WILLIAM OF OCKHAM'S ETHICAL THEORY

CKHAM presents his ethical theory not systematically but in remarks and discussions scattered throughout his writings, a fact that has obscured the structure of his views. He worked within a tradition of moral philosophy that took the basic normative principles to be given in the Bible and the conceptual tools of moral theory to be given by Aristotle; with these materials he put forward an original, powerful, and subtle theory. Ockham holds the rightness or wrongness of an act to depend not on any feature or characteristic of the act itself or its consequences, but rather on the agent's intentions and character (elaborated in Ockham's theory of the will and of the virtues respectively). The goodness or badness of the agent's will, in turn, depends on its conformity to the dictates of right reason in the first stage and to God's will in the final stage.

1. The Nature of Morality

Morality deals with human acts that are in our control—more exactly, with acts that are subject to the power of the will according to the natural dictate of reason and other circumstances.[1] The requirement that morality be a matter of reason and will rules out brute animals as moral agents[2] while allowing angels and humans to qualify. Before attempting to spell out the respective contributions of reason and will to moral action, a fundamental question needs to be addressed: Is morality a rational enterprise in the first place? Are there moral truths, and if so, can we know them?

In *Quodl.* 2.14 Ockham asks whether there can be demonstrative knowledge with respect to morality. He distinguishes two parts of ethical theory:[3] (*i*) positive moral knowledge, which "contains human and divine laws that obligate one to pursue or to avoid things that are good or evil only because they are prohibited or commanded by a superior whose role it is to establish the laws," namely a superior such as a legislator or God; (*ii*) nonpositive moral knowledge, which "directs human actions without any precept from a superior, as principles that are either known *per se* or by experience direct them." The former is like the knowledge jurists have with regard to human

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[1] *Quodl.* 2.14 (OTh IX 176.11–177.16).

[2] *Sent.* 3 q. 11 (OTh VI 359.20–360.2).

[3] *Quodl.* 2.14 (OTh IX 177.18–28).

laws; it is regulated by logic and reason but is based on positive laws or commands that need not be evidently known. The latter, however, is a matter of principles that are evidently known and the conclusions that can be drawn from them, and so can be formulated in demonstrative form. Hence ethical theory is not only a matter of nonpositive morality (principles), but may take into account positive morality (authoritative commands) as well.

Positive morality, consisting of divine commands, can clearly provide substantive moral content to human action. Its knowability is a matter of God's informing us of his commands, which poses no theoretical problems. However, why following such commands should be a matter of morality is a question that needs to be addressed. We will take up Ockham's discussion of divine commands in §6.

Nonpositive morality consists of ethical principles that are either known *per se* or derived from experience. Now there seem to be two kinds of ethical principles knowable *per se*. On the one hand, some principles connect fundamental ethical notions at a high level of abstraction: everything right should be pursued and everything wrong should be avoided;[4] the will should conform itself to right reason;[5] anything dictated by right reason should be done.[6] These ethical principles connect the virtues by regulating permissible behavior.[7] On the other hand, some principles classify kinds of wrongful acts. In *Sent.* 2 q. 15 Ockham tells us that theft, adultery, murder, and the like are by definition not to be done: the very names do not pick out acts absolutely but connote that "the one performing such acts is obligated by divine precept to do the opposite."[8] Murder, for instance, is wrongful killing. Hence principles such as "Murder is wrong" or "Theft is wrong" are knowable *per se*. Nonpositive morality, then, includes principles that are analytically true: one should do the right and avoid the wrong, not commit murder, and the like. But these principles, though discoverable by reason, do not tell us what the right is, or whether a given instance of killing is murder, and so do not provide us with any substantive moral content.

Nonpositive morality also includes ethical principles derived from experience—that is, particular propositions regarding what is to be done, which an agent devises on the basis of his particular experiences. These propositions may then be generalized into universal propositions; Ockham gives as a

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[4]   *Quodl.* 2.14 (OTh IX 176.26–27) and *Connex.* art. 3 (OTh VIII 347.143).

[5]   *Ibid.* (178.40–41).

[6]   *Sent.* 3 q. 12 (425.5–6) and *Connex.* art. 7 (OTh VIII 347.144–145).

[7]   *Connex.* art. 3 (OTh VIII 347.142–143).

