

WILLIAM OF OCKHAM AND THE
METAPHYSICAL ROOTS OF NATURAL LAW

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Much valuable work on the philosophy of William of Ockham (ca. 1285–1347) has been done in recent years, and many are the scholars who insist that the Venerable Inceptor should not be accused of subscribing to a purely voluntaristic account of the content of moral law. Still, Ockham's voluntarism remains a debatable issue for several reasons. First, it is not always clear which principle in Ockham's complex system of ethics takes primacy, since there are many vying for that honor. John Kilcullen proposes a set of three: right reason, love of God for his own sake above all things, and obedience to divine commandments.¹ Of course, one of these principles would have to be first, simply speaking, as there could not be many irreducibly first principles. It could be the case, however, that on the basis of available writings it is difficult or impossible to identify which one Ockham himself deems primary. But even if that question can be settled, there seems to be some disagreement among the experts as to what constitutes a voluntaristic theology or ethics. Usually voluntarism is understood to be asserting at least two things: on the one hand, that the content

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¹“Natural Law and Will in Ockham,” *History of Philosophy Yearbook*, vol. 1 of the Australasian Society for the History of Philosophy, ed. Knud Haakonssen and Udo Thiel (Canberra, 1993); this article is posted on Kilcullen's website and can be located by searching for its title.

of the moral law is determined solely by an omnipotent will (not, that is, in reference to any creature, nature, or idea); on the other hand, that the freedom of the intellectual creature consists in a power of total self-determination vis-à-vis good and evil.² So defined, the textual evidence for a certain type of voluntarism in William of Ockham, and an extreme one at that, is hard to overlook or explain away. To complicate matters, a number of authors, rallying to its defense and lauding its bold advocates, are now asking if voluntarism really deserves the scorn it has tended to receive. If these people are right, there would be nothing to fear from Ockham's version; on the contrary, we stand to gain from it.³ Other studies deal sympathetically with Ockham's doctrine of knowledge and of right reason, and reach the conclusion that his exaltation of divine will and his philosophical razor cuts did not necessitate the radical skepticism into which the nominalist movement eventually plunged. A recent article by John R. White implies that the "received view" of Ockham as the solvent of scholasticism is a legend fabricated by neoscholastics of the nineteenth century and sharpened by heresy-hunting

² The question of voluntarism arises in nearly all discussions of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. The recent lively debate between two eminent scholars over the correct interpretation of Scotus's voluntarism (which is the progenitor of Ockham's) brings out the major issues at stake: Thomas Williams, "The Unmitigated Scotus," in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 80 (1998): 162-81, and Allan B. Wolter, OFM, "The Unshredded Scotus: A Response to Thomas Williams," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 77 (2003): 315-56.

³ See Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Structure of Ockham's Moral Theory," *Franciscan Studies* 46 (1986): 1-35; idem, "Ockham: Voluntarist or Naturalist?," in *Studies in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. John F. Wipfel (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 219-47. A largely positive interpretation of Ockham's theoretical moves is also presented by Harry Klocker, SJ, in his short book *William of Ockham and the Divine Freedom*, 2nd ed. (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1996), a reworking of several older articles. My notes will sometimes refer to the book and sometimes to one of the original articles, "Ockham and the Divine Freedom," *Franciscan Studies* 45 (1985): 245-61.

Thomists of the twentieth.⁴ This would make the latter men imitators of Ockham's first outspoken opponent, the Thomist John Lutterell, chancellor of Oxford University, who in 1324 (the year after Saint Thomas's canonization) charged his com-patriot with fifty-six heretical propositions.⁵

It is not my intention here, nor is it in my competence, to offer solutions to any of the particular disputes that flourish in Ockham-related secondary literature.⁶ What interests me are

⁴ "Ockham and Nominalism: Toward a New Paradigm," *Catholic Social Science Review* 6 (2001), available on the internet. White presents useful historical material but labors under a serious, though not uncommon, misunderstanding of the Church's commendation of Saint Thomas.

⁵ This action prevented Ockham from occupying a university chair at Oxford (hence his nickname, since an *inceptor* is one who has completed the requirements but has not yet mounted the professorial chair) and brought him to the papal court in Avignon to defend himself. In May of 1328, having taken sides with the Franciscan minister general Michael of Caesna and the would-be Emperor Ludwig of Bavaria against Pope John XXII, Ockham fled from Avignon, was excommunicated, was expelled from the Franciscan Order, and embarked on a career as political philosopher and propagandist for the last twenty years of his life in Munich, where he died unreconciled to the Church (cf. Gedeon Gál, OFM, "William of Ockham Died 'Impenitent' in April 1347," *Franciscan Studies* 42 [1982]: 90-95). As will become clear, I happen to think that Lutterell and his modern confederates have good reasons to grind their axes.

⁶ An indication of the breadth of scholarship devoted to Ockham, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century, may be gathered from three major studies and their bibliographies: Gordon Leff, *William of Ockham: The Metamorphosis of Scholastic Discourse* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975); Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987); Armand Maurer, *The Philosophy of William of Ockham in the Light of Its Principles* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1999). Several concise overviews of the Franciscan's life and writings can also be recommended, in spite of being a little outdated: Frederick Copleston, SJ, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 3: *Ockham to Suárez* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 43-121; idem, *A History of Medieval Philosophy*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 230-56; Julius R. Weinberg, *A Short History of Medieval Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 235-65. Readers who wish to pursue the discussion into primary texts

the larger implications of ideas present expressly or seminally in Ockham and in the powerful movement that took inspiration from his works.⁷ Many today are asking: How did the once-Christian West end up where it is today, in the midst of a cultural crisis of unprecedented magnitude? A complete answer would have to take many elements into account, but doubtless one crucial element is what happened to the metaphysical foundations of ethics, that is, the origin and essence of natural law. I propose that we may find Ockham a greater revolutionary in this regard than Hobbes or Nietzsche—not because *their* views are more pious or truthful, but because their errors tend to be superficial, and so, at least for one who is paying attention, evident. Ockham's are subtler, more fundamental, and therefore more insidious, whatever his intentions may have been. I will return to this perennial problem of good intentions and poor philosophy in my concluding remarks.

It is a well-known fact that Ockham's strictly philosophical and theological writings, as opposed to his polemical and political works, contain no explicit treatment of natural law. This lacuna is all the more noteworthy when one recalls how much attention Ockham's predecessors devoted to the subject.⁸ Are we then to think that a natural law doctrine lies *hidden* somewhere, disguised under a different title? Or should

of the Venerable Inceptor will find copious citations in the secondary literature to which I will be referring in these pages. For information on the critical editions of Ockham's works, see note 74.

⁷ It has to be borne in mind that once Ockham's notions and arguments had spread throughout Europe, they were developed by a host of thinkers with a variety of (at times conflicting) aims, leading in some cases to conclusions that Ockham would have repudiated. However, there is ample reason to speak of an Ockhamist "movement," if not of a "school" in the strict sense. On this movement, see Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 3:122–52; Weinberg, *Short History*, 266–89.

⁸ See Kevin McDonnell, "Does William of Ockham Have a Theory of Natural Law?," *Franciscan Studies* 34 (1974), 383–92. In defense of the minority position that Ockham does have an articulate theory of natural law, see the Kilcullen article mentioned in note 1.

we admit, as most commentators do, that a natural law theory does not emerge in Ockham's writings until the political treatises, where, in any event, it appears only sporadically? The gap in earlier writings and the sparseness in later writings point to one explanation more than any other: Ockham knew what he was combating, and chose the weapon of silence. As his theory of knowledge and his metaphysics had already emptied out the contents of natural law, there was no need to repeat his critique in the sphere of ethics. Ockham is a man who strikes at the root, and if he objects to natural law as Aquinas or Scotus presents it, it is because he objects to the metaphysical commitments these accounts presuppose.

The three main parts of this article will engage three questions: (I) On what foundation did the doctrine of natural law traditionally stand, and how was its metaphysical framework, so confidently wrought by Thomas Aquinas, shaken by the innovations of John Duns Scotus? (II) In what way, if any, can "natural law" remain, once Ockham undermines the foundations upon which, both for Aquinas and for Scotus, it had rested? (III) If natural law ends up shattered, what perils can we expect to meet with in the Ockhamist universe? This last question merges into the pre-history or gestation of modernity, for many of Ockham's ideas, having been spread throughout Europe by the nominalists who taught at the universities, were like hardy seeds buried in wintry soil, ready to sprout when the climate allowed.⁹

⁹ See the compelling, if slightly exaggerated, portrait of Ockhamism in Michael A. Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 12–28. It has become fashionable to call into question the labeling of Ockham as a "nominalist," "conceptualist" being the preferred alternative. But what's in a name? The positions associated with medieval nominalism are frequently not only defended by Ockham, but developed by him to their utmost extent; and one might add that to an opponent of nominalism, a "conceptualist" system is hardly less objectionable. Ockham's system generally gets the title "nominalism" because he asserts: *universale est pure factum*. Universals are pure inventions, the mind's moulding and shaping of reality, mere "names" or

I. Exemplarism and the Natural Law¹⁰

I. Thomas Aquinas on the Law of Human Nature

On the basis of the *ratio boni*, “good is that which all things seek after” and by analogy with the first indemonstrable principle of speculative reason (“the same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time”), Thomas establishes the first indemonstrable principle of practical reason: “Good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided.” Thus, “whatever practical reason naturally apprehends as man’s good or evil belongs to the precepts of the natural law as something to be done or avoided.”¹¹ To three levels of natural inclination correspond the many particular precepts by which human goods are secured. Because man is a *substance*, whatever preserves his proper being and removes danger to his life be-

“breaths of the voice” (*nomina, flatus vocis*) that refer to collections of sensible individuals. In reality there are only individual things, purely and simply individual. The mind constructs relationships among them based on elements that each happens to have. The concept “rational animal” names not a thing, but a bunch of properties that happen to be assembled in an individual subject. Alternatively, Ockham’s system is called “conceptualism” because it attempts to reduce most real or formal distinctions to conceptual ones. For example, he argues that there are not ten genera of categories of real or extra-mental being, viz., substance and the nine genera of accidents; there are but two, substance and quality. The rest are ways of thinking or talking about substance and quality. See the summary in James A. Weisheipl, OP, “The Interpretation of Aristotle’s *Physics* and the Science of Motion,” in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. N. Kretzmann, A. Kenny, and J. Pinborg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 530–33. See also the insightful essay by Calvin G. Normore, “The Tradition of Mediaeval Nominalism,” in Wippel, *Studies in Medieval Philosophy*, 201–17.

¹⁰ This section is partly adapted from my article “Divine Art, Natural Law, and Human Perfection,” in *The Catholic Faith* 8.1 (Jan.–Feb. 2002): 22–27.

¹¹ *Summa theologiae* [ST] I-II, q. 94, a. 2. Quotations from the *Summa* are taken from the translation of the English Dominicans (New York: Benziger, 1948; repr. Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1981). Reference is made to the body of an article unless otherwise indicated.

longs to the natural law; because man is an *animal*, whatever promotes the good of the species, such as sexual union and the education of offspring, belongs to the natural law; because man is a *rational animal*, whatever is proper to rational animals, such as knowledge of the truth and living together peaceably, belongs to the natural law. Of the last sort is everything that pertains to man’s rational inclinations, such as “to shun ignorance” and “to avoid offending those among whom one has to live.” This elegant presentation of law starts with the broadest category to which man pertains (substance), proceeds to a generic nature he shares with others in that category (animal), and culminates in the specific nature uniquely his (rational animal). Any further determinations of natural law can be placed under one of these three headings. As an example of a deduction from these primary precepts, Thomas mentions the obligation that “one must not kill,” traceable to “one should do harm to no man.”¹² That one man should not harm another is in turn an expression of the general precept that man should live according to the good of his proper nature. Because man is social and political *by nature*, Thomas can state that it is *natural* for a person “to avoid offending those among whom he has to live.” Similarly, it is *naturally* right that goods entrusted to someone should be restored to their owner upon request, unless some special circumstance, such as the intention to use a weapon for a crime, changes the aspect under which the action has to be evaluated.¹³

Defining natural law as the rational creature’s “participation in the Eternal Law,” i.e., “a share of the eternal reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end,”¹⁴ Saint Thomas, schooled by Saint Paul, maintains that this law in its most general determinations is naturally inscribed on the human heart and is thus able to be known and explicited by human reason. However, the weakness of

¹² ST I-II, q. 95, a. 2.

¹³ ST I-II, q. 94, a. 4.

¹⁴ ST I-II, q. 91, a. 2.

man's reason, above all when blinded by sin, called for a revelation that would give greater force to the precepts governing human action by adding to them the sanction of divine authority, and also, at times, by clarifying their precise content.¹⁵ In other words, the moral law is divinely promulgated to *commend* it the more seriously to human attention and effort because of the person of him who promulgates it. Accordingly, in its *moral* precepts, not its judicial and ceremonial ones, this "divine law" inculcates the same precepts as those to which man can attain by reflecting on the inclinations of his nature and the rights and duties they imply, although a more detailed knowledge of these precepts will not be available to all.

The moral precepts, distinct from the ceremonial and judicial precepts, are about things pertaining of their very nature to good morals. . . . It is therefore evident that since the moral precepts are about matters which concern good morals, and since good morals are those which accord with reason, and since also every judgment of human reason must be derived in some way from natural reason, it follows of necessity that all the moral precepts [of the Old Law] belong to the natural law—but not all in the same way. For there are certain things which the natural reason of every

¹⁵ See *ST I-II*, q. 91, a. 4, where the reason for the giving of divine law is said to be "the uncertainty of human judgment"; q. 94, a. 4, where the failure to know natural law is attributed to natural obstacles and the perversion of reason "by passion or evil habit or an evil disposition of nature"; and q. 99, a. 2, where the divine law is presented as the remedy both for the insufficiency of reason and the obscurity of vision induced by sin. Scotus's position is similar if not identical: see *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, trans. Allan B. Wolter, OFM (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 58–59. On the question of the extent to which man can forget or become blind to the precepts of the natural law, see Gregory Doolan, "Culture, Ignorance, and Culpability," *The Thomist* 63 (1999): 105–24.

man, of its own accord and at once, judges ought to be done or not done, e.g., "Honor thy father and thy mother, and thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal"; and these belong to the natural law absolutely. And there are certain things which, after a more careful consideration, wise men deem obligatory. Such too belong to the law of nature, yet so that they need to be inculcated, the wiser teaching the less wise, e.g., "Rise up before the hoary head and honor the aged man," and the like. And there are some things, to judge of which human reason needs divine instruction, whereby we are taught about the things of God, e.g., "Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven image," "thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain."¹⁶

Because of the many defects to which fallen human beings are prone, divine law includes—repeats, if you like, with greater clarity and authority—moral precepts identical with those discoverable by reason. If man in his present condition were not so helpless, there would be no need for a revelation of any law save such judicial and ceremonial prescriptions as the Lord may choose to hand down.¹⁷ Although precepts directly bearing on the respect due to God seem to be inaccessible to

¹⁶ *ST I-II*, q. 100, a. 1. Note that Thomas begins by setting off to the side the ceremonial and judicial precepts. Not *all* laws promulgated by God are traceable to inherent demands of human nature; some are purely "positive." For Thomas, only the moral precepts have this deep connection to man's rational nature. It was not necessary that certain particular animals be sacrificed at certain times by certain people, or that others be avoided as unclean, but it was fitting within a given context. This is why it can become unfitting in another. Judicial and ceremonial precepts, though *in harmony with* human nature, specify actions that need be undertaken only by those to whom they have been promulgated. The justice of such actions consists in God's having *willed* them to be just under certain circumstances and for certain reasons. They come into being at a certain time, and are revocable. See note 23.

¹⁷ See *ST I-II*, q. 99, aa. 2–5; q. 100, a. 1.

reason working on its own, they are still traceable to human nature as to their root cause, even if divine instruction must inculcate them.¹⁸ As with the precepts taught by wise men to society at large, the image suggested is one of a father instructing his children in what is naturally good for (yet unknown to) them, rather than a monarch laying down positive laws from a distant throne.

Given the foregoing, we can see why Thomas maintains that the basic *purpose* of every law—that is, every law worthy of the name—is “establishing friendship either between man and man or between man and God.”¹⁹ Defending the reasonableness of the Old Law’s containing moral precepts such as “Thou shalt not kill,” “Thou shalt not steal,” he writes:

Just as the chief intention of human law is to create friendship between man and man, so the chief intention of the divine law is to establish man in friendship with God. Now since likeness is the reason of love, according to Sir. 13:19, “every beast loveth its like,” there cannot possibly be any friendship of man to God, who is supremely good, un-

¹⁸ It should be noted that the third commandment of the Decalogue is an exceptional case. It goes beyond natural law as such by taking what is certainly a requirement of the natural law, viz., that man offer due worship to God, and determining it to circumstances that are fitting but not inherently necessary, viz., that man set aside for this purpose the seventh day of the week. Christian theologians acknowledge that this commandment, *in forma specifica*, is no longer obligatory. The definitive offering of due worship to God has been accomplished by Jesus Christ on the cross. Of this paschal mystery—and thus, of this perfect “worship in Spirit and in truth”—we are made participants in the eucharistic banquet. It is the Church’s responsibility to determine exactly when we are obliged to participate in that sacrifice, and from the very beginning she has chosen Sunday as the Lord’s Day *par excellence*, thus abrogating the legal observance of the Sabbath. On this and related matters, see Kevin G. Long, “The Nine Commandments: The Decalogue and the Natural Law,” *The Aquinas Review* 3 (1996): 137–52.

¹⁹ *ST* I-II, q. 99, a. 1, ad 2.

less man become good. Thus it is written in Lev. 19:2 (cf. 11:45): “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” But the goodness of man is virtue, which “makes its possessor good” (*Ethics* 2.6). Therefore it was necessary for the Old Law to include precepts about acts of virtue, and these are the moral precepts of the Law.²⁰

Precepts “are expressed by way of absolute command or prohibition” because reason dictates that some acts *must* be done, “as being so necessary that without [them] the order of virtue would be destroyed.”²¹ Thomas thus relates the moral content of the divine law to the virtues perfective of human nature:

The community for which the divine law is ordained is that of men in relation to God, either in this life or in the life to come. The divine law, therefore, proposes precepts about all those matters whereby men are well ordered in their relations to God. Now man is united to God by his reason or mind, in which is God’s image. Thus the divine law proposes precepts about all those matters whereby human reason is well ordered. But this is effected by the acts of all the virtues, since the intellectual virtues set in good order the acts of reason in themselves, while the moral virtues set in good order the acts of reason in reference to interior passions and exterior actions. It is therefore evident that the divine law fittingly proposes precepts about the acts of all the virtues.²²

He continues: “Certain matters without which the order of virtue (which is the order of reason) cannot even exist, come under an obligation of precept.” A statement like this indicates why Thomas so firmly defends the immutability

²⁰ *ST* I-II, q. 99, a. 2.

