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**Disagreement and Faith:
Ockham on Faith as an Intellectual Virtue.**

At the beginning of Chapter III, Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle lists five intellectual virtues or veridical habits: art, which is evident knowledge of how to make things; scientific knowledge, which is evident knowledge from demonstration; prudence, which is evident knowledge of how to act; intellectual intuition, which is evident knowledge of principles; and wisdom, which combines intellectual intuition and demonstration (Wood, 25). The intellectual virtues are habitual powers of the mind to act that promote certainty and true belief, and Aristotle distinguishes them from opinions, in which “we may be mistaken” (Aristotle, 1024; *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139b18-1139b19). Unlike beliefs attributable to the veridical habits, which altogether exclude falsity and doubt, it is recognized even by those who hold them that opinions are less than certain, and that they could be either true or false. Regarding faith, however, it’s unclear from Aristotle’s account whether it is opinion or veridical habit. Faith has the unwavering certainty that opinion lacks, yet it lacks the evidence that would rule out error and make for knowledge. Should faith be made an intellectual virtue? Is it, instead, a species of opinion? Or, is it a category unto itself?

What follows is an examination of a late-medieval debate over the position of faith in the framework of the veridical habits. William of Ockham (c. 1287-1347) claimed faith to be a virtue on par with the other five. While we cannot have evident knowledge on the basis of faith, beliefs held through it are nevertheless certain and true. Faith is therefore distinguishable from mere opinion and should be considered a veridical habit. His confrère and student, Adam Wodeham (c. 1298-1358), rejected Ockham’s position. The disagreement between the Jewish and Christian faiths over Jesus being the messiah demonstrates that a false belief can be supported by faith just as well as a true one. An analysis of the positions shows that Wodeham is correct. If faith were a veridical habit, then an increase in degree should eliminate disagreement.

But an equal increase in faith on both sides of a dispute does not reduce disagreement. If anything, it intensifies it. So faith cannot be a veridical habit. Let me begin with a brief exposition of where the veridical habits fit into Ockham's overall views on knowledge.

Ockham considers knowledge (*scientia*) to be habitual mental dispositions to act that are capable of increase and decrease in degree of intensity, and exist as qualities of the mind. He argues that knowledge can only be a quality or qualities located subjectively in the mind, because belief is capable of changing. In the same way that a body can successively take on incompatible colours, the move from ignorance to knowledge implies that one contradictory can be successively replaced by another, or that the mind can take on some quality that it previously lacked (Ockham, *OPh IV*, 5). Furthermore, newly acquired and repeated acts create habits for the mind to behave in certain ways that increase with intensity through use (*ibid.*). This is just to say that the more exposed we are to a certain bit of knowledge, the more prone we become to using it, the easier it gets, and the more we understand it (*ibid.*).

While all knowledge may be habitual dispositions of the mind, Ockham is aware that not every such disposition counts as knowledge. The task of separating knowledge from other beliefs is difficult because we use the term knowledge in various senses, some more inclusive than others. Ockham says that in its loosest sense knowledge is "a certain apprehension of something true" (*ibid.*), which includes beliefs held through "faith alone" (*ibid.*). I may not have an evident cognition such as I would have if I had actually seen Rome or my mother giving birth to me with my own eyes to support the beliefs that "Rome is a big city" and that "this is my mother," but beliefs such as these, because they are true and certain, nevertheless count as knowledge (*ibid.*). Knowledge in this sense can be had through reliable and authoritative

testimony, and, to be clear, what distinguishes it from opinion is that it excludes both falsity and doubt.¹

The second sense of knowledge refers to beliefs formed from evident apprehensions or first-hand experience of contingent truths. There is no necessity to a particular wall existing at a particular time and being a particular colour. However, from seeing a white wall my mind will form the simple cognitions “white” and “wall”, form a mental proposition conforming to the simple apprehensions, and assent to the proposition, such that I can know that “the wall is white” (ibid. 6).

A third refers to “evident notions of something necessary. And contingents are not known in this way, but principles and the conclusions that follow” (ibid.). What Ockham seems to have in mind is what follows analytically from axioms and self-evident principles, as in Euclidian geometry.

The fourth refers to evident notions of necessary truth arrived at from necessary premises, such as we have with a novel truth obtained through demonstration (ibid.). Ockham identifies knowledge in this sense as scientific knowledge properly speaking, and he says that it is distinct “from intellect, which is the habit of principles, and also from wisdom, just as the Philosopher taught in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*” (ibid.).

