Would Epicurus Endorse "Occam's Razor?"

Post by “Cassius” of August 29, 2020 at 4:01 PM

I saw casual reference to Occam's Razor today and for the first time I asked myself "Given what we know of Epicurean epistemology, would Epicurus endorse "Occam's Razor?" I am asking this on the spur of the moment without much thought, but already it is not completely obvious to me that he would.

Here's the wikipedia opening:

Occam's razor, **Ockham's razor**, **Ocham's razor** (Latin: *novacula Occami*) or **law of parsimony** (Latin: *lex parsimoniae*) is the problem-solving principle that "entities should not be multiplied without necessity."[1][2] The idea is attributed to English Franciscan friar William of Ockham (c. 1287–1347), a scholastic philosopher and theologian who used a preference for simplicity to defend the idea of divine miracles. It is variously paraphrased by statements like "the simplest explanation is most likely the right one". This philosophical razor advocates that when presented with competing hypotheses about the same prediction, one should select the solution with the fewest assumptions,[3] and that this is not meant to be a way of choosing between hypotheses that make different predictions.

Similarly, in science, Occam's razor is used as an abductive heuristic in the development of theoretical models rather than as a rigorous arbiter between candidate models.[4][5] In the scientific method, Occam's razor is not considered an irrefutable principle of logic or a scientific result; the preference for simplicity in the scientific method is based on the falsifiability criterion. For each accepted explanation of a phenomenon, there may be an extremely large, perhaps even incomprehensible, number of possible and more complex alternatives. Since failing explanations can always be burdened with *ad hoc* hypotheses to prevent them from being falsified, simpler theories are preferable to more complex ones because they are more testable.[6][7][8]

Note the section on "Controversial Aspects:'

Controversial aspects

Occam's razor is not an embargo against the positing of any kind of entity, or a recommendation of the simplest theory come what may.[a] Occam's razor is used to adjudicate between theories that have already passed "theoretical scrutiny" tests and are equally well-supported by evidence.[b] Furthermore, it may be used to prioritize empirical testing between two equally plausible but unequally testable hypotheses; thereby minimizing costs and wastes while increasing chances of falsification of the simpler-to-test hypothesis.

Another contentious aspect of the razor is that a theory can become more complex in terms of its structure (or syntax), while its ontology (or semantics) becomes simpler, or vice versa.[c] Quine, in a discussion on definition, referred to these two perspectives as "economy of practical expression" and "economy in grammar and vocabulary", respectively.[76]

Galileo Galilei lampooned the *misuse* of Occam's razor in his *Dialogue*. The principle is represented in the dialogue by Simplicio. The telling point that Galileo presented ironically was that if one really wanted to start from a small number of entities, one could always consider the letters of the alphabet as the fundamental entities, since one could construct the whole of human knowledge out of them.

Also I see this, which includes ARISTOTLE as someone with a similar view:

Part of a page from John Duns Scotus's book *Commentaria oxoniensia ad IV libros magistri Sententiarus*, showing the words: "*Pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate*", i.e., "Plurality is not to be posited without necessity"

The origins of what has come to be known as Occam's razor are traceable to the works of earlier philosophers such as John Duns Scotus (1265–1308), Robert Grosseteste (1175–1253), Maimonides (Moses ben-Maimon, 1138–1204), and even Aristotle (384–322 BC).[12][13] Aristotle writes in his *Posterior Analytics*, "We may assume the superiority *ceteris paribus* [other things being equal] of the demonstration which derives from fewer postulates or hypotheses." Ptolemy (c. AD 90 – c. AD 168) stated, "We consider it a good principle to explain the phenomena by the simplest hypothesis possible."[14]

Anti-razors

Occam's razor has met some opposition from people who have considered it too extreme or rash. Walter Chatton (c. 1290–1343) was a contemporary of William of Ockham who took exception to Occam's razor and Ockham's use of it. In response he devised his own *anti-razor*: "If three things are not enough to verify an affirmative proposition about things, a fourth must be added, and so on." Although there have been a number of philosophers who have formulated similar anti-razors since Chatton's time, no one anti-razor has perpetuated in as much notability as Chatton's anti-razor, although this could be the case of the Late Renaissance Italian motto of unknown attribution *Se non è vero, è ben trovato* ("Even if it is not true, it is well conceived") when referred to a particularly artful explanation.

Anti-razors have also been created by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and Karl Menger (1902–1985). Leibniz's version took the form of a principle of plenitude, as Arthur Lovejoy has called it: the idea being that God created the most varied and populous of possible worlds. Kant felt a need to moderate the effects of Occam's razor and thus

created his own counter-razor: "The variety of beings should not rashly be diminished."[77]

Karl Menger found mathematicians to be too parsimonious with regard to variables, so he formulated his Law Against Miserliness, which took one of two forms: "Entities must not be reduced to the point of inadequacy" and "It is vain to do with fewer what requires more." A less serious but (some[*who?*] might say) even more extremist anti-razor is 'Pataphysics, the "science of imaginary solutions" developed by Alfred Jarry (1873–1907). Perhaps the ultimate in anti-reductionism, "'Pataphysics seeks no less than to view each event in the universe as completely unique, subject to no laws but its own." Variations on this theme were subsequently explored by the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges in his story/mock-essay "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius". There is also Crabtree's Bludgeon, which cynically states that "[n]o set of mutually inconsistent observations can exist for which some human intellect cannot conceive a coherent explanation, however complicated."[*citation needed*]

So possibly the question ought to be "Would Epicurus approve of what is generally taken by non-specialists to be the meaning of Occam's Razor?" But regardless of how we formulate the question, I think it would be interesting to consider the implications of what is generally understood to be something like "giving preference to the simpler explanation." especially in the context of Epicurus "multivalent" approach to accepting the "truth" of multiple possibilities. Is it possible that Chatton's anti-razor is closer to Epicurus than Occam?