[8]   *Sent.* 2 q. 15 (OTh V 352.15-18)

standard example "An angry person should be calmed down with soothing words."[9] This is commonly called "prudence," although it is really nothing more than an application of reason to the situations in which the agent finds himself. Ockham holds that prudence is necessary for moral action,[10] although in itself it does not necessitate it; one can have prudence but not act morally.[11] In part this is a corollary of Ockham's claim that the will is naturally free and hence can diverge from the dictates of the intellect. But there is a deeper question here. What does human reason have to work on when it tries to cope with particular situations? For example, is there some objective rightness or wrongness that human reason can come to know in acts or types of acts?

2. The Moral Neutrality of Acts

Ockham holds that all acts are morally neutral, neither good nor bad in themselves—except for the act of loving God above all else for his own sake (considered in §3). He argues for this claim in *Quodl.* 1.20 in two basic ways. First, one and the same act is good when combined with one intention and evil when combined with another. His typical example is of a person who sets off to church intending to praise and honor God but at some point continues his journey out of vainglory.[12] So too for the case of someone who hurls himself from a cliff intending to commit suicide but sincerely repents halfway down.[13] In each case the act—walking to church, falling to one's death—remains the same in respect of multiple acts of the will,[14] although it changes its moral quality: from good to evil in the former case, conversely in the latter case. Hence "the act is neither morally good nor evil but neutral and indifferent,"[15] and only called good or evil in virtue of the agent's intentions. Strictly speaking, only the agent's intentions are good or evil, although the acts corresponding to them may be extrinsically denominated as such. He summarizes the neutrality thesis sharply:

> If you were to ask what the goodness or evilness of the act adds beyond the substance of the act that is called 'good' or 'evil' only by a certain extrinsic denomination, such as an act of the sensitive

[9]   *Connex.* art. 2 (OTh VIII 330.14–331.26).

[10] *Ibid.* (362.493–494).

[11] *Ibid.* (363.521–522).

[12] *Sent.* 3 q. 11 (OTh VI 360.8–16).

[13] *Quodl.* 1.20 (OTh IX 103.83–95).

[14] *Sent.* 3 q. 11 (OTh VI 383.2–4).

[15] *Ibid.* (384.9–10).

> part and likewise an act of the will, I say that it adds nothing positive
> that is distinct from the act, whether absolute or relative, which has
> being in the act through any cause. Instead, the goodness is only a
> name or a connotative concept, principally signifying the act itself
> as neutral and connoting an act of the will that is perfectly virtuous
> and the right reason it is elicited in conformity with. Hence such an
> act is called 'virtuous' by an extrinsic denomination.[16]

Therefore, acts have no intrinsic moral qualities at all.

Second, Ockham argues that the performance or non-performance of the
act doesn't affect moral evaluation—this is, in effect, an argument against
moral luck. If each of two people wants to perform a virtuous deed and
attempts to do so, and one succeeds while the other fails through no fault
of his own, we still hold that they have equal moral goodness. To hold
otherwise would be to allow luck to play a role in moral evaluation. Likewise,
a person who would commit adultery given the opportunity is no less guilty
than the one caught in the act.[17] Ockham's intuition here is that act-
centered morality loses any counterfactual purchase on what might have
been the case and so cannot separate moral from nonmoral factors. To
allow for the possible and the might-have-been, something other than the
actual deed has to enter into the determination of moral worth. Intentions
need not be discharged for the agent to be praised or blamed, and hence
they are able to provide a counterfactual foothold for moral assessment.

Ockham draws a further conclusion from his arguments, namely that
there is no identifiable feature or set of features common to acts that corre-
spond to good intentions or to bad intentions. That is, there is no type-type
correspondence between acts and morally good or morally bad intentions.
Consequently, there is no way to pick out morally permissible or impermissi-
ble acts as such without reference to the agent's intentions. This conclusion
clashes with the contemporary consensus of Ockham's day on normative
principles taken from the Bible, traditionally understood to be absolute
prohibitions regarding the performance or nonperformance of specific acts:
we are enjoined not to kill, not to bear false witness, and so on. (Some for-
bidden acts are arguably acts of the will, *e. g.* those involving covetousness,
but as such they don't pose a problem for Ockham's view.) Ockham offers
two replies to this line of criticism. On the one hand, the performance of
the act may lead to further sinfulness by intensifying the (evil) intention,
either in its own right or through enjoyment of the pleasure the performance

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[16] *Ibid.* (388.18–389.5).

