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## FORMALLY AND EQUIVALENTLY IMPERATIVE ACTS OF WILL IN OCKHAM'S MORAL THOUGHT

The question of the connection of the virtues was a much debated theme in the Middle Ages. If someone is just, will she also be courageous<sup>1</sup>? Ockham's contribution to this theme is found in *Quaestiones variae*, q. 7, titled «On the Connection of the Virtues» (*Utrum virtutes sint connexae*). In my paper, however, I am not going to deal with what Ockham says about the relations between the different kinds of virtues. Instead, I am interested in another topic that is also discussed in q. 7, namely Ockham's distinction between formally imperative and equivalently imperative acts of will. Ockham presents this distinction just before his well-known discussion of the five grades of moral virtue<sup>2</sup>. In the first part of my paper, I will explain the main point of the distinction<sup>3</sup>. In

<sup>1</sup> For the discussion, see Ch. 4 «The Medieval Debate on the Connection of the Virtues» in the introduction in R. WOOD, *Ockham on the Virtues*, Indiana, Purdue University Press, 1997, pp. 40-59. Besides the introduction by Rega Wood, the book contains her translation of Ockham's *Quaestiones variae*, q. 7, and her commentary on it.

<sup>2</sup> For the most important source material for this paper, see Guillelmus de Ockham, *Quaestiones variae*, G.I. ETZKORN, F.E. KELLEY and J.C. WEY (eds.) St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, N.Y. 1984, q. 7, a. 2, pp. 333-337 (Guillelmi de Ockham Opera theologica, vol. VIII); see also *ibid.*, p. 372.

<sup>3</sup> Ockham, *Quaestiones variae*, q. 7, a. 2, 333.76-334.100: «...habituum moralium quidam sunt geniti ex actibus imperativis executionis formaliter, quidam sunt geniti ex actibus respectu eorundem obiectorum, qui actus non sunt formaliter imperativi executionis sed tantum aequivalenter imperativi, quia ad illos actus non inclinatur habitus talis quando est impedimentum executionis, sed amoto omni impedimento, tunc ad tales actus inclinatur habitus de necessitate. Exemplum primi: aliquis vult patienter sustinere mortem pro defensione fidei, et intentata sibi morte, imperat potentiis sustinere talem poenam sine rebellionem. Istud imperium non est nisi velle actualiter sine contradictione

the second part, I will briefly look at Ockham's discussion of the grades of virtue in order to see the relation between these two themes. Finally, the third part is dedicated to the question of the moral meaning of the equivalently imperative acts of will.

### I. FORMALLY AND EQUIVALENTLY IMPERATIVE ACTS OF WILL

A formally imperative act of will is an act by which the will of a person actually commands her executive faculties to execute an act. For example, if someone wills to donate money for the poor because of loving God, she can command herself to go to the bank and pay a sum to some given account. That command is a formally imperative act of will and it is nothing other than willing effectively to do something<sup>4</sup>.

An equivalently imperative act of will is an act by which the will, because of some known impediment, wills only conditionally something which it otherwise would, or at least could, will actually, and without conditions<sup>5</sup>. On the basis of the examples used by Ockham, it seems to be essential that the person is unable to remove the impediment in question<sup>6</sup>. The impediment is not in the power of the will, at least at the moment when the equivalently imperative act is elicited. As far as I can see, it is just the fact of an impediment which makes the act only an equivalently imperative act, and this means it is not imperative at all; it could be if there were no hindrance. Ockham's idea in defining it in this way is, I think, to say that you can genuinely compare equivalently imperative acts with formally imperative acts, but they still are not identical; nor could they be,

*sustinere mortem quando mors sibi offertur. Aliud exemplum est: aliquis habens multas divitias vult actualiter illas dare pauperibus pro amore Dei, et imperat actualiter, amoto impedimento, potentiis executivis ut exsequantur. Quod imperium non est aliud quam velle sic actualiter dare, amoto omni impedimento; si enim esset impedimentum, tunc non posset rationabiliter velle dare absolute sed tantum condicionaliter, puta si tale impedimentum non esset. Exemplum secundi: aliquis vellet sustinere mortem pro defensione fidei, si mors immineret sibi, et non esset impedimentum. Similiter, quantum ad aliud exemplum, aliquis vellet libenter dare divitias pro amore Dei, si eas haberet, et non esset aliud impedimentum; sed quia non habet, ideo non potest rationabiliter illas actualiter absolute dare propter impedimentum. Istud velle est actus imperativus non formaliter sed tantum aequivalenter».*

<sup>4</sup> See note 3.