Elsewhere, in the Prologue to the *Ordinatio*, Ockham expands on faith in relation to the intellectual virtues. He says the reason Aristotle did not consider faith to be a veridical habit was that there can be faith in what is false just as much as in what is true. In other words, Aristotle falsely identified faith with opinion (Ockham, *OTh I*, 200). What Aristotle should have done,

¹ Ockham, *OTh IV*, 5: [Scientia] uno modo est certa notitia alicuius veri; et sic sciuntur aliqua per fidem tantum. Sicut dicimus nos scire quod Roma est magna civitas, quam tamen non vidimus; et similiter dico quod scio istum esse patrem meum et istam esse matrem meum, et sic de aliis quae non sunt evidenter nota; quia tamen eis sine omni dubitatione adhaeremus et sunt vera, dicimur scire illa.

according to Ockham, is separate belief that is open to truth and falsity equally and thus allows doubt from belief that is true and excludes doubt. Ockham concludes that because faith is true and certain, it is therefore a legitimate species of knowledge and a veridical habit. He further notes, however, that there is a relevant difference between faith and the other five virtues: the five are both evident and certain, while faith is certain but non-evident (ibid. 201).²

Adam Wodeham was a student and friend of William of Ockham. For a time he served as something like a personal secretary to Ockham, finishing the *Summa Logica* after the Venerable Inceptor was summoned to Avignon in 1324 to defend his views before the papal authorities. His position in the history of philosophy is only now coming to be understood. Prior to the 1990 publication of the critical edition of the *Lectura Secunda*, one of his three *Sentences* lectures, Wodeham was considered a dedicated defender of Ockham's views, but not much of an original thinker.³ Since the critical edition's appearance, it is gradually becoming recognized that he was an independent philosopher/theologian of some significance in his own right, whose views were informed by a wide variety of sources, including Ockham's detractors. Wodeham outright disagreed with Ockham on major issues, and the identification of faith as a veridical habit is a good example.

Wodeham follows Aristotle in making truth a defining characteristic of a veridical habit. While faith may provide certainty, it does not exclude falsity, and thus cannot be considered a virtue. He cites the Jewish faith as evidence, saying that "faith can be false, as is clear from the faith of the Jews remaining the same before and after the coming of Christ" (Wodeham, *LS I*,

² Ockham, *OTh I*, 201: ...secundum Philosophum, fides ...non est habitus veridicus, quia ita potest esse respectu falsorum sicut respectu verorum, secundum eum, tamen praeter illos habitus est aliquis habitus veridicus, quia sibi non potest subesse falsum. Et huiusmodi est fides respectu credibilium theologicorum, sive sit infusa sive acquisita.—Aliter potest dici quod Philosophus tantum loquitur de habitibus evidentibus et certis, qualis non est theologica respectu credibilium, quia non est evidens, quamvis sit certus.

³ Tachau, 310. Tachau notes that Wodeham was considered nothing more than a "slavish" follower of Ockham.

223). Faith can inform a true belief, as is the case with the Christian belief that Christ is the messiah, but it can inform a false belief just as well, as with Jewish belief that Christ is not the messiah. Because faith equally informs both the true and false belief, faith cannot be a veridical habit.⁴

But there is an obvious response to Wodeham's argument: Wodeham is conflating opinion and faith in the same way Aristotle had. The Jewish belief that Christ is not the messiah may be certain but it is not true, while the articles of the Christian faith are both certain and true. Having the criteria of both truth and certainty marks faith as a veridical habit distinguishable from opinion. The Jewish belief is false, and is therefore opinion. The Christian belief is true, and is therefore faith.

But this response merely side-steps the issues regarding the nature of veridical habits in Ockham's account brought to light by Wodeham's argument. Because the intellectual virtues are habitual dispositions, they are capable of change in degree (Ockham, *OTh IV*, 5). If the veridical habits of intellectual intuition and demonstration were to be increased in a subject, then we would expect the beliefs formed on their basis to move closer to the truth; conversely, we would expect a movement away from truth to occur if the dispositions were decreased. For instance, if my understanding of the principles of arithmetic and my ability to use them to draw conclusions increased through practice, then a corresponding increase in the quality of my beliefs regarding arithmetic truths would be inevitable. My test scores in math would improve if I studied. If, on the other hand, my understanding of the principles of arithmetic and the ability to draw conclusions from them were decreased, it would follow that my beliefs would recede from truth.

⁴ Wodeham, *LS I*, 223: Et fidei potest subesse falsum, sicut patet de fide Iudaeorum manete eadem post Christi adventum et ante. Et ita non est habitus veridicus, id est cui repugnat esse falsidicum, quia sic intelligo de habitu veridico.—Et per idem ad per idem ad sequentia exempla: habitus talium secundum veritatem posset significare falsum, ideo non est habitus veridicus modo praedicto.

The likelihood of my being wrong would increase. So, if faith is in fact a veridical habit like the others, then a corresponding narrowing of the distance between belief and truth should result from its intensification.

What this implies is that in cases of disagreement the intensification of a veridical habit would eventually lead to agreement. If, for instance, I were to argue with someone about the answer to a math question, and the degree of intuition of principles and ability to draw conclusions from them on both sides of the disagreement were intensified, then one of three things should occur. In case I were wrong and my interlocutor were right, I would come to recognize the fact, and I would change my belief. Or, if I were correct and my interlocutor were incorrect, my interlocutor would change her belief to coincide with mine. And finally, we could both be wrong, in which case we would alter our beliefs in favour of what we would both recognize to be the accurate belief. The salient point is that in all three cases an intensification of intellectual virtue ultimately results in reconciliation.

This means that the persistent disagreements between Christians and Jews over matters of faith show us is that faith is not a veridical habit. The belief that Christ is the messiah is either true or false. There is no third option. Moreover, because this belief is not held as evident knowledge, only faith can be appealed to for confirmation. And what is clear is that we could increase the amount of faith on both sides to an infinite degree and there would be zero movement on either side. Instead, what we would see is an intensification of the disagreement corresponding to an intensification of faith. Because an increase in faith does not lead to agreement, but reinforces disagreement, faith cannot be an intellectual virtue.

There is, however, a counter-argument that can be made on Ockham's behalf. What makes faith a veridical habit distinct from opinion according to him is that faith is certain and

true (*ibid.*), which means that faith in a false belief is not really possible. Because the example of the disagreement between the Jewish and Christian faiths regarding Christ assumes that the Jews believe in something false, they cannot have faith in that belief, only opinion. In other words, faith is only possible regarding the belief that Christ is the messiah, because that is the true belief. So, the disagreement between Jews and Christians is not a disagreement between faiths, because if the Jews had any faith at all they would believe what the Christians believe. Thus its intensification ends in agreement, and faith should therefore be considered a veridical habit along with the other five.

Unfortunately for Ockham one of his own examples can be used to show us how weak this counter-argument actually is. Ockham uses the belief in the identity of his mother as an example of faith as a veridical habit (*ibid.*). So long as he had received consistent reports during his lifetime from those in a privileged position to know that the person he believed to be his mother truly was his mother, then there would be no reason for him to believe otherwise. But, is this enough to exclude falsity? Obviously not. Imagine Ockham had an older brother, whom later in life, after the passing of the woman Ockham believed to be his mother, told Ockham that he was adopted. Let's also imagine that the older brother had seen the adoption take place, and that he therefore had an intuitive apprehension that would make his belief evident knowledge, making the disagreement imbalanced against Ockham. In such a scenario there are two possible consequences. Ockham could agree with his brother, in which case he would also have to agree that a belief he had held on faith turned out to be false. Or, he could insist that he was correct in spite of his brother's testimony on the basis of faith in his belief, in which case his faith would be invincible. In the first case, faith would be open to falsity, and because of that not a veridical habit. In the second, it would be invincible ignorance, the opposite of an intellectual virtue.

There is, however, one last refuge for someone who wished to argue that faith is an intellectual virtue: divine intervention. Even if both a Jew and a proto-Christian—a Jew who thought Jesus to be the messiah—were present at the crucifixion of Christ and thus each had intuitive apprehensions of Jesus himself, disagreement about whether he was the messiah would still be possible, and both parties of the disagreement would seem equally justified in their beliefs. In a balanced disagreement of this sort, with no further evidence available, the beliefs would seem to be the result of luck from the perspective of a third party. The Jew chose heads, the Christian tails, and judgements about who was right and who was wrong in such an instance would be arbitrary. But, there could be more to the situation than meets the eye. An omnipotent being, God, would have the power to intervene and implant the belief that Christ is the messiah—we'll assume for the sake of argument that this is the true belief—in the Christian, in which case the belief would not be the result of luck, and the distinction between faith and opinion as set out by Ockham would stand (*ibid.* 198 & 200).⁵

This may sound incredible to modern ears, but such a scenario was used by Ockham as a trope to illustrate something of a Buridan's ass problem in epistemology (*ibid.* 183-206). The believer and the non-believer have identical evidence sets regarding the belief that Christ is the messiah. What in addition explains assent from the believer and dissent from the non-believer?⁶

An Ockhamist would point out now that Ockham's position is against what I'm saying, and that neither the Christian's nor the Jew's belief can be said to be knowledge in Ockham's

⁵ Ockham, *OTH I*, 200: [Quando] dicitur quod habitus intellectuales veridici sunt tantum quinque, dico quod habitum veridicorum *naturaliter adquisitorum* sunt tantum quinque genera, quae enumerat Philosophus VI *Ethicorum*.

⁶ Someone might say that the resurrection of Christ is a better scenario than the crucifixion. The miracle evident in the resurrection might compel the non-believer to believe. But one of Ockham's contemporaries, Walter Chatton (c. 1290-1343), provided a counter-argument: the resurrection—indeed any miracle or supernatural act—could be attributed to the Antichrist or some other malevolent supernatural entity just as well as Christ. The resurrection might provide evidence of a miracle, but would not be enough to compel assent to Christian beliefs (Chatton, 69 & 75).

opinion. But, such an objection would fail to appreciate the nuances in Ockham's epistemology that the distinction between non-evident and evident veridical habits allows. It is true that neither scientific nor evident knowledge can be had regarding beliefs held on faith alone, according to Ockham. If faith were evident knowledge, then the faithful would be able to demonstrate beliefs held on the basis of faith to the non-believer in such a way that the non-believer would be compelled to assent. But demonstrations fail to convince, and disagreements regarding beliefs held through faith persist. So, faith must not be evident knowledge.⁷ However, just because faith is non-scientific and non-evident does not mean that non-evident and non-scientific beliefs are epistemically equivalent or reduce to opinion to Ockham. Rather, his position—faith is a non-evident veridical habit—is that we have a class of beliefs that constitute knowledge distinct from both opinion and evident knowledge.⁸ Such a position explains disagreements from a single evidence set between the believer and non-believer.

But, even if supernatural intervention regarding particular beliefs allows for a distinction between opinion and faith, naturally caused beliefs, such as the one regarding the identity of Ockham's mother, seem open to falsity, and fail to meet the distinction as set out by Ockham himself. How, for instance, would one distinguish between those beliefs that one mistakenly thinks are faith from those that truly are faith? Faith alone doesn't seem to offer a solution to this question. At best we could say that there could still be a distinction between opinion and faith, but that a fallible human being would have no way to distinguish which of her beliefs might be opinion, and which faith.

⁷ Ockham, *OTH I*, 190: Probo: quia omnem actum quem habet fidelis potest habere infidelis exercitatus in theologia. Ita enim posset talis infidelis defendere et roborare fidem, similiter persuadere fidelibus et infidelibus, respondere rationibus haereticorum et infidelium sicut aliquis fidelis. Et tamen manifestum est quod talis non haberet scientiam proprie dictam. Igitur ex talibus actibus non potest probari quod theologia sit scientia proprie dicta.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 206: Omnis habitus veridicus evidens respectu veritatis necessariae est sapientia vel scientia etc.; tamen habitus veridicus inevidens potest esse fides, et talis est theologia pro magna sui parte.

However, even if it be granted that grace-informed faith makes for a viable distinction between faith and opinion, it does not follow that faith is therefore an intellectual virtue. The intellectual virtues are habits of the mind that promote true belief and certainty, which are capable of alteration in degree. They exist subjectively in the mind as powers available for use, which is not the case with faith. Faith can be intensified and remitted, but the mechanism for this is located outside of the human mind in an omnipotent being. I can readily access and use the other veridical habits. I can study for a math test. I can practice the intellectual virtues to improve my own epistemic orientation. But I cannot practice faith and use it to improve my beliefs. It is simply imposed on me from an external position and offers no way to distinguish true faith from false opinion.

It should be mentioned that one of Ockham's predecessors, Peter Aureol (c. 1280-1322), did argue that faith can be intensified through religious practice and the study of theology.⁹ But Ockham ruled this out as a way to break the stalemate between the believer and non-believer. While Ockham agrees that the study of theology intensifies faith in a believer, he says that the exact same material could be studied and intensified by a non-believer and not lead to faith in the least.¹⁰ I would add that those of different faiths study different texts. Study would only intensify disagreements between traditions.

Hence, while Ockham may be correct that we should distinguish between opinion and faith, faith cannot be a veridical habit. Because the intellectual virtues are powers that the mind has at its disposal, in cases of disagreement the increase of a virtue should be possible on both sides and the dispute should terminate in agreement. Those who would defend Ockham with the

⁹ Aureol, 18: [Dicendum] quod fides utique est nobilior habitus quam Theologia, cum sit infusus habitus, & Theologia acquisitus; nec propter hoc vane facit fidelis studendo ad acquisitionem istius habitus; tum quia fides perficitur, & illustratur per eum; tum quia melius est fidelem, & Theologum esse, quam esse fidelem tantum.

¹⁰ Ockham, *OTh I*, 196: [Omnes] actus quos experitur fidelis, praeter actum credendi, posset experiri infidelis; quia sciret rationem reddere de fide eandem quam fidelis et contra impios defendere et in mentibus piorum roborare et sapientem loqui inter perfectos eodem modo sicut fidelis.

claim that faith is only possible regarding a true belief make disagreement impossible, which may continue to allow for a distinction between faith and opinion, but does not make faith an intellectual virtue, precisely because a veridical habit is a power of the human mind. If a belief and its contrary were held on the basis of an intellectual virtue, then the virtue should be accessible to both sides of a disagreement, and in the case of faith, it either is not, or is but does not result in reconciliation. Hence, faith cannot be an intellectual virtue, and Wodeham is correct.

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