²¹ *ST* I-II, q. 99, a. 5.

²² *ST* I-II, q. 100, a. 2.

of the natural moral law²³ as articulated in *both* tables of the Decalogue.²⁴

²³ It must be stressed that we are speaking here and in the following pages of the precepts of the *moral* law, which for Thomas are unchanging and unchangeable, but which for Scotus (and even more for Ockham) are radically contingent upon God's will. All three thinkers agree, however, that divine law and human law contain precepts that derive their justice from the simple fact of having been willed for the common good by one who has care of the community. For Thomas, certain laws promulgated by God are *iustum* simply because He promulgates them, and not on account of an intrinsic necessity stemming from human nature in itself (e.g., "Thou shalt not kill") or from human nature in relation to God (e.g., "Thou shalt have no gods before me"). As Thomas explains: "The divine right [*ius*] is that which is promulgated by God. Such things are partly those that are naturally just, yet their justice is hidden to man, and partly are made just by God's decree. Hence also divine right may be divided in respect of these two things, even as human right is. For the divine law commands certain things because they are good, and forbids others, because they are evil; while others are good because they are prescribed, and others evil because they are forbidden" (*ST* II-II, q. 57, a. 2, ad 3).

²⁴ Scripture clearly mentions two tables—in fact, two *pairs* of tables, since Moses smashed the first pair when he saw the golden calf, after which God asked him to make another pair—on which God himself inscribed the commandments (cf. Ex. 31-32, 34, Deut. 9-10, etc.), but nowhere are we told exactly which words were written on each table. Nevertheless a tradition arose that the "first table" contained the first three commandments, having to do with love of God, while the "second table" contained the last seven commandments, having to do with love of one's neighbor. Jesus lends support to this division by implying that all laws can be placed under one or the other heading: "the first and greatest commandment" is to love the Lord with all one's heart, etc., and "the *second* is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (cf. Mt. 22:36-40). The scholastics often saw the salient difference in this way: the precepts of the one have to do with the *uncreated good*, whereas the precepts of the other have to do with *created goods*. At *ST* I-II, q. 100, a. 8, Saint Thomas will say that the precepts of the first table order men rightly to God, while those of the second table order men rightly among

2. Scotus, the Second Table, and the Idea of Man²⁵

Now, John Duns Scotus's treatment of the same matters proceeds along different lines. He writes:

A practical truth of natural law is either one whose truth can be ascertained from its terms (in which case it is a principle of natural law, even as in theoretical matters a principle is known from its terms) or else one that follows from the knowledge of such truths (in which case it is a demonstrated conclusion in the practical order). And *strictly speaking*, nothing pertains to the law of nature except a principle or a conclusion demonstrated in this fashion. Nevertheless, something is said in an extended sense to pertain to the law of nature if it is a practical truth that is immediately recognized by all to be consonant with such a law.²⁶

Circumscribing "necessity" within severe limits, Scotus argues that the precepts of the second table lack this property:

Those propositions which are true by reason of their terms, whether they be immediately so or conclusions therefrom, have their truth prior to any act of the will, or at least they would be true even if, to assume the impossible, no act of willing existed. Therefore, if those precepts of the Decalogue or the practical propositions that could be formed

themselves; so, too, Saint Bonaventure, in his *Collations on the Ten Commandments*, trans. Paul J. Spaeth (Saint Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, 1995), 25-28. (The equivalent work among Thomas's writings, the *Collationes in decem precepta*, deserves to be better known; it has been translated by Laurence Shapcote, OP, as *Conferences on the Two Precepts of Charity and the Ten Commandments* [London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1937].) All this being said, it has to be admitted that each commandment involves both the relationship between man and God, and the ordered use of created goods.

²⁵ On the matters discussed in this section and the next, see Patrick Lee's enlightening article "Aquinas and Scotus on Liberty and Natural Law," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 56 (1982): 70-78.

²⁶ *Ordinatio* IV, dist. 17, De iure naturali; Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 263; cf. *ibid.*, 295.

from them possessed such necessity (e.g., if these were necessary: "No neighbor should be hated or killed," "Theft should never be committed," and the like), it would follow that apart from all volition the divine intellect would see such propositions as true of themselves, and then the divine will would necessarily agree with them or it would not be right [i.e., the divine will would be disordered]. . . .

[If these precepts possessed intrinsic necessity], it would also be necessary to assume that [God's] will is necessarily determined in an unqualified sense in regard to willing things other than himself. And even if you say that a created will must necessarily be conformed to these truths if it is to be right, this still does not say that the divine will wills in accord with them; rather because it wills accordingly, therefore they are true.²⁷

Take note of the last phrase: *sed quia conformiter vult, ideo sunt vera*. For a proposition of practical reason or a moral precept to be necessary *simpliciter*, it must be *per se nota* to the divine intellect and naturally willed by the divine will. On no other account, seemingly not even with reference to the nature of man as eternally present in the divine understanding, can a precept be considered to possess such necessity that its contrary would be unthinkable or unwillable. It is important to see why Scotus does not grant necessity to moral law: to do so would seem to compromise divine freedom and divine intellectual autonomy. For Scotus, to identify God and the unchanging exemplar of the creature is, in a roundabout way, to introduce metaphysical *necessity* into God's creative causality of the contingent universe. Thus creaturely natures are not to be regarded as "part" of God's very being, as Saint Augustine had seen them to be. (In saying "part," one does not mean that the natures of creatures are precontained in God as distinct beings—for a form is received, or possessed, according to the mode of the recipient or possessor. Thus everything *in*

²⁷ *Ord.* III, suppl. dist. 37, corp.; Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 275.

God is God; in him the ideas of all things are identical with his simple self-contemplation.)

It was Augustine who wrote the Platonically inspired words: "The Son is the art of the omnipotent God, full of all the living ideas, and all things are one in this art."²⁸ This theological insight was developed with particular clarity by Saint Bonaventure, an ardent Augustinian and a colleague of Thomas's in Paris, and so it will be helpful to spend a moment with him for the sake of establishing a richer background to our discussion of natural law.

In his *Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ*, Bonaventure distinguishes two kinds of likeness: the likeness of imitation which is "the way in which a creature is a likeness of the Creator," and the exemplary likeness, "the way in which the exemplary idea in the Creator is a likeness of the creature." The former is the cause of knowledge in a mind that receives sensible species and abstracts the intelligible content from the sensible; such a likeness "involves some degree of imperfection" because it "involves a sort of composition or addition in the knowing intellect." For the rational creature, things are the cause of knowledge. The latter kind of likeness, however, "causes things to be," and "does not come from outside"; consequently, no imperfection is implied. Such exemplars of things subsist in the mind of God, are none other than his very nature, and are perfectly expressive of the realities they cause to be. The Creator's *knowledge* is the cause of *things*.

The divine intellect is the supreme light, the full truth, and pure act. So, as the divine power to produce things is sufficient in itself to produce everything, so the divine light and truth is sufficient in itself to express all things. And since this expression is an intrinsic act, it is eternal. Because an expression is a form of assimilation, the divine intellect—expressing all things eternally in its supreme truth

²⁸ *De Trinitate* VI, c. 10, n. 11.

—possesses from eternity the exemplary ideas of all creatures.²⁹

To speak of the ideas in God as expressive of things is to speak of his causality with respect to the creature expressed, the total making of the creature according to its eternal pattern in the mind of the divine Artificer: “The eternal ideas are the productive principles of all things.”³⁰ Although the ideas in the mind of the Creator are other than the Word, there is an intimate connection between idea and Word. Just as the Word is the expression of the Father, the unique Word begotten of the Father by an interior procession of knowledge, so too the ideas in the mind of God, many in notion but one in divine substance, are the fullest and truest expression of all creatures. The ideas of created things are expressed *through* the Word of God, and to this Word is attributed the exemplarity of creation. “In a true and proper sense, God is Word. But a word is the likeness of that which is spoken. Therefore, if the Son of God is the Word in whom all things are spoken, it is necessary that the likenesses of all things that are expressed be present in that Word.”³¹ Hence, as the Word is the necessary expression of the Father, so creation is the free artistic expression of the divine ideas, brought into being through the Art of the Word, “by which, through which, and according to which all beautiful things are formed.”³²

²⁹ *Quaestiones disputatae De scientia Christi*, q. 2, corp.; *Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ*, trans. Zachary Hayes, OFM (Saint Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, 1992), 90–91.

³⁰ *De scientia Christi*, q. 3, arg. neg. 10; Hayes, *Knowledge of Christ*, 103. In a Bonaventuran turn of phrase, we find Thomas saying, apropos of the heavenly realm: “In that intelligible world are enclosed, in a way, the *rationes* of all things that are brought to completion in this world, as the *rationes* of something effected are enclosed in its cause, and the *rationes* of artifacts in the artificer” (*ST* I-II, q. 102, a. 4, ad 6).

³¹ *De scientia Christi*, q. 2, arg. aff. 10; Hayes, *Knowledge of Christ*, 86.

³² *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, cap. 2, §9; *The Journey of the Mind to God*, trans. Philotheus Boehner, OFM, ed. Stephen F. Brown (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 15.

Thus we are led to see that the Word of God is the *perfect expression* of creatures, who pre-exist in him in the highest clarity and integrity. “A likeness of exemplarity and expression is found in its supreme form in the Creator with respect to the whole of creation, because that which is truth itself, being the supreme light, expresses all things in the most perfect way.”³³ Bodily creatures are refracted light, divided by a medium and differentiated by matter. The Eternal Art by which the Father creates—“that Eternal Art which is not only the form that produces all things, but also the form that conserves and differentiates them, for this is the Being that contains the form in all creatures, and is the rule that directs the form in all things”³⁴—is the undivided light of pure act, in whom all distinct forms subsist in absolute simplicity. In his discussion of the two different meanings of *truth* (“the entity of a being” and “the expressive light in intellectual knowledge”), Bonaventure shows the way in which the *truth* of a thing is found more fully in the exemplary idea than in a thing’s real existence in the world:

In the first instance [“truth is whatever exists”], truth is the remote principle of knowledge. In the second instance [“truth is a rightness perceptible only to the mind”], it is the proximate and immediate principle of knowledge. Therefore, when it is said that truth is found more fully in the real existence of a being than in its likeness, this is true if truth is taken in the first sense, but not if it is taken in the second sense. But that truth which is the proximate and immediate principle of knowledge is found more fully in that likeness which resides in the intellect. It is found particularly and in the supreme degree in that likeness which is the exemplar of creation. Such a likeness expresses the creature more perfectly than the created being itself can.³⁵

³³ *De scientia Christi*, q. 2, ad 5; Hayes, *Knowledge of Christ*, 92.

³⁴ *Itinerarium*, cap. 2, §9; Boehner, *Journey*, 15.

³⁵ *De scientia Christi*, q. 2, ad 9; Hayes, *Knowledge of Christ*, 93.

Only through some contact with the original idea can we embrace the full truth of the idea's concrete expression: "God is truly the eternal mirror which makes possible the knowledge of every intelligible being."³⁶ The view expressed here by Bonaventure, at the level of generality at which we have summarized it, is nearly the same as Thomas's.³⁷ In the domain of principles governing man's activity, the relationship of natural law to Eternal Law parallels the relationship of creature to exemplar—and this parallelism, it may be superfluous to add, is crucial for the traditional view of the natural moral law as a law discernible by reason. Although Scotus does not depart explicitly from this tradition, his doctrine of divine will (and arguably his parallel account of human will) is already moving in that direction, coloring his treatment of the natural law.

We should not overlook the fact, then, that the Thomistic account of natural law presupposes an exemplarist foundation, implying in turn a necessary connection between the beings God freely wills to create and the eternally true conditions of any creatable universe. As perfect intelligence, he foreknows

³⁶ *De scientia Christi*, q. 2, arg. aff. 9; Hayes, *Knowledge of Christ*, 85.

³⁷ For a fuller exposition of the points made in the foregoing paragraphs, see my article "The World as Symbol of Divine Beauty in the Thought of Saint Bonaventure," *Faith & Reason* 24/25 (1999-2000): 31-54, from which part of the present section has been taken. Cf. Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of Saint Bonaventure*, trans. Dom Iltyd Trethowan and Frank J. Sheed (Paterson, N.J.: Saint Anthony Guild Press, 1965), 127-46. While Bonaventure is an illuminationist and Aquinas an "abstractionist," they are unanimous in attributing to the divine light and truth the function of first formal, first efficient, and ultimate final cause as regards human acts of knowing. They differ rather as regards *how* this causality plays out at the level of cognitive faculties and acts. See Thomas's masterful treatment of these issues in *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 1, a. 1. Armand Maurer's translation of Questions 1-4 of this commentary is published under the title *Faith, Reason and Theology* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1987); Maurer's remarks on illuminationism (xv-xviii) are also helpful.

the scope of his creative activity: all possible finite participated likenesses of his infinite self-subsistent being. These likenesses correspond to the intelligible archetypes that Thomas, in line with Augustine, calls divine ideas.³⁸ The creature is constituted in being as a finite likeness of that infinite perfection whose inexhaustible riches God understands as diversely imitable. Each distinct imitation is foreknown, at all levels of identity (genus, species, individual). Hence, when we say all horses "participate" in God's idea of a horse, we mean that *each* horse is a created likeness of a certain self-understanding of divine perfection. God's self-understanding is radically one, as is his being. Yet precisely because of the infinity of his being, he understands all possible kinds and ways of imitation. The divine ideas represent in God, as it were, the whole range of the creature's being, from its most common feature to its utmost particularity. God's *knowledge* is the creative *cause* of all that pertains to the creature,³⁹ whether as individual being

³⁸ See *ST I*, q. 15, a. 3, ad 2; q. 14, aa. 9 and 12; q. 15, a. 2; *De veritate*, q. 2. The most comprehensive study to date of Aquinas's doctrine of divine ideas and its metaphysical setting is that of Gregory T. Doolan, "Saint Thomas Aquinas and Divine Exemplarism," Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 2003. In several places, Gilson suggests that Thomas's theory of divine ideas is a mere holdover from Augustine. But nothing in Aquinas is a mere holdover. No one appreciated more than he the need to recognize in creatures their distinctive perfection and genuine causal power, precisely to give all the more honor to the generosity and power of their Creator. If exemplarism is explained solely in terms of an imitation of God's *essence* and not of his *ideas*, one cannot escape denying the positive perfection of creatures; what is stressed is that in imitating God, creatures fall short of *his* perfection. Of course, that is true. But they do live up to their *own* perfection, exemplified in their imitating God in *this* respect (their "own" idea). God wants them to be that way: imperfect in comparison to his unlimited being, but perfect in respect to their own. Deny the ideas, and you deny this perfection. (I am indebted to Prof. Doolan for this insight.)

³⁹ *ST I*, q. 14, a. 8; q. 19, a. 4. Saint Thomas clarifies that it is not simply God's *knowing* a thing that brings it into being (that is, if one

or as member of a species or of any higher genus. The divine knowledge of possible things and the divine willing of their actual existence account for the two most elementary data of the creature: *that* it exists, and *what* it is.⁴⁰

Just as the idea of the creature in its individuality and in its species or kind is identical to the divine nature because there is no composition in God of thinker and thought, so

conceives of this knowledge abstractly), but his knowing it *and willing it*, or, in other words, the cause of a creature is God's *knowing approval* or approbation thereof.

⁴⁰ In attempting to summarize the Cartesian rejection of a doctrine of divine ideas, Lilli Alanen voices a common misunderstanding of what that doctrine implies: "There are no models, no prior natures or logical patterns *to which God has to look or conform* in creating the truths [of things]: in creating the truths, i.e., in willing and knowing them, he makes the models. God could as well have conceived (made) the triangle, or any other geometrical figure, in some other way, incompatible with the way in which we actually conceive it, but to conceive how that would be possible is and remains beyond our understanding which is, as it were, programmed to represent them in certain determinate ways we cannot change or modify" ("Descartes, Duns Scotus, and Ockham on Omnipotence and Possibility," *Franciscan Studies* 45/2 [1985]: 157-88; 185, emphasis added). Surely neither Augustine nor Thomas thought that God had to "look to" models outside himself or "conform to" any standard other than his own intellect. It is precisely in *his* intellect that the ideas subsist, they do not stand over against him. And these ideas are immutable not because they are an inexplicable law unto themselves that God has to obey, but precisely because they are none other than God's act of regarding the perfection of his own essence, which is simple and immutable. To him, many "views" of this perfection are possible, though he sees this all at once, not by many distinct acts of viewing. It is baffling to discover how many summaries of Ockham offer a caricature of the theory of the divine ideas in order to make Ockham's anti-Augustinian campaign plausible, but this implies one of three things: the commentator has a superficial grasp of the traditional view and possibly also of Ockham's critique; Ockham himself targets a caricature; Ockham *does* understand the traditional view, and rejects it. If the last is the case, he is repudiating the foundations of any rational metaphysics of creation.

too the natural law, wherein the rational creature discerns the principles according to which his life should be regulated, is a participation in the Eternal Law through which God governs the universe. By the power of reason, we are able to reach up from this changing world to the unchanging *pattern* of creation and the *law* governing it. Both are rooted in God's foreknowing and foreordaining the world according to his wisdom and love. As a consequence, Thomas bases the necessity of the precepts of the moral law on man's *essence* as eternally known in God's mind, without disregarding the fact that prior to any of the necessities that may envelop the creature there must be a free exercise of the divine will in populating a contingent world with a variety of natures.⁴¹

⁴¹ A clarification is in order, lest one imagine that I am attributing to a created entity some necessity such that God is externally constrained and obliged by it. God freely establishes the foundations of all necessities *ad extra*, since only his own *esse* is purely and simply necessary to be willed, since it lacks nothing of the nature of goodness; the necessity attributed to contingent effects flows from what they are freely willed by God to be. Yet—and this is the underlying point—God wills no creature without eternally knowing what it is to be and how it is to act, according to its inherent form and ends. For an excellent discussion, see *Summa contra gentiles* III, chs. 97-98. In the former chapter we read: "[T]hat God love His own goodness is something necessary, but it does not necessarily follow from this that it should be reflected in creatures, since the divine goodness is perfect without this. Consequently although the divine goodness is the reason why creatures were originally brought into being, nevertheless this [bringing into being] depends on the simple will of God. Supposing, however, that God wishes to communicate His goodness to His creatures by way of likeness as far as it is possible, this is the reason why creatures are of diverse kinds: although there is no necessity for this diversity being according to this or that degree of perfection, or this or that number of things. . . . It is therefore clear that the dispensations of providence are according to a certain reason, and yet this reason presupposes the divine will." Two errors are thereby excluded: "the error of those who maintain that all things follow from [God's] simple will, without any reason . . . [such that, for example,] the

Undoubtedly, the only reason man *exists* is God's unconstrained decision, for human nature is one of an infinity of ways in which his divine perfection can be imitated. Granting man to be such as God knows and wills him, however, certain rules of human behavior naturally and necessarily follow. The truth regarding a definite nature, a truth eternally known by God, cannot be altered or negated without violating the principle of non-contradiction. Put differently, the essence of man in the divine mind is self-identical: as one way of reflecting the divine being, it has its definition and determination in God no less than a square, a sea urchin, or a seraph.