<sup>5</sup> See note 3.

<sup>6</sup> See «Exemplum secundi» in note 3.

for the equivalently imperative act has an impediment as its object, whereas the formally imperative act does not<sup>7</sup>. This entails that the equivalently imperative act cannot be an actual command to execute an act. An example of an equivalently imperative act of will would be the following: someone would will to donate money for the poor because of loving God, if he would have money which he does not have.

The distinction between formally and equivalently imperative acts of will is mentioned also in *Quaestiones variae*, q. 4, which concerns the causality of the end. Ockham's example of an equivalently imperative act there can be rendered as follows: I would will to take medicine because I will to get well, if there were no impediment<sup>8</sup>. Here a person wills some means because she wills some end, but due to some impediment she does not want to use the means in question, or rather is not able to use it; for example, the person finds the medicine too bitter. When describing the willing of the means in a case like this, it is important to mention the impediment and express the willing conditionally: A wills P and would will to do Q, the means, if there were no non-removable impediment for doing it, because A wills P.

The formally imperative act of will, on the other hand, does not have any impediment as its object. It is as follows: I will to take medicine that I dislike because I will to get well<sup>9</sup>. In an act like this, the willing of the

<sup>7</sup> See Ockham, *Quaestiones variae*, q. 7, a. 2, 334.101-104.

<sup>8</sup> Ockham, *Quaestiones variae*, q. 4, 120.465-121.490: «...loquendo de effectu producto per actum voluntatis formaliter imperativum executionis in actu exteriori vel interiori – dico quod causalitas finis...est primo finem absolute cognosci et amari uno actu, et postea illum finem alio actu amari, et aliud propter finem amatam amari, sic quod agens agat effectum extra vel intra, ita quod secundum velle videtur velle imperativum formaliter executionis. ... Exemplum de sanitate et potione amara. Possum enim amare sanitatem primo absolute, et postea amare sanitatem, et propter ipsam amatam amare potionem amaram absque hoc quod velim bibere potionem mihi oblatam, quam forte nolo bibere propter amaritudinem vel aliquod aliud impediens. Et ista istud velle quo sic volo potionem amaram non est imperativum formaliter, sed solum imperativum aequivalenter, puta velle bibere si non esset impedimentum».

<sup>9</sup> Ockham, *Quaestiones variae*, q. 4, 121.490-122.499: «Sed si volo primo sanitatem absolute per unum actum, et post per alium actum volo sic sanitatem quod propter eam amatam volo bibere potionem mihi oblatam, quo velle posito statim bibo potionem, nec impeditur effectus bibendi, illud secundum amare sive velle est causalitas causae finalis respectu actus bibendi. Et eodem modo est dicendum si imperetur aliquis actus interior, puta actus studendi; et tunc effectus productus extra et actus voluntatis formaliter imperativus habent eandem causam finalem, puta sanitatem».

means will naturally and necessarily follow, once the end is willed in an efficacious way<sup>10</sup>.

What seems to be common to the formally and equivalently imperative acts of will is that in both cases one wills something else for the sake of willing an end. In the case of the equivalently imperative act, however, the willing of the end is not effective, because of the known impediment. The result is that the willing of the means remains an attitude of the type «I would will if I could». If this interpretation is correct, we can analyze all the equivalently imperative acts of will as follows: «A would will the means, if there were no impediment». It is very clear that the formally imperative act is analyzed differently. A firm opinion of what is the necessary means for obtaining the end is linked to the willing of the end. When the agent knows the means and does not know of anything that would prevent the use of it, the willing of the means is necessarily caused by the efficacious willing of the end. The willing of the means, or its election, is the formally imperative act. Ockham seems to think that one can call this election a formally imperative act of will just because it is identical with the act of will by which the will commands executive faculties to execute the act.

