WILLIAM OF OCKHAM'S THEORY OF CONSCIENCE

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

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This work is designed to show that there is an implicit connection between Ockham's academic and political careers in his theory of conscience.

Thomas Aquinas offers a theory of moral responsibility according to which the conscientious individual has knowledge of the rightness of her act which does not preclude her doing otherwise. His account of the will, however, proves that this state of affairs never obtains. Ockham's alternative presupposes that we freely choose our own ends. He is therefore entitled to assert that conscience is the knowledge of one's own acts as right or wrong.

The libertarian metaphysics underlying Ockham's ethics is tested by the problem of unfulfilled prophecy. Thomas Bradwardine argues that the Antichrist is free not to come because it is possible for God to undo the past. Thomas
Buckingham argues for the possibility that the prophecy never meant that the Antichrist was going to come. Meanwhile, Ockham is left with the possibility that God lied. Ockhamist John of Mirecourt shows why this 'heretical' solution is the only way to save the faith.

Ockham’s theory of conscience provides a sound basis for interpreting his treatise on heresy. Heresy is disobedience, not to authority, but to the truth. Since the condemnation of heresy is itself a paradigm instance of this kind of perversity, freedom of speech prevails by default. Ockham’s conception of a community united by this realization provides an answer to twentieth-century speech-regulation advocates.

Ockham thought that it is through our obedience to the truth that Jesus’s promise to be with his disciples ‘always, to the end of the age’ will be fulfilled. According to Walter Burley, ‘I promise you a Christian’ converts with ‘A Christian is promised to you by me.’ According to Ockham, in contrast, it is an opaque construction. This account of the logic of indefinite promises implies that no individual can claim to be one of the disciples to whom Jesus was referring.

I hope to leave the reader in a better position to appreciate the sense in which the claim that Ockham’s two careers are united by his nominalism may be considered correct.
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William of Ockham (c. 1285-1347) cuts a fascinating figure in the history of Western culture. His *Summa Logicae*, which elaborates a systematic foundation for nominalist philosophy, is generally recognized to be one of the most important intellectual contributions of the Middle Ages. At the same time, however, Ockham was much more than a logician. He not only advanced seminal arguments in other areas of philosophy, but also lived his philosophy in a truly heroic way. Like Socrates, Ockham was arrested and tried for corrupting young minds with dangerous ideas. Unlike Socrates, he escaped alive and devoted the rest of his life to fighting the tyrannical forces which continue to haunt free thinkers everywhere.

Most studies of Ockham's thought focus either on his speculative philosophy or on his political involvement while ignoring the connection between them. Such compartmentalizing is particularly tempting in the case of Ockham because his life was quite conveniently divided into
two separate careers. As A. S. McGrade observes, Ockham
himself gives us little excuse to theorize connections:

It is natural when dealing with a medieval theologian
and philosopher to attempt to explain his political
thought by deducing it from his more general speculative
world view. There are, however, at least three
difficulties with such a plan in Ockham's case: the
intrinsic difficulty of correctly interpreting
nominalist theology and philosophy, the nearly total
absence of explicitly political passages in the
speculative works, and a corresponding paucity of
specifically nominalist passages in the political
works.¹

It is commonly taken for granted that, if there is a
connection between Ockham's speculative and political
thought, it is to be found in nominalism, where this doctrine
is variously characterized in terms of skepticism,
positivism, fideism, or radical empiricism. The present work
constitutes an effort to clarify the issue by focussing on a
much more specific theme. My thesis is that the connection
between Ockham's two careers lies in his theory of
conscience.

The impetus behind the present work was the desire to
understand Ockham holistically, and to communicate his
philosophy in a way which would be maximally accessible to
non-specialists. I have therefore organized my research into
four free-standing essays. Each features one of the defining

¹The Political Thought of William of Ockham: Personal
and Institutional Principles (Cambridge: Cambridge University
dimensions of Ockham's thought - ethics, metaphysics, politics, and logic - in so far as it relates to the theme of conscience. From the inception of my plan I have striven always, not necessarily to be exhaustive, but rather to present the lesser known aspects of Ockham accurately, and to show how he can provide valuable insight into enduring philosophical issues.

Ockham began his academic career as a monk, and remained throughout his life a deeply religious man. On my view, his first prerogative in generating a philosophical world view was to account for his own Franciscan understanding of the relationship between God and human beings. From the very beginning we find him committed to a theocentric ethics which carries immediate implications concerning the nature of human agency. To act morally is to love God in the same way that he loves us: radically freely. In the first chapter of the present work I examine this foundational element of Ockham's philosophy, and defend it on ethical grounds.

Ockham's conception of human freedom also gives rise to a metaphysical problem, however. If there can be no antecedent condition sufficient to guarantee that the future will turn out exactly as it does, then how is divine foreknowledge possible? Ockham answers that God possesses a transcendent kind of knowledge which is consistent with radical contingency. This answer would have solved the
problem if it were not for the fact that God can reveal the future to prophets. Ockham is forced to maintain that the future could turn out differently than even a true prophet says, and that this would mean that God had lied. In chapter two we will explore the fourteenth-century debate over the problem of unfulfilled prophecy in detail.

Given this single example of how Ockhamist metaphysics produces unorthodox conclusions, it is hardly surprising that Ockham soon found himself at the center of a full-blown political controversy. This inspired him to write a treatise on the subject of heresy. Only a God who is able to lie is able to make promises, and Ockham's whole understanding of church authority is based on Jesus' promise to be with his disciples 'always, to the end of the age.' The minimum required for this promise to be fulfilled is that at least one individual human being remain faithful at any given time. But since Jesus never said who will be the bearer of his promise, it will be up to every individual to decide for him- or herself which beliefs should be considered heretical. In chapter three I shall endeavor to show how metaphysical freedom translates into political freedom for Ockham.

But Ockham's interpretation of Jesus's promise is not just an ad hoc polemical maneuver. Rather, it follows from a nominalist analysis of the logic of promising. The statement, 'I promise you a Christian' does not supposit for
any particular individual, but only converts with an indefinite future-contingent statement. Chapter four consists in an effort to show how this approach is superior to the realist alternative from a strictly logical point of view. By exploring these four dimensions of Ockham’s work we should emerge with a clearer picture of the coherence and plausibility of his philosophy as a whole.
1.1 Introduction

Kant says something truly astounding in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. It is the kind of thing you might not notice if you were reading the entire work from start to finish because it is tucked deep in the bowels of the book and flows effortlessly from his theory as a whole. Nevertheless, it leaps right off the page at you if you happen to catch sight of it, as I did, while I still had my native intuitions about me. What he says is this: "to act in accordance with conscience cannot itself be a duty."\(^1\) In saying this, Kant admits that his account of moral responsibility implies that conscience does not bind.

I think this is false, and flagrantly so, but I think I can see why he says it. Conscience, on Kant's view, is what

\(^1\)Translated by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 202.
makes us aware of what our duty is. So if we had a duty with respect to it, we would need a second conscience to make us aware of this. His assumption seems to be that someone who fully understands that the moral law binds rational beings as such will obey it of necessity. The failure to do our duty does not imply a willful disobedience but rather a weak and/or faulty conscience. Hence, according to Kant, human beings are bound to sharpen their moral understanding so that conscience can reach its verdict effectively, but are not further bound to act in accordance with it.

This all makes perfect sense at the theoretical level but does not ring true in actual moral practice. Have you ever witnessed someone deliberately acting against his own conscience? I have. In fact, I think that the most disturbing and prevalent kind of evil we face is precisely this: when someone knows full well that what she is doing is wrong, but is determined to do it anyway. And I for one want to be able to say to such a person, ‘Hey! You are obligated to obey your conscience!’ Such a person is not lacking in understanding. Therefore, we are not forced, as Kant thought, to posit a second conscience through which she could become aware of her duty to the first. The problem is rather to find a second source of normativity which lies outside of conscience itself, something which could oblige us always and everywhere to follow the dictates of our own moral
understanding; something, in short, like God.

This is where the average medieval philosopher is leaps and bounds ahead of the average enlightenment philosopher. Poor Kant sorely feels the God-shaped hole in his theory, but insists that we cannot have a duty toward someone of whom we have no experience.¹ For such authors as Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham, in contrast, God is not only real but in our face all of the time demanding that we do what we know to be right. My own view is that their theistic approach generates a plausible account of why it is a duty to act in accordance with conscience. But it is not without its own interesting pitfalls. In what follows I would like to explain Aquinas's theory of conscience, to show where I think he goes wrong, and then to argue that Ockham's alternative not only improves upon his predecessor's, but also provides a way of meeting a classic objection to theocentric ethics.