[17] *Quodl.* 1.20 (OTh IX 103.97–104.116), following Augustine.

of the act generates; on the other hand, acts and intentions are prohibited together in the Decalogue so that ordinary people do not mistakenly think that only the performance of the act is morally reprehensible.[18] The Biblical prohibitions are absolute, but they apply to intentions and not to acts.

Ockham's thesis that exterior acts are themselves morally indifferent has other equally counterintuitive consequences, as he himself was aware. For example, it seems to countenance the literal truth of the claim that God wills evil: God wills us to give alms to the poor, an act that Jones performs out of vanity (say); Jones's act is evil, and so God wills something that is an evil—hence God wills evil.[19] After pointing out that one cannot conclude that God is evil because he wills evil in this literal sense, Ockham is careful to say that he has only been considering this view as one that might be held, whereas he himself rejects this manner of speech even if it is literally true.[20] What matters, Ockham tells us, is not that one performs just acts but that one does so justly.[21]

3. The Will

To the negative thesis that exterior acts are morally indifferent Ockham counterposes the positive thesis that acts of will are the bearers of moral worth. More exactly, he argues first that there must be some (interior) act that is "necessarily and intrinsically virtuous." His reasoning is as follows:[22] Take any interior act that is granted to be virtuous; it is either intrinsically virtuous or not. If it is, the conclusion is established. If it isn't, then it is at best only contingently virtuous, that is, virtuous through its conformity with some other act. Consider the second act; is it intrinsically virtuous or not? If it is, the conclusion is established; if it isn't, it must be contingently virtuous in virtue of its conformity to some third act, and so on to infinity. But there can not be an infinite regress here. Hence, at some point there must be an act that is virtuous in itself rather than by its contingent relation to another act. Therefore, some interior act is intrinsically virtuous.

Second, the interior act in question must be an act of the will:[23] only an agent's intentions are primarily praiseworthy or blameworthy, for these alone are clearly and immediately in the power of the will—and "it is a

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[18] *Sent.* 3 q. 11 (OTh VI 375.14–376.17): see also *Quodl.* 1.20 (OTh IX 104.119–105.129).

[19] *Sent.* 1 d. 47 q. unica (OTh III 681.2–15).

[20] *Ibid.* (684.6–16).

[21] *Ibid.* (683.1–2).

[22] *Connex.* art. 1 (OTh VIII 327.99–328.130) and *Quodl.* 3.14 (OTh IX 255.43–58).

[23] *Connex.* art. 1 (OTh VIII 329.132–144) and *Quodl.* 3.14 (OTh IX 256.67–72).

necessary condition for the goodness of an act that it be in the power of the
will of the agent who has the act."[24] Other interior acts, such as passions
or acts of the intellect, are produced by faculties only indirectly controlled
by the will, whereas acts of will are directly in our control.

Third, the act of the will that is intrinsically virtuous is an act of loving
God:

> I state that the act that is necessarily virtuous in the way described
> above is an act of the will, because the act in which God is loved
> above all else and for his own sake is an act of this kind; for this
> act is virtuous in such a way that it cannot be vicious, and this act
> cannot be caused by a created will without being virtuous—because
> on the one hand everyone, no matter where or when, is obligated
> to love God above all else, and consequently this act cannot be
> vicious; and, on the other hand, because this act is the first of all
> good acts.[25]

The act of loving God above all else for his own sake is good in itself and
generates or tends to generate a virtuous habit in the agent's will (properly
identified as the virtue). This act is good whenever it is elicited, and it is
the intrinsic good on which the goodness of other acts depends, including
the goodness of other acts of will. The proviso 'whenever it is elicited' is
meant to sidestep a logical puzzle, namely whether the act of loving God
above all else for his own sake is virtuous in the circumstances where God
commands that he not be loved. Ockham's response is to hold that in such
circumstances the agent cannot in fact elicit the act of loving God above
all else for his own sake, for to love God means to do as God commands,
and hence not to love God, which is contradictory. Hence the love of God
above all else for his own sake cannot be elicited in this singular set of
circumstances, although even here the agent can love God "with a simple
and natural affection though not above all else."[26] The logical puzzle, in
other words, has to do with the conditions of eliciting the act and not with
the content of the act itself, which is not affected by its circumstances.

4. The Stages of Moral Action

In *Connex.*, Ockham describes what he calls "five stages" for each moral
virtue. His presentation is misleading on two counts. First, while the first
four stages are sequential, the fifth is not clearly like the others. Second,

[24] *Sent.* 3 q. 11 (OTh VI 389.21–22).

