

OCKHAM'S RAZOR

Talking points:

1. The ancient Greeks believed in a pantheon of gods who influenced geological events such as earthquakes and storms. But around 500 BCE, some philosophers began to offer naturalistic accounts of such events—that is, accounts that did not involve the activity of gods. For example, Thales (c. 600 BCE) suggested that the ground floats on water and that an earthquake occurs when the ground shakes because of the movement of the water. Anaximenes (c. 550 BCE) speculated that earthquakes were due to either the earth drying up and cracking during a drought or the earth crumbling apart during times of heavy rain. By giving a naturalistic account of geological events, Thales and Anaximenes had no need to resort to the use of additional entities, gods, to explain geological phenomena. Accordingly, their explanations are the most attractive according to the use of Ockham's razor.
2. Consider crop circles found, for the most part, in the south of England. A crop circle is a circular disturbance of a crop (such as barley) in which the crop has been flattened. There are three possible explanations for these circles:
 - They are the result of pranksters who go out into fields and form them in the middle of the night.
 - They are the result of vortex winds caused by unusual weather conditions.
 - They are a paranormal phenomenon (ranging from the activity of prankster aliens to a message from Mother Earth in response to global warming).

The first two possibilities seem to give the simplest explanation and, therefore, according to Ockham's razor, are more attractive explanations than one that involves additional entities such as aliens; nevertheless, the paranormal hypothesis has its proponents.

Questions for discussion:

1. Do the examples above represent an application of Ockham's razor?
2. What if we declare that everything that happens, happens because that is how God intends things to happen. Would this explanation be the simplest and most elegant? Would the application of Ockham's razor, where we must refrain from multiplying entities beyond those that are necessary to provide a complete explanation of something, result in the declaration that God is the reason for everything? After all, by declaring that God is the reason for everything, we only need appeal to one entity: God! Justify your response.