Ockham puts the distinction discussed above in a moral context: some virtues or moral habits are engendered by the formally imperative acts of will, and some by the equivalently imperative acts of will<sup>11</sup>. Because equivalently imperative acts of will are capable of engendering virtues, it is plausible to assume that they have some kind of moral significance. However, here we must be careful; Ockham's theory of ethics does not represent virtue ethics, and virtues do not have a central place in his ethical thought. Ockham puts the acts of will in the center of morality; the primary interest in morality is in the evaluation of the acts of will as either morally good or virtuous, or morally bad or vicious. The moral goodness of an act

<sup>10</sup> Ockham, *Quaestiones variae*, q. 6, a. 11, 302.354-360: «...infirmus potest libere velle potionem amaram et non velle sicut placet. Sed stante uno actu in voluntate quo vult efficaciter sanitatem omnino, nec pro aliquo impedimento dimitteret consequi sanitatem, et alio actu in intellectu quo dictat ipsum infirmum non posse sanari nisi per potionem amaram necessario tunc et ita naturaliter – sicut ignis calefacit – vult tunc potionem amaram». See also Ockham, *Ordinatio*, G. GAL (ed.) St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, N. Y. 1967, d. 1, q. 6, 496.6-13 (Guillelmi de Ockham Opera theologica, vol. I).

<sup>11</sup> See note 3.

of will is judged by certain criteria; its capability of engendering virtues is not included in these criteria<sup>12</sup>.

## II. THE GRADES OF MORAL VIRTUE

As mentioned, Ockham makes a distinction between formally and equivalently imperative acts of will just before his discussion of the five grades of moral virtue. I will next consider whether Ockham's discussion of the grades of moral virtue<sup>13</sup> sheds more light on the question of the moral significance of the equivalently imperative acts of will. When Ockham discusses the grades of virtue, he uses virtue-terminology, of course, but, in fact, the discussion concerns morally good action in the different grades of virtue<sup>14</sup>. Every grade of moral virtue deals with one specific mode of acting in conformity with the dictate of right reason. I will return to this dictate of right reason later on. Thus, Ockham's discussion is about various kinds of patterns of acting rightly<sup>15</sup>. Briefly, one can speak of different levels of morality. The grades or levels differ from each other so that every higher grade takes on some additional condition as compared with the grade before it. Ockham describes the virtuous acts of will at the different levels of morality as complying with the virtue of justice, which is the virtue directed to exterior acts<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> See T.M. HOLOPAINEN, *William Ockham's Theory of the Foundations of Ethics*, Helsinki, 1991, pp. 26-31, 85-91, 110-132 (Publications of Luther-Agricola-Society, B 20).

<sup>13</sup> For Ockham's discussion of the five grades of moral virtue, see *Quaestiones variae*, q. 7, a. 2, 335.116 - 337.192.

<sup>14</sup> See HOLOPAINEN, *William Ockham's Theory...*, 1991, p. 121; see also P. KING, «Ockham's Ethical Theory» in P.V. SPADE (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 233.

<sup>15</sup> In Ockham's ethics, morally right or good action consists of willing some obligatory end and electing some means dictated by reason because of that end. For the structure of the moral act in Ockham's ethics, see T.M. HOLOPAINEN, «The moral Act in Ockham», in B.C. BAZÁN, E. ANDÚJAR, L.G. SBROCCHI (eds.), *Les philosophies morales et politiques au Moyen Âge: actes du 9e Congrès international de philosophie médiévale*, Ottawa, 17-22 août 1992, Legas, New York-Ottawa-Toronto, 1995, vol. III, pp. 1276-1284 (Publications du Laboratoire de la pensée ancienne et médiévale, I.1-3).