We return to Scotus. Scotus interprets the first two commandments as having rigorous necessity, because only precepts directly pertaining to *God* can have necessity from the very meaning of their terms—a negative necessity, it should be added:

Indeed the first two [precepts of the Decalogue, which regard God immediately as object], if they be understood in a purely negative sense . . . belong to the natural law, taking law of nature strictly, for this follows necessarily: "If God exists, then he alone must be loved as God." It likewise follows that nothing else must be worshipped as God, nor must any irreverence be shown to him. Consequently, God could not dispense in regard to these so that someone could [rightly] do the opposite.⁴²

Scotus's application of his general position to the second table deliberately severs any intrinsic connection between the laws pertaining to God and the laws pertaining to neighbor:

I say that some things can be said to belong to the law of nature in two ways: One way is as first practical principles

sole reason why fire heats rather than chills is because God so wills," and "the error of those who assert that the ordering of causes proceeds from divine providence by way of necessity."

⁴² *Ord.* III, suppl. dist. 37; Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 277.

known from their terms or as conclusions necessarily entailed by them. These are said to belong to the natural law in the strictest sense, and there can be no dispensation in their regard. . . . But this is not the case when we speak in general of all the precepts of the second table. For the reasons behind the commands and prohibitions there are not practical principles that are necessary in an unqualified sense, nor are they simply necessary conclusions from such. For they contain no goodness such as is necessarily prescribed for attaining the goodness of the ultimate end, nor in what is forbidden is there such malice as would turn one away necessarily from the last end, for even if the good found in these [precepts] were not commanded, the ultimate end could still be loved and attained, whereas if the evil proscribed by them were not forbidden, it would still be consistent with the acquisition of the ultimate end.⁴³

Consider the important test case of whether a man is naturally obliged to look out for the good of his neighbor and for the common good of society. Thomas argues that if one loves God, one will love one's neighbor and will want him to love God. Scotus rejects the argument:

The third way of answering the objection [about the duty of procuring that one's neighbor also love God] is that even if it were strictly a matter of the natural law that our neighbor be loved in the way this was explained above, namely, that one must want the neighbor himself to love God, because this is what it means to love one's neighbor, the precepts of the second table still do not follow from this. For instance, that one must not kill him, so far as his good [is concerned]; or that one must not want him to commit adultery, so far as the good of his partner; or that one must not want him to steal, so far as the goods of fortune that he uses; or that one must want him to show reverence to his parents, which consists not just in honoring them but also in supporting

⁴³ *Ibid.*

them. For it is possible for me to will that my neighbor love God and nevertheless not will that he preserve corporeal life or conjugal fidelity, and so on with the other precepts. Consequently, these two can coexist: that I want my neighbor to love God as I ought to love him (which would be a kind of necessary conclusion from the practical principles) and still do not will him this or that good pertaining to the second table, since the latter is not a necessary truth.⁴⁴

Starting from a universal negative precept, "one must not hate God," nothing else follows, he maintains; human nature necessitates no other duties. "I do not have to will that the common good pertain to another in such a way that God has to be loved by this other," Scotus remarks, because it is quite possible that God has predestined my neighbor to hell.⁴⁵ That Scotus should argue in this manner seems puzzling until one realizes that his overall project is the reduction of commitments to ideal foundations of natural categories (e.g., man's social inclinations) in the blazing light of divine omnipotence

⁴⁴ *Ord. III, suppl. dist. 37; Wolter, Will and Morality, 285* (the position Scotus rejects is summarized in his own words on 281ff.). Thomas would have objected to this reasoning. To love God as a rational being already implies reasonable habits with respect to oneself and others, a virtuous love of self and love of neighbor. To be a spouse, to own property, to possess life—these are real goods tightly bound to human nature. They can be foregone for a higher cause, but they cannot be looked upon as incidental. In the passages cited, Scotus seems to marginalize man's social and bodily nature by separating off this dimension of morality from the attainment of man's final end. Lee drives home this objection in "Aquinas and Scotus on Liberty and Natural Law," 75-76.

⁴⁵ *Ord. III, suppl. dist. 37; Wolter, Will and Morality, 283*. The passage reads: "One could reply that from this precept, 'Love the Lord, your God,' it does not follow that I ought to want my neighbor to love God. And when one insists that a perfect and well-ordered love is not jealous, I reply that I do not have to will that the common good pertain to another in such a way that [God] has to be loved by this other. For it is not necessary that I will this good for another, if God does not want to be the good of such, as when he predestines one and not another, wishing to be the good of the predestined and not of the other."

and freedom. Scotus will not be satisfied until every apparent restriction of God's autonomy is cut away. As a consequence, he asserts that the moral precepts are not natural in the strong sense, stating the conclusion twice in succession for emphasis: "It is true that love of neighbor fulfills the law," but "not in the way that love of neighbor follows from the first principles of natural law"; the whole law "depends on this commandment . . . again understanding this not as something that follows of necessity from the first principles of natural law."⁴⁶

At stake is not whether human beings need to observe the existing moral law; Scotus is as firm on that point as Thomas. At stake is the bottom line of the moral law—*why* man should be moral, *why* he should love his neighbor. What philosophical defense can be given of the Decalogue's moral precepts? Are they a matter of nature or a matter of positive law? If the latter, then philosophy must confess its ignorance of the principles of human behavior and yield to a theological justification based on revelation.⁴⁷ On Scotistic terms, we are left with two ways of explaining the moral precepts of the second table: either they arise from the free exercise of divine will with no reference to the essence of man, or they are greatly "in accord with" that essence but not *intrinsically* in accord with it, otherwise they would be seen to flow invariably from it. On either account, the moral law must be construed as *external* to man's nature, in such wise that it is imposed, laid down, in the manner of positive law.⁴⁸ Whether divine will

⁴⁶ *Ord. III, suppl. dist. 37; Wolter, Will and Morality, 285*.

⁴⁷ Thomas Williams does not think it problematic to hold that a moral law dependent only on God's free will can be accessible to natural reason without the benefit of revelation. His explanation is presented in "Reason, Morality, and Voluntarism in Duns Scotus: A Pseudo-Problem Dissolved," *The Modern Schoolman* 74 (1997): 73-94. I find Williams' argument interesting but not fully convincing.

⁴⁸ Scotus concurs with Thomas that positive divine law will always be in harmony with man's nature; a supremely beneficent Creator does not legislate injuriously. "The other way in which things belong to the

is the sole determinant or whether a sort of co-determination results from the operation of divine omnipotence keeping in view the exigencies of man's life in society, the Scotistic position reduces law to two mutually exclusive modes: the Eternal Law, by which is signified the immanent and necessary activities of the divine essence; positive law, the result of God's free choice toward his creatures.

3. Summary Comparison of the Positions of Aquinas and Scotus

For Thomas, the natural law must be seen in terms of the inner necessity of the creature's essence, its unchanging exemplar in the mind of God. Whatever the rational creature's nature gives rise to is either a first principle of natural law or deducible therefrom. God is said to have no power over this law, *not* because he is constrained by an outside rule, but rather because he cannot *not* will the nature's self-identity and thus its fitting behavior as eternally known to him.⁴⁹ Indeed, since all that God thinks is identical with himself, to hold that the activity suited to some nature is subject to radical change is to hold that the nature as such may be changed—which, in the last analysis, is to hold that the divine mind is capable of mutability of thought and variability of will, that its thinking is reformulable, its willing arbitrary. In short, such a claim would necessitate that God unthink his own thought

law of nature is because they are exceedingly in harmony with that law, even though they do not follow necessarily from those first practical principles known from their terms. . . . Now, it is certain that all the precepts of the second table also belong to the natural law in this way, since their rightness is very much in harmony with the first practical principles that are known of necessity" (*Ord.* III, suppl. dist. 37; Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 279).

⁴⁹ See note 40 on the misconception involved in believing God to be "constrained" by his own ideas, and hence in thinking it an act of homage to divine simplicity and freedom when these ideas are purged from the speculative account of God's creative knowledge.

(in which is precontained the archetypes of all possible beings) and unwill his own volition (in which is precontained the choice to reduce to actuality some of the possibles he foreknows); and this would be a violation of the principle of non-contradiction, an instance of God undermining his own being. Thomas recognizes this:

As the Apostle says, God "continueth faithful, he cannot deny himself" (2 Tim. 2:13). But he would deny himself if he were to do away with the very order of his own justice, since he is justice itself. Thus God cannot dispense a man so that it be lawful for him not to direct himself to God, or not to be subject to his justice, *even in those matters in which men are directed to one another.*⁵⁰

As the acts of a *creature*, human acts are naturally governed by principles that flow from the Creator's knowledge of man, which is to say, from the nature or essence of man as image of God, a sharer in God's knowledge and providence. By heeding and applying these principles he makes progress in virtue and becomes more fully *human*; by failing to do so he sins and falls away from his own good.⁵¹

For Scotus, in contrast, the natural law must be seen in terms of the necessity of the divine will in its immanent activity of loving and knowing itself. Whatever the divine will must will when considering its own nature is either a first principle of natural law or a conclusion directly deducible

⁵⁰ *ST* I-II, q. 100, a. 8, ad 2, emphasis added.

⁵¹ This is why Saint Thomas can make the striking statement: "God is not offended by us except when we act against our own good" (*Summa contra gentiles* II, ch. 122). In the supernatural realm this process is not reversed but accelerated, since baptism takes a person who is already *imago Dei*, sharing in the goodness of the creator, and makes him *imago Christi*, a sharer in the still greater riches of the redemption. Hence, in the order of redemption it remains true that we are made more human the more we correspond with grace, yet with this difference: the perfect humanity toward which we are led by the Spirit is not our own but Christ's—he from whom all grace comes, unto whom all grace leads, to whom all grace causes likeness.

from a first principle. "Natural" refers to the divine essence as such, seemingly prescinding from its imitability or from any conception of possible creatures. As Wolter writes,

The law of nature, in his [Scotus's] system, loses something of its impersonal and inflexible character. Its personal dimension cannot be ignored. Where other scholastics, following Augustine who in turn was influenced by the Stoics, link it with the *lex aeterna*, Scotus eliminates this last vestige of impersonalism. To legislate or command is a function of will, not of a nature as such, even if it be the most perfect of natures.⁵²

Thus only the first two commandments are "natural" because they pertain directly to the divine nature which must never be hated (the first principle of natural law) but must be loved (directly concluded to from that first principle). Although greatly in harmony with the natural law, the second table can be changed by God, for *he* is not necessarily bound to any of these precepts. They are not truths in such a way that, the divine intellect considering them, the divine will must will them. With the tradition, Scotus admits that the natural law and its associated precepts, as expressed in both tables of the Decalogue, can be said to be "prescribed interiorly in the heart of everyone."⁵³ However, that a law is inscribed in man by the free decree of his maker, and that such a law *must* be his

⁵² Allan B. Wolter, OFM, *The Philosophical Theology of John Duns Scotus* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 161–62. Later he observes: "Many of Scotus' colleagues, following Augustine, made use of an idea borrowed from the Stoics. They considered the entire decalogue as a reflection of some impersonal 'Eternal Law' that was written into nature, and saw it as binding on God by reason of what he is and the sort of created nature he decided to make. . . . [T]he values protected by the second table cannot have the same absolute value as those preserved by the first table. They are not as independent of, or antecedent to, what God wills, in the way the values safeguarded by the precepts of the first table are" (ibid., 200–201).

⁵³ *Ord.* III, suppl. dist. 37, ad 3; Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 287.

by nature or according to his being, are two different claims. Scotus concedes the first and denies the second.

4. *Difficulties and Dispensations*

What does each party to the debate make of those perplexing passages in Sacred Scripture where God seems to command or legislate acts contrary to the content of the second table of the Decalogue?⁵⁴ Scotus sees the long-famous examples of Abraham's intention to kill Isaac (Gen. 22), Hosea's marrying a "wife of harlotry" (Hos. 1:2; cf. 3:1), and the Jews plundering the Egyptians (Ex. 12:36) as *proving* his view of the natural law. Yet one wonders if he is begging the question by assuming that God commanded acts of murder, adultery, or theft, properly so called.⁵⁵ Thomas, relying upon a distinction between the letter of the law and the intention of the lawgiver, sees in no case any revocation of or dispensation from the moral precepts of the Decalogue.

Precepts admit of dispensation when there occurs a particular case in which, if the letter of the law be observed, the intention of the lawgiver is frustrated. Now the intention of every lawgiver is directed first and chiefly to the common good; second, to the order of justice and virtue, whereby the common good is preserved and attained. If therefore there

⁵⁴ For Thomas's handling of these instances, see *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 5 and q. 100, a. 8; for Scotus's, see *Ord.* III suppl. dist. 37; Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 269–87. In one place at least, Scotus offers an interpretation of the Jews' despoliation of the Egyptians which closely parallels that of Saint Thomas: see *Ord.* III, s.d. 37; Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 287. On whether Aquinas believes the precepts of the Decalogue can admit of any dispensation, see the superb article by Patrick Lee, "Permanence of the Ten Commandments: Saint Thomas and His Modern Commentators," *Theological Studies* 42 (1981): 422–43.

⁵⁵ The despoiling of the Egyptians is not a particularly strong objection, since the sacred text says that the Israelites *asked* the Egyptians for their gold and silver and clothing, and implies that the Egyptians freely handed it over, just to get rid of the plague-bearing Israelites.

be any precepts which contain the very preservation of the common good, or the very order of justice and virtue, such precepts contain the intention of the lawgiver and therefore are indispensable. . . . Now the precepts of the Decalogue contain the very intention of the lawgiver, who is God. For the precepts of the first table, which direct us to God, contain the very order to the common and final good, which is God; while the precepts of the second table contain the order of justice to be observed among men, that nothing undue be done to anyone, and that each one be given his due; for it is in this sense that we are to take the precepts of the Decalogue. Consequently, the precepts of the Decalogue admit of no dispensation whatsoever.⁵⁶

Taking up the problematic cases mentioned, Thomas does not see contradictions of the moral law that was promulgated with the very creation of man, but special interventions from God that change the ordinary course of affairs. So, since hu-

⁵⁶ ST I-II, q. 100, a. 8. There is a difference between the *principles* and the *precepts* of the natural law. The principles ("do good, avoid evil") are universal, absolute, immutable and knowable with certitude, but at the same time, somewhat vague, unclear and indeterminate (cf. ST I-II, q. 94, aa. 4-5). The precepts, on the other hand, are either practical conclusions drawn from the principles or certain determinations of them. Even the *precepts* of the natural law are sometimes vague and indeterminate and require determination by custom and the civil law. All of the latter are correspondingly more clear and determinate, but less universal and immutable than the *principles* of the natural law.

One interesting test case is raised by Saint Augustine in *The City of God*, 15.16. Did the sons of Adam and Eve sin by marrying their sisters? Clearly, the natural law commands as a first principle filial piety, which would exclude intercourse or marriage with parents. By extension, that is, by a certain conclusion, it would exclude incestuous relations with close relatives, especially siblings. However, because the prohibition of sibling incest is a *precept*, it is not absolute (cf. ST II-II, q. 154, a. 9, *corp.* and ad 3; Supplement, q. 58, a. 4). It must be weighed against a more fundamental, positive, and urgent precept, namely, the obligation to perpetuate the race. The same analysis would apply in the hypothetical case of a brother and sister who, as the result of some global catastrophe, were the last man and woman on earth.

man life wholly belongs to God, and since he inflicts death on all men, whether guilty or innocent, on account of the sin of Adam, he may therefore at any time justly demand a life be given back to him. No individual human has the authority to appoint the day and the hour, but the Lord certainly does, and used it with Abraham as a test of faith. (That is, had Abraham taken Isaac's life *without* being commanded by his superior to do so, it would have been murder, just as a private citizen who intentionally kills a criminal commits a vicious act whereas a judge who decrees the same criminal's death can, in the right circumstances, be acting virtuously.⁵⁷) Again, adultery means sexual intercourse with another's wife. But a wife is allotted to a man by the law emanating from God, the author of the institution of marriage, just as Eve was given to Adam to be his. Thus if God commands intercourse with an unmarried woman, this cannot be adultery or fornication, but is tantamount to God's having appointed a wife.⁵⁸ Finally, theft is the taking of another's property. But

⁵⁷ Cf. ST I-II, q. 100, a. 8, ad 3; II-II, q. 64, aa. 2 and 3. Concerning Abraham and putting men to death, see Lee, "Permanence of the Ten Commandments," 433-41. If a State has the authority to punish malefactors with death, this is *only* because the State is acting on behalf of God by acting to safeguard the social common good, which, as Thomas often says, is the most godlike among created goods. This seems to be one of the reasons why John Paul II has turned against capital punishment in the context of liberal democracies that disclaim, in principle, action on behalf of a transcendent principle and perhaps no longer even aspire to a properly common good.

⁵⁸ If the woman is a harlot or concubine, she is not, strictly speaking, already married, and so the argument still follows. A difficulty would arise if God were to assign as a wife a woman already married, for this woman is already joined to another in an unbreakable bond. If, however, one views marriage as a covenant freely instituted by the divine authority, then it would follow that even if no *man* has authority to dissolve such a covenant, *God* retains such authority, and should he will to dissolve such a union, it would be *ipso facto* dissolved. The statement "What God has united, let no man separate" implies only that *man* has no authority to do this; what God has united, *God* may separate. (In

even as God is the Lord of life and death, he is also the ruler of all creation, the "owner" of all good things, for he is their source. Hence, he is perfectly free to allot these goods as he deems fitting, and if he commands that a thing be taken, that very command transfers the title.⁵⁹

A still greater scriptural challenge awaits the natural law theorist: the patriarchal practice of polygamy and the Mosaic permission of divorce. Aquinas handles these issues with customary confidence and serenity.⁶⁰ In his attempt to resolve the same difficulties, it becomes clear that Scotus is not stubbornly committed to his own view of natural law, for he allows more traditional accounts a place. Aquinas and Scotus

like manner, God commands us: The life of an innocent man may never be lawfully taken, since we are not the origin of that life—although we are the guardians of social order and so the ruler may have authority in certain cases to take a guilty man's life. However, God is fully justified in taking even the innocent's life, since he gave it.) Can God establish a union indissoluble even by his own power? It would seem not; a union of two creatures is a contingent reality, and God is not bound by anything *extra eum*. Insofar as the union could be dissolved by divine power, it would not be able to bear an exact likeness to the union between Christ and the Church, which is eternally indissoluble. Insofar as marriage is indissoluble on the part of a Christian man and a Christian woman who vow their love before God, it *does* bear this likeness, which is precisely the good of *sacramentum* in Augustine's terminology. The hypothetical case remains nonetheless difficult. Divorce, which is a moral evil, would be implicit in God's re-assigning a wife from her husband to another man, yet one cannot attribute to God the positive willing of any moral evil. Moreover, if the man to whom God newly assigns the woman were already married, she would become his second wife, which implies the direct divine willing of bigamy, contrary to God's original intention as specified in Genesis.