1.2 Normative Necessity According to Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas is the preeminent medieval rationalist. Like all of the Christian philosophers of his day, he is firmly convinced that God is the ultimate source of normativity: human actions are called right or wrong in so far as they are

¹ Ibid., 238.
understood to agree or disagree with his will. Nevertheless, divine volition is not an unfathomable mystery according to Aquinas. He asserts, on the contrary, that God's will is informed by God's intellect which is in turn informed by the truth about good and evil. This implies that what God wills is what is objectively best, and thus discoverable independently of his will. In fact, God supplied human beings with intellects like his own precisely for the purpose of self-direction. Because the power of our minds is limited, we must rely on direct divine revelation for some ethical information. Nevertheless, the bulk of the moral life consists in discerning through our own natural powers what is best, and then willing it of our own accord. On this view, Aristotle was right to suppose that practical reasoning is normative for human beings. He only failed to see that this is because the general principles employed in moral syllogisms are in fact divine precepts. Aquinas set out to show how the Christian ethic of obedience and the philosophic ideal of rationality merge seamlessly in the concept of conscience.

A. What Conscience Is

Aquinas begins his discussion of conscience with a consideration of the nature of human knowledge. Unlike
angels, who know everything that they know instantaneously, human beings find things out discursively, which is to say that we increase our understanding little by little over time. Every new insight implies a previous insight from which it was derived with the help of reason and experience. But the regress must end somewhere in order for us to get started in the first place.

Thus, [Aquinas writes] just as there is a natural habit of the human soul through which it knows principles of the speculative sciences, which we call understanding of principles, so too, there is in the soul a natural habit of first principles of action, which are the universal principles of natural law (T q. 16, a. 1; JVM II, 304). Aquinas calls this habit of the soul 'synderesis,' the innate spark of virtue, which motivates all good deeds and can never be completely extinguished.

Knowledge of general moral principles is not enough,

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3All references to Aquinas's De Veritate, will be to the worthy translation, Truth, by James V. McGlynn, S.J. (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953). I will designate this work 'T' followed by the question and article numbers (which are standard for any edition), followed by 'JVM' along with its volume and page numbers. All references to Aquinas' Summa Theologicae, will be to the worthy translation by Thomas Gilby O.P. (Cambridge: Blackfriars, 1964-81). I will designate this work 'ST' followed by the standard question and article numbers, followed by 'BF' along with its volume and page numbers. All references to Ockham's works will be to my own translations of Guillelmi de Ockham opera philosophica et theologica (Editiones Instituti Franciscani Universitatis S. Bonaventurae: St. Bonaventure N.Y., 1967-86). I will list the name of the specific work as well as any further division numbers, followed by 'OTH' (since I have no references to the opera philosophica) along with the volume and page numbers.
however, for moral agency. In order for us to know whether and how synderesis applies to particular circumstances, we need to be able to make particular judgements. This is the role of conscience, which Aquinas defines as nothing other than the application of knowledge to an act.

Thus, [he writes] the act of conscience is the result of a kind of particular syllogism. For example, if the judgement of synderesis expresses this statement: "I must not do anything which is forbidden by the law of God," and if the knowledge of higher reason presents this minor premise: "Sexual intercourse with this woman is forbidden by the law of God," the application of conscience will be made by concluding: "I must abstain from this intercourse" (T q. 17, a. 2; JVM II, 324).

Aquinas does not claim that such a verdict is infallible. On the contrary, the minor premise is especially vulnerable to error given that it requires an accurate assessment of contingent facts. So to act in accordance with conscience is not always positively virtuous. Nevertheless, to act against conscience, whether it is accurate or inaccurate, is always vicious because it shows contempt for the law of God.4

In saying this, Aquinas suggests that it is our respect

4"Sin is principally in the will. But whoever decides to transgress a divine commandment has an evil will. Therefore, he sins. Whoever believes that something is a command and decides to violate it wills to break the law. Therefore, he sins. Moreover, one who has a false conscience, whether in things intrinsically evil or in anything at all, believes that what is opposed to his conscience is contrary to the law of God. Therefore, if he decides to do that, he decides to act contrary to the law of God, and so, he sins. Consequently, conscience, no matter how false it is, obliges under pain of sin" (T q. 17, a. 4; JVM II, 331).
for the role of human reason in determining what the moral law amounts to which accounts for the dismay we feel at witnessing someone disobey her own conscience. In order to support this suggestion, however, he needs to be able to show how such a circumstance can arise.

Thus, it sometimes happens [he writes] that the judgement of free choice goes astray, but not the judgement of conscience. For example, one debates something which presents itself to be done here and now and judges, still speculating as it were in the realm of principles that it is evil, for instance, to fornicate with this woman. However, when he comes to apply this to the act, many circumstances relevant to the act present themselves from all sides, for instance, the pleasure of the fornication, by the desire of which reason is constrained, so that its dictates may not issue into choice. Thus, one errs in choice and not in conscience. Rather, he acts against conscience and is said to do this with an evil conscience in so far as the deed does not agree with the judgement based on knowledge (T q. 17, a. 1; JVM II, 320).

So it seems that it is the free choice of the will which explains why evil deeds are not always the result of weak and/or faulty consciences. Even after arriving at an evident moral conclusion, I may decide to act with it or against it, and will be judged innocent or guilty accordingly. This is the intuitive result we seek. But at the same time, if human beings are free to take or leave the verdict of conscience as they wish, then we are left with the question, in what sense can it be said to bind?

Aquinas's answer is that our knowledge of God's law places us under conditional necessity. The primary sense of
necessity applies to physical objects which can be forcibly caused to move. The will, in contrast, is a spiritual entity which only moves of its own accord. It can, however, be moved from without on the presupposition of an end to be attained. "In this way," Aquinas writes, "necessity is so imposed on one that, if he does not do a certain thing, he will not receive his reward" (T q. 17, a. 3; JVM II, 327).

This explication of normative necessity is interesting because it implies that the decision to be a conscientious individual is voluntary: I must obey the moral law if and only if I want what obedience brings.

B. Beatitude and the Human Will

When we turn, however, to Aquinas's account of the nature of human volition, we find the will curiously well adapted for fulfilling this condition. His intuitions in this regard are guided by a strong interpretation of the Aristotelian principle that human beings always choose things under the aspect of the good. The will is a blind hunger for goodness, according to Aquinas, and the intellect is its seeing-eye dog. If the intellect tells the will that $x$ is better than all of the available alternatives, then the will wills $x$ of
necessity.\(^5\) Hence, the will can be necessitated from without by being presented with a reward than which no greater can be conceived. And God has presented just such a reward in final beatitude, the maximally happy life, which consists in eternal contemplation of truth.\(^6\) Aquinas grants that this may leave one wondering why we do not find ourselves surrounded by individuals bent upon attaining beatitude.

Beatitude [he responds] can be considered in the abstract and in the concrete. Take it in its general meaning, then everybody is bound to wish for happiness \([\text{beatitudinem}]\). For it signifies, as we have said, complete goodness. Since the good is the object of the will, the perfect good is that which satisfies it altogether. To desire to be happy \([\text{appetere beatitudinem}]\) is nothing else than to wish for this satisfaction. And each and everyone wishes it.

Take it, however, to point to where happiness \([\text{beatitudine}]\) lies, then all do not recognize it, for they are ignorant about the object which gathers all good together. And so in this sense not everybody wills happiness \([\text{beatitudinem}]\) \(\text{(ST 1a2ae q. 5, a. 8; BF XVI, 141)}\).

So we are surrounded by individuals bent upon attaining beatitude. Their lack of success is explained by their failure to fully understand their goal. And this is no surprise considering that this goal, being a kind of supernatural existence, exceeds their own natural capacity by definition. It is, in fact, impossible for human beings to

\(^{5}\text{ST 1a q. 82, a. 1-2; ST 1a2ae q. 5, a. 4, ad 2; ST 1a2ae q. 91, a. 1-3; T q. 22, a. 5.}\)

\(^{6}\text{ST 1a2ae q. 3, a. 8.}\)
will final beatitude efficaciously. Only God can do that for them, which is why it is considered a gift.  

Nevertheless, according to Aquinas, God has ordained that it would only be fitting to bestow such a gift upon those who are duly prepared for it. Hence he set up a more realistic goal for us to aim at: the penultimate end of proximate beatitude. It consists in the moral life, where this is conceived as doing the things which the laws prescribe and refraining from the things they forbid. Proximate beatitude involves a lot of hard work and is

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7"We have shown that happiness [beatitudo] is a kind of blessing surpassing the natural scheme of things. Consequently for it to be conferred by any creaturely action is not possible; a man becomes blessed [beatus] by the agency of God alone. Mind you, we are speaking of perfect bliss [beatitudine perfecta], for if we are speaking of partial happiness [beatitudine imperfecta], which consists in the activity of virtue, then the same rules apply to the acquisition of happiness [beatitudo] as apply to the acquisition of virtue" (ST 1a2ae q. 5, a. 6; BF XVI, 135).