<sup>16</sup> Ockham, *Quodlibeta septem*, J.C. WEY (ed.) St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, N.Y. 1980, III, q. 18, 274.35-41 (Guillelmi de Ockham Opera theologica, vol. IX): «Sed iustitia non habet passiones sed operationes exteriores pro obiecto et materia: sicut bona aequaliter distribuere, aequaliter dividere, liberare etc. Nam actus iustitiae est

Many central features of Ockham's deontological moral thought become unveiled in his discussion of the five grades of virtue. However, we cannot treat the subject in detail here<sup>17</sup>. I will just mention one aspect which, I think, makes Ockham's discussion particularly interesting. Ockham seems to think that the higher the level of morality, the more clearly and specifically the agent recognizes the profound idea or core in morality. The third grade of virtue represents the best possible natural morality and the fourth grade represents Christian morality, which Ockham deems to be the perfect way of acting virtuously. On these levels, it is not possible to refer to some more or less extrinsic matters, for example, the outcome of the action, to ground a moral election. Instead the moral election must be based on a definite intention, which is understood as an act of willing a certain general end. In third-grade natural morality, moral elections are based on the intention of following the dictates of right reason. In fourth-grade Christian morality, moral elections are based on the intention of following the divine commands disclosed by right reason. Morality as profoundly understood is, then, quite a demanding, duty-based morality<sup>18</sup>. This point of view of Ockham's ethics goes together well with the view that Ockham puts formally imperative acts of will at the core of morality in the different grades of virtue. I will next consider how Ockham explicitly connects them to the fifth grade or heroic virtue.

Heroic virtue arises when an agent, in accordance with the dictate of reason, elects to do a deed which, at least for some aspect, is against natural inclination. Acting heroically is possible both for Christians and non-Christians. Their heroic actions originate from the same virtue and differ from each other only in their intention. The intention of a non-Christian is something other than loving God. The heroic election is identical with the command of the will to execute the act, which Ockham

velle tales operationes debito modo exercere; et per consequens illae operationes sunt obiecta illorum actuum, igitur et habituum ad tales actus inclinantium, quia hoc est generaliter verum, quod idem est obiectum actus et habitus correspondentis».

<sup>17</sup> For some further remarks, see HOLOPAINEN, *William Ockham's Theory...*, 1991, pp. 121-125.

<sup>18</sup> It is a conceptual and necessary truth in Ockham's ethics that morally good action is to fulfill moral obligation as a moral obligation. Another question is whether there are actual moral obligations. This question is connected in an interesting way to Ockham's distinction between formally and equivalently imperative acts of will. For this, see *Quaestiones variae*, q. 7, a. 2, 334.94-109.

calls the formally imperative act of will. Ockham explicitly says that heroic virtue can only be engendered by these kinds of formally imperative acts of will<sup>19</sup>. Ockham's view seems to be quite clear, because nothing very heroic will come into being, for example, through a moral agent's equivalently imperative act of will in the case where someone is in extreme danger and in need of help on the part of the moral agent. His view also implies, I think, that he accepts the reality of moral virtues engendered by the equivalently imperative acts of will in the first, second, third and fourth grades of moral virtue<sup>20</sup>. Another question is, what is the moral meaning of acts of will in these grades of virtue?

How strongly, then, are the moral agents obligated to heroic moral elections? The levels of morality described by Ockham have one formal condition in common: the election must be in conformity with the dictate of right reason. Ockham seems to think that in some kinds of situations, reason can dictate heroic action already in the second grade of virtue which represents the more modest level of natural morality<sup>21</sup>. If it so happens, the moral agent is obligated to the action dictated by reason. As far as I can see, the heroic pattern of action has been included in all the grades of virtue except the first one, which represents the most modest level of moral action. Accordingly, heroic virtue is not really a level of morality; no one seems to be obligated solely to heroic action. Instead, anyone who commits herself to second, third, or fourth level morality can be committed to the heroic pattern of action in some extreme situations.

<sup>19</sup> Ockham, *Quaestiones variae*, q. 7, a. 2, 336.152-337.167. Cfr. *ibid.*, q. 6, a. 10, 275.72-277.122; see also M. McCORD ADAMS, «Scotus and Ockham on the Connection of the Virtues» in L. HONNEFELDER, R. WOOD and M. DREYER (eds.), *John Duns Scotus. Metaphysics and Ethics*, Leiden, New York, Köln, E.J. Brill, 1996, p. 513.