⁵⁹ See *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 5, ad 2; q. 100, a. 8, ad 3.

⁶⁰ For Thomas's view, see the Supplement of the *Summa*, q. 65 on the plurality of wives and q. 67 on the bill of divorce; for Scotus's view, see *Ordinatio* IV, dist. 33, qq. 1 and 3; Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 289-311. The Supplement is the early Thomas of the *Commentary on the Sentences*, but his position on the topics does not undergo significant change during his career.

agree that marriage, as a natural institution, is defined by the two ends that belong to it by nature: the primary end is the procreation and education of offspring, the secondary end the lifelong union of two spouses in a common household. God may specify the extent to which the secondary end can be modified for the sake of the primary.⁶¹ Like Thomas, Scotus refers to the original "law of nature" instituted by God and restored by Christ: "They shall be two in one flesh." If any variation from this law of monogamy is to occur, it must be explained either in terms of a divine permission, under exceptional circumstances, to relativize the secondary end for the sake of a superior achievement of the primary end, or in terms of indulgence to sinners, as when Moses permitted divorce because of the people's hardness of heart. Since it does not, in and of itself, harm the good of offspring (*proles*), polygamy is not intrinsically sinful, but it is patently deficient as regards the goods of the spouses' mutual loyalty and the sacramental symbolism of their union (*fides, sacramentum*).⁶² In contrast, divorce under the Mosaic law remained evil, and like any moral evil it could be tolerated so as to discourage the commission of worse deeds, but was never approved, though its guilt might be lessened by divine indulgence. That is, Mosaic divorce seems to involve the toleration of a moral evil, of a sin, rather than being a genuine dispensation, whereas (if I understand Thomas aright) polygamy is an imperfection, an imperfect realization of marriage, but not a moral evil *per se*. Hence, the patriarchs were permitted to have a number of wives, and they could still become holy under those circumstances, whereas divorce, of itself, militates against holiness. Many figures of the Old Testament are understood to be saints and are liturgically venerated as such (the calendars of Eastern churches, both Catholic and dissident, are full of

⁶¹ All of this is spelled out clearly in the Supplement, q. 65, aa. 1-2.

⁶² On the three traditional goods or blessings of marriage, see the Supplement, q. 49.

their feastdays), but no one can be a saint who lives at manifest variance with the law of God. We do not find divorced and remarried saints, but we do find saints under the Old Law who lived with many wives.

This being said, it is nevertheless true that the covenant between man and woman was *created* to be indissoluble and monogamous, as Christ teaches. Consequently, dissolubility or polygamy could never be considered *secundum naturam* in the strict sense. Divorce might be tolerated for a time due to "hardness of heart," and an imperfect realization of the secondary end might be allowed for a given period, but in regard to what the divine lawgiver intends, viz., what is simply *best* for the human race, both these policies are a manifest falling away. In the Gospel, our Lord teaches that marriage has to be understood according to the Creator's original plan (cf. Mt. 19:3-6) and links indissolubility to the sixth commandment (Mt. 19:7-9), as if to show that this precept of the second table is, in its very letter, a direct consequence of man's pristine nature.⁶³ The polygamy of the Old Testament was never intended to seem attractive. The first polygamist recorded in Scripture was a murderous descendent of Cain, Lamech (Gen. 5:17-24), and the manner in which the patriarchs become the partners of a number of women is usually far from edifying, nor are the households models of peace (cf. Gen. 16, 21, 29-30, etc.).

In summary, for Aquinas the allowing of dispensations (e.g., for patriarchal polygamy) or the toleration of evils (e.g., divorce) cannot be construed as a *changing* of natural law or as support for the principle that moral evil may be done for the sake of procuring a greater good. The precepts of the law remain consistent, universal, irrevocable, for they are rooted in human nature and in God's eternal law.

⁶³ Notably, Aquinas's account parallels the argument of Christ, while the Scotistic view of marriage, at least in *Ord. IV*, dist. 33 (Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 297-311), engenders serious difficulties of exegesis.

In a question on the subject of divorce, Scotus admits that Christ "returned marriage to an unqualified state of perfection, namely, as indissoluble as it was under the law of nature"; the Mosaic permission to divorce, "like other imperfections licit under the law of Moses, Christ removed."⁶⁴ Indeed, Scotus concedes that "marriage under the Mosaic law was not marriage in an unqualified sense."⁶⁵ He also thinks that the book of Deuteronomy and the prophet Malachi speak of permission for certain acts which "are still mortally sinful" but "are allowed only to prevent an even graver mortal sin from happening."⁶⁶ In this admission we are closer to Aquinas and the tradition coming through Augustine, Jerome, and Peter Lombard. From his cautious tone, one gathers that Scotus is not satisfied with the available explanations. His unwillingness to embrace a single account indicates that he cannot see the way to applying his theory of divine voluntarism and creaturely contingency with full consistency. Perhaps he senses that a full-scale voluntarism would yield shocking results, and it may be this that holds him back from a naked divine-will doctrine rooted in an anti-essentialist reductionism. His younger confrere and philosophical antagonist William of Ockham will not feel burdened by the same scruples.

II. Ockham's Subversion of Natural Law

Four distinct theses constitute the foundations of Ockham's ethical theory. (1) There are no natures and no divine ideas of natures. (2) God has unbounded power to determine moral legislation and exempt from it. (3) The human will determines its own end. (4) The normative value of right reason

⁶⁴ *Ord. IV*, dist. 33, q. 3, re 1; Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 305; for commentary on Scotus's teaching on marriage, polygamy, and divorce, see *ibid.*, 64-73.

⁶⁵ *Ord. IV*, dist. 33, q. 3, ad 2; Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 309.

⁶⁶ *Ord. IV*, ad 2b; Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 311.

—the *rightness* of right reason—is a dictate of the divine will. I shall concentrate on these elements, placing aside discussions of the sphere of “right reason.” For if all moral principles (including right reason) exist at the sufferance of divine volition, then it matters little how thoroughly Ockham adopts a traditional framework of virtues and vices; any such framework may exist as if necessarily with respect to a given order of creation and set of commands, but in itself it would remain wholly contingent. When the tradition inquires about the necessity of natural law, it means to ask precisely this: whether any moral precepts are immutably binding on mankind, in all circumstances; whether human nature essentially demands conformity to such precepts. Hence the proof of (4) will be decisive in helping us to ascertain the objective status of right reason in Ockham’s thought, quite apart from its subjective status as a trustworthy measure of human acts from a lower or second-level point of view.

I. *There Are No Natures and No Divine Ideas of Natures*⁶⁷

For Saint Thomas, “a divine idea is nothing but a given way in which God views his essence as capable of being imitated by a creature. Prior to the actual creation of a given entity there is a divine idea to which that creature will correspond if it is ever brought into actual being.”⁶⁸ Such an idea captures not only the existence of the individual, but the essence

⁶⁷ The best study of this question is Armand Maurer’s “The Role of Divine Ideas in the Theology of William of Ockham,” in *Being and Knowing. Studies in Thomas Aquinas and Later Medieval Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 363–81, the substance of which is reproduced in the same author’s *Philosophy of Ockham*, 205–28. Cf. Klocker’s treatment in his book *Ockham and the Divine Freedom*, 77–89.

⁶⁸ As formulated by John F. Wippel, “The Reality of Nonexisting Possibles According to Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, and Godfrey of Fontaines,” *Review of Metaphysics* 33 (1981): 732–33. See the fuller discussion of divine ideas above, in Part I, section 2.

of which the individual is a particular expression or instance. This is another way of saying that God knows John not only as John, but also as man, as animal, and as substance. Inasmuch as John is each of these, certain conditions and certain acts will be suitable for his perfection, others harmful to it. Rightness and wrongness of possible human acts will obtain regardless of whether or not John ever comes into existence. The creature’s essential foundation in the divine intellect makes it possible to speak absolutely of what is healthy and unhealthy, appropriate and inappropriate, good and evil, for the creature.⁶⁹

Ockham looks upon such a theory with considerable unease. It seems to threaten not only divine unicity but also divine freedom. He will have none of what he regards as Platonic natures or Greco-Islamic necessitarianism.⁷⁰ Nothing should be posited which might in any way imply that God’s

⁶⁹ Thus, from all eternity, murder will be evil, even if the world were never created. Murder could not take place, of course, unless human beings actually existed, but *murder* would still be known to be wrong just because of the goodness of human life as understood by God. In this sense, for Thomas, the essential content of the Decalogue is eternal and has nothing to do with the contingency of creation, unlike, for example, the number of continents into which the earth’s land will be divided, the variety and duration of plant and animal species that will be reduced to actuality, the number of races that will diversify the human species, and so on, none of which *has* to be one way rather than another.

⁷⁰ The theme of Ockham’s anti-Platonism and his attack on heathen metaphysics, particularly in the form of Arabian Aristotelianism, is emphasized by all the commentators. Nearly all of Ockham’s major disagreements with Aquinas come down to a contention that, in one respect or another, Aquinas had not sufficiently freed himself from the pagan essentialism common to the Greeks and inherited (in different ways) by Augustine and by the Arabs. Copleston may be allowed to speak on behalf of the secondary literature: Ockham seems to have been engaged in “a struggle to liberate Christian faith from the contamination of Greek and Islamic metaphysics”; his critique aimed at “effecting a welcome liberation of faith from the tyranny of rationalist metaphysics of non-Christian origin”; “In addition to his logical preoccupations he has in mind the liberation of Christian faith from what he regards, rightly or wrongly, as the alien yoke of Greek and Islamic ways of thinking, which

actions toward his creatures are pre-necessitated, measured, or patterned apart from his command.⁷¹ Although Ockham uses Augustinian language out of deference to tradition, he does not grant to ideas any reality within the divine essence. "Now to hold with Augustine that there are ideas and at the same time refuse to identify them in any way with the divine essence left Ockham only one alternative. He had to identify them in some way with creatures."⁷² The idea of a creature in God "can only be the creature itself known directly, perfectly, and individually by God."⁷³ Ockham pointedly declares that such ideas "are only of singulars."⁷⁴ "The ideas are not in God subjectively and really; but they are in him only objectively, that is, as certain things which are known by him, for the ideas are the things themselves which are producible by God."⁷⁵ The idea denotes the individual creature but connotes the divine

have contaminated its purity"; "Ockham evidently wishes to free ethics from any elements of Greco-Islamic necessitarianism, which would represent the divine will as subject to norms in a manner analogous to that in which the created free will is subject to norms and to obligation" (*History of Medieval Philosophy*, 232-33, 238, 254).

⁷¹ As Copleston puts it: "Even the doctrine of eternal divine ideas as exemplars or patterns of creation seems to him to smack of Greek necessitarianism, at any rate if it is interpreted as meaning that the divine will is constricted by eternal archetypes" (*History of Medieval Philosophy*, 238). Of course, neither Augustine nor Aquinas had thought that God was in any way "constricted" by the divine ideas, which are internal to him and identical to his nature, since they are nothing other than the very understanding of that nature's inexhaustible imitability. See note 40.

⁷² Klocker, "Divine Freedom," 252-53.

⁷³ Klocker, "Divine Freedom," 254.

⁷⁴ *Sent.* I, dist. 35, q. 5 (*OTh* IV, 497). Citations of Ockham's theological writings are from the critical edition published by the Franciscan Institute: *Opera Theologica*, ed. Gedeon Gál et al., 10 vols. (Saint Bonaventure, N.Y.: 1967-1988). Although I do not refer to them here, critical editions of Ockham's other works are also available: *Opera Philosophica*, ed. Philotheus Boehner et al., 7 vols. (Saint Bonaventure, N.Y., 1974-1988); *Opera Politica*, ed. H. S. Offler et al., 4 vols. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1940-1997).

⁷⁵ *Sent.* I, dist. 35, q. 5 (*OTh* IV, 493).

knower or his knowledge. Consequently, the ideas are reinterpreted as connotative terms or concepts. It was a mistake to consider them *quid rei*, something real.⁷⁶ God has in mind no "archetypes"; each "idea" is nothing more than the individual creature *qua* producible. In a way, by speaking of ideas in God's mind, we are guilty of projecting onto him something that is true only of the rational creature's thought-process.⁷⁷

It may be difficult to say exactly *what* a divine idea can be after Ockham has applied his razor to it. But an important corollary cannot be evaded: there is no such thing as the essence of man in the divine mind; there are no eternal types behind natural forms. God does not create Peter, James, and John as three instances of *man*, three circumscriptions or projections of an eternally-known archetype with its own fixed identity and suitable perfection. He made Peter, James, and John as three individual absolutes who, by his free choice, happen to have the same basic set of characteristics. Do they share in human nature? No. Is there such a thing as humanity? No. They share nothing in common. There is no all-embracing idea of *what* they are. Each man is a new and different creation not only in his material individuality but in his very essence. Put differently, a thing's essence is identical with its individual subsistence. (In Ockham's view, there is neither a real *nor* a formal distinction between essence and existence.⁷⁸) "[W]hat God wills are singular existents, each of which is independent of all the others. Any connection

⁷⁶ Klocker, "Divine Freedom," 254.

⁷⁷ For a study of the contrasting positions, see Alice Ramos, "Ockham and Aquinas on Exemplary Causality," in *Proceedings of the PMR Conference*, vols. 19-20 (Villanova: Augustinian Historical Institute, 1994-96), 199-213.

⁷⁸ As articulated by Scotus and his contemporaries, a formal distinction is intermediate between a *distinctio rationis tantum* (such as that, e.g., between the definition and the thing defined) and a *distinctio realis* (which obtains between things that can exist separately or at least can be made to exist separately by divine omnipotence—the parts of a body; substance and accident). A thing is "formally" distinct when, in essence and in

between them, any ordering of one to the other, is the result of that creating will."⁷⁹ Even if God decides to make many creatures of the same description, he has no pattern for them in mind. Individual men are not "born into" a natural law that, reflecting the Eternal Law, determines both their ordination to God and their social obligations. For Ockham, observes Klocker, "every created effect is not an expression of an intelligibility grounded in the nature of God himself, but a finite extrapolation of the divine will's power to produce."⁸⁰ Gillespie puts it succinctly: "Divine omnipotence, properly understood [in Ockham's system], thus entails radical individualism. . . . There are no species by nature, but only individual things that resemble one another and that thus can be signified, that is, represented by a sign."⁸¹ Anticipating slightly a later stage of my analysis, I will quote here Gillespie's con-

cept, it can be thought of by itself, although it may in reality be so closely united to something else that not even God's power can separate the two (e.g., the soul and its faculties; the soul's faculties among themselves). Aquinas would probably have regarded as arbitrary Henry of Ghent's condition that actual separability establishes a real distinction; in fact, Scotistic formal distinctions may be classified as real distinctions when they pertain to *what things are* and not merely how we think of them. Not surprisingly, when Ockham rejects the formal distinction as useless, he thereby rejects a good many real distinctions, too. Cf. Alexander Broadie, "Duns Scotus and William Ockham," in *The Medieval Theologians*, ed. G. R. Evans (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 250–65. Part of this note was adapted from Parthenius Mingos, s.v. John Duns Scotus, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1909 ed.).

⁷⁹ Klocker, "Divine Freedom," 256. He continues: "One encounters a *de facto* existing singular which speaks only of itself and in a rather unstable fashion at that. All connections between such singulars are also *de facto*, sequential, and just as unstable" (257). In fact, Ockham goes so far as to say we cannot know *with certainty* whether any one thing is the cause of any other. For example, we don't know whether fire is what is really burning the wood placed into it, or God is just making it look that way (cf. Weinberg, *Short History*, 241). See note 132.

⁸⁰ Klocker, "Divine Freedom," 257.

⁸¹ *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 17; 19–20. Gillespie rightly points out that the famous principle of parsimony (or "Ockham's razor") is de-

clusion about how this approach will affect the perception of finality and, indeed, the entire realm of morals:

With the rejection of realism and the assertion of radical individuality, beings could no longer be conceived as members of species or genera with a certain nature or potentiality. In Aristotelian terms, the rejection of formal causes was also the rejection of final causes. As a result, only material and efficient causality remained.⁸²

Ockham does not reject a formal cause within the individual (he accepts the hylomorphic doctrine of the *Physics*), but this form is in every respect as singular as the substance itself.⁸³ It does not take many steps to get from this view to the now-common opinion that "human nature" is a mental

rived from this view: "nature is radically individual and every universal is thus a distortion of reality. To minimize this distortion it is necessary to minimize the number of universals, hence Ockham's formulation of the principle as the injunction: 'Do not multiply universals needlessly'" (ibid., 18).

⁸² *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 21.

⁸³ Since for Thomas the form of a bodily nature is contracted to an individual *suppositum* by matter, there cannot be a form that is common or universal, properly speaking, in the world of existing individuals. This fact opens up the possibility of a nominalist reduction: there are simply no natures whatsoever. However, this cannot be true, since it is not by chance nor by convention that all horses are *horses*, born of parent horses, able to generate baby horses. The members of a species are really connected and, in some way, are *one*. This real commonness is neither in the world, where there are only individuals, nor in created intellects, where there is only the *concept* of a nature, a concept that has to be derived in some way *from* that nature. (Even if there is only one of a kind—say, the last dodo on earth—this individual has an *infima species*, a universal common form, because it is *of such a nature* that there could be others *idem in specie*.) Therefore this real commonness must be in *God*; the common nature subsists in the mind of the first cause of being. It is because God knows what a horse is and causes it to be such in fact, that all horses are really alike—each expresses somehow one and the same essence as eternally known and as willed to be instantiated in this or that singular. One should add moreover that matter is only the principle of individuation in the natural order, for it is the divine idea of the singular as singular

fiction or cultural construction, and that, consequently, "reason" and "morality" are equally fictitious or constructed. This is routinely said even about maleness and femaleness, and the heterosexual relationship inherent in their complementarity: such things do not really exist, but are invented by our brains, imposed by our surroundings. Homosexuality is neither more nor less "natural" than heterosexuality. In short, no form of behavior or way of life can be good or bad in itself, since each thing is an absolute novelty that cannot be judged in relationship to a natural kind or natural ends.⁸⁴ Hence, it is not surprising that Ockham's political philosophy exalts the self-determining individual and, as an eventual consequence, critiques what he regards as the overextension of papal authority in secular affairs.⁸⁵

that is its ultimate foundation. The horse was able to be conceived and born because of the generative power and resources of the parents, but the first cause of its existence is God's knowing exhaustively this very singular and willing it to come to be through a process of natural generation. This is true in a yet more mysterious way for the conception of a human being, where God acts as proximate agent in the creation of the rational soul. Such reflections permit us to see once again how crucial is the doctrine of divine ideas in the metaphysical vision of the Angelic Doctor. See Gregory T. Doolan, "The Causality of the Divine Ideas in Relation to Natural Agents in Thomas Aquinas," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44 (2004): 393-409.