8"As already stated, virtue is ordered to the good. Now the good is realized principally in an end, for whatever is subordinated to an end is said to be good only with reference to it. Therefore as end is twofold, ultimate and proximate, so too is good, ultimate on the one hand, proximate and particular on the other. For man the ultimate and principal good is the enjoyment of God, according to the verse in the Psalms, But for me it is good to be near to God, and to this end he is directed by charity. A secondary and as it were, particular good is also twofold, one which is truly good [i.e., proximate beatitude] and by its nature capable of being directed to the principal good which is the ultimate end, another a seeming but not a true good, since it leads man away from his final good" (ST 2a2ae q. 23, a. 8; BF XXXIV, 27-29).
therefore not a reward than which no greater can be conceived. Yet it is a necessary condition for final beatitude. This is to say that, although living the moral life is not sufficient to secure the ultimate reward, living the immoral life is sufficient to guarantee that the ultimate reward will not be granted. Human beings are bound by their knowledge of the moral law because they cannot but want to avoid being caught in that position.

Does this explanation of normative necessity jibe with what Aquinas says about willful disobedience? When we reconsider the case of the man who had sexual relations against the dictates of his own conscience, a definite problem emerges. This man can only know that he is bound not to have these relations in so far as he understands that having them will disqualify him for final beatitude. But in so far as he knew that, he would not want to have them. For his will is a magnet for that than which no greater can be conceived, and his conscience tells him that refraining from fornication is the means to that end. If the immediate

9 "Such happiness surpasses all created nature, and so in the fitting course of things no mere creature gains it without some motion of activity towards it. Superior in nature to man, an angel gains it, according to the economy of divine wisdom, by one meritorious motion: this we have explained in the Prima Pars. Man, however reaches it through many motions of activity, which are called his merits. The conclusion is in line with Aristotle, who thought of happiness as the reward for virtuous acts" (ST 1a2ae q. 5, a. 7; BF XVI, 139).
pleasure of the deed succeeds in conquering him, the only conclusion to be drawn is that he didn’t understand that he was bound not to do it. We can imagine two scenarios: (1) His conscience failed to convince him that fornication would disqualify him for final beatitude. This is to say that he conceived of the warning against fornication as something less than a divine command. Such a man has a weak conscience. (2) He was convinced that fornication would disqualify him for final beatitude but not that this particular act would. In other words, he was not convinced that he was disobeying a divine command. Such a man has a faulty conscience. In neither case is it accurate to say that he was doing what he knew full well to be wrong.¹⁰

When pushed on this issue, Aquinas seems to want to say that we would be dismayed at witnessing this man’s behavior, not because he was acting against a fully functional conscience, but because he was acting out of ignorance of

¹⁰This point should not be particularly controversial considering that Aquinas says himself that “there is some truth in the saying of Socrates that as long as a man is in possession of knowledge he does not sin: provided, however, that this knowledge includes the effective application of reason in an individual matter of choice” (ST q. 58, a. 2; BFXXIII, 69). Nevertheless, this directly contradicts his other claim, quoted in section IIa above, that sometimes “one errs in choice and not in conscience. Rather, he acts against conscience and is said to do this with an evil conscience in so far as the deed does not agree with the judgement based on knowledge” (T q. 17, a. 1; JVM II, 320).
something which he should have known.\textsuperscript{11} Suppose this was an accurate interpretation of the phenomenon in question. It is still not at all clear that Aquinas is in a position to explain how someone can fail to know something which he is bound to know. For suppose that our man’s transgression was caused by his ignorance of the commandment, ‘Thou shalt not commit adultery.’ The question is, did he ever have the opportunity to learn this commandment? If not, then he was not capable of knowing it, and hence not bound.\textsuperscript{12} If so, then we are left with the problem of why he failed to take advantage of this opportunity. If his conscience told him that learning this commandment was the means to final beatitude, then he would have done everything in his power to learn it; if it did not tell him this, then he was not bound, and we cannot say that this commandment is something that he ‘should have known.’ For the failure of his conscience to tell him that he was bound on this occasion would only be his fault if it was in turn the result of some prior circumstance – which must be analyzed the very same way. Hence, we either have an infinite regress or termination in an originally defective conscience.

\textsuperscript{11}T q. 17, a. 3, ad 4; JVM II, 329. See also a. 4, ad 3; JVM II, 333.

\textsuperscript{12}“Therefore, one who is not capable of the knowledge of a precept is not bound by the precept” (T q. 17, a. 3; JVM II, 328).
We can summarize the problem that Aquinas has arrived at as follows. On the one hand, I am only bound to do a particular deed in so far as I know that this deed is required by God. On the other hand, to know that this particular deed is required by God is to know that doing it is a necessary condition of attaining what I want more than anything else. Hence, a fully functioning conscience makes obedience irresistible.

I submit that there is real difficulty in reconciling a rationalist explanation of why conscience binds normatively with what we know from experience— that it does not bind absolutely. The assertion that the law places us under conditional necessity, binding the will on the presupposition of an end to be attained, had potential for explaining why human beings do not always find the dictates of conscience compelling: anyone who doesn't want the end is free to reject the means to the end. But Aquinas veered too quickly away from the idea that it is possible for someone to refuse the reward God has to offer. For development along these lines, we turn to William of Ockham.

1.3 Normative Necessity According to Ockham

William of Ockham is the preeminent medieval voluntarist. I
use this label to point to one basic difference which goes straight to the heart of what we really want to know, namely, what has he got over Aquinas? After all, Aquinas could dissolve the problem we generated for him in the foregoing discussion by contending that my belief that I have witnessed someone deliberately doing what she knows full well to be wrong is simply mistaken. Wouldn’t it be a better theory, in the end, which could put my sinister imagination to rest? I think not, because any theory which cannot account for willful disobedience cannot account for willful obedience. Of course, Aquinas has secured the thesis that any moral act on the part of a human being is traceable to his will for beatitude. But he denies that we adopt the will for beatitude of our own accord. Ockham, in contrast, insists that we do. For beatitude, on his view, consists in the love of God and the moral life is not a means to that end, rather, it is that end itself. This is to say that being moral is how human beings go about loving God and being happy: they do it by willing what he wills. Aquinas was right to suppose that God wills what is objectively best, and that human beings can find out what God wills by discerning for themselves what is objectively best. But unless such goods are willed for the love of God, they have no bearing on that all-important relationship. What Ockham has over Aquinas is
the thesis that God's love for human beings is a free choice and that human beings are able to return this love in kind.

A. What Conscience Is

Ockham has no less esteem for the ancient theory of practical syllogistic than Aquinas. In fact, whereas Aquinas wavers on the question of whether prudence can be considered the common denominator or 'connection' of the virtues, Ockham asserts this thesis unequivocally.

The moral virtues [he writes] are all connected in certain general principles. For example, 'Every noble thing is to be done,' 'Every good is to be loved,' 'Every dictate of right reason is to be done,' which are able to be majors and minors in a practical syllogism concluding in a particular conclusion, the knowledge of which is prudence immediately directive in the virtuous act (Quaestiones Variae q. vii, a. 3; OTh VIII, 347). Ockham affirms that these general principles are self-evident and that the prudent behavior they direct is natural to human

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13ST 1a2ae q. 65, a. 1; BF XXIII, 183. Criticized by Ockham in Quaestiones Variae q. vii, a. 3; OTh VIII, 341-2.

14Again: "No moral virtue nor virtuous act can exist without any prudence. For no act is virtuous unless it conforms to right reason, since right reason is posited in the definition of virtue in II Ethics. Therefore, any virtuous act and habit of necessity requires some prudence. And if you ask whether, after the generation of virtue, an act of virtue is able to be elicited without prudence, I respond that it is not because no one acts virtuously unless he acts knowingly and from freedom" (Quaestiones Variae q. vii, a. 3; OTh VIII, 362).
beings, but he denies that prudence is sufficient for moral virtue properly speaking. Aquinas effectively conflated these two species of act by claiming that among the self-evident principles of action is that, 'One must not do anything which is forbidden by the law of God.' Ockham grants that the principle, 'No one should be induced to do

\[\text{Quaestiones Variae q. viii; OTh VIII, 410-14.}\]

\[\text{We saw this principle in action in section IIA, above (T q. 17, a. 2; JVM II, 324). Aquinas admits that all prudential acts are virtuous in the following passage:}\]

"Other intellectual virtues, but not prudence, can exist without moral virtue. The reason for this is that prudence is right judgment about things to be done, and this not merely in general, but also in the particular instance, wherein action takes place. Prerequisite for right judgment are principles from which reason proceeds. Yet when reason is concerned with the particular, it needs not only universal principles, but also particular ones. So far as the general principles of practice are concerned, a man is rightly disposed by a natural understanding, by which he knows that he should do no evil, and by some normative science. Yet this is not enough in order that a man may reason rightly about particular cases. In fact, it happens sometimes that general principles and conclusions of understanding and science are swept away in the particular case by a passion. Thus to one who is overcome by lust, the object of his desire then seems good, although it is against his general conviction. Consequently, as by the habits of natural understanding and science, a man is rightly disposed with regard to general truths, so, in order that he may be rightly disposed with regard to the particular principles of action, namely, their ends, he needs to be perfected by certain habits whereby it becomes, as it were, connatural to him to judge rightly about an end. This is done by moral virtue, for the virtuous man judges rightly about the end of virtue, because, as Aristotle says, such as a man is, such does the end seem to him. Consequently right judgment about things to be done, namely prudence, requires that a man has moral virtue" (ST la2ae q. 58, a. 5; BF XXIII, 77-9).
something against his or her god' is self-evident, but it is fundamental to his theory that whether or not the individual designated by the name 'God' is our god (meaning our highest object of love and devotion) is a matter of choice, not a matter of fact.