[25] *Quodl.* 3.14 (OTh IX 255.60–256.67).

[26] *Ibid.* (256.73–257.94).

the stages are as much about moral motivation and the agent's intentions as they are about the virtues and thereby address a wider variety of concerns than merely the theory of character (though they do that as well). The five stages—or at least the first four—explicate the nature of moral action.

The first stage, on which the next three are grounded, is described in detail as follows:

> The first stage is when someone wills to perform just works in conformity with right reason, which dictates that such works ought to be done, in the appropriate circumstances, looking precisely to the work itself for the sake of the rightness of the work insofar as it is an end. For example, the intellect dictates that such a work should be done at such a place and at such a time, for the sake of the rightness of the work, or for the sake of peace or something of the sort, and the will elicits an act of willing such works in conformity with the dictate of the intellect.[27]

There is nothing peculiar to the virtues here; Ockham's mention of "just" works at the beginning is inessential—he could as easily have said "when someone wills to perform works in conformity," and so forth. What is most striking about the first stage is that it seems to characterize an agent who is doing what he can to act morally. Right reason dictates that a given work should be done; the circumstances are apt; the agent does the work because it is right (while remaining morally neutral in itself). Yet although it seems the very picture of Aristotelian morality, Ockham finds it incomplete.

The second stage adds one of the missing elements: it is the same as the first stage "along with the intention of not putting such things aside at all for anything that is against right reason; not even for death, if right reason were to dictate that such a work not be put aside for death."[28] The missing element is that morality should be an overriding concern of the agent—or at least a concern to the extent prescribed by right reason, itself a moral arbiter. The agent should not put aside moral reasons for immoral ones; one who does is not taking morality seriously. The very seriousness of morality is one of the key features that sets it apart from other legitimate but non-ultimate concerns an agent may have in his life.

The third stage builds on the second stage, adding to it that the agent "wills to do such a work in the aforementioned circumstances precisely and solely because it has been so dictated by right reason."[29] That is, the agent

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[27] *Connex.* art. 2 (OTh VIII 335.116–123).

[28] *Ibid.* (OTh VIII 335.125–128).

[29] *Ibid.* (335.134–136).

should act from a purely moral motive. It is not enough merely to do the
right thing, or even to hold to doing it in the face of other temptations. The
right thing should be done for moral reasons—or, in Ockham's terminology,
it should be done precisely because right reason dictates it should be done,
no more and no less. Even if the agent has other motives for action, they
should not be what move him to do what should be done. More exactly, it
is better for an agent to be motivated only by a concern for acting rightly
than for any other reason. Such an agent, it seems, acts from a purely moral
motive.

When we come to the fourth stage, it is not clear whether any moral
feature is added to the preceding three:

> The fourth stage is when the agent wills to do such a work in line
> with all the aforementioned conditions and circumstances, and be-
> yond this precisely for the love of God, *e. g.* because the intellect
> so dictates that such works should be done precisely for the love of
> God. And this stage alone is the true and perfect moral virtue of
> which the Saints speak.[30]

The intention to act out of the love of God does not move us out of the realm
of moral virtue, not even to the theological virtues; Ockham allows that
justice, for instance, may exist in a fourth-stage form that is recognizably
higher and still a matter of morality rather than theology. Ockham offers
three arguments to prove that fourth-stage action is properly moral:[31] (*i*)
it is generated by and in turn is directive of moral actions; (*ii*) the mere
variation in the agent's end doesn't alter the action in question from moral
to nonmoral; (*iii*) the vice opposite to this virtue is moral vice strictly
speaking, and so the action must be morally virtuous. Yet these essentially
technical arguments let the larger question go begging. What moral features
are missing from third-stage action that are provided in fourth-stage action?

No clue is forthcoming from the fifth and final stage. Whereas the first
through the fourth stages are hierarchically ordered, Ockham is explicit that
the fifth stage can build on either the third or the fourth stage of action:[32]
if one puts aside the end of the action, "which can come about indifferently
for the sake of God, or rightness, or peace, or something of the sort," what
is distinctive about fifth-stage action is that the agent acts in a way that
far transcends the ordinary human condition, either by supererogation or
heroic perseverance. The person who deliberately commits himself to the

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[30] *Ibid.* (335.137–336.142).

[31] *Ibid.* (336.143–151).