⁸⁴ For Thomas, we are able to judge rightly about singulars because we first attain, in some way, to universal natures: *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 2, ad 4. I would not for a moment imply that Ockham could have ceded rights to so manifest a perversion as sodomy. What I wonder about is whether he realized the extent to which his views might undermine the reasonableness of any universal discrimination between virtuous and vicious behavior, or might call into question even the possibility of securely grasping the intelligibility of any course of behavior. These issues will be discussed in the following pages.

⁸⁵ Ockham's privileging of personal conscience over clerical authority deserves a separate treatment by itself. Obviously, what a thinker has to say (or not say) about natural law will profoundly alter the political philosophy he is likely to uphold. See Georges de Lagarde, *La naissance de*

2. *God Has Unbounded Power to Determine Moral Legislation and Exempt From It*

In the field of ethics, Ockham is most famous for his disconcerting theses about the power of God over the content of morality. Once moral truths are accepted as having the status of positive law suspended by a thread from divine omnipotence and liberty, the entire created order, the moral law not excepted, is seen to be utterly contingent,

in the sense that not only its existence but also its essence and character depend on the divine creative and omnipotent will. . . . There are [for the tradition] acts which are intrinsically evil and which are forbidden because they are evil: they are not evil simply because they are forbidden. For Ockham, however, the divine will is the ultimate norm of morality: the moral law is founded on the free divine choice rather than ultimately on the divine essence. . . . God can do anything or order anything which does not involve logical contradiction. Therefore, because, according to Ockham, there is no natural or formal repugnance between loving God and loving a creature in a way which has been forbidden by God, God could order fornication [as an act of virtue]. Between loving God and loving a creature in a manner which is illicit there is only an extrinsic repugnance, namely the repugnance which arises from the fact that God has actually forbidden that way of loving a creature. Hence, if God were to order fornication, the latter would be not only licit but meritorious. Hatred of God, stealing, committing adultery, are forbidden by God. But they could be ordered by God; and, if they were, they would be meritorious acts.⁸⁶

l'esprit laïque au déclin du moyen âge, rev. ed., 5 vols. (Louvain: Éditions Nauwelaerts, 1956-1970), esp. vol. 5, *Guillaume d'Ockham: Critique des structures ecclésiastiques*.

⁸⁶ Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 3:104-5. For references to relevant passages in Ockham's writings, see Maurer, *Philosophy of Ockham*, 525-36; Adams, "Ockham's Moral Theory," 27-33.

God was just as free to command us to hate him as to love him, and had he commanded us to hate him, it would have been virtuous to do so. Of course, as Ockham admits, we could not actually perform this command, because in doing so, we would be obeying God, which is an act of love, and thus we could not be hating him at the same time. Nevertheless, by means of so provocative an example, Ockham wishes to make the point that man's love of God is good because *commanded*, and not because of any relationship between human nature and God's nature. The goodness is *willed into* the act by choice, it is not there owing to the kind of act it is. For Ockham, loving God is good, or murdering the innocent evil, only *extrinsically*, that is, in relation to the divine will. It would change nothing to say that God had willed that these acts *always* be good or evil; they would be no less conventional for that.⁸⁷

Nowadays examples of sins like fornication or divorce and remarriage, being almost universally accepted practices in the modern West, are not likely to stimulate our attention to the radical nature of what Ockham is proposing. According to his theory, any deeds whatsoever, so long as they include no logical contradiction, could be imposed by God upon some or all men as a meritorious moral obligation: wife abuse, child pornography, the raping and torturing of refugees, the extermination of Jews, harvesting organs from the handicapped. God is under no obligation to act or to refrain from acting, to commend or to forbid anything, to institute any kind of law or limit whatsoever, while man is under an absolute obligation to do whatsoever God commands, regardless of what

⁸⁷ In passing, one should take note how this view directly contradicts the teaching of the Magisterium on *intrinsically* good and evil acts, a teaching forcefully reiterated in John Paul II's Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. It has often been pointed out that "progressive" moral theology—the kind that dissents from *Humanae Vitae* on the grounds that it envisions a changeless human nature with inherent finalities that give rise to unchanging moral precepts—is deeply Ockhamistic in its methodology.

it may be. "Evil," Ockham writes, "is nothing other than to do something when one is under an obligation to do the opposite. Obligation does not fall on God, since he is not under any obligation to do anything."⁸⁸ The fact that God has not willed such things is simply a free choice on his part. Ockham is not suggesting that adultery, theft, or hatred of God are legitimate in the moral order of the world in which we find ourselves. But that is simply a matter of *fact*, for it could have been otherwise. An oft-quoted passage from Ockham brings this out clearly:

I say that although hate, theft, adultery and the like have a bad circumstance annexed *de communi lege*, in so far as [*quatenus*] they are done by someone who is obliged by divine precept to the contrary, nevertheless, in respect of everything absolute in those acts they could be done by God without any bad circumstance annexed. And they could be done by the wayfarer even meritoriously if they were to fall under a divine precept, just as now in fact their opposites fall under divine precept. . . . But if they were thus done meritoriously by the wayfarer, then they would not be called or named theft, adultery, hate, etc., because those names signify such acts not absolutely but by connoting or giving to understand that one doing such acts is obliged to their opposites by divine precept.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ *Sent.* II, qq. 3-4 (*OTh* V, 59); cf. q. 15 (*OTh* V, 343). It is important to note that none of the scholastics regard God as incurring any obligation, strictly speaking, vis-à-vis creatures; he can be a debtor to no one, for a debtor stands to receive from another, and owes something to his benefactor. Nevertheless, the conclusions Ockham derives from this truth are questionable, to say the least.

⁸⁹ *Sent.* II, q. 15 (*OTh* V, 352), translated by Kilcullen. The last sentence is a brilliant example of Ockham's nominalism in action: the name "theft" carries a note of disapproval, so if God had commanded theft as a meritorious act, we would have found some neutral or positive name for it, so as to prevent any dubious associations! For Thomas, on the contrary, thievery, regardless of what one calls it, is always wrong. Kilcullen thinks that the voluntarism expressed in this passage is relative—in other

Commentators often give the impression that Ockham's distinction between God's *potentia absoluta* and his *potentia ordinata* affords us room for consolation.⁹⁰ But of course the distinction does no more than assure us, provisionally, that acts actually forbidden in the present order will remain forbidden, if this is the correct meaning of God's revelation to us. The point of dispute is not about the current moral law—we are not asking what is right and wrong now, but what *could* have been, and what might become, right and wrong.

words, Ockham is saying that *one* reason why someone should or should not do something is the command of his superior, whereas elsewhere he speaks of human acts as having a certain order *apart from* the command of any superior. But this resolution is fatally flawed because God is not just "any" superior; he is the total cause from which the entire reality of creation is suspended. Hence, if Ockham thinks that the principle of non-contradiction can be violated only if, *per impossibile*, God were to act against his eternal self, and that *nothing* having to do with creation falls within the ambit of divine self-identity, he must believe that the content of morality is contingently fixed by divine will alone. All the other principles he invokes, regardless of their stability *in abstractu*, are therefore relativized *in concreto* when set against this ultimate horizon.

⁹⁰ On this distinction, see two studies by Mary Ann Pernoud: "Innovation in Ockham's References to the *Potentia Dei*," *Antonianum* 45 (1970): 65–97; "The Theory of the *Potentia Dei* According to Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham," *Antonianum* 47 (1972): 69–95. Put briefly, we consider one and the same divine omnipotence under two aspects: considered in itself, God's power is "absolute," unlimited and illimitable, capable of doing or making anything whatsoever that does not violate the principle of non-contradiction; considered in relation to his love and wisdom, God's power is "ordered," i.e., exercised in accord with those laws that he himself has instituted in his creation. This distinction arises merely in our way of looking at things, since God's power is infinite and simple. Indeed, Ockham rather stresses that anything whatsoever that God may will would necessarily fall under the rubric of *potentia ordinata*, since God does not and could not act blindly and pointlessly. See Maurer, *Philosophy of Ockham*, 254–65; Alanen, "Descartes, Scotus, Ockham"; David W. Clark, "Ockham on Human and Divine Freedom," *Franciscan Studies* 38 (1978): 122–60 (hereafter cited as "Ockham on Freedom"), esp. 149–60.

Indeed, it is a grave misconception to think that the omnipotent God cannot upset the moral order even now. Ockham's statements make it clear "not only that God could have established another moral order but that he could at any time order what he has actually forbidden. There is no sense, then, in seeking for any more ultimate reason of the moral law than the divine *fiat*."⁹¹ While it is true that, so far as we *know*, the present order of nature and grace will remain stable, the ordained course of things and events may include *within it* shifts more fantastical than man is capable of conceiving.⁹²

For Ockham, God does not choose from a set of possible worlds, but from a set of possible individual creative and conservative acts throughout the duration of whatever world he causes. To restrain the ordination of the world's unfolding progress by appealing to a universal legislative pattern is precisely what Ockham's understanding of divine freedom rules out. Thus the actual *exercise* of God's absolute power, i.e., his *potentia ordinata*, can contain within itself whatsoever determinations are available in principle to the *potentia absoluta*. The fixity of which we are authorized to speak is not of a regular, unbroken arrangement of affairs—for to speak in this way is to revert to the consoling Platonic model of a world structured according to changeless forms. We can only speak of the set of possible acts judged by the sole standard of non-contradiction—a set whose future temporal realization is and must be, from unaided reason's vantage, unknowable

⁹¹ Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 3:105.

⁹² The Avignon papal commission that investigated Ockham's theological propositions for heresy contended that the New Covenant was at once a free act of God and a permanent, immutable institution. But we must remember that for Ockham the free and the necessary are mutually exclusive: "Were God compelled to conserve the present state of nature and grace (due to the metaphysical necessity of his nature or the provisional necessity of his given world), then God would not operate contingently *ad extra*" (Clark, "Ockham on Freedom," 154). See E. Randi, "Ockham, John XXII, and the Absolute Power of God," *Franciscan Studies* 46 (1986): 205–16.

and inconceivable. "The human predicament," David Clark writes, "arises not from [God's] capricious exercise of absolute power but from [our] ignorance of the fullness of God's ordained plan. Whatever is possible absolutely could be included in the future unfolding of the ordained will."⁹³ That many commentators have de-emphasized this aspect of Ockham's theology is understandable; one prefers not to linger over the assertion of God's power to subvert the present order of nature and grace. Clark summarizes the breadth of Ockham's vision of contingency:

The difference between possibility and fact must be decided from moment to moment. Not that God changes his mind—from eternity divine foreknowledge and pre-ordination decided the exact difference between those possibilities to be realized and those to remain unrealized. But men cannot claim to know the fullness of God's contingent decision. The liberty in which God creates and conserves the world prohibits men from making any *a priori* judgments about God's future plan. Whatever is ontologically possible might be ordained as fact tomorrow. . . . The freedom of God is problematic for Ockham himself. He surrenders the intrinsic restraint upon freedom that the [divine] intellect provided for Saint Thomas. The exercise of divine liberty is not restrained by eternal truths or divine psychology or the metaphysical entailments of "common natures" as in Duns Scotus. The Ockhamist brand of freedom means that moral laws could change radically; that the revealed path to salvation could be altered drastically; that the entire structure of natural causality might warp.⁹⁴

⁹³ "Ockham on Freedom," 153.

⁹⁴ "Ockham on Freedom," 151–52. All this is true, as far as it goes, except that Clark's phrasing of the Thomistic view is unsatisfactory. It is not as if God's will requires "restraint" by his intellect, as, to be sure, the *human* will needs to be guided by practical wisdom. Nor would any Thomist claim to "know the fullness of God's contingent decision" as regards matters truly contingent, for here God is supremely free (cf. *ST*

3. *The Human Will Determines Its Own End*

The background to this point is Ockham's original manner of denying the primacy of intellect over will. In making this denial itself, he was only adhering to a view worked out by his Franciscan predecessors. However, the *way* in which he went about defending the claim was novel, because he did not then proceed to put the will in the first rank. As Clark explains:

Distinct types of activity are not reason to assert different causes or faculties and so, according to Ockham, the primacy of intellect or will is a false question. . . . The intellect is the soul thinking; the will is the soul willing. In Ockham's semantic, the terms "intellect" and "will" signify the same item, the soul, and connote specifically different acts of the soul. Giving these "nominal" definitions, Ockham reduces the rationalism-voluntarism question to absurdity—Is the same thing more noble than itself? . . . [T]he grammar of "connotative" terms is a repudiation of the "faculties" theory of human psychology that was common to both the rationalist and voluntarist position.⁹⁵

Hence when the question arises, Ockham writes:

To the first principal argument, I concede that perfect happiness resides in the most noble power. And when it is said that "The intellect is the most noble power," I agree. Likewise, when someone states that "The will is the noblest power," I agree. I concede both assertions because that power which is the intellect and that which is the will are in no way distinguished *a parte rei* or *a parte rationis*.⁹⁶

One of his disciples, Adam Wodeham, states quite simply: "neither the intellect is the more noble power than the will

I, q. 19, a. 3 and a. 10). The sole disagreement comes down to *which* matters are truly contingent, and which are not.

⁹⁵ "Ockham on Freedom," 132–33.

⁹⁶ *Sent.* I, dist. 1, q. 2 (*OTh* I, 402).

nor vice versa because the intellect is the same as the will in every way and vice versa in the same intellective substance."⁹⁷ I stress the importance of this position because it makes possible the transition to regarding the will merely as "an activity of the soul" rather than as "a distinct nature or faculty within the soul that operates according to a consistent formal cause for a consistent purpose."⁹⁸

Saint Thomas argues that "each power of the soul is a form or nature, and has a natural inclination to something. Hence each power desires, by natural appetite, that object which is suitable to itself."⁹⁹ The will is a power oriented, of its very nature, to the universal good as ultimate end. Human freedom extends only to the choice of "means" to the end, or as Thomas prefers to phrase it, things that stand in some relation to the end, *ea quae sunt ad finem*.¹⁰⁰ Ockham, on the contrary, asserts that the will is an altogether active power that "decides its purpose instead of ratifying inevitably some pre-conscious or pre-determined end such as happiness."¹⁰¹ The ultimate end, too, is chosen. In our relativistic age, this view is held so widely that it seems to many people a self-evident proposition.¹⁰² Yet we do well to remember that for

⁹⁷ Wodeham, *Sent.* I, dist. 1, q. 14, cited by Clark, "Ockham on Freedom," 134.

⁹⁸ Clark, "Ockham on Freedom," 135.

⁹⁹ *ST* I, q. 80, a. 1.

¹⁰⁰ Scotus already questions this formulation in his exaltation of pure freedom: see Lee, "Aquinas and Scotus on Liberty and Natural Law"; Thomas Williams, "The Libertarian Foundations of Scotus's Moral Philosophy," *The Thomist* 62 (1998): 193-215.

¹⁰¹ Clark, "Ockham on Freedom," 142. See the discussion in Maurer, *Philosophy of Ockham*, 510-15, and the references given there.

¹⁰² As we read in the U.S. Supreme Court's decision for *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833, 851 (1992): "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." This is *exactly* Ockham's position, though of course he would have added that anyone who defined

well over a thousand years, Christian theologians had taken it nearly for granted that man *by nature* acts for the sake of human fulfillment, that is, to achieve "happiness" as each one understands it (some having a better, some a poorer, grasp of the actual content of this happiness and the means whereby it may be reached).¹⁰³ As we shall see, Ockham's rejection of this truth is explosive in its consequences.¹⁰⁴

Natural agents—agents impelled by a natural determination to some end—always and necessarily act for that end if no impediments stand in the way. When the eyes are open, they must see the colored, provided that the transparent medium is illuminated. A functioning eye cannot *not* see. Saint Thomas does not hesitate to say: "Tending to the good is related to the will, as tending to something pleasurable is related to the concupiscible appetite, and being ordered to sound is related to the sense of hearing."¹⁰⁵ Ockham disputes this comparison. Freedom must be *unlimited*, or it cannot be freedom. For him, as Clark writes, "[t]he will . . . is capable of producing contrary actions or postponing any action within identical

a concept or meaning that contradicted what God had authoritatively revealed would be in danger of damnation. Accordingly, Ockham has also been labeled a fideist. Like traditional Protestants, Ockham would oppose *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* not primarily because it is irrational or unnatural, but because it contradicts Scripture. A Protestant might well agree that human liberty is unlimited; this would explain why it, and with it, all of human nature, can be or become *totally* corrupt. As I will mention again below, it should come as no surprise that one of Luther's teachers, Gabriel Biel, was an Ockhamist.

¹⁰³ See Servais Pinckaers, OP, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 3rd ed., trans. Mary Thomas Noble, OP (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 244-52; Colleen McCluskey, "Happiness and Freedom in Aquinas's Theory of Action," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 9 (2000): 69-90.

¹⁰⁴ Scotus had already worn a path in this direction. See Thomas Williams, "How Scotus Separates Morality from Happiness," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 69 (1995): 425-45.