<sup>20</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams and Rega Wood discuss equivalently imperative acts of will as pertaining to the second grade of virtue; Wood identifies the equivalently imperative act as a conditional intention in this grade. See M. McCORD ADAMS, «Scotus and Ockham on the Connection of the Virtues», 1996, pp. 512-515; R. WOOD, *Ockham on the Virtues*, 1997, pp. 208-210, 250 (in the commentary to the translation). To my mind, it is not obvious that the added feature in the second-grade virtue would be an equivalently imperative or conditional intention, and it is not at all clear that Ockham basically thought of equivalently imperative acts as conditional intentions.

<sup>21</sup> Ockham, *Quaestiones variae*, q. 7, a. 3, 350.212-213.

### III. WHAT IS THE MORAL MEANING OF THE EQUIVALENTLY IMPERATIVE ACTS OF WILL?

Conformity with the dictate of right reason is, as said, a formal condition included in every grade of virtue. In any grade, acts of will have to be in conformity with right reason to be virtuous. The moral status of the equivalently imperative acts of will depends on how Ockham understands this formal condition. I will only mention one important point here. According to Ockham, right reason refers to the knowledge of some particular judgment. The judgment of right reason is an actual dictate to elect a certain means for obtaining a certain end in a concrete situation, and the moral agent's obligation is to make a choice in conformity with that particular judgment<sup>22</sup>.

The equivalently imperative acts of will do not fulfill the formal condition for virtuous action. The conditional willing of a person can be consistent with reason, but the problem is that this consistency is not linked with a dictate connected to a concrete situation, and with a moral choice in conformity with that dictate, which is required of virtuous action at every level of morality. Because the equivalently imperative acts of will do not fulfill the formal condition for virtuous action, it appears that no act of this type can acquire the proper status of a morally good act in any grade of virtue. This status is reserved for the formally imperative acts of will, and, as far as I can see, they fulfill this role also in connection with Ockham's discussion of the grades of virtue.

In order to clarify what has been said above, let us consider a passage in article 3 in the question under discussion:

Someone might ask whether the act directing the execution of an exterior act is different from the act by which someone effectively wills a dictate of right reason. My answer is that if the act by means of which we will a dictate of reason is a formally imperative act – as in the case of an act of heroic virtue – then the act by means of which we will the dictate is entirely the same as the act by means of which we direct its execution, since once the will is posited, it is immediately executed, in the absence of an impediment, as was evident above; no other act of will would be

<sup>22</sup> Ockham, *Reportatio* III, F.E. KELLEY and G.I. ETZKORN (eds.) St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, N. Y. 1982, q. 12, 422.15-17 (Guillelmi de Ockham Opera theologica, vol. VI); *ibid.*, 422.1-7; *Quaestiones variae*, q. 7, a. 4, 395.458-459; *ibid.*, q. 8, a. 1, 414.124-126; *ibid.*, q. 7, a. 3, 347.142-147. For a discussion of right reason and its relation to virtuous action, see HOLOPAINEN, *William Ockham's Theory...*, 1991, pp. 115-129.



required. But if the act is equivalently imperative – as in the case where someone wills a dictate of reason if it is opportune and there is no impediment – then, if the execution of the exterior act is subsequently directed when it is opportune, that directive is a different act from the first. The first act is only equivalently imperative; the second, formally. The first act has the impediment as its object; the second does not. The second act has the present time as an object, the first does not. Consequently, these are different acts<sup>23</sup>.