[32] *Ibid.* (336.152–337.180).

flames rather than perform an immoral act has done something the ordinary person probably could not nerve himself to do and deserves our respect and praise accordingly. But this will not help in understanding how fourth-stage action is a moral improvement over the third stage. To put the problem sharply, what moral feature does the love of God add to acting from purely moral motives?

5. God and Right Reason

Ockham returns to a slightly simplified version of his distinction among moral stages in *Dial.* 1.6.77,[33] where he contrasts only three possibilities: an action may be done for the sake of God, or because it is dictated by right reason, or for the sake of some useful or pleasurable good to be pursued. He raises the last possibility only to dismiss it as not a kind of moral motivation at all. Hence, we are left with the contrast between third-stage and fourth-stage action. Here Ockham tells us that actions performed for the sake of God are instances of perfect virtue, whereas actions performed because they are dictated by right reason are instances of true virtue, though imperfect with respect to actions performed for the sake of God. His example, framed in terms of the context in which he is discussing the veracity of witnesses, suggests an interpretation of the difference:

> Wanting to tell the truth for the sake of God is much more perfect an action than wanting to tell the truth only because right reason dictates the truth should be told, even as God is more perfect than right reason, and so this truth is more imperfect than the other... There were such moral virtues, some people think, in many pagans. For many of them tried to live and did live according to right reason.[34]

Ockham argues that even as God is more perfect than right reason, so too the truth told is more perfect from one of the devout than from an upright pagan. Now he cannot mean that the devout truthteller is more veracious than the pagan truthteller. Both, he admits, are telling truths; they are each virtuous. (It might be that the devout are less likely to lie, owing to their fear of divine retribution, than pagans are, but that is a different matter altogether.) Nor is there a difference in the result: God and right reason each prescribe telling the truth. Instead, the difference lies in where one puts one's trust for a source of truth—God or reason.

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[33] *Dial.* 1.6.77 (Goldast 1614).

[34] *Ibid.*

Reason is, first and foremost, an individual cognitive capacity, as sight is an individual perceptual capacity; when Ockham and others speak of "right" reason they mean an intellectual capacity that is not disordered. One of the signs that reason is functioning properly is its ability to recognize evident truths, including those discussed in §2 (*e. g.* "Murder is wrong"). Now it is by no means wrong to trust right reason. Yet our finite and limited cognitive capacities can take us only so far. Human reason does not tend to converge on nonevident truths (witness long-standing philosophical disagreements). Fortunately we are not limited to cognitive capacities; in good Franciscan fashion, Ockham holds that the will can reach beyond the intellect and even help to guide it. In more traditional terminology, faith can extend the grasp of reason.

Ockham holds that it cannot be proved by natural reason that we require any "supernatural habit" (such as faith or charity) for our ultimate end; faith is not enjoined by reason,[35] though it may complement and extend it. Recall from Ockham's definition of the fourth stage of moral action that it builds on the third stage: the agent performs an action precisely because it is dictated by right reason and precisely for the love of God. That is, one expresses the love of God by acting in accordance with the dictates of right reason. The feature added in the fourth stage is to see moral action itself as expressing one's love of God. This deepens the ordinary notion of the moral but does not alter or replace it. Hence Ockham can maintain some pagan thinkers led lives of perfect moral rectitude and were deserving of final reward: "It is not impossible that God ordain that one who lives according to the right dictate of reason, in such a way that he believes only what he concludes through natural reason he ought to believe, be worthy of eternal life."[36] This is true even though there is an important sense in which the moral virtues of the pagan philosophers are systematically different from the moral virtues of Ockham and his contemporaries, the latter inspired as they are by faith.[37]

6. Subordination of the Will

The highest stage of moral behavior, then, is act out of the love of God above all else for his own sake. What does this formula entail? How is moral action structured by this end? Ockham has already suggested the answer in the discussion of the logical puzzle presented at the end of §3—"to love God

[35] *Sent.* 3 q. 9 (OTh VI 279.3–5).

[36] *Ibid.* (280.10–13); see also *Sent.* 1 d. 17 q. 1 (OTh III 452.2–453.10).

[37] *Sent.* 4 qq. 3–5 (OTh VII 58.6–23).

above all else is this: to love whatever God wants to be loved."[38] Again, "anyone who rightly loves God loves all that God wants to be loved."[39] In short, the will binds itself to God by subordination. We love God above all else by wanting what God wants precisely for the reason that God wants it. For Ockham, then, the core of ethics is the love of God (the intrinsically good act), and the love of God is a matter of conforming one's own will to God's will.