¹⁰⁵ *Quaest. disp. De virtutibus in communi*, a. 5, corp.

circumstances. The active, self-determined and selective operation of the free will is magnified when juxtaposed with the regular and predictable reactions of nature. In the mind of Ockham, the 'natural' and the 'free' are antithetical notions."¹⁰⁶ In order to safeguard the freedom of the will against what he perceived to be a subtle determinism—a theory of willing patterned after the model of the opened eye or the bird's laying of eggs—Ockham "tries to discredit any theory which would determine the mode, object or purpose of voluntary activity through the ontological structure of the will. This aspect requires an attack upon the Aristotelian rules of explanation since they explain the effect by means of the formal and teleological character of its cause."¹⁰⁷

The will [according to Thomas's teleological view] operates formally *sub ratione boni* and finally for the sake of happiness. The mode and purpose of willful actions is thus a matter of "natural necessity"—an exigency of the will's nature. The irony here, in Ockham's view, is that the tools used to explain the nature of free will would inhibit its freedom. Free and contingent actions cannot be produced through natural necessity. When the will is inserted into the structure and structures of a "nature," the efficient, final, formal and material laws that govern its behavior also forbid its indetermination. The cost of Aristotle's explanation is determination. Ockham insists that the will can choose good or evil, happiness or unhappiness as such. Face to face with its Creator, the will retains its natural capacity to say "yes" or "no."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ "Ockham on Freedom," 143-44. There is good reason to consider this view—viz., that freedom and nature are antithetical—the moral heresy of the modern age, as the argument of the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* implies.

¹⁰⁷ "Ockham on Freedom," 140.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 136-37. I do not agree that "the cost of Aristotle's explanation is determination," at least not *total* determination. Saint Thomas did not think so, and he was no feeble interpreter of the Philosopher (on this issue, see David M. Gallagher, "Free Choice and Free Judgment in

For the tradition culminating in Saint Thomas, action is unintelligible apart from an end toward which the agent is naturally inclined. Any created nature has an end in the possession of which its perfection consists. The nature is incompletely realized until it attains or is doing that for the sake of which it exists; any first perfection, such as a power, needs and desires its corresponding second perfection, its activity, and preferably the best among those activities possible to it.¹⁰⁹ Exhibiting once again an unexpected affinity with modernity, Ockham turns this scholastic principle upside down by insisting that *only* the free agent acts for the sake of an end.¹¹⁰ We cannot know that any unfree thing acts for the sake of an end, as its motions may simply be the blind actions and reactions that spontaneously arise from its material construction. According to Klocker:

[Ockham] saw no way to establish finality in nature. Nature was only itself being itself and would act like itself whether there was an ultimate final cause or not. Ockham was willing to admit some sort of finality in intellectual beings, for

Thomas Aquinas," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 76 [1994]: 247-77). Ockham wants to assert that freedom remains unlimited even in the beatific vision, yet he recognizes a problem: could not a soul already blessed fall, by its own choice, from beatitude into damnation? Since he is unable to found his answer upon any natural inclination of the will to the good as such, he works out a bizarre solution: while in this life it is we who cause our basic volitions, in the next life God causes them in us. That is, he causes the blessed eternally to will the good that he is, and the damned eternally to not-will this good (see Arthur Stephen McGrade, "Ockham on Enjoyment—Towards an Understanding of Fourteenth Century Philosophy and Psychology," *Review of Metaphysics* 33 [1981]: 706-28; 723).

¹⁰⁹ See the arguments in defense of every agent's acting for an end and for the sake of the good in *Summa contra gentiles*, III, chs. 2-3. For further discussion, see my article "The Inseparability of Freedom, Goodness, and Final End in Saint Thomas," *The Aquinas Review* 5 (1998): 50-69.

¹¹⁰ See Arthur M. Hippler, "Modern Confusions About the Final Cause," *The Aquinas Review* 2 (1995): 45-58, esp. 52-56.

such beings do propose ends for themselves and act to accomplish them. But such ends also do not point beyond themselves to any ultimate end such as beatitude. Because of the freedom of the will he saw any end as rejectable, including final beatitude.¹¹¹

When we consider the free agent, Ockham believes, we should see that the final cause of contingent acts of will

is not embodied metaphysically within the will's power so that happiness, goodness, self-realization or some other natural goal must appear within the structure of voluntary actions. Instead, Ockham maintains that the purposes of the free will are a disparate and contingent matter. . . . Free actions do not embody the formal exigency or teleological urge of their cause.¹¹²

What follows from this insistence on the will's power of self-determination? Again Clark puts it well: "Freedom [in the Ockhamist account] represents a sort of breakdown in the principle of sufficient reason; there is no better reason for contingent will-acts to occur than not to occur. . . . The motive for contingent action is simply personal preference. 'I did it because I wanted to do it.'"¹¹³ Moreover, "[t]o be intelligible, the will's nature need not be determined to operate on a specific object for a specific motive."¹¹⁴ This would have to be true of each individual will-act: one could act pointlessly, endlessly. There need be no *reason* for a voluntary action. The vision of the French existentialists, of Sartre and Camus—that human life is a sort of desert or void whose meaning has to be created from within, *ex nihilo*—is here given its theoretical basis. It is a view that commends itself today to a strain of Christian postmodernism, only too happy to say: "Yes, your life is utterly meaningless without faith, and there-

¹¹¹ Klocker, "Divine Freedom," 246.

¹¹² Clark, "Ockham on Freedom," 146-47.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

fore God in his mercy *gives* you the meaning you are vainly trying to fabricate on your own." But anyone can see that this view, taken at face value, destroys any and all connection or likeness between nature and grace, reason and faith, human virtue and infused virtue. We must at least be able to recognize the meaningfulness of what God proposes to us in terms of a meaningfulness implicit within our native experience. Indeed, all of this stresses the importance of Augustine's (and later, Thomas's) argument that a *natural* desire for happiness is the driving force of all human action—even though this desire, due to its creaturely limits, cannot attain the end which is *concretely* man's perfect happiness; hence the need for sanctifying grace and all that follows in its wake, chiefly the virtues of faith, hope, and charity, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. To reject happiness as the natural and necessary end of human willing is to cut the underlying cord, one might even say the umbilical cord, that binds the rational creature to its sovereign Lord.¹¹⁵

Ockham must have known that his position stood in conflict with the entire sweep of Christian thought prior to him. Not even Scotus, who also endorses indeterminacy or indifference of will, could accept a natural power without some intrinsic orientation to an end. Hence Scotus developed his doctrine of the *affectio iustitiae* to account for the will's inclination toward the good *per se*.¹¹⁶ Clark concludes: "From Ockham's doctrine of freedom and his rejection of inherent

¹¹⁵ See Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, 240-53.

¹¹⁶ For Scotus, the human will is divided into a tendency toward what is good in itself, *affectio iustitiae* (whose prime object is God, the *summum bonum*), and a tendency toward what is fitting to oneself or away from what is unfitting to oneself, *affectio commodi*. The latter is a self-centered inclination that has to be opposed or at least restrained in the name of a purer love of God. On this distinction, borrowed from Anselm, see Allan B. Wolter, "Native Freedom of the Will as a Key to the Ethics of Scotus," in *Philosophical Theology of Scotus*, 149-57; John F. Boler, "An Image for the Unity of the Will in Duns Scotus," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 32 (1994): 23-44.

finality it is impossible to construct a theory of 'natural law' morality in either the Thomistic or Scotistic senses."¹¹⁷ Thus it should not shock us to find Ockham implying, in a striking text, that simple freedom or the power of indeterminacy, even more than rationality, is the definitive characteristic of human nature.¹¹⁸ Rational animal is too Aristotelian a title; man is the *free* animal. It is worth noting that this was to be Descartes's position in the fourth of the *Meditations on First Philosophy*: the attribute whereby man is most like unto God is "freedom of choice."¹¹⁹

One of the best-known contemporary Ockham scholars, Marilyn McCord Adams, summarizes the Venerable Inceptor's conclusions:

¹¹⁷ Clark, "Ockham on Freedom," 148. As Copleston says, Ockham's "view on the will's freedom even in regard to the willing of happiness in general (*beatitudo in communi*) fitted in very much with his ethical theory. If the will is free to will or not to will happiness, it would scarcely be possible to analyse the goodness of human acts in terms of a relation to an end which is necessarily desired" (*History*, 3:102).

¹¹⁸ See *Sent.* I, dist. 1, q. 3 (*OTH* I, 426); Clark, "Ockham on Freedom," 148.

¹¹⁹ As Descartes writes: "It is only the will, or freedom of choice, which I experience within me to be so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp; so much so that it is above all in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear in some way the image and likeness of God. For although God's will is incomparably greater than mine . . . nevertheless it does not seem any greater than mine when considered as will in the essential and strict sense." In *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 40. Thomas Williams underlines this point in regard to Scotus: "Freedom thus conceived [i.e., as the source of acts having no fully adequate explanation] is a pure perfection, and like every other pure perfection it can, for Scotus, be predicated univocally of God and creatures. So for Scotus free creatures (that is, creatures who have wills) are free *in exactly the same sense* in which God is free. It is their likeness to God's unconditioned creative activity that makes free actions valuable and noble" ("Libertarian Foundations," 210).

With regard to any given object, the will's options are not merely action versus inaction, but also willing (*velle*) versus nilling (*nolle*); and it has all three options, no matter what right reason may dictate. From this general thesis, Ockham counts the ways a free will can will against (*nolle*) the good: (a) the will can choose to hate God; (b) the will apart from divine interference can will against (*nolle*) enjoyment even when the divine essence is clearly seen; (c) the will can will against its own happiness and will its own misery; (d) the will can will against its ultimate end, whether because of ignorance . . . or simply because as a free power it can will against any object; (e) the will can will against the good in general. And with equal detail, he spells out how the free will can will (*velle*) evils: (f) the will can do unjust deeds precisely because they are unjust, dishonest, and contrary to right reason; (g) the will can will evil under the aspect of evil.¹²⁰

4. Right Reason's Normative Value Is Determined by Divine Fiat

Posing the question why an act elicited contrary to the dictate of right reason is morally wrong, Ockham answers: "It would be elicited contrary to the divine precept and the divine will which wills that an act should be elicited in conformity with right reason."¹²¹ "In other words," Copleston observes, "the ultimate and sufficient reason why we ought to follow right reason or conscience is that God wills that we should do so,"¹²² when he might just as well have willed that we *never* follow reason, or follow it only when it accords with our sense-appetites, or follow it when ordered by the State to do so.

¹²⁰ "Ockham's Moral Theory," 13-14.

¹²¹ Cited in Copleston, 3:109, with a reference to *Sent.* III, 13, C in the Lyons edition. The point is also made at *De connexionione virtutum*, q. 8 (*OTH* VIII, 428); cf. q. 7, a. 4 (*OTH* VIII, 394-95).

¹²² Copleston, *History* 3:109.

Ockham speaks of an act's being "intrinsically and necessarily virtuous *stante ordinatione divina*"¹²³—that is, its quality of being intrinsic and necessary is itself derived from the divine ordination. Necessity from man's point of view, even what seems rigorous necessity, is contingency from God's. Copleston summarizes: "A necessarily virtuous act is only relatively so, that is, if God has decreed that it should be virtuous. Given the order instituted by God, it follows logically that certain acts are good and others bad; but the order itself is dependent on God's choice."¹²⁴ When I maintain that strangling an infant is intrinsically wrong, I cannot be referring to the deed itself, or to some incompatibility between the law of my nature and this kind of deed; rather, it is always wrong because the accident of moral evil has been attached to it by divine choice. Ockham candidly states: "*Stante ordinatione quae nunc est* [By the order that now obtains], no act is perfectly virtuous unless it is elicited in conformity with right reason."¹²⁵ Statements like these might pass by unnoticed when such a mass of text in praise of right reason is ready to hand, but we must not fail to absorb their full implications.

As David Clark has shown, Ockham upholds *both* right reason *and* the free divine will as relevant factors in the determination of moral good and evil; he does not waver between them, but consistently appeals to each.¹²⁶ Yet the problem of *how* they are related to one another remains an acute tension

¹²³ *De connexionione virtutum*, q. 7, art. 4 (OTh VIII, 393).

¹²⁴ Copleston, *History* 3:109.

¹²⁵ *De connexionione virtutum*, q. 7, art. 4 (OTh VIII, 394).

¹²⁶ See David W. Clark, "Voluntarism and Rationalism in the Ethics of Ockham," *Franciscan Studies* 31 (1971): 72-87; idem, "William of Ockham on Right Reason," *Speculum* 48 (1973): 13-36. Clark's defense of Ockham's consistency came under fire in an article by Linwood Urban, "William of Ockham's Theological Ethics," *Franciscan Studies* 33 (1973): 310-50. In part, Kilcullen's "Natural Law and Will in Ockham" is intended as a response to Urban.

and a vexing question in Ockham studies. It seems to me that the Franciscan's clear statements about the divine ordination as the *cause* of the very primacy of right reason in human action are decisive in this regard, for they imply that the determinative function of reason was ascribed to it contingently.¹²⁷ (Thus, there might have been a universe in which *passion* had been granted this royal function instead, and reason subordinated to it. If the first man in this universe had chosen to follow reason instead of passion, this would have been the fall of man and the substance of original sin.) The role and position of reason is therefore totally altered in the new system of ethics, as Pinckaers explains:

Having removed from both divine and human wills all dependence upon their respective natures, Ockham could no longer find any links between man and God, as with other freedoms, except those issuing from the divine will and power: such would be the law, the expression of the divine will, acting with the force of obligation. . . . [A]ccording to Ockham it was no part of the practical reason's function to discover, found, or justify moral laws in view of man's and creation's relationship to God. He no longer spoke of a natural *habitus*, of the first principles of the moral law, or of synderesis, as treated in the scholastic tradition. The function of the practical reason was basically to show to the will the commandments of God, as they were expressed chiefly in revelation. . . . Practical reason and prudence were, then, simply intermediaries between law and free will. Their function was to transmit precepts and obligations.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Cf. Maurer, *Philosophy of Ockham*, 516-39, esp. 537-38.

¹²⁸ *Sources of Christian Ethics*, 247, 250. That is, we are dealing here with what is possibly the first instance in the Christian era of a full-blown theory of reason construed instrumentally or calculatively. Reason does not penetrate to the ultimate essential roots of things, and in this way attain, however obscurely and inadequately, to their divine origins; rather, it is a depositary and transmitter of information, a navigational tool. Granted, for Ockham it is still holding and conveying *divine*

Defenders of Ockham's ethics, among whom Marilyn McCord Adams is perhaps the most dedicated, seem reluctant to acknowledge that conformity to the dictates of right reason is, for him, a contingent and humanly non-deducible determination of the divine will, subject to the same dialectic of obligation and dispensation as are adultery and theft.¹²⁹ The most that can be said in favor of right reason is that God has *ordained* it to be a trustworthy guide, and so, a guide that philosophers, without the aid of revelation, can "discover" to be reliable. By admitting that the present state of affairs—where morals contribute to merit and informed reason is a sure guide to action—is a matter of *fact*, i.e., an observable arrangement of creaturely affairs, Adams places reason in the ontological category of the "given," over which God has absolute power. Hence, faithful to Ockham, Adams implicitly grants the contingency and thus the non-necessity of right reason as the standard of moral acts.

The final word seems to be this. In Ockham's view, man cannot help but see certain acts as being harmonious or discordant with the dictates of reason; they seem to possess an inner invariable quality of rectitude or perversity. Yet we should deceive ourselves if we imagined that this standard of moral good and evil were *also* a standard for God in his free dealings with us. The necessity is psychological and contingent, flowing from a free divine ordination: it was "written" on

information, but *formally* speaking, it need not be doing so, since it is an instrument whose function is contingently determined. It could also be the scout and spy of the passions, as it is for Hobbes and Hume.

¹²⁹ For Pinckaers, the most objectionable aspect of Ockham's ethics is that it reduces good and bad actions to a mere question of obligation: in the Franciscan's own words, "a man commits a sin only because he is bound [*tenetur*] to do something that he does not do, or does something that he ought not to do" (*Sent.* II, q. 15 [*OTh* V, 343]). For Aquinas, questions of obligation and debt, command and obedience are very important, of course, but such concepts are not the foundation, much less the substance, of moral doctrine.

the heart, but was one of many scripts that might have been put there. The exercise of God's power in the order he creates endows reason with its perceptions of necessity and its praiseworthy inclination to regard rational dictates as binding. How, then, do we reconcile the antinomy of right reason and divine will in Ockham's thought? Copleston spells out the dilemma:

On the one hand there is his authoritarian conception of the moral law. It would appear to follow from this conception that there can be only a revealed moral code. For how otherwise than through revelation could man know a moral code which depends entirely on God's free choice? Rational deduction could not give us knowledge of it. On the other hand there is Ockham's insistence on right reason, which would seem to imply that reason can discern what is right and what is wrong. . . . Like other Christian mediaeval thinkers he accepted, of course, the existence of an actual moral order; and in his discussion of such themes as the function of reason or the existence of natural rights he implied that reason can discern the precepts, or at least the fundamental precepts, of the moral law which actually obtains. At the same time he insisted that the moral order which actually obtains is due to the divine choice, in the sense that God could have established a different moral order and that he could even now order a man to do something contrary to the moral law which he has established. But, if the present moral order is dependent simply and solely on the divine choice, how could we know what it is save through God's revelation? It would seem that there can be only a revealed ethic.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Copleston, *History* 3:107-9.

III. What Happens to Ethics Without Natural Law?

It should now be more apparent why Scotus is father to Ockham. Scotus's doctrine makes possible the transformation of the traditional bond between God, human nature, and natural law into the sharp discontinuity between human nature and the divine will characteristic of Ockham's ethical theory, according to which God legislates absolutely and unboundedly because there are no ideal natures foreknown in the divine intellect. In Ockham, the dualism between Eternal Law as pertaining solely to the divine nature, and positive law as pertaining to the behavior of rational creatures, is intensified to the point of placing *every* determination of the creature on the side of positive law, and *only* God's self-referential acts of knowing and loving on the side of necessity. Thus for Ockham, the preservation of God's simplicity and free omnipotence demands that no conceivable archetypal principle "guide" the divine dealings with creatures. Ockham places all ten commandments under the absolute power of God, reducing them simply to choices of the divine free will. Though it was not he who invented the formula *quia conformiter vult, ideo sunt vera*, Ockham was the first to carry it to its logical conclusion.

What happens to the naturalness of moral laws if there is no archetype in the divine mind? Naturalness is reduced to convention, the *fact* of God's having historically exercised his absolute power in such and such a way. There is no such thing as naturalness; no such thing as an inviolable law inscribed in one's soul, governing one's being; no such thing as the *ratio legis* in any strong sense—there is the brute fact of *this* law and *that* law.¹³¹ Are you looking for a reason? God's

¹³¹ The haunting parallelism with Hobbesian political philosophy should be apparent. What difference would there be, in principle, be-

inscrutable will. There *is* no other reason—no pattern abiding in the divine mind, no *convenientia* on the part of the creature. Recall Ockham's doctrine that intellect and will, whether human or divine, are in no way distinct, not even formally. To will and to think are identical. God "intellects" with his will and wills with his intellect. Supreme thought *is* supreme volition, there is not even a difference in notion by which one could speak of a rational priority of knowledge over will. The knowability of law and the security of moral judgments is cast into shadows; ethics is protected from the chill of nihilism by cloth spun of divine dictates. The same problem obtains in physics as in ethics. Causality, especially teleology, is impenetrable; we observe mere phenomena and their typical association.¹³² It is in Ockham, not in Descartes, that we shall

tween God and the Leviathan, except that the latter is saddled with mortality?

