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that appeared in volume 3 of*

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*Mark McKergow and Jenny Clarke*

## Occam's Razor in the NLP Toolbox

*It is vain to do with more what can be done with fewer—Occam*

### *Introduction*

Since recorded time began, philosophers have been struggling with the concept of “reality” and whether it exists, either in objective form or indeed anywhere outside the thinker’s thoughts. William of Occam lived from 1285 to 1347, a period when philosophy was dominated by the Scholastics, whose aim was to integrate knowledge derived from human reason with the understanding granted by divine (Christian) revelation. Occam used extreme rigour in his logic, arguing that many of the received Christian beliefs (for example, that God is One, indivisible and the Creator of all things, and that the human soul is immortal) could not be demonstrated by reason, but only by revelation (see for example Adams 1987). His lasting contribution to philosophical thought is the principle that “it is vain to do with more what can be done with fewer”—in other words, one should cut away unnecessary assumptions as if with a razor (hence “Occam’s Razor”) and strive for simplicity.

### *Zero-Linguistic Programming?*

What has Occam to say to a modern student of NLP? Like Occam, NLP makes a virtue of distinguishing between what we can detect with our own senses and what we deduce from a variety of sources—experience, reading, generalizing, rationalizing etc. (as well as the twentieth century equivalents of divine revelation, which add the theories of the myriad schools of psychology to the older theological traditions).

In their seminal book, *The Structure of Magic*, published in 1975, Richard Bandler and John Grinder make the point this way:

There is an irreducible difference between the world and our experi-

ence of it. Each of us creates a representation of the world in which we live—that is, we create a map or model of the world which we use to generate our behaviour. Our representation of the world determines to a large degree what our experience of the world will be, how we will perceive the world, what choice we will see available to us as we live in the world. (p. 7)