In *Sent.* 1 d. 48 q. unica, Ockham asks whether every created will is bound to conform itself to God's will. In the course of his answer he draws a series of distinctions to make precise the sense in which we subordinate our wills to God's will. The first and most important distinction is that one will can conform itself to another in three ways:[40] (*i*) to will what has been willed by another will; (*ii*) to will that which another will wills it to will; (*iii*) to will something in a way similar to that in which another will wills it. Ockham puts the last of these aside and concentrates on the first two. The natural way of interpreting the phrase "loving what God wants to be loved" is in line with (*i*), where the agent adopts the will of another. Brown wants to make Smith happy; Jones, who wants to conform his will to Brown's, adopts the desire to make Smith happy. However, Ockham holds (*ii*) to be the better interpretation, where the agent takes his will to be directed by the will of another and not merely to adopt whatever desires the other has.[41] Thus, the appropriate desires on the part of those conforming their will may differ systematically from one another, and any or all from the will of the one to whom they conform their wills. For example, Brown may want to make Smith happy but wants Jones to do something that would make Smith sad (perhaps so that Smith can thereafter be made happy by contrast); Jones, in conforming his will to Brown's, should thereby want to make Smith sad rather than happy. Ockham elsewhere offers a pair of examples where (*i*) and (*ii*) come apart:[42] God from eternity willed the death of Christ and yet wanted the Jews not to want Christ's death in the way they brought death upon him; God wills my father to die and yet wants me not to want my father's death. To love God above all else, then, involves willing what God wants one to will.

More precisely, Ockham argues in *Sent.* 1 d. 48 that any given created

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[38] *Quodl.* 3.14 (OTh IX 257.87–88).

[39] *Connex.* art. 3 (OTh VIII 359.416–417).

[40] *Sent.* 1 d. 48 q. unica (OTh IV 687.2–6).

[41] *Ibid.* (689.22–690.1).

[42] *Act. virt.* (OTh VIII 434.575–435.580).

will is bound to will habitually and mediately what God wills it to will, precisely because God wills it, thereby manifesting the love of God above all else for his own sake. Ockham unpacks this claim as follows:

> And if the question were raised what the habit is that inclines one to will everything willed by God, it should be said that it is some such habit by which one's will is pleased by everything that pleases the divine will, and this should always exist in everyone having the use of reason after he achieves (or can achieve) a cognition of God. Yet this habit doesn't incline one immediately to everything willed by God. For it has to presuppose a cognition in which it is known that this is willed by God, and it inclines one to act through the mediation of this cognition.[43]

The will is not a blind faculty; it operates through the mediation of right reason, though it need not follow its dictates; the will is free. In order to act properly, therefore, an agent must try to be the sort of person who wills what God wants him to will precisely because he knows God wills him to will it.

This is, roughly, a general condition on rational action: to be habitually disposed to carry out God's will. When it comes to the actual cognition of God's will, Ockham points out that we are not bound to know everything willed by God, since this is simply impossible for our finite capacities. However, if we do know something is willed by God, then we are bound to conform our will to it; such is the case for particular precepts as well as general moral rules.[44] Ockham says the expected things about our epistemic responsibilities: the will can elicit a right act even with an error in the intellect, provided the error could not be overcome and the agent is in no way culpable,[45] since "a created will following reason that is erroneous though an invincible error is right."[46] If God wants us to act in a certain way, then he can make his will known to us, and we are bound to carry out his will, as described earlier in this section.

7. Divine Commands

God can issue commands that differ systematically from one agent to another,[47] but he cannot give anyone contradictory commands, nor can he

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[43] *Sent.* 1 d. 48 q. unica (OTh IV 688.12-19).

[44] *Ibid.* (689.5–21).

[45] *Act. virt.* (OTh VIII 423.307–308).

[46] *Ibid.* (436.610–611).