¹³² See Klocker's book *Ockham and the Divine Freedom*, 15–33. As Copleston writes: "To state without more ado that Ockham reduced causality to regular succession would be incorrect; but he does seem to show a tendency to reduce efficient causality to regular succession. And, after all, to do so would be very much in harmony with his theological view of the universe. God has created distinct things; and the order which prevails between them is purely contingent" (*History of Philosophy*, 3:73). See the careful study by Marilyn McCord Adams, "Was Ockham a Humean about Efficient Causality?," *Franciscan Studies* 39 (1979): 5–48. Though Adams concludes that he was not, it remains true that the teachings of the Venerable Inceptor run in parallel lines to the better-known views of a host of early modern and modern thinkers. In saying this, I do not mean that we find in Ockham a preliminary version of, say, Hume's extreme skepticism, which is based upon a fallacious method of reasoning and a superficial grasp of metaphysical principles. On the contrary, it is precisely because Ockham is a powerful metaphysician, an accomplished logician, and a thinker in dialogue with the tradition preceding him—in all three respects unlike Hume—that he is worthy of being studied with utmost attention. As Charles De Koninck once said in a letter to Mortimer Adler, the only philosophical opponents with whom one can spend time fruitfully are those who argue in a *principled*

find the wellspring of modern philosophy. In the opinion of Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The way [Ockham] alternates between intramundane empiricism and theological positivism (or a-priorism) represents the original form of all variations of 'modern' thought."¹³³

Unless reason can apprehend for itself a moral law, there can be no conscience. No willful imposition of right reason can overcome the suspicion that everything is relative, conscience a fiction. Ockham anticipates aspects of Kant's position on human freedom and the moral law: to save the possibility of an ethical life, we must *posit* an harmonious correspondence between the act of willing and the structure of the universe. We must have *faith* that the universe is so constituted that it will be friendly to our actions, that we shall be rewarded good for good, evil for evil, that there is not a supreme indifference, irrationality, perversity, behind the play of images and experiences in which we are immersed from birth to death. For Kant, the goodness of God, no less than his existence, is a necessary postulate of practical reason; a framework of abstract conditions must be granted in order to account for moral goodness and badness in acts.¹³⁴ Since Ockham denies that there is a natural good for man or that

manner, appealing to common principles and drawing conclusions from them. With such a man, dialogue and meaningful disagreement are possible. With someone like Hume or Kant, fruitful dialogue is impossible. A critique can be offered, but it will take the form of a dialectical defense of first principles naturally known.

¹³³ *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2: *The Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 246.

¹³⁴ Ironically, in view of its avowed purpose of liberating human consciousness from external constraints, a subjectivism such as the Kantian "critical" philosophy, if it is ever to get off the ground, has to impose upon its adherents a set of preliminary dogmas—assertions of formal or structural conditions—that demand more blind faith than any version of realism. The same holds true in the realm of morals.

we can know the infinite goodness of God, he must, if he is to maintain that any truth can be reached about human actions, postulate the truths upon which they have to be based. Without such postulates, how can human acts be intelligible? How could they be judged? If this assumption must be made for the theory to work, will not the reductionist critic have the right to ask: How is your transempirical first principle of universal harmony to be justified? Is it intuited? Is it revealed? How could intuition of items in the world *or* the knowledge of special revelation—both contingent on the free exercise of God's will, both mediated through human interpretations—suffice for the kind of framework you need? There is no limit to the absurdities that can follow in the wake of abandoning the reality of common natures or essences foreknown in God, accessible to a created mind, unchanging in their inner structure, reliably stable in their actual instantiation. The implications of an anti-essentialist metaphysics are rarely unfolded to their ultimate consequences. Ethics requires natural fixity and divine ideas. If either is compromised both fall, and morality becomes indefensible.

The traditional doctrine of natural law rests upon a realist doctrine of knowledge and an exemplarist doctrine of creation which function together as the preconditions for a genuine link between the concepts of the human mind and the realities outside of it. Because of the disappearance of a metaphysical "mediation" between God and the individual creature, it is difficult to find in Ockham any *intrinsic* link between the will of God and the will of man. Man's will is self-determining, self-orienting, thus unable to be motivated by an external end which accounts for any chain of actions initiated by desire and culminating in a possession perfective of one's being. Man's will is stripped of its need to locate perfection in the perfect good, for if it truly had this irreplaceable need, nothing else would satisfy it and nothing else, in the last analysis, could motivate it. And God's will, by sheer superiority of power,

is normative and thus domineering in the ethical situation. But is there any reason to love a God who prevails over the absolute liberty of the human will by a right scarcely distinguishable from might? Even the choice to love God takes on an arbitrary character because this love cannot be grounded in *what man is*, it cannot be seen as perfective of me, nor its object as that for which I am made, that to which I must *orient* myself in order to *be* myself. Far from saving liberty of will, Ockham destroys the reason for willing, and in so doing, overturns the order of perfection necessarily involved in a hierarchy of being—the reciprocity of potency and act, neediness and gift, that makes intelligible the activities of its members. Man's freedom is exalted at the expense of its intelligibility.

To deny that the human will is naturally directed to an end implanted in it by the author of man's being entails asserting that the rational creature confers an end upon itself, i.e., that the *telos* of the creature is self-appointed and self-derived, with no other principle of action apart from its act of willing *x* to be the end to which it directs itself. As a result, the will's correspondence to the absolute good would not be a natural measure against which the creature's deviations can be blamed and its acts of love be praised. If God is the supreme good, then he is supremely to be loved; but why? Is it because the human will has a *natural* order to the supreme good; is it because man, by virtue of what he is, *ought* to direct himself to this good? But if we use the language of "being" linked with an "ought," we are speaking of determinations that *require* a being to achieve its fulfillment as a creature of a given kind; we are using the language of natures and ends. In short, introduce a supreme good, and a moral obligation to conform to it, and you are introducing a root-necessity, a stopping point that cannot be gainsaid amid the multitude of free acts by which the rational creature directs its course of life.

Furthermore, if one does away with essence or nature in the strong sense, i.e., an eternal type known to God and iden-

tical with himself in which the individuals of a species participate, then one also does away with the mainspring of all free action for the sake of an end. To turn toward the good presupposes a desire for that good as perfective of me. To *see* that good as perfective requires directedness, a tendency toward the good *prior* to any concrete pursuit of it. This tendency or "natural appetite" is the immediate consequence of a thing's core identity, which the tradition calls its "nature." There is no absolute freedom at the root of one's being because one is not the creator and conserver of one's being. One is not free to negate the conditions according to which purposeful activity is possible. Grant such measureless freedom, and you have undermined the intelligibility and even the desirability of being. Without the inner necessity, viz., the will's natural appetite for beatitude in the supreme good, one is left with obedience to God because he demands obedience.¹³⁵ In this vision of reality, freedom and natural ordination are irreconcilably opposed. To be free is to have complete power over opposites, even over the final end for which one exists. It is not enough, as it was for Aquinas, that wayfaring man be free to choose *in what way* he will follow his natural inclination, where he will locate his happiness (in riches, in sensuality, in

¹³⁵ It would be necessary to ask further questions. What gives to revelation its privileged status, apart from Christian custom? And how strong is *custom*? Here is the quandary: according to Ockham's natural theology, we cannot know by reason that God is the infinite Good, yet we must maintain that his will is the absolute measure of human action. *Revelation* tells us that God is the infinite Good. Now I am caught in a dialectic between a custom which alone justifies the ascendancy of this infinite being over my actions—actions that, proceeding from my will, are exclusively self-determined, since I do not have any necessary orientation to the highest good—and a rational knowledge (again, on Ockham's account) of the possible limitedness, non-uniqueness and non-perfection of the deity who rules the visible universe accessible to us. In other words, reason gives no preambles to faith. The worlds of reason and of faith are discontinuous and possibly mutually frustrating. An appeal to "right reason" at this meta-ethical level would seem ironic at best.

knowledge, in fine art, in God). It is not enough, as it was for Scotus, that man be free to subordinate the *affectio commodi* to the *affectio iustitiae* and to pursue the simply good over the advantageous good, should they conflict. No, to undermine ethical determinism once and for all requires the rejection of irresistible inclinations, however they may be described, in order to vouchsafe the total freedom, the volitional contingency, of human acts.

But is the traditional view really a form of determinism? And what results from negating the dependency of will-acts on an irreducible desire for union with the good? In music, if one denies principles of scale (e.g., that the tonic and the dominant are more noble, more *final*, than the subdominant or the seventh), one destroys the order of melodic and harmonic progression. There is no longer any *reason* for putting this note after that one. Euphony gives way to cacophony. In fact, one destroys the *possibility* of melodic or harmonic order, which rests upon an unchangeable structure of sound in the confines of which the composer chooses particular means of expression. Total compositional “freedom” leads to the privation called atonality, the absence of form, synthesis, and meaning.¹³⁶ If the possibility of coherent expression disappears, will not the intellectual virtue of art, as well as its many fruits (including contemplation), also vanish? In the sphere of ethics it is no different. If the will has the pure power to determine itself, with no rational order woven into it by nature, one could have a right or a reason, but never right reason. To go further: what of right *reason*? If reason and will are identical,

¹³⁶ Often, even in the most “expressionistic” or “aleatory” works, traces of these qualities are present, but only *per accidens*, i.e., not by the artist’s intention, but merely because man cannot consciously act entirely without intelligence, and therefore all his works will bear some sign of that intelligence, if only a sign of the free decision to make something. (And at times it seems that this is the *only* thing the artist wants to signify, his raw efficient causality—a truly miserable impoverishment of rational agency.) These observations hold true also for painting, the plastic arts, and so on.

as Ockham asserts, if they are not even formally distinct from each other, can we not speak of “right will” as the measure of the moral act? And if the will determines for itself what will constitute its beatitude—if, in other words, man gives an end to himself—how can “right will” mean anything other than “my will as such”? My will as such is the measure of the moral act.

You may say: “God’s will is the overarching measure presupposed to all philosophical analysis.” But the man seduced by Ockhamism replies: “This God of yours is a tyrant who would have me obey him against my will.” You respond: “It is better for me to obey him. I shall be happier, I shall . . . *perfect* myself!” But he asserts: “My will has no natural inclination to an end. I must *endow* myself with a purpose, as I have *no nature* to be perfected according to some divinely foreknown plenitude with which I must bring myself into harmony. Obedience has worth only to the one who freely places his happiness in a life of obedience.” You shake your fist: “But God is better than anything else, he is the most lovable being we can know—it would be *irrational* to defer to something less than him as one’s end!” Then your opponent admits his Nietzscheanism in broad daylight: “I do not want to believe in a God whose will has bound me to a life and to a universe to which I did not consent, by which my freedom is compromised, in which I must spend the rest of eternity miserable or blissful depending on whether or not I play the slave to this master. He is better than anything else, you say, but his laws are none the less capricious for that, and my will none the less free. I glory in my self-determination, which not even this deity can remove from me without annihilating me.”¹³⁷

¹³⁷ This imaginary Nietzschean could take as his charter Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in which Satan is the real hero. He is the rebel whose very punishment bespeaks the glory of freedom, while the God who sits on his white throne, adored and feared, rules over a kingdom of broken wills.

Ockham's God is all-powerful and all-free, but he is far removed from the all-lovable God to whom Christians raise their humble prayers, confident in the creator of nature and the redeemer of fallen nature. In him everything is permanent (unlike the mutability of this life), everything trustworthy (unlike the deceit or inconstancy of our fellow men), everything *rationalis* in the highest degree (unlike the absurdities we must put up with in this vale of tears). The experience of Christian piety as well as the tenets of Christian theology yield a "portrait" of God diametrically opposed to the one suggested by Ockham, however defensible his intentions may have been in devising it. One senses that the beneficent creator of an intelligible universe, the God of light from whom the metaphysics of Aquinas may be said to radiate, has, in the parsimonious hands of Ockham, been thrust to an unreachable realm of darkness. In the words of Clark:

If Scholastic theology intends to justify the ordained word of God then Ockham is somewhat subversive. His meta-biblical dialectic may be valid as a theological exercise but its explanatory and pastoral value is debatable. The contingencies which Ockham transcends are often the explicit ordinations of God. Conjectures about divine commands to commit murder or theft are not normal or entirely wholesome components of a Christian ethics. To preach that the diligent and obedient pursuit of salvation might end in annihilation rather than eternal life hardly inspires a congregation. At times, God's freedom paints a picture of chaos. Ockham's thesis and antithesis can be so awesome that his synthesis is either missed or dismissed. Let it be a moot point whether Ockham really expected a total reversal of the laws of nature or a divine revelation of a Newer Covenant. It is sufficient that he released the specter of divine caprice without the philosophical or theological means to control its apparitions.¹³⁸

For the nominalists of the fourteenth century and later, writes Gillespie, "God the creator and destroyer became preeminent,

¹³⁸ Clark, "Ockham on Freedom," 159-60.

and the redeemer and God of love faded into the background. This God who stepped forth as if newly born beyond reason and justice, beyond love and hope, was a God of infinite power whose dark and incomprehensible form was as much an object of terror as of love and veneration."¹³⁹ If Ockham's God is wise, loving, and merciful, we do not have nature, mind, or happiness as evidence. What Bonaventure saw as a world crying out the presence of God and his goodness,¹⁴⁰ we should

¹³⁹ *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 24. Shortly after these words, Gillespie makes an arresting claim: "It was the idea of such a God that Descartes had to face and that was the source of the question that lies behind his fundamental principle. Descartes' thought can thus be understood at least in part as the attempt to open up a space for man, a realm of freedom invulnerable to the powers of this God." It is well known both that Descartes was influenced by nominalist currents and, moreover, that scholastics in the generation prior to his had already written about counterfactual scenarios in which the manipulation of appearances by an all-powerful God could rob a man of all certainty about the surrounding world. The careful reader of the *Meditations* will notice a highly significant detail: Descartes deliberately refrains, at the end of the first meditation, from allowing the "evil genius" infinite power (this was first clearly demonstrated by Richard Kennington in "The Finitude of Descartes' Evil Genius," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32 [1971]: 441-46). Had the deceiver such power, even the *cogito* argument would falter, and no rational science of nature could be launched. Descartes knew all this quite well. His implicit meta-argument: If there were a God such as the Christians believe in, no science would be possible. But science is possible (and mastery of nature will be its indisputable verification); therefore such a God does not exist. Already Leibniz, ca. 1679, had discerned that Descartes was more an atheist than a Christian (cf. G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989], 242), and Spinoza's pantheistic extrapolation of Cartesian metaphysics ("Deus sive natura") only adds support to this view. See note 157.

¹⁴⁰ The Seraphic Doctor's words: "All creatures, whether they are viewed in terms of their defects or in terms of their perfectibility, in voices most loud and strong, cry out the existence of God whom they need because of their deficiency and from whom they receive their completion. Therefore, in accordance with the greater or lesser degree of fullness which they possess, some cry out the existence of God with a loud voice; others cry out yet louder; while still others make the loudest cry." *Quaestiones disputatae De mysterio Trinitatis*, q. 1, a. 1, corp.; *Disputed*

be forced to see as a world silent in its opacity, inscrutable in its purposes, vulnerable to tectonic shifts in law and being.¹⁴¹ If there is to be any handle on reality, one must search it out in the extreme categories of logical analyticism and gritty faith, between which the immense territory of ordinary experience, the realm of man's hopes and fears, stretches without light and without warmth. The deep Augustinian roots of exemplarism, part and parcel of Christology no less than ethics, have here been eradicated, leaving an eerie world of isolated substances and positive laws, somewhat like the Newtonian universe. This impoverished metaphysical universe offers no natural home for mankind and gives him no natural signposts for his confidence. What could a moral "norm" be—would it have a meaning more than superficial—if it is rooted in sheer self-determination of *will*, human and divine? Depth cries out to depth, one autonomous entity to another.

For Aquinas, moral discourse is anchored in an eternal referent, moral absolutes are discoverable, perennial, immutable, defensible. For Ockham, moral discourse becomes dialectical, if not a mere exercise in dialectic; to speak of absolutes in the Augustinian manner is to speak of chimeras. The Ockhamist road leads us to a supremely powerful monarch ruling in a chaos of contingency. Moral laws, like dew or manna, fall from heaven—there is nothing more to them. To the question "why love God, why love my neighbor?" the Ockhamist replies: "Because God says so; he commands you to do it." Such an answer would replace 1500 years of ethical reflection with an adolescent's picture of adult authority. The disciple of Saint Thomas has a more convincing answer. Friendship with God and with one's neighbor, as it commences in this life, is the fruit of rational insight, love, and obedience; it is the beginning of one's perfection, which will come to fruition as

Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity, trans. Zachary Hayes, OFM (Saint Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, 1979), 116.

¹⁴¹ Not because these shifts *will* occur, but because, in principle, they *could* occur at any moment, if God had made provision for this in his ordered exercise of power.

the soul's total enrapturement in the embrace of the Blessed Trinity, source of her life, goal of her motion, meaning of her being. My self-love and my freedom are blessed and fulfilled if, and only if, I love God for his own sake and above all else, and if I love myself and others with a view to glorifying him. *Then* I am truly free to be who and what I am, able to do all that God delights in my doing. There is no need to see inescapable tensions between perfection and unselfish love, freedom and obligation, dignity and obedience.¹⁴²

Copleston suggests that Ockham's cleavage between science and faith left open the possibility of turning away from God in favor of human preoccupations, much as a wayward youth might forsake the house of his father for the excitement of independent living.