According to this text, it is essentially important to notice that the equivalently imperative act of will is not at all a command to execute an act. It cannot be, because it has an impediment as its object; it is an act by means of which one wills something provided that some impediment is removed. Let us again think of someone who would will to give his money to the poor if only he would not be impeded because of lack of money. Because of the impediment, the conditional willing cannot be a command to action. However, it can happen that things change and the impediment is removed. Say, the person in question receives a considerable inheritance. In the new situation, the equivalently imperative act of will is, or can be, replaced by a similar formally imperative act of will which, however, does not have an impediment as its object. Ockham clearly emphasizes the status of the new act: it is a command to execute the relevant act and as such it is an actual election of the will in conformity with the dictate of right reason linked with the concrete situation. Ockham does not explicitly say that it is this new act that is morally evaluated, but this follows from Ockham's view that conformity with right reason is the criterion for virtuous action. But what Ockham explicitly says in this connection is also decisive, when we think of the moral status of the equivalently imperative acts. Namely, as already mentioned above, the

<sup>23</sup> Ockham, *Quaestiones variae*, q. 7, a. 3, 372.720-734: «Si quaeras utrum imperare executionem actus exterioris sit alius actus ab illo quo vult efficaciter dictatum a recta ratione: respondeo, si actus ille quo vult dictatum a ratione sit actus imperativus formaliter, qualis est actus virtutis heroicae, tunc est idem actus omnino quo vult dictatum et quo imperat executionem, quia ipso posito, statim exsequitur amoto impedimento, sicut prius patet, et hoc sine omni alio actu voluntatis. Si autem sit imperativus aequivalenter, puta aliquis vult dictatum a ratione si esset opportunitas et nisi esset impedimentum, si post imperet executionem actus exterioris habita opportunitate, ibi imperare est alius actus a primo, quia primus est imperativus solum aequivalenter, secundus formaliter; primus habet impedimentum pro obiecto, secundus non; secundus habet tempus praesens pro obiecto, primus non; et per consequens sunt diversi actus». Translated by R. WOOD in her *Ockham on the Virtues*, 1997, pp. 135-137.

equivalently imperative act of will is not a command to execute an act, according to Ockham. Consequently, it cannot be identified with an election of the will in conformity with the dictate of right reason in a concrete situation. The conclusion is that when we speak of an equivalently imperative act of will, we cannot focus on a morally evaluable election, for the reason that there is none.

The missing of the election surfaces also in the passage in which Ockham introduces the distinction that we have been discussing. In this passage, he first says that some virtues or moral habits are engendered by the formally imperative acts of will and others only by the equivalently imperative acts of will. Thereafter, Ockham says that such a habit does not incline us to those acts when there is an impediment to their execution<sup>24</sup>. To my mind, Ockham means that the will inclined by a habit is not disposed to giving a command, when an impediment to its execution is known. As long as the command is missing, the moral election is also missing, because the command of the will and the election of the will are one and the same act. When speaking of acts to which a habit does not incline us, when there is an impediment to their execution, it must be formally imperative acts that Ockham has in mind. They are the acts to which a habit does not first incline us because of the impediment, but to which it inclines us once the impediment is removed. As far as the habit is concerned, it cannot be the moral habit engendered by the equivalently imperative acts of will, but it has to be the habit which first has been engendered by the formally imperative acts of will, and thereafter inclines to the formally imperative acts of will<sup>25</sup>.

From the moral point of view, equivalently imperative acts of will are problematic. How can one know whether a person would will the means, if there were no impediment? It seems to me that Ockham took this question seriously. His remarks about the two kinds of acts of will and virtues engendered by them leave little room for the equivalently

<sup>24</sup> Ockham, *Quaestiones variae*, q. 7, a. 2, 333.76-82. This text is found at the beginning of note 3.

<sup>25</sup> Ockham, *Quaestiones variae*, q. 7, a. 2, 334.104-109: «...tum quia quantumcumque habitus ille generatus ex actibus imperativis aequaliter augetur in infinitum, numquam inclinaret ad actum imperativum formaliter. Distinctio istorum patet per separabilitatem actuum, quia aliquis potest habere actum imperativum aequaliter, etsi numquam habeat actum imperativum formaliter».

imperative acts, and the virtues engendered by them, as part of morality. In Ockham's theory, equivalently imperative acts of will cannot be evaluated as morally good or morally bad in the proper sense. In the same way, it is difficult to see how the virtues engendered by these acts could play any major role in morality. In order to maintain some moral significance for equivalently imperative acts of will, one could suggest that a virtue engendered by them, perhaps, makes it somehow easier to produce formally imperative acts of a similar kind. But this is not what Ockham himself says in his remarks on the topic.

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