Hence the first task on Ockham's agenda is to jettison that singularly unaristotelian notion of synderesis. Recall that Aquinas had appealed to this putative habit in order to explain how human beings get started on the path to beatitude. On Ockham's view, he has the order of explanation the wrong way around since habits are the products of acts, not vice versa. He provides an example of the kind of empirical phenomenon which needs to be explained.

Suppose [Ockham writes] that someone elicits many acts of loving with regard to one man in such a way that he is not able to hate that man without sadness. And after such an act [of hatred] he has remorse of conscience, which is nothing other, as it seems, than a certain

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17 Quaestiones Variae q. vii, a. 3; OTh VIII, 366.

18 Ockham would have been gratified to know that the notion of synderesis was introduced into the medieval philosophical literature almost by accident. It makes its first appearance in St. Jerome's commentary on Ezekiel. Jerome uses the term 'synteresis' (from the Greek verb syntereo, to conserve) to describe the spark of conscience which not even Cain could eradicate from his soul. But some scholars speculate that Jerome actually wrote the Greek word 'syneidesis,' which is the Greek word for conscience, and that it was miscopied by medieval scribes. See the introduction to Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality by Allan B. Wolter, O.F.M. (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 45.
sadness left in the will from the fact that it elicits some act against an inclination acquired through the right dictate of reason (In III Sent. q. 11; OTh VI, 358).

We feel it when we act against conscience, not because we are resisting some innate spark of virtue, but because we know we are losing out on something we have experienced to be good in and of itself.

Ockham agrees with Aquinas that there really is a metaphysical hierarchy out there, that some things are objectively better than others. Nor does he wish to dispute the Aristotelian principle that human beings always choose things under the aspect of the good. But he interprets this principle to mean simply that human beings call 'good' whatsoever they will.\(^\text{19}\) What is objectively good is not good

\(^{19}\) I say that 'good' is understood in two ways. In one way for the good as divided into the just, useful, and desirable. In another way, 'good' means the same as the willed thing, or is understood for all that which is willable. In the same way 'bad' is understood in two ways: either for that which is opposed to good in the first way or for something which is nilled or nillable.

By understanding 'good' in the first way and 'bad' in so far as it opposes good in this sense, I say that the will is able to will a bad which is neither really good nor apparently good, and is able to nill a good which is bad neither really nor apparently. . . .

Second, I say that, understanding 'good' and 'bad' in the second way, the will is not able to will something unless it is good nor nil something unless it is bad, or under the aspect of the bad. . . . The authorities and the doctors who say that the will is not able to will something unless it is really or apparently good can be glossed thus" (Quaestiones Variae, q. viii; OTh VIII, 442-6).
for me unless I happen to like it. Even if I know that
loving God is better than loving Saturday morning cartoons,
for example, I may decide that God does not satisfy my will
for frivolity. By making frivolity my good, I choose my end,
and if my entire life is set up for the sake of watching
Saturday morning cartoons, then frivolity is my ultimate end.
Ockham argues at length that human beings are fully capable
of turning away from God in favor of loving something else
even while knowing full well that God is the best that there
is.\textsuperscript{20} Prudence is what tells you the means to whatever end

\textsuperscript{20} "The first conclusion will be this, that the will
contingently and freely – in the way explained – enjoys the
ultimate end shown in general, because he is able to love
beatitude and not to love it and he is able to seek or not to
seek beatitude for himself. . . . This argument is confirmed
because he is able to nil that in which he believes that he
is not able to be satisfied. But he is able to believe that
he is not able to be satisfied in anything possible for him.
Therefore he is able to nil anything possible for him – and
it is certain that he is able to nil anything impossible for
him – therefore he is able to nil anything whatsoever.
Furthermore, whosoever wills something efficaciously wills
everything which he believes to be necessary for obtaining
the willed thing. But some faithful person believes that he
will not be able to obtain beatitude without a good life, and
nevertheless does not will to serve a good and holy life.
Therefore he does not efficaciously will beatitude, and
consequently for the same reason he is able not to will it" (Ordinatio I, d. 1, q. 6; OTh I, 503-5).

"Again, an obliquable power which does not of necessity
conform to right reason, is able to do the opposite of one
dictate of the intellect for the same reason that it is able
to will the opposite of another dictate. But the created
will is obliquable, and is able to will against one dictate
here in this life as is evident through experience.
Therefore, notwithstanding that the intellect dictates this
you may choose; conscience is what reminds you which end is worth having.

B. Beatitude and the Human Will

If there is no natural necessity to choose God as an ultimate end, then in what sense does his will bind? As Wittgenstein once said (I am paraphrasing): Whenever someone says to you, 'Thou shalt do x,' the first thing you should ask is, 'What happens if I don't?' Aquinas argued that if you do not live the moral life you will not attain beatitude, which no human being could want to be without. But Ockham seems to want to say that I might set myself up so as not to find satisfaction in the love relationship which obedience to God brings. If this is the case, then why shouldn't I reject it?

Ockham's theory of normative necessity is best captured in the thesis, apparently original to him, that virtue comes in five grades. Suppose we have a world consisting of ten

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\[ \text{To be the ultimate end, the will is able to nil that end} \] (In Sent. IV q. xvi; OTh VI, 350-1).

\[ \text{21 Tractatus} \ # \ 6.422. \]

\[ \text{22"The first grade is when someone wills to do just deeds in conformity to right reason dictating such a work to be done because some circumstance requires precisely that deed for the sake of some end. For example, the intellect dictates that some just deed is to be done in such a place at such a time because of the fittingness of the work itself or} \]
individuals who have no concept of duty at all. How does virtue arise in this hypothetical state of nature?

because of peace or some such thing, and the will elicits the act of willing this deed in conformity to the dictate of the intellect.

The second grade is when the will wills to do some just deed in accordance with the aforementioned right dictate, and further, with the intention of never setting it aside for something contrary to right reason — not even to avoid death if right reason were to dictate that the deed is not to be set aside to avoid death. For example, a man wills thus to honor his father according to the aforementioned right dictate at some time and place etc., with the intention and the will of not setting that honor aside to avoid death if death were immanent.

The third grade is when someone wills to do such a deed according to the aforementioned right reason with the aforementioned intention, and further, he wills this act in accordance with the aforementioned circumstances precisely and only because this is dictated by right reason.

The fourth grade is when he wills to do such a deed in accordance with all the aforementioned conditions and circumstances, and further, precisely because of the love of God. For example, certain works are done because it is dictated by the intellect that they are to be done precisely for the love of God. This grade alone is the perfect and true moral virtue of which the Saints speak.

The fifth grade is when someone elicits to do such a deed according to all of the aforementioned conditions with the exception of the end, when it is able to be done indifferently for the sake of God as an end, or for the sake of fittingness or peace or some such thing — which I take to be the meaning of the Philosophers —, and further, he elicits to do this deed with a formally imperative act, not only an equivalent one. If then he wills by a formally imperative act to do or to suffer something which by its nature exceeds the common state of men and is against natural inclination, or the deed does not exceed the common state of men nor is against natural inclination by its nature, but only from some circumstance opposes natural inclination — I say such a formally imperative act of such a deed is generative of heroic virtue or elicited by heroic virtue according to the philosophers and according to the truth. And no other habit generated from some other act is heroic virtue” (Quaestiones Variae q. vii, a. 2, OTH VIII, 335-7).
The first grade is achieved, according to Ockham, when these individuals spontaneously decide to act for the sake of a good end, for example, peace. If peace is an objectively good state of affairs, then those who pursue it are acting in accordance with right reason, regardless of their intentions. Virtue in the first grade is meant to account for our intuition that it is possible for someone like Cicero to do good deeds without any Christian orientation whatsoever.

Virtue in the second degree is achieved when a good end is pursued with the intention of pursuing it even if this should prove inconvenient. It is easy to seek peace when the circumstances are conducive to it. Imagine instead that everything about our state of nature conspires against peace, but that one of the individuals in it is so committed to this end that she would only abandon it if someone could prove to her that peace would be an objectively bad state of affairs under the circumstances. Then she is a step up from her fair-weather companions on the scale of virtue.