If the creature is regarded as having a real essential relation to God, and if it cannot be properly understood without this relation being understood, it is reasonable to conclude that the study of the way in which creatures mirror God is the most important and valuable study in the world, and that a study of creatures in and for themselves alone, without any reference to God, is a rather inferior kind of study, which yields only an inferior knowledge of the world. But if creatures are "absolutes," they can perfectly well be studied without any reference to God. Of course . . . when Ockham spoke of created things as "absolutes" he had no intention of questioning their utter dependence on God; his point of view was very much that of a theologian; but none the less, if we can know the natures of created things without any advertence to God, it follows that empirical science is an autonomous discipline. The world can be studied in abstraction from God, especially if, as Ockham held, it cannot

¹⁴² On the harmony of freedom and obedience to moral law, see *Veritatis Splendor*, which summarizes the contemporary conception of obedience as alienating heteronomy, and then proposes the Thomistic understanding of a participated theonomy. For a detailed study of this approach written prior to the encyclical, see Martin Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason: A Thomist View of Moral Autonomy*, trans. Gerald Malsbary (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

be strictly proved that God, in the full sense of the term "God," exists.¹⁴³

The historian Egon Friedell argues in like manner:

[Ockham's] skeptical-critical subtleties were simply the powerful expressions of his religiousness. The thought of the unlimited divine despotism was soothing rather than irritating to him. His submissiveness would not be satisfied if he imagined any limitations, even those of causality and morals, to God's omnipotence. . . . He laid the emphasis entirely on the *Credo* [of Tertullian's *Credo quia absurdum*]: it was just the fact that faith and knowledge were two separate things which made the preservation of faith possible. But how if, one fine day, it occurred to someone to lay the emphasis on the *absurdum* and so arrive at the conclusion that this fact of faith and knowledge being two different things annihilates faith and saves knowledge? A shallow notion, but an extremely dangerous one. To Ockham this

¹⁴³ *History* 3:70-71. Copleston's argument has to be glossed. The pagan Aristotle, long before the advent of Christian philosophy, perceived that the study of even the humblest natural things contributes to knowledge of the divine (cf. *Parts of Animals*, I, 5, 645a4-11). While it is true that the most noble reason for studying any reality other than God is the illumination such a study can shed upon divine things, it does not follow that there is no other legitimate reason to study the order of creatures, and that such study has no value apart from its usefulness in theology. Speculative knowledge—including mathematics and "empirical science"—is distinct from art, technology, and practical wisdom. It is perfective of the mind *as such* and so requires no extrinsic justification from above or from below, from theology or from utility. *In this sense*, the sciences can be justly called "autonomous disciplines." The problem Copleston has in mind is not the study of natural things, not even the pursuit of increasing knowledge about them as a perfection of the human intellect, but the *isolation* of this study from a larger intellectual and religious context. Any and all studies must ultimately be integrated *at least* by a love of charity for the divine Good who is author of all being, and *at best* by an explicit theological intentionality, so that progress in the understanding of created things may serve to deepen wisdom about their uncreated source and goal. Something similar is true for the arts and the manner and purpose of their productions.

possibility of shifting the accent does not seem to have occurred.¹⁴⁴

Once the rift opened, it could not be bridged. By his doctrine of the human will as self-determining and the divine will as law-imposing, Ockham and those whom he influenced introduced an unbearable tension fated to be overcome by discarding the divine and idolizing the human. Man is his own "life-project," answerable to no one: such is the kernel of eighteenth century libertinism, nineteenth century nihilism, and twentieth century existentialism.¹⁴⁵

That Friar William himself would have scorned such a view is clear from everything we know about him. Despite his falling out of favor with Pope John XXII over complicated canonical issues,¹⁴⁶ he seems to have been a devout Franciscan who faithfully lived the evangelical counsels. (In this regard he might be contrasted with Luther, who by marrying a nun broke his solemn vows and was complicit in her breaking of her own, or with Descartes, who fathered an illegitimate child from a Protestant woman and had the child baptized in a Protestant church in Holland.) Ockham held the positions we have discussed because he wanted above all to guard and reverence the attributes of God, his omnipotence, his freedom, his independence of creatures, his infinite sovereignty and majesty, his incomprehensible mystery, the transcendent purity and limitlessness of his being. He did not want to see God being used by scholastic thinkers as though he were a rationally predictable principle standing Zeus-like at the top of a pagan cosmology. Perhaps Ockham was right to feel that second-rate theologians of his day had become too confident and cavalier in their discussions of the God "who dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16). Most of his defenders

¹⁴⁴ *A Cultural History of the Modern Age*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, 3 vols. (London: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), 1:88-89.

¹⁴⁵ See *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 46 and surrounding paragraphs.

¹⁴⁶ See John Kilcullen, "Ockham and Infallibility," *The Journal of Religious History* 16 (1991): 387-409. This article is posted on its author's website.

today argue that Ockham was committed to the defense of the primacy of God's will, which he, as a Christian, believed to be the expression of God's superabundant goodness and the root of his loving and saving works toward men.¹⁴⁷ We and all creatures are radically dependent on this will for our being and our goodness; we depend on it for natural and supernatural life. Hence we must obey it always and in all things with the unconditional faith Abraham showed in believing the promise of a child, and in obeying God's command to sacrifice the same child. This is what even *natural reason* is telling us—obey God's will. Scripture reinforces the lesson. Ockham can thus be portrayed as a kind of mystic of the divine will, celebrating God's boundless freedom and creativity and the higher freedom we gain through obedience to him. If, as Chesterton remarked, Aquinas should have been called *Thomas a Creatore*, then surely Ockham's nickname could have been *Guillelmus a Voluntate Divina*.

Good intentions notwithstanding, however, a Christian theologian does more harm than good when he allows metaphysics to be crushed under the weight of isolated theological demands. Although *sacra doctrina* has its sources in revelation, much of its framework and many of its working principles rest upon intuitions of the human intellect and the sciences educed from these, which prevent theology, not to mention ordinary life, from veering into nonsense. A good Christian can be a poor philosopher; there is no guarantee that sanctity will translate into science. What is worse, dubious ideas introduced into theology even for the best of reasons can end up working untold damage—in theology first of all, but also in the whole realm of sciences subordinated to it, and eventually in the thoughts and deeds of common folk, misshaped by misshapen leaders.

¹⁴⁷ See Klocker, *Ockham and the Divine Freedom*, 7–13, 85–89, 107–14; Adams, “Ockham: Voluntarist or Naturalist?,” 245–47; idem, “Ockham's Moral Theory,” 33–35.

Among the thinkers who took up where Ockham left off, one could cite as representative Nicholas of Autrecourt (c. 1300–after 1350), Robert Holcot (d. 1349), and Pierre d'Ailly (1370–1420). Nicholas was a notorious figure whose quasi-Cartesian opinions included the following: (a) Aristotle's philosophy is a confused mass of barely probable conclusions; (b) no one can attain certainty about things in the world because our powers of knowing are too weak; (c) our arguments can reach the level of probable guesses at best, because the only truth clear to us is the principle of non-contradiction; (d) God's existence can in no way be proved; (e) we would make a better use of our time doing community work than studying theology.¹⁴⁸ Robert Holcot used the notion of God's *potentia absoluta* to undermine traditional claims about causality, divine and human knowledge, natural law, grace and predestination, beatitude, and the Incarnation.¹⁴⁹ Pierre d'Ailly thought that the reality of divine omnipotence rendered impossible any certainty about the natural or supernatural orders.¹⁵⁰ It is in the writings of men like these that we find the real origins of modern skepticism and a host of other anti-philosophies. Hence it comes as no surprise that the University of Paris condemned nominalism several times in the fourteenth century, that Nicholas was compelled to burn his writings, and that even French kings got involved

¹⁴⁸ On Nicholas, see Weinberg, *Short History*, 267–83; Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 3:135–48. A short biography and some texts are included in Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh, eds., *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1973), 703–13. Of the few works of Nicholas that are extant, by far the most important is *The Universal Treatise*. This has been translated by Leonard A. Kennedy, CSB, Richard E. Arnold, SJ, and Arthur E. Millward (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1971).

¹⁴⁹ See L. A. Kennedy, *The Philosophy of Robert Holcot, Fourteenth-Century Skeptic* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1993).

¹⁵⁰ See L. A. Kennedy, *Peter of Ailly and the Harvest of Fourteenth-Century Philosophy* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1989).

in the dispute over whether the nominalist school should be tolerated.¹⁵¹

If we move a century ahead, we find that one of Martin Luther's teachers, Gabriel Biel (d. 1495), was a nominalist heavily indebted to Ockham.¹⁵² One can see evidence throughout Luther's work of the deplorable state of theology in the late medieval period.¹⁵³ A few propositions from

¹⁵¹ See Hyman and Walsh, *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, 649–50.

¹⁵² See Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967). A vast amount of work has been done on the intellectual prehistory of the Protestant revolt. It must be emphasized that the connection between Ockham, Biel, and Luther is far from simple; it is not a matter of two straight lines drawn between three dots. Luther differed with Biel over matters as important as freedom of will, good works, and justification. But it would be even stranger to deny the influence of the Ockhamist movement on the whole of late medieval thought, or to doubt the pronounced effect of the confused and confusing world of early sixteenth century scholasticism upon Luther. "In fact, the influence of Ockhamism outside Spain, where [traditional] scholasticism continued to flourish, was so great that by the time of Luther there was, for example, only one university in Germany that was not dominated by the nominalists" (Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 24); "Through the predominance of nominalist thinking in England it played an important role in the development of English empiricism, especially for Bacon and Hobbes" (ibid., 26). Too, the revival of systematic skepticism in the Renaissance and Reformation periods among both Catholic and Protestant apologists could not have occurred unless the ground had been prepared for it by a widespread conceptualism. "The research of the last forty years or so," claims John White, "seems to show not only that Ockham was one of the most influential thinkers of the fourteenth century, but that his, along with Scotus's thought, dominated the medieval universities in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Indeed, it seems that these two traditions formed the bulk of university thinkers for some 250 years (1300–1550)" ("Ockham and Nominalism"). On Luther's indebtedness to Ockham and nominalism, see Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Image Books, 1992), 118–21.

¹⁵³ On the fascinating subject of the relationship between late medieval scholasticism and the formation of early Protestant theology, see

Luther's *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* (1517) allow one to infer the decrepitude into which theological studies had fallen by the year of its publication. "Man is by nature unable to want God to be God. Indeed, he himself wants to be God, and does not want God to be God." "Virtually the entire *Ethics* of Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace." "Indeed, no one can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle." "The whole of Aristotle . . . is to theology as darkness is to light." "He who is outside the grace of God sins incessantly, even when he does not kill, commit adultery, or become angry." "What the law wants, the will never wants, unless it pretends to want it out of fear or love." "Anyone's will would prefer, if it were possible, that there would be no law and to be entirely free. Anyone's will hates it that the law should be imposed upon it; if, however, the will desires imposition of the law it does so out of love of self." "To love God is at the same time to hate oneself and to know nothing but God."¹⁵⁴ Many lines of the *Disputation* are wild exaggerations of sentences regularly met with in theologians and mystics of the High Middle Ages, or, in other cases, are brusque dismissals of opinions torn out of context. Its

Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), esp. 69–121; Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250–1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980). As McGrath notes, it was not a particularly edifying spectacle when, in 1521, a debate between Melanchthon and the theologians of the Sorbonne revealed the existence of at least eight different theological camps: Albertists, Egidists, Thomists, Scotists, Scotellists, "Modernists," Ockhamists, and Gregorists. It was nearly impossible at this time to identify a common Catholic theology. This became one of the great problems at the Council of Trent as well. For example, there was no standard sacramental theology, and it was only agreement on the most general principles that permitted the drafting of texts acceptable to all.

¹⁵⁴ Props. 17, 41, 44, 50, 62, 72, 85–86, and 95, trans. Harold J. Grimm, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 31: *Career of the Reformer I*, ed. idem (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 9ff.

content displays a childish oversimplification and impatience that could well be a desperate reaction against the infernal dialectics practiced by Ockham and his followers. A document like this could only have been written in dark times of great confusion.

Inasmuch as Ockhamism played a significant role in late medieval thought, it also exercised a strong but often hidden influence upon the birth of early modern philosophy. The Cartesian revolt against Aristotelian physics and metaphysics would have been inconceivable had the road not been paved by nominalism's deconstructive tendencies. As Gilson demonstrated, the celebrated author of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* was not nearly as original as moderns unacquainted with the world of late scholasticism thought him to be. On the contrary. Descartes as a youth was nurtured on the eclectic scholasticism of his Jesuit teachers, and in his later efforts to build a new system, he often recycled and refurbished the ideas of his contemporaries.¹⁵⁵ To take one example among many, the scenario of an evil genius who tries with all his might to deceive the seeker of certainty—a scenario that people instantly associate with Descartes, the daring skeptic—is a secularized version of the elaborate counterfactual hypotheses floated in nominalist circles.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Gilson's groundbreaking studies were *La doctrine cartésienne de la liberté et la théologie* (Paris: Alcan, 1913) and *Etudes sur le rôle de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système cartésien* (Paris: Vrin, 1951).

¹⁵⁶ Some late medieval thinkers were getting worked up by the problem of the divinely-caused intuitive cognition of non-existent objects. If God can make me think that I am seeing a sheep when there is no sheep outside my mind, then can I be certain that the whole world is not simply a fantasy? Or: if God could make a wolf look exactly like a sheep, then if I saw the sheep I would be mistaken in thinking it was a sheep. But if that's true, then I could be mistaken about everything. So I can't know anything. All this speculation is not the expression of sheer perversity. The background is discussions of eucharistic transubstantiation. If God can bring it about that what looks, tastes, and feels like bread is *not* bread, then could not the whole universe be similarly manipulated? And if this

Still, it is as important to see the ways in which Ockham and his medieval partisans really *differ* from the quintessential moderns—from Luther, Machiavelli, Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, Hume, Kant, et alia—as it is to notice how their views overlap in suggestive ways. Medieval thinkers were, so far as we can tell, sincere believers who employed hypertrophic doubts or counterfactual scenarios as instruments for testing the tensile strength of discourse about God and creation, the same God whom they worshiped in the holy sacrifice of the Mass, bringing to his feet all the gifts of the world. They were mistaken in methods or conclusions, but they do not strike one as perverse in their intentions or impious in their actual religious beliefs. With the early moderns, it is different. We are really in a different world. Whatever Luther's familiarity with Gabriel, Ockham, or other scholastics, whichever devotions he sentimentally retains, he is no longer a Catholic. He is not a man who preaches and teaches *within* the bosom of the Church. However much Descartes plunders the writings of "decadent scholastics" and makes a pretense of faith, he is not one of them, and has little care for religion.¹⁵⁷

is so, how, by unaided reason, could we know whether we may or may not trust our senses? We might *believe* that the world isn't this way, we may even have decisive *reasons* for believing it isn't, yet this would still be an object of a sort of faith.

¹⁵⁷ This is patently obvious if one reads the *Discourse on Method* with care. Of countless examples, one need only consider Descartes's provisional code of morals in Part 3, which consists of a conventional pragmatism that repudiates any vows by which one would limit one's freedom (first maxim, applicable above all to the vows of baptism, by which the natural freedom to follow the world, the flesh, and the devil is perpetually forsworn); a voluntarism that maintains it is better to pursue *any* course to the end, once it has been chosen, so as to avoid remorse or regret (second maxim); an explicitly Stoic naturalism that limits man's good to what is within the limits of his nature and his natural power, and exalts as the best life the one that is entirely within the bounds of unaided reason (third and fourth maxims, where the only happiness mentioned is that of the Stoic "gods"). All this is profoundly anti-Christian, as is

He is (and understood himself to be) a revolutionary aspiring to undreamt-of ends, who was willing to use scholastic language to win a hearing and to infiltrate the schools.¹⁵⁸ And it is from this point—Luther the self-appointed reformer of religion, Descartes the solipsistic reformer of physics and metaphysics—that the story familiar to many of us, the story of Western intellectual decadence and revolt against the institutional Church, picks up and gains momentum. It will, over time, become a revolt against God and nature, reason and sanity.

We are in a position, as men of the fourteenth century were not, to see where seemingly remote, abstract, “theoretical” mistakes can lead when they mold the secret thoughts of statesmen or trickle down to the masses. This will not bring us comfort, but it may bring us wisdom. Recall the forceful judgment of Pope Leo XIII in *Aeterni Patris* (1897):

Whoever turns his attention to the bitter strifes of these days and seeks a reason for the troubles that vex public and private life must come to the conclusion that a fruitful cause of the evils which now afflict us, as well as those which threaten us, lies in this: that false conclusions concerning divine and human things, which originated in the schools of philosophy, have now crept into all the orders of the State, and have been accepted by the common consent of the masses. For, since it is in the very nature of man to follow the guide of reason in his actions, if his intellect sins at all his will soon follows; and thus it happens that false opinions, whose seat is in the understanding, influence human actions and pervert them.¹⁵⁹

the dualist metaphysics of Part 4 that Descartes disingenuously suspends from a God too easily understood and too quickly forgettable.

¹⁵⁸ See *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, *Correspondence*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 153, 157, 173, 209–10, 212, and passim; Gillespie, *Nihilism*, 28 ff.

¹⁵⁹ *Aeterni Patris*, n. 2. Cf. Leo XIII, *Libertas Praestantissimum*, n. 6:

With Hitler’s camps and Stalin’s purges, with weapons of war that have obliterated millions of civilians, with liberal abortion laws spread over the face of the globe, with schools instructing children in methods of fornication, with legalized adultery (“no fault” divorce) in nearly every Western nation, and with many other examples only too well known, the twentieth century has gone a long way toward establishing a transvaluation far more radical and pernicious than the one effected by Ockham: man believing *himself* to be endowed with absolute power and limitless freedom over the moral law.¹⁶⁰ I do not think we could have gotten to this extreme of absurdity were it not for Ockham and the movement shaped by his ideas. It is no wonder Leo says later in the same Encyclical:

Domestic and civil society even, which, as all see, is exposed to great danger from this plague of perverse opinions, would certainly enjoy a far more peaceful and secure existence if

“[A]s the possibility of error, and actual error, are defects of the mind and attest its imperfection, so the pursuit of what has a false appearance of good, though a proof of our freedom, just as a disease is a proof of our vitality, implies defect in human liberty. The will also, simply because of its dependence on the reason, no sooner desires anything contrary thereto than it abuses its freedom of choice and corrupts its very essence.”

¹⁶⁰ As Alice Ramos writes: “The late medieval conception of an omnipotent God led to a new vision of man and nature, a vision which emphasizes will over reason, and freedom over necessity and order. The transformations which the Ockhamist omnipotent God undergoes throughout the history of philosophy result in a kind of modern thought which sees man as a superhuman being who, through the application of his infinite will, is able to recreate the world. The absolute power of God is thus replaced by the absolute human will. The revelation of the world as the product not of reason but of will, of a divine omnipotence which could change the existing order of things, gradually gave way to a universe governed by man’s infinite will, and susceptible to even greater disorder and chaos, than had been imagined possible under the absolute power of God” (“Ockham and Aquinas on Exemplary Causality,” 199–200).

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a more wholesome doctrine were taught in the universities and schools—one more in conformity with the teaching of the Church, such as is contained in the works of Thomas Aquinas.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, n. 28. In the paragraph that follows Leo singles out for praise “the teachings of Thomas on the true meaning of liberty, which at this time is running into license, on the divine origin of all authority, on laws and their force, on the paternal and just rule of princes, on obedience to the higher powers, on mutual charity one toward another.”

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