[47] *Sent.* 1 d. 47 q. unica (OTh IV 683.10–17).

will a contradiction.[48] Because the very notions of theft, murder, adultery, and the like involve the notion of someone performing an action who is under the obligation by divine command to the opposite, it follows that God cannot make such actions the objects of his commands, that is, God cannot make murder or theft right; he can, however, enjoin the acts that are commonly described by these names, since the acts in themselves are morally neutral.[49] Ockham offers a lively illustration: when God commanded the sons of Israel to despoil the Egyptians, this, it turns out, was not a case of theft at all; "it was a good thing rather than an evil."[50]

Given the moral neutrality of acts, it seems as though God could command any given act or type of act to be obligatory or prohibited, and indeed that his command would be constitutive of the rightness or wrongness of these acts. Yet the matter is not quite so straightforward. In *Sent.* 1 d. 46,[51] Ockham discusses the case in which Abraham is told he must sacrifice his son Isaac. He is reluctant to simply assert God's freedom to command anything; he recognizes God granted Abraham the power to sacrifice Isaac and gave him the command to do so but maintains that God did not want to be a co-participant in the sacrifice.[52] But why not? It would no more have been murder than despoiling the Egyptians was theft. Ockham even hints that the reason God did not permit the sacrifice to occur was that "God neither commands nor counsels sin."[53]

Now God devised humans in such a way that clear cases of murder, theft, and the like would appear to be such. (There may be difficult borderline cases.) Were God to command that some class of acts is obligatory or forbidden that appears to our faculties to be otherwise, then we should have been designed otherwise. This is, of course, compatible with God's informing us of special cases that might appear to be theft (despoiling the Egyptians) or murder (sacrificing Isaac) but in fact are not such. However, the tension between God's freedom to command and the apparently wrongful acts that are commanded is one of the most controverted points in scholarship on Ockham's ethics, and there is no consensus about his response to the difficulty, or even whether he recognized a difficulty at all.

No matter how this issue is resolved, it is clear that Ockham's ethics

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[48] *Sent.* 2 q. 15 (OTh V 353.3–18).

[49] *Ibid.* (352.3–7).

[50] *Sent.* 1 d. 47 q. unica (OTh IV 685.8–9).

[51] *Sent.* 1 d. 46 q. 1 (OTh IV 670–675).

[52] *Ibid.* (673.6–10).

[53] *Ibid.* (674.2–3).

ultimately rests on at least the possibility of different divine commands to different agents. Yet there is something that underlies all of their actions, namely their virtue.

8. The Virtues

In *Sent.* 3 q. 11, Ockham asks where the virtues are located in human psychology: the intellect? the will? the passions? He offers a complex and subtle argument that advances the following theses:[54] First, we should postulate a habit in the sensitive appetite that inclines one to act—roughly, that we have or can develop patterns of emotional responses. Second, this habit is not, strictly speaking, a virtue, although it is often loosely called one. Third, for every such habit postulated in the sensitive appetite a corresponding habit should be postulated in the will. Fourth, this habit in the will is properly the virtue.

The will is a free potency and so of its nature is no more inclined to one alternative than to another in a choice situation. Yet after eliciting several acts of the same sort there does seem to be an effect on the will such that it is inclined (but not determined) to act in that way, or at least to act more easily in that way than in other ways. In fact, we experience this effect in ourselves. We can call it a "habit" and recognize it in other faculties as well; habits are a fundamental part of Ockham's philosophy of mind. Our ability to train our responses, emotional and otherwise, is also a phenomenon of habit.

Ockham's argument for the crucial fourth thesis presented earlier is short and to the point. The only thing that can properly be called a virtue is that whose act is strictly virtuous; but only the act of the will is virtuous; hence virtue must be a habit of the will.[55] Now traditionally the virtues were taken to be patterns of emotional and motivational responses to situations. Those that were stable and abiding could be identified as character traits. Ockham rejects this traditional account and replaces it with the idea of an inclination to choose in certain ways. On his account, the virtues are much more closely linked with the will.

Ockham recognizes two kinds of virtues: theological and moral. The theological virtues are those of faith, hope, and charity; the moral virtues include justice, temperance, and fortitude. (Ockham does not treat prudence as a virtue.) He occasionally refers to other virtuous conditions, such as chastity and virginity, abstinence, and the like, but for the most part his

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[54] *Sent.* 3 q. 11 (OTh VI 358.18–22). See also *Quodl.* 2.16.

[55] *Sent.* 3 q. 11 (OTh VI 366.1–3).

discussion is only concerned with the specific virtues listed above. As noted in §4, each of the moral virtues may occur in various stages.