Virtue in the third degree is achieved when deeds are done, not for the sake of any extrinsic goal, but for the sake of right reason alone. We have been using peace as a paradigm of objective value. However, as consideration of the last grade suggested, pursuing peace is not good always and everywhere, but only on the condition that it is done in accordance with right reason. The person who is willing to
abandon this end for the sake of right reason is only one small step away from seeing that to act in accordance with right reason is itself an end, the only end, in fact, which is unconditionally good. So our virtuous person reaches what Ockham calls perfect virtue\(^2\) for the first time when she attains the third degree, by subordinating all goals to the goal of righting her own will.

So far our state of nature contains all of the objective values which make up the metaphysical hierarchy, but it contains no specifically moral value. The reason is that moral value is a product of normative necessity,\(^2\) and our world as yet contains no normative necessity. This is evident in that individuals who decide not to do good deeds do not thereby incur any penalty. As Kant says, acting for the sake of right reason alone is intrinsically unrewarding,\(^2\) and by acting against right reason one may be

\(^2\)"I understand by 'perfect virtue' virtue in the third and fourth grades, of which we spoke above" (Quaestiones Variae q. vii, a. 3; OTh VIII, 347-8). Evidently, the third degree of virtue inclines to the fourth and would only be considered 'perfect' in a world in which God exists since Ockham also writes, "Nothing is a perfect virtue unless it inclines to an act with respect to a supernatural object" (Quaestiones Variae q. vii, a. 4; OTh VIII, 402).

\(^2\)"Moral goodness or badness connotes that the agent is obliged to that act or its opposite" (In Sent. II q. 15; OTh V, 353).

able to get exactly what one wants. Someone who devotes his energy to amassing riches while everyone else is busy seeking peace, for example, may not see the negative consequences of his behavior as negative for him. The fact that having a right will is objectively good does not obligate one to pursue this end at all. How do human beings become bound to right reason? Ockham indicates that someone who is virtuous in the third degree will be inclined to undertake a personal commitment to do what he knows is right, and that he will then be morally responsible in so far as he upholds or transgresses his commitment. The conditions under which this inclination arises might be described as follows.

One of the principles of right reason which is known self-evidently is that debtors are obliged to pay back what they owe.\(^{26}\) So suppose it occurs to the individual who is seeking to right her own will that if someone in this world were responsible for creating and sustaining it, then she would owe her very existence to him. And suppose further that she has had experiences which lead her to believe that there is such a person at large. Then right reason would incline her to pay back her debt. And so, judging that she can only pay back the debt of life with her life, she devotes

\(^{26}\)Ockham's formulation is, 'Every benefactor deserves to be benefitted' (Quaestiones Variae q. vi, a. 10; OTh VIII 281-2).
herself to the creator and sustainer of the world by willing what he wills. But as it happens, what he wills is that she become perfectly virtuous. So now our virtuous individual not only wills peace and the like for the sake of having a right will, but also wills to have a right will for the sake of God. And it is this last end which places her under normative necessity. For every time she does what she knows is wrong, she denies that she is indebted and hence corrodes her relationship with God. Of course, she is just as free to do this as she is to shun right reason in the first place. 

But unlike acting for the sake of right reason, acting for the sake of God is not intrinsically unrewarding. On the contrary, Ockham thought that although human beings may decide that the love of God will not satisfy them, the love of God is the only thing that can satisfy them.27 Therefore, those who break their commitment to God (or avoid making one in the first place) are de facto penalized; meanwhile, those who make and uphold it by choosing to be satisfied with the

27"I say that it cannot be naturally demonstrated that the will is not able to be satiated or satisfied in something other than God. . . .[Nevertheless] I say that no other object than God is able to satisfy the will. For no act with respect to anything other than God excludes every anxiety and sadness, unless with some objective created habit, the will is able to seek something else with anxiety and sadness. . . . I say that the act of enjoyment with respect to the divine essence is the most perfect and, on that account, it alone will satisfy" (Liber I d. 1, q. iv; OTh I 434-46).
status 'child of God' enjoy virtue in the fourth degree.

Finally, the fifth grade of virtue is to cling to right reason, not only with the intention of suffering any inconvenience for so doing, but with the misfortune of actually having to suffer. This is heroic virtue, and it is available in both the specifically moral and non-moral or 'prudential pagan' varieties. There is an important difference, however.28 Heroic pagan virtue stands with vice, since a pagan might will to die for peace while at the same time willing something else which is contrary to the dictates of right reason, such as to kill an innocent bystander. Whereas heroic moral virtue does not stand with vice since then dying for peace would be willed for the love of God, and

28"The sixth conclusion is that justice in the fourth grade does not stand with any vice or culpable error. This is proved as follows. If some vice were to stand, either it would be a sin from ignorance or from malice or from passion. Not the first because that ignorance either would be vincible or invincible; if vincible, then of necessity he conquers it and removes the impediment if he loves God or the honor of God ordinately. Not in the second or the third, because if thus, it would follow that something was loved more than God, and in this way that virtue by which I love something because of the love of God would be corrupted.

The seventh conclusion is that justice in the fifth grade, in so far as it is perfect heroic virtue in a Christian, who orders such an act for the honor of God, is not compatible with any vice or culpable defect for the same reason. Nevertheless, the heroic virtue of some philosopher is perfectly compatible with vice because it is an act of a different species. The Christian act has God for its object, the Pagan act does not" (Quaestiones Variae q. vii, a. 4; OTh VIII, 354-5).
it is impossible to contradict right reason while acting for his sake. Thus, it is evident that Ockham sees the normative necessity of doing and being good entering the picture with the entry of God. Human beings are obligated to follow all of the dictates of right reason in so far as they want to love him.

1.4 Difficulties with Divine Commands?

Upon further consideration, however, is Ockham entitled to the claim that it is impossible to contradict right reason while acting for the sake of God? After all, what loving God requires is that we will what he wills because he wills it. But Ockham is famous for asserting that God is free to will anything which does not imply a contradiction, and that it does not imply a contradiction for God to will against things like peace, which are objectively valuable. According to his five-tier system, God is in the position of a man who attains to the third degree of virtue in a Godless world. He is free to right his own will or not, without any natural or normative constraints at all. Ockham writes:

And if you say that then God would sin by causing such a deformed act, just as the created will sins because it causes such an act, I respond as follows. God is a debtor to no one. On that account, he is held [tenetur] neither to cause that act nor to cause its opposite, nor not to cause it. And so he does not sin
in so far as he causes that act. The created will, however, is held by the divine precept not to cause that act. Consequently, in causing that act it sins because it does what it should not do. Hence, if the created will were not obliged to not cause that act or the opposite, then in so far as it were to cause it, it would not sin at all, just as God wouldn’t (Quaestiones Variae q. vii, a. 4; OTh VIII, 389-90).

It seems to follow from Ockham’s conception of duty that God could order us to do manifestly bad things, and that if he did, we would be obligated to obey.

I think that the genealogy of morals which we just traced, however, provides a ready solution to this objection. Suppose that God visits Abraham and orders him to slaughter his first born son like a sheep. It would be open to Abraham to reply that this seemed to him to be an objectively bad state of affairs which right reason precludes. If God were able to convince him that it wasn’t, then he would not be commanding a manifestly bad thing. If, on the other hand, God says, ‘Yes, that is correct; I am asking you to act against right reason,’ then it would be open to Abraham to reply that God has thereby dispensed him from his obligation to obey, since it was right reason which bid him pay back what he owed with his life in the first place. Someone who is seeking to right his own will would only confer the status of ultimate benefactor or god upon someone who loves what is objectively good perfectly. And it is impossible to do something vicious while loving such a person.
This conception of duty is elucidated by analogy to the relation between parent and child. One will go out of one's way to do something for the sake of such persons (i.e., when one would just as soon not do it), unless they do something to make themselves unworthy of such devotion. Of course, someone may choose to obey an unworthy parent. But then we would not say that she was obeying someone to whom she owed obedience; we might even say that her 'obedience' is a kind of slavery, and that this 'parent' had actually forfeited his parenthood. In fact, to act against right reason voluntarily for the sake of someone else (like stealing pears with the boys only to throw them to the pigs) is a paradigm instance of immorality. Conversely, to act in accordance with right reason for the sake of someone else is a paradigm instance of morality. But if the right thing happens to be conducive toward your own personal preference (and you would have done it without being asked anyway), then the act is one of prudence, not one of obedience, and hence not one of moral virtue at all. These are common intuitions with respect to human relations. The only difference with respect to God is that he will never do anything to make himself unworthy of absolute devotion. Nevertheless, on the hypothesis that he did fail to live up to the standards of godhood, then right reason would no longer incline one toward obedience.
I think it is crucial when interpreting Ockham to see that right reason does not dictate that God ought to be loved and obeyed above all else but rather that if God is to be loved and God is the being to whom we are ultimately indebted, then he must be obeyed above all else. Recent commentators have had trouble with Abraham-type scenarios because they think that Ockham is committed to the view that right reason not only inclines but somehow obligates us to love God. This is surely false. Even if I knew that God occupies the highest position on the metaphysical hierarchy, I might decide that loving him is not best for me (i.e., satisfying). Can right reason tell me that God ought to be my ultimate end? No, because all 'oughts' bind on the condition of some further end to be attained, and there can be nothing more ultimate than the love of God. If there were some further reason for loving God (even if it were right reason) we would be using him as a means to an end, which (even if it was the end of righting one's own will) would not count as love of God at all. We do not love God in order to be virtuous; rather, we act virtuously in order to love God.

Of course, right reason can generate the trivial command that, 'If I want to love God, I ought to love God.' But that still leaves the sixty thousand dollar question, namely, do I want to? And this is something right reason cannot tell me. For even if it tells me that God is the only thing that can satisfy me, it cannot tell me that I want to be satisfied under those conditions.

Ockham’s overarching concern to preserve the conception of love as a radically free choice which unites two independent wills is at the root of his rejection of Aquinas’s moral theory. Aquinas agrees that true love of God means attaining “to God himself so as to rest in him without looking for any gain” (ST 2a2ae, q. 23, a. 6; BF XXXIV, 25), but he is also convinced that such an act is beyond human capability. Therefore, he asserts that whenever an individual experiences true love of God, it must be completely infused in him from without by the holy spirit (ST 2a2ae, q. 24, a. 2; BF XXXIV, 39). Meanwhile, Aquinas is further committed to the view that love of God is the mother of moral virtue, that moral virtue is meritorious, and that an act is only meritorious if it is voluntary. Hence, he needs to find another way for human beings to love God. The will for beatitude is the habitual form\(^\text{30}\) which answers this

\(^{30}\)As Aquinas sometimes puts it (ST 2a2ae q. 23, a. 2; BF XXXIV, 41).
need.

Likewise [Aquinas writes] a person comes to love an object as appreciated as good for him [apprehendit illud ut bonum suum]. Because he hopes to be able to obtain a good from another he looks on him on whom he relies as a good for himself. And so from basing his hopes on another, he proceeds to love him. Thus, in the sequence of coming to be, the act of hope precedes that of charity (ST 1a2ae, q. 62, a. 4; BF XXIII, 147).  

For Aquinas, the love of God is either purely natural, and hence motivated by personal gain, or purely supernatural, and hence not voluntary on our part.

Ockham's response is that neither of these kinds of love is suitable for a relationship between God and human beings. In order for the will to love God freely, it must be able to move with the holy spirit of its own accord prior to and independently of any inclination for personal gain.

He issues a strong critique of the Thomistic analysis:

He who would desire charity because of himself just as an ultimate end of the highest love would abuse charity. . . . Such abuse with respect to God does not have some ordinate use contrary to it because every use with respect to God is inordinate and abuse. . . . And this is what I said from the beginning: that to use

31Again: "To say that our charity issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and unfeigned faith [I Timothy I, 5], refers to the act of charity which these awake. It can also mean that such acts prepare us to receive charity from above. Augustine is to be explained in a similar way when he says that fear introduces charity [I Corinthians 12, 11], and a gloss on Matthew also, when it remarks that faith generates hope, and hope, charity" (ST 2a2ae q. 24, a. 3; BF XXXIV, 41).

32See Liber I d. 17, q. 11; OTh III, 473-4
something properly speaking is when the will elicits some act concerning something which it would not elicit unless something else was presented concerning which it has its act (Liber I d. 1, q. 1; OTh I, 390-3).\textsuperscript{33}

Regardless of whether I enjoy the relationship, and regardless of whether I am hoping that it will extend into eternity, I have to be able to return God’s love with the true love of friendship, which is freely chosen without the presupposition of an end to be attained.\textsuperscript{34} Such an act is

\textsuperscript{33}Ockham continues: "Furthermore, a blessed person is not less able to have an act with respect to the divine essence in itself – beyond the act with respect to the vision of the divine essence – than is the wayfarer. But the wayfarer, beyond the act by which he desires to see and have God, has the act of loving God in himself. And this is more noble and more meritorious. Therefore, the blessed person has, beyond that act by which he loves the very vision and the having of God, another more perfect act terminating first in God himself. The assumption is evident because given that God was never to be had other than he is had in this life, still he would be maximally lovable. And with this posited it would not be by the love of desire; therefore, it would be by another act which is not of a desired thing. Consequently, for the same reason, even now, he is lovable in himself and not only desirable" (Liber I d. 1, q. iii; OTh 441-2).

\textsuperscript{34}Ockham seems to have thought that the love of God is meritorious precisely because it is its own reward. The following texts go some distance toward establishing this.

"... in every meritorious act, charity is the partial efficient cause. Nevertheless, virtue is able to be ‘moral’ in the sense of natural morality if it has the required circumstances for such a virtue in accordance with nature. In this way, the philosophers were virtuous without any charity, but they were not able to have a meritorious act without charity" (In II Sent., q. xi; OTh VI, 374).

"... it can be said that some act is indifferent in the will if it is caused totally by God, because then it is
neither strictly natural since it is self-transcendent, nor
supernaturally infused, since it is voluntary on the part of
the agent. It is a very peculiar sort of act which we can
hardly blame Aquinas for not including in his rationalistic
system. Nevertheless, from Ockham's point of view, such a
system is a bit too tidy. It cannot do justice to the
experienced phenomenon of true love.

Making room for this phenomenon leads to a number of
interesting quirks which Ockham is obliged to accommodate,
not the least of which concerns the First Commandment. Given
that all commands bind on the presupposition of an end to be
attained and that there can be no further end for the sake of
which God is loved, we cannot be commanded to do it. Of
course, God can and does command that we love him above all
and for his own sake. But even this must be interpreted as a
called neither morally good nor morally bad, because this
name connotes an activity of the will as a meritorious act. .
. . I say that it is not virtuous precisely because it is in
conformity with right reason since if God were to make in my
will an act in conformity to right reason, with my will doing
nothing, the act would not be meritorious or virtuous. On
that account, it is required for the goodness of the act that
it is in the power of the will having that act" (In II Sent.,
q. xi; OTh VI, 388-9).

In accordance with medieval tradition, Ockham believed that
the blessed are unable not to love God. But he also thought
that one's final reward or punishment depended upon the state
of one's soul at the moment of death. This all makes sense
if we conceive of eternity as a changeless mode of existence.
Upon death, those who love God are frozen in that love (just
like the angels), and those who hate him are frozen in that
hatred. Voilà heaven and hell.
conditional: 'If you want to love me, then only wholehearted love will do.' Such a precept could easily be dictated by right reason since it seems self-evident that, with an infinite being, love is an all or nothing affair. But right reason cannot require that I fulfill the condition any more than right reason can require that I pay back what I owe. It can only inform me that the payback is required for the friendship. This, on my view, is the basic intuition which Ockham's theory of conscience was designed to account for.

Ockham's theory of conscience puts God at the center of the moral universe while at the same time giving right reason the last word. He who acts for the sake of right reason always and in every way becomes perfectly virtuous. Such a man does not have a conscience to obey, however, because he has not chosen an ultimate end which is its own reward. Once he has acted for the sake of God, the memory of this value remains in his soul and calls him back when he is tempted to act for other ends. This is conscience, the application of knowledge to an act — not speculative knowledge as Aquinas thought, but rather empirical knowledge. He who has experienced the love of God feels it when he turns it down and is dismayed to witness others doing the same. No amount of prudence could generate this normative necessity. What generates it is the decision to be satisfied with a certain relationship. This is the single inexplicable act which
explains all moral agency. Hence, Ockham does not just contend that theists are obligated to obey their conscience, but that conscience is the immediate source of all genuinely moral obligations.

1.5 Conclusion

Kant thinks that the meta-duty to do what one knows is right is impossible because it could only be imposed by something outside our own minds — of which we have no experience. It is, I think, true and interesting that any source of duty must be experienced. But Kant is still wrong on two counts. First, plenty of reasonable and trustworthy people claim to have experienced God. Second, even if all of these people are mistaken, Kant has not proven that such an experience is impossible.\(^{35}\) The mere possibility of experiencing God is enough to show that one can have a duty toward him, and hence to do what one knows is right. Ockham takes it on faith that this possibility is the reality.

The upshot of his theory is that all duty is conditional upon the agent’s wanting what acting for the sake of God

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\(^{35}\)His belief that it is impossible comes from the assumption that God transcends time and space and hence cannot be experienced as an empirical phenomenon. Suffice it to say that Ockham’s conception of eternity does not carry this implication.
brings, namely, true love. It is no coincidence that Jean-Paul Sartre, who knew all about true freedom, also knew all about true love. He suggests that if such a thing were possible it would be the only thing worth having in and of itself. He comes to the conclusion, of course, that it is not in fact possible. And I am inclined to think that this is exactly the right conclusion for an atheist to draw. Theists, on the other hand, have an infinite resource at their disposal for lending support to this outrageously romantic idea. Theocentric ethics is built upon the condition of true love. So on this view, the conviction that everyone has an obligation to obey their conscience errs. But it errs in a rather nice way I think, because it makes the completely unwarranted assumption that everyone wants to

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37 Sartre asserts that theism is false because it contradicts the thesis that existence precedes essence in human beings (i.e., we have to make our own free choices before we can say what we are). If God exists then human essence precedes human existence because God would have a complete concept of each and every individual, which they would have no choice but to fulfill. See Existentialism, translated by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), 13-16. I think that Ockham’s claim that act precedes habit is interestingly parallel to Sartre’s thesis. But Ockham found a way to preserve divine foreknowledge without canceling the radical freedom of the will, as I shall endeavor to show in the next chapter.
fulfill that condition.
CHAPTER II
THE METAPHYSICAL DIMENSION

2.1 Introduction

The fourteenth century brought strange days to Western Europe. The Hundred Years’ War, the Black Plague, and the Great Schism, among other disasters, promoted a widespread apocalyptic mood which is recorded in the art and literature of the period. The coming of the Antichrist was a very tangible problem for these people. It finds expression, not only in their pictures, sermons, and stories, but also in their philosophical treatises. Fourteenth-century philosophers argued a great deal over future contingents, and it is no coincidence that for them the issue often boiled down to a question about prophecy. It is prophesied in the Bible that the Antichrist is going to come.¹ But surely

¹The word ‘Antichrist’ occurs only in the epistles of John. However, the “lawless one” mentioned in II Thessalonians, various images evoked by Daniel of the Old Testament, and of course the “beast” of the Book of Revelation have all been taken by various theologians to represent the Antichrist (Encyclopedia Britannica Micropedia,
there is room for hope that things will not get worse than they already are. If the Antichrist is responsible for his actions just like other human beings, then it seems that he must be free not to do what the Bible says he will do. So suppose that he doesn’t. On the one hand, this would dispel our anxiety about the future; on the other hand, it would leave us with the problem of unfulfilled prophecy.

Unfulfilled prophecy creates a gripping thought experiment which was not fully appreciated until the twilight of scholastic thought. Thomas Aquinas had asserted that God is like a man on a mountainside watching a caravan on the road below. He can see what happens at the beginning, the middle, and the end all at once. Meanwhile, human beings experience things in succession, like someone walking along in the caravan. According to this picture it is absurd to suppose that the Antichrist will fail to come. That we would even wonder about what is going to happen only seems to prove the limited power of our minds. But this is precisely where the metaphor misleads. If it is true that the Antichrist might go either way, then it makes just as much sense to

1995 ed., s. v. "Antichrist"). Although in more recent theology, 'Antichrist' is often said to stand for an idea, a system, or an attitude, the medievals we will be discussing assume that the Antichrist will be a man and that his 'coming' means his rise to power – sitting in the temple of God, seducing the nations, etc.

2Summa Theologiae Ia, q. 14, art. 13, ad. 3.
suppose that he doesn’t come as it does to suppose that he does come. If he doesn’t come, then, by hypothesis, God would have known that. But what about the prophecy? It has already been made. So it seems there is no way to escape the conclusion that it may not be fulfilled.

Fourteenth-century philosophers were very much concerned to show that free will is consistent with the prophetic tradition. In what follows I wish to explain three of their ingenious solutions to the problem that the Antichrist poses. In so doing I hope to show how this thought experiment challenged some standard presuppositions about the logic of future contingents which I think we would do well to reconsider ourselves.

2.2 The Thesis that God can Undo the Past

Most philosophers believe that truth-value is bivalent, i.e., that every meaningful assertoric proposition is either true or false. Hence the proposition, ‘The Antichrist will come,’ bears a truth-value right now just as surely as do the propositions, ‘Jean Chrétien is Prime Minister of Canada,’ and ‘Caesar crossed the Rubicon’; the only difference is that we happen to know the truth-value of the propositions about the present and the past, whereas we do not know the truth-value of the one about the future. If the Antichrist comes,
then we will say that the proposition, 'The Antichrist is going to come,' was true all along. But this should not lead us to believe that the Antichrist never had any choice in the matter. The present truth-value of the proposition depends upon the Antichrist's choice, even though that choice has yet to be made. I belabor this rather banal point in order to call attention to an aspect of it which is not so banal, namely, the apparent assertion that something which exists now (i.e., a fact of the matter) depends for its existence upon something which not only does not yet exist, but may never exist (i.e., a future-contingent state of affairs).

The easiest way to resolve this paradox, of course, is to deny that facts exist in any meaningful sense of the term. There is no fact about the coming of the Antichrist, there is just a future-tense proposition which may be true or false. In other words, a fact is not a thing in the world which constrains reality to conform to it, but only a name given to propositions which happen to reflect reality. This provides a convenient way of accommodating the freedom of the Antichrist. If the Antichrist decides not to come, then we need only say that we were mistaken to call a particular proposition about him a fact. Nevertheless, when we change the entity in question from proposition to prophecy, it becomes clear that we cannot afford to be quite so
dismissive. Prophets are purveyors of facts about the future. If such things do not exist in any meaningful sense of the term, then neither do prophecies. But it is a central tenet of most religions of the world that prophecies do exist. Those who believe in prophecy do not believe in a name applied to propositions about the future which happen to turn out true. They believe in divine revelation. Are they thereby committed to the existence of something which depends for its own existence upon something which does not and may never exist?

In a way, yes. But this claim is not as unreasonable as it may sound within the context of a religion which also posits the existence of divine eternity. Eternity alleviates the backwards dependence relation by asserting that the existence of the prophecy depends upon the knowledge of God, which in turn depends upon the future. It seems that we can settle the entire issue through the mediation of God's instantaneous omniscience. If the Antichrist decides not to come, then God would have known that and the prophecy about

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Of course, any dependence of God upon something outside of himself will create a conflict with the doctrine of divine impassivity. Contemporary authors who use the eternity solution are generally prepared to give up or modify this doctrine. See, for example, Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *The Journal of Philosophy* 78:8 (August 1981): 429-58; and "Prophecy, Past Truth and Eternity," *Philosophical Perspectives 5*, ed. James E. Tomberlin (Atascadero: Ridgeview, 1991), 395-424.
him never would have existed.

This analysis, however, only serves to elaborate the Thomistic metaphor of the mountain caravan. It asserts the truth of a proposition of the form, 'If x were to happen then y would have happened,' known as a 'backtracking counterfactual' in twentieth-century discussions.\(^4\) The problem with counterfactual backtrackers is that they tell us what the past is like in various possible worlds, without fully acknowledging that the actual past is a given. In this world the revelation about the Antichrist has already been made, and yet the Antichrist's choice has not. Are we prepared to concede that a certain proposition found in the Bible constitutes an antecedent condition given which the supposition that the Antichrist does not come cannot be made? If so, then we must take back the claim that he is free to go either way. And in so doing we commit ourselves to some version of determinism which will undermine our ability to attribute moral responsibility to the Antichrist.\(^5\)

This conclusion might be resisted on the grounds that


\(^5\)According to the tensed version of the principle of alternate possibilities (which is known in the contemporary literature as PAP) a person is morally responsible for what he does only if he is now or was at some time able to do otherwise.
the prophecy does not count as an antecedent condition at all. Its existence depends upon God's knowledge, which in turn depends upon the choice itself. To say that the Antichrist must come is only to make the benign assertion that, necessarily, whatever will be will be. But once it is denied that the prophecy counts as an antecedent condition sufficient to guarantee the coming of the Antichrist, it must be conceded that the Antichrist is able not to come. In virtue of what is he able under these circumstances? In virtue of the fact that the past is just as contingent upon his choice as is the future. Given that the prophecy already exists it is equally possible for the Antichrist to refrain from coming as it is for him to undo the past.

Undoing the past sounds suspiciously close to a contradiction-in-terms, just the sort of thing one would hope to be able to impute to an adversary. Perhaps it would be less tendentious for me to assert, therefore, that counterfactual backtrackers are committed to the claim that the Antichrist has it within his power to bring about the past.⁶ Nevertheless, on the supposition that the Antichrist is equally able to go either way, which he is according to this tradition, the two claims amount to the same thing: If

the Antichrist decides not to come, then he will bring about a different past (i.e., a past in which there was no revelation about his coming).

Although there is no way for counterfactual back-trackers to escape this implication altogether, they can reduce its shock value by expanding their eternalist framework so that it is not only the case that God has knowledge of all of time, but also that he has power over all of time. Then the backwards dependence relation can be rephrased as follows: The existence of the prophecy is contingent upon God's having revealed it, which is in turn contingent upon the Antichrist's choice; but eternity is a position from which one can cause an effect at any time one pleases, therefore, God is still fully capable of bringing it about that he never revealed that the Antichrist is going to come. According to this expanded eternalist view, the past is not a given at all. On the contrary, our complete world history is permanently and in every detail contingent upon the divine will.

Strange as it may sound, this view attained to the height of orthodoxy when it made its appearance as the doctrinal centerpiece for Thomas Bradwardine's *De Causa Dei*, completed five years before his death in 1349. Bradwardine begins the penultimate chapter of this more than eight-
hundred page opus by admitting that, when he was younger, he used to think of God as everlasting. That is, even though he knew that God endures without beginning, end, or change, he conceived of this perfect mode of being as somehow corresponding point for point with the time-line of creation. Having considered the matter more carefully, he is now convinced that God must be conceived as transcending all measure of succession. This can be accomplished with the help of ‘instants of nature,’ a concept popularized through one of John Duns Scotus’ famous thought experiments.7

Imagine an angel who exists for only a single instant of time and suppose that her entire short life is spent loving God. Was she morally responsible for her good deed? This depends on whether she was free not to love God, and so it seems that the answer is no. When was she able to do other than what she did? But Scotus’ answer is yes, on the grounds that for every single instant of time there are two instants of nature which afford the requisite possibility. This claim is a particular application of the powerful philosophical principle which came to be known as the Proposicio Famosa Scoti:

Whatever the real per se order would be among things if

they were really distinct, that is the per se order among them corresponding to the distinction which they have, for example, an order of reason, if they are distinct by reason.\(^8\)

Everyone grants that if the angel had lived for at least two instants of time it would have been possible for her not to love God. The reason is that temporal succession furnishes a conceptual priority: first she can and then she does. But the hypothesis that the angel lives for only one instant does not preclude our ability to conceive of the same priority. This is to say that there is no logical contradiction in distinguishing can and does and ordering them according to prior and posterior independently of any real temporal succession.

Bradwardine asserts that Scotus's analysis provides a timeless conception of causality which

is best for saving contingency and liberty in God and man. For it seems it should be said that they were able not to have willed what they will. This may seem necessarily to imply a possibility for the opposite through temporal priority. However, it does not necessarily imply the latter, but only the aforementioned causal priority.\(^9\)

Bradwardine criticizes those who try to explain divine

\(^8\)Quoted in Stephen D. Dumont, "The Propositio Famosa Scoti: Duns Scotus and Ockham on the possibility of a Science of Theology," Dialogue 31 (1992): 418. In this case the distinction will be a formal one.

\(^9\)Translated from Thomas Bradwardine, De Causa Dei (Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1964), 836.
causality on the model of their own experience of the empirical world without Scotus's conceptual tools. They end up with a God who is "first this way and then that way in an intrinsically successive fashion," a medieval version of what is today known as 'process theology.'

Once timeless causation is posited with respect to God it can be used to solve the problem of human free will as well. Although we experience the past as necessary and the future as contingent and understand this experience in terms of temporal succession, there is no ultimate basis for such a distinction. This is evident in that God freely created this total-world-history in a single instant, and from his eternal point of view nothing has changed. Therefore, he is still able to bring it about that the world was different, or even that the world never was. And this is how he ensures that there will never be an unfulfilled prophecy. Every possible world in which the Antichrist fails to come is a possible world in which the Biblical prophecy about him does not exist.

Despite his confidence in this successionless account of causality, Bradwardine sees fit to pause over a sophisticated version of the empirical approach which he rejects.

If in fact one diligently reads the books of the philosophers and more diligently rereads them, it appears that they posit a general bipartite division in means and in ends. There are two ends, namely being and non-being and, correspondingly, two means, namely,
generation and corruption leading to the two ends. Therefore, when they say that a thing existing in some end, that is, in or somehow under either being or non-being, can be in or under the opposite end, they mean a power capable of change, realization and termination in opposite ends by succeeding in turn. [Hence] power is twofold. One kind of power is completely absolute, though not a power of contradiction. By this kind of power, something can be otherwise without any change. The other kind of power is natural, capable of change, realization, and termination in opposite ends successively, within the bounds of contradiction and the natural order. By this second power something is not able to be otherwise unless through some change among opposite ends in it or in something else.¹⁰

The philosophers to whom Bradwardine refers hold that this natural order places temporal limitations even on God.

We can get a better understanding of what their view amounts to by considering two sorts of causality God might be thought to exercise in the universe. It is easy enough to see how God could perform an action from his eternal vantage point without changing anything. God is himself changeless. So anything he does which does not involve any beings other than himself can be accomplished without making any change. Suppose, for example, that God is the only being existing in the universe, and that the entire natural world is nothing but a projection of the eternal God himself. Then anything about this world can be otherwise without change in virtue of God's ability to do otherwise without changing. But the same analysis does not apply if God creates a being ontologically

¹⁰Ibid., 860.
distinct from himself. For to generate a human, for example, is to change an identifiable individual from non-being into being. So even if God destroys this being, it will always be true to say that it used to exist. Once a change has been made vis a vis existence, succession has occurred, and there is no going back, even for God.

Bradwardine grants that this view is superior to process theology since it does not require that God change, but only that some change take place in the universe when creative causality is exercised. Nevertheless, he maintains that his own view should be preferred because those who adopt its rival will find themselves committed to a certain "grave error" when it comes time to solve the problem of unfulfilled prophecy – whereas he himself has settled this issue in a manner perfectly consistent with the catholic faith. ¹¹

So far we have seen that solution number one requires that God have, not only knowledge of, but also power over every instant of time. Can the view which denies that God can undo the past provide an alternative without slipping into greater difficulties? To find out we must turn to Bradwardine’s younger contemporary, John of Mirecourt, who provides a vigorous exposition of solution number two.

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¹¹Ibid., 864.
2.3 The Thesis that God Can Lie

John of Mirecourt was a graduate student in theology at the University of Paris when Bradwardine's *De Causa Dei* was born. Although he is presumed to have come originally from Mirecuria Vosges in northeastern France, his Sentences Commentary is so full of Oxford philosophy previously unknown on the continent that it seems likely that he either studied in England or had intimate contacts there. Unfortunately, Mirecourt's skill and enthusiasm for introducing these new ideas to the University of Paris brought him nothing but trouble. In the spring of 1345 a commission was assembled to investigate sixty-three suspect propositions extracted from his lectures. Two years later, when the investigation was complete, forty-one propositions were condemned. Mirecourt wrote explanations of his errors which were circulated with his Sentences Commentary as an example, no doubt, for other graduate students of what not to do. Although this attempt to suppress the British invasion mostly backfired, Mirecourt disappeared from Paris after the trial, and there is no

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record of his death.\textsuperscript{13}

Just what was it about the new English philosophy which so threatened the Parisian status quo? For one thing, it led Mirecourt to assert the grave error Bradwardine warns about. The first 'suspect' list drawn up by the commission contains the following thesis:

15. Sometimes to say a falsehood is to lie and to do evil and to sin and thus God is not able to say a falsehood. But not every saying of a falsehood is to do evil and to lie, and on that account God is able to do this.

Evidently the commission was satisfied with Mirecourt's explanation of this proposition since it was dropped from the final 'condemned' list which nevertheless contains two propositions about deception on the part of Jesus:

2. That Christ was able to say a falsehood and even to assert it by a created assertion, vocal or mental.

12. That it is possible for Christ to have erred by a

\textsuperscript{13}We have no reason to believe that Mirecourt was hurt, imprisoned, or killed. The result of such academic condemnations during this period was usually no worse than a ruined career. This was no small punishment for a medieval intellectual, however, considering that, according to Richard and Mary Rouse, it was hard enough for university affiliates to gain access to good books. See their article "The Franciscans and Books: Lollard Accusations and the Franciscan Response," \textit{From Ockham to Wyclif}, ed. Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987). Nor was Mirecourt the only victim of such treatment at the University of Paris during this period. A master list of condemned propositions called the 'New Parisian Articles' was completed by 1364. According to William Courtenay it contains propositions extracted from at least seven different students. See his "Inquiry and Inquisition: Academic Freedom in Medieval Universities," \textit{Church History} 58 (1989), 168-81.
created volition and perhaps to have promulgated a lie with respect to human beings.\textsuperscript{14}

Why would Mirecourt say such things?

The story begins once again with Scotus who, despite being the main inspiration for Bradwardine’s expanded version of eternalism, argues that there is no timeless point of view. "If something future is actual in relation to God," he writes, "then it is actual in and of itself."\textsuperscript{15} Clearly the future is not actual in and of itself. But if this is the case, then it seems that God can have no direct awareness of it. So how does he know what will happen? Scotus answers that God knows the contingent future because he himself is going to bring it about in accordance with his own unfrustratable plan.\textsuperscript{16} This starkly deterministic formula was immediately criticized for destroying human freedom.

Scotus’s fellow Franciscan Peter Aureole pinpoints the problem:

\begin{quote}
For an efficacious will is always implemented and is the cause of that which happens. But the divine will is not
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14}Translated from F. Stegmüller, "Johannes de Mirecuria Apologia Prima" and "Johannes de Mirecuria Apologia Altera," Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiéval 5 (1933), 53, 193, 196.

\textsuperscript{15}John Duns Scotus, op. cit., vol. vi, p. 410. This view seems to me a clear implication of that other famous Scotistic principle, the univocity of being. Nevertheless, some