

Ockham and the decline of moral theology

William of Ockham (c. 1285-1347) made a decisive impact not only on the 14th century but also on all subsequent moral theology. In this article Fr. Pinckers shows how Ockham fashioned the first morality of obligation. Ockham conceives man's freedom as a series of independent, voluntary decisions which are to conform to the obligations issuing from God's law. Even loving God, according to Ockham, must be subjected to obligation.

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Catholic moral theology reached its zenith with St. Thomas Aquinas. At the same time, there was also a rich development of moral in Alexander of Hales, St. Bonaventure, and Duns Scotus. These two schools, Dominican and Franciscan, were in serious disagreement on important points. Nonetheless, they represented a common effort of the Christian intellect to sound the mystery of salvation—a mystery which transcends all human understanding and hence lies open to a variety of approaches.

William of Ockham and the nominalism which he sired brought an end to this development and steered moral theology in a quite new direction that influenced all subsequent thinking. Our present interest lies in those aspects of Ockham's work which evidence a new structuring in moral thought. Its essence lies in his conception of freedom as radically

indeterminate, completely self-autonomous and absolutely self-determining, with no "outside" input into its decision-making.

The following comparison may seem bold but it fits the facts. With Ockham, we witness the first atomic explosion of the modern era. The atom which Ockham splits is psychology's new conception of freedom which integrates the nucleus of the human soul with its powers, provoking a chain reaction which splits the unity of theology and of Western thought. With Ockham, freedom, in its claim of radical autonomy, splits off from reason and sensitivity, from natural inclinations and from every external factor. The result is further chain reactions: between freedom on the one side, and nature, law and grace on the other, between the moral and the mystical, reason and faith, the individual and society.

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Freedom of choice for Ockham no longer results from the interaction of intellect and will. It is solely the act of the will—a will that becomes man's essential faculty. When we cap this with the nominalist's insistence that only the singular is real, morality comes to dwell only in each individual act of free choice. Finality—whether as natural inclination or as organizing principle—gets lost. (Ockham admits to finality only *within* the individual act.) Man's moral life thus becomes a series of individual acts with no intrinsic connections. The individual acts in an absolute manner—as an island unto himself. This insularity paved the way for regarding moral as “cases of conscience” (casuistry).

Man's natural inclinations?

Because our natural inclinations are marginalized from the center of the free act (the source of morality), finality has no place outside the individual act. For St. Thomas, man's natural inclinations to the good, being, the true, were the source of his freedom; constitutive of will and intellect, they joined forces and thus formed free choice. For Ockham, though there may be an inclination to happiness, the will is free to act against it and even reject it. To be free and moral, says Ockham, man's choice must be made independent of his natural inclinations.

Since each (free) act must be independent of all previous acts, habits and virtues play no decisive role in free will. Indeed, to the extent that habit influences the will it reduces freedom and, as a result, the goodness of the act. Habits indeed exist,

but only to facilitate *carrying out* free decisions—not to make them. Any act is good only if the will, at each instant, has full and unrestricted freedom to respond or not to obligations. *Anything* that limits freedom restricts the goodness and merit of the act. Thus Ockham's morality is not one of growth in goodness, but a morality of acts.

God's freedom

Ockham formally defines God's freedom in the same way as man's—its essence is to be absolutely unrestricted. God's nature in no way limits the range of his freedom. His choices are not grounded in reason. Consequently God can make even blasphemy good and meritorious. He can command man to hate him and reward him for doing so.

The difference between man's freedom and God's does not lie in any mitigation of its absolute character, but rather in God's being more powerful and thus able to impose his will on man. Since there can be no intrinsic prior determination of morality, either in God or in the nature of things, the whole of morality becomes dependent on God's will and the whole of morality for man lies in doing God's will. Thus obligation (i.e., the obligation of law) is made essential and central to morality.

In setting obligation and law at the center of morality, Ockham displaces love. Love of God has no direct, essentially moral value; even it is dependent on God's free will. This is clear from Ockham's insistence that God can make it meritorious to hate him. Any emphasis on love as leading to perfection is separated from moral. Here we find the

basis for later separating mystical and ascetical theology on the one hand from moral theology on the other.

Moral obligation is fixed by law. The work of the moralist becomes determining the laws and obligations imposed by revelation (and by logical deduction from that revelation). Morality is not based on nature nor justified by right reason.

Old terms, new content

Further, prudence and practical reason no longer deal with intrinsic rightness. They simply funnel the obligations imposed by God's all-powerful (arbitrary) will. Here, as so often, Ockham used Aristotle's (and Thomas') terminology while giving it a vastly different content. (Later moral theologians will substitute “conscience” for Ockham's “practical reason.”)

Thus while maintaining a classical doctrine on the surface, Ockham transformed and adapted it to his system. All of morality depends on freedom, and practical reason and prudence are purely intermediaries between law and free will. Their function is to make known precepts and obligations.

But the act of freedom is not moral simply because we follow God's law. For an act to be fully good, says Ockham, it must not only be founded on right reason, but be willed *solely because* dictated by right reason (obligation). Love, hope, or any other motives can play no part in a fully virtuous act. Thus Ockham displaces happiness, love—all virtues—

from their central position in morality. This formulation led inevitably to Kant's categorical imperative.

Obligation, which until Ockham had played a minor role, now takes center stage. Ockham fashioned the first morality of obligation. This shift in emphasis decisively influenced later moral theologians. They indeed criticized nominalism (particularly for relativizing moral law and refusing to base it on nature); but by the 17th and 18th centuries there was a quasi-unanimity that obligation must be the heart of morality.

Ockham's new structuring of moral had two poles: God's freedom and man's. From God comes moral law. This law expresses his will concretely and from him receives its power to oblige. And man's freedom is conceived as a succession of independent, voluntary decisions which are to conform to the orders and obligations issuing from law and made known by reason.—Freedom and law, practical reason (what later moralists will call “conscience”), free acts or cases of conscience (casuistry), and, at the center, obligation—these are the constitutive atoms of the nominalist system. We readily see the principal traits that will form the later moral manuals. Only the emphasis on sin is missing. But subsequent to Trent, this too will come to the fore.

Ockham reduces virtue (goodness) simply to the conformity of each will act with obligation. The theme of friendship—which St. Thomas used to define love of God—disappears from morality.