "manipulation of Space-Time", and likewise, incidentally, *any* sort of hypothesis, having expressed once and for all time, in *The Humanoids*, p. 70, proposition 37, my total contempt for all speculation that does not aim to disencumber us of spurious ideas, explicit or not.

Let us skip too the fact that the words "simple", "complex", "uncertain", are vague words, admitting of no objective definition except in Mathematics, where there are no hypotheses in the sense that is meant here, and that a hypothesis cannot be qualified as *simple*, *complex* or *uncertain* except in relation to the fancy of each of us, and to what he knows and, above all, what he does not know.

Despite this, let us admit provisionally that we can be in agreement to the extent of declaring that one given hypothesis is simpler than any other. The question is one of knowing whether the rule according to which you have to stick to this hypothesis until the contrary is proved is a useful rule, or on the contrary a bad one.

It must be pointed out, right at the outset, that *proof of the contrary* can only be sought by somebody who refuses to stick to the "simplest hypothesis". The rule attributed by M. Fouéré to William of Occam, and which he, Fouéré, enjoins upon us at every opportunity(3),

consequently requires us to wait for the facts, of their own accord, to force us to abandon the "simplest hypothesis".

It is quite easy to verify for yourself that all discoveries, without exception, have been made by people who rejected this attitude. The history of Science shows likewise that the facts discovered by rebels were always contested precisely in the name of this very same "simplest hypothesis"; that Kepler was called a madman because he refused to wait for the facts to come along and of their own accord destroy the theory of epicycles, inasmuch as the objection made to him was that the circle was "simpler" than the ellipse; that Galileo was called a dreamer, first because he rejected Aristotle's *impetus* and Plato's *antiperistasis*, and preferred to gaze through his telescope, and then, later, because Jupiter's satellites were a "useless complication"; that this same paralysing mechanism was applied to Newton, Pasteur, Planck and Einstein, and is now being applied to those dreamers who obstinately refuse to adhere to the "misinterpretation" theory about UFOs — delightfully simple as it may nevertheless be — and put forward the extraterrestrial hypothesis.

Why is it that the so-called "simplest hypothesis" has this tendency to be imposed upon us as a dogma? It is because, by its very nature, it is "unique", single. There is, by definition, only one "simplest hypothesis", whereas the consideration of some other and more "complex" hypothesis begets doubt as between the two of them, and consequently stimulates the imagination to discover experiments capable of bringing about a decisive vote in favour of the one against the other. Since Science knows of no other method of progressing, it is consequently clear that the rule of the "simplest" hypothesis conceals behind its facade of somewhat inane wisdom a dangerous intellectual narcotic. It engenders mental drowsiness, dogmatism and self-satisfaction. It is, in fact, the very symbol of mediaeval conformity. Though the history of Science has never stopped refuting it, it is still alive and kicking and in good health, still spreading false evidence and blocking research.

In opposition to this odious rule of the "simplest hypothesis" I propose now to set up another rule which we might call "Kardashev's Rule". Kardashev is that Russian astrophysicist who, after studying the curious cyclic variations of the quasar C.T.A.-102, asked himself the question: "And what if it were a signal?"

As we all know, there are twenty "simpler" hypotheses than this one, and all of them, by the way, just as uncertain too as this one is. But, out of all these uncertain hypotheses, Kardashev proposes the one that is most stimulating to our minds.

I know several astronomers who have begun to take an interest in the quasars since this Kardashev business, and several young men who, through it, came to discover their own scientific vocation. And so, three cheers for Kardashev! And let William of Occam, that fine flower of the Middle Ages, return to his angels.

Notes

(1) *Phénomènes Spatiaux*, No. 7, March 1966, p. 24.

(2) Michel, A., *The Valensole Affair*, FSR. November/December 1965.

(3) See also *Phénomènes Spatiaux*, No. 13, September 1967. p. 2.

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Editor's note:

In the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary we read: "The leading principle of the nominalism of William of Occam [or Ockham] (was) that for the purposes of explanation things not known to exist should not, unless it is absolutely necessary, be postulated as existing."
The section not in italics is known as "Occam's Razor", and, as Waveney Girvan stated, in the Editorial of FSR, Vol. 10, No. 1, it is often quoted against us by scientists. The article continued: "the argument is based on what may be a false premise — namely that flying saucers cannot exist. Could we ever be told why they cannot?"