Ockham has an extensive discussion of the nature of the virtues and their interrelations in *Connex.* (OTh VIII 323–407); most of the following discussion will be indebted to his analysis presented there. But before turning to it, we can summarize its main results by looking at Ockham's more compact discussion in *Sent.* 3 q. 12.[56] His conclusion can be summed up in a slogan: the moral virtues are connected dispositively but not formally. That is, no given moral virtue of its nature involves any other moral virtue; they are formally independent. They are of course each compatible with one another. Yet in addition to their formal independence and their actual compatibility, there is an important fact about the moral virtues: the possession of one may dispose their bearer to the possession of another (or all the others). They are connected "dispositively."

In *Connex.* Ockham again inquires into the connection of the virtues but this time in the context of the stages outlined in §4 and adds a treatment of the theological virtues. His analysis defies summary. However, a statement of some of the main points can provide a feeling for the subtleties and nuance of which Ockham was capable.

Start with the moral virtues. Ockham holds that third- or fourth-stage moral virtues are such as to incline their possessor to engage in acts generative of other virtues. For instance, someone with third-stage justice would be so unwilling to perpetrate injustice or to see it done that he would at least begin to resist, even in the face of danger—which is to say, he would thereby make a start on the virtue of fortitude as well. An agent who merely had a second-stage moral virtue might or might not be so inclined; it would depend on the virtue and on the case. But first-stage moral virtue does not so incline its possessor for the agent would presumably be willing to abandon the moral pursuit for another concern (because the distinction between first- and second-stage moral virtue amounts to this).

Matters become more complex when we take the vices contrary to these moral virtues into account. Any given first- or second-stage moral virtue may coexist in an agent with the vice contrary to some other moral virtue. But this is not the case for third- and fourth-stage moral virtue, which, as just noted, tend to reinforce other moral virtues and thereby drive out the corresponding contrary vices. The only exceptions for the latter are instances of non-culpable ignorance; an agent may have fourth-stage justice, for example, and due to unavoidable ignorance commit an intemperate act.

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[56] *Sent.* 3 q. 12 (OTh VI 424–425).

The theological virtues do not admit of stages; they all express the agent's love of God by their very nature. They are formally independent of one another; as Ockham remarks in *Sent.* 4, God can make charity without faith or hope, at least by his absolute power.[57] Because the theological virtues usually occur together, though, it is clear that they are mutually compatible.

Returning to the discussion in *Connex.*, Ockham notes that the theological virtues can be possessed without all the moral virtues, although they are directly incompatible with the moral vices. Clearly fourth-stage moral virtues require the theological virtues. But none of the preceding stages of moral virtue requires the theological virtues, and the first two stages of moral virtue are also compatible with the theological vices (contrary to the theological virtues). The third stage of moral virtue, however, is only compatible with a theological vice through some form of reasoning error.

Conclusion

Ockham's scattered and fragmentary presentation of his ethical views belie the systematic rigor and unity they possess. His insistence on the moral centrality of the agent as well as the moral centrality of God give shape to his distinctive and original claims regarding actions, the will, divine commands, and the virtues. Ockham's ethical theory, centered on the subordination of the human will, serves as a marked contrast to our modern insistence on the autonomy of the will as a fundamental ethical principle. It is a testament to Ockham's philosophical creativity that he could devise such a powerful and original theory—not to mention having done so within the traditional constraints of Biblical and Aristotelian morality. Ockham's theory deserves more attention than it has received.[58]

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[57] *Sent.* 4 qq. 3–5 (OTh VII 48.15–16). See also *Quodl.* 3.9.

[58] Recommended reading with this chapter: Adams [1986]; Freppert [1988]; Suk [1950]; Urban [1973]; Wood [1997].

RECOMMENDED READING

Adams [1986]. Marilyn Adams, "The Structure of Ockham's Moral Theory" in *Franciscan Studies* 45 (1986), 1–35.

Freppert [1988]. Lucan Freppert, *The Basis of Morality According to William of Ockham*. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press 1988.

Kent [1995]. Bonnie Kent, *Virtues of the Will: The Transformation of Ethics in the Late Thirteenth Century*. Catholic University of America Press 1995.

Suk [1950]. Othmar Suk, "The Connection of the Virtues According to Ockham" in *Franciscan Studies* 10 (1950). Part I: 9–32. Part II: 91–113.

Urban [1973]. Linwood Urban, "William of Ockham's Theological Ethics" in *Franciscan Studies* 33 (1973) 310–350.

Wood [1997]. Rega Wood, *Ockham on the Virtues*. Purdue University Press 1997.