Contrary to St. Thomas Aquinas and the rest of the scholastic tradition of Aristotelian ethics, William of Ockham argued that wickedness as wickedness could be willed. Specifically, he argued that Thomas was wrong to think that we can explain willed wickedness by positing ignorance of the particular propositions which form the minor premises in practical syllogisms.

Against Bl. John Duns Scotus, Ockham argued that willing wickedness is just as bad as doing something wicked. In support of his claim, Ockham distinguished between conditional and executive acts of will. What lends plausibility to the view that external acts are worse than internal volitions is our suspicion that willing wickedness without external action is somehow blameless because ineffectual. According to Ockham, that’s a confusion that results from our failure to distinguish conditional volitions from executive acts of will. Conditional volitions do not result in external action because actual external actions were never intended; executive, formally imperative acts of will inevitably result in action unless impeded by an entirely extraneous external circumstance—such as, the failure of the firing mechanism of the weapon of a murderer.

Walter of Burley, like his predecessors in the classical and scholastic traditions denied that wickedness as wickedness could be willed. But he agreed with Ockham that sometimes ignorance of particulars cannot explain willed wickedness. When we depart from diets which dictate that ‘all sweets should be eliminated from the diet’ and eat chocolate truffles, we are not ignorant of their sweetness. Moreover, like Ockham’s, Burley’s account of practical reason involves executive acts.

So as is often the case, the views of these contemporaries are related in an interesting fashion, which brings us to a perennial problem: which of them wrote on ethics first? Burley was born about 1275;¹ Ockham,

more than ten years later in about 1287. But Ockham’s teaching career was much shorter than Burley’s; beginning about 1318, it effectively ended about 1328, when like Burley he entered the political arena. By contrast Burley’s philosophical works date from 1301 until almost the end of his life in 1344. Specifically the work with which we shall be most concerned here, Burley’s *Ethics* commentary is dated about 1333-1334, more than ten years after Ockham’s *De connexione virtutum*; so we will be considering a well-known older master’s response to a younger man’s work. Burley did not take kindly to Ockham. Even when he borrowed Aristotelian exposition from Ockham, Burley pointedly called him a beginner in logic. Though Ockham was not named in the *Ethics*, presumably Burley was tacitly replying to him. And since Burley was partly convinced, though still very critical, it ought to be an interesting reply; and it is.

In this article, Ockham and Burley will be compared and contrasted on three topics:

1) how to explain cases where we do what we know is wrong
2) how to distinguish weakness of will from vice, or in medieval terms incontinence from intemperance, and
3) how to describe the link between knowledge and volition in moral acts.

In conclusion, I will consider what effect medieval speculations on vice may have had on the concept of intellect.

Much of this article will concern the difference between incontinence and intemperance, or between moral weakness and moral vice. It is a topic where examples are useful. For purposes of clarity, instead of simply alternating sexes in the examples, I have adopted a convention which presents weak women and wicked men. Unfortunately, experience suggests that there are also plenty of weak men and wicked women. The convention I adopted does not reflect my beliefs about the distribution of moral flaws among the sexes; rather it is a sign of sloth. There are more examples of weakness, and only male scholastic authors, so this convention makes ambiguity in pronoun reference easier to avoid.

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3 J. Weisheipl 1969 (*op.cit.*, above, n. 1), 187.
4 Burley, *Expositio s. totum Phys. Aristot.* I t.c.4-5 tr.1, f.8ª; I t.c.15 tr.2 c.1, f.13ª; III t.c.11 tr.1 c.1, f.64ª; IV t.c.42 tr.1 c.5, f.96ª; VI t.c.24 tr.1 c.4, f. 183ª; VI t.c.79 tr.3 c.1, f.196ª (ed. Venice 1501). *In Artem Veterem, Praedic.* 3, Venice 1541, f.33ª, 34ª. Cf. G. Gál, *Opera Philosophica Guillaume de Ockham*, II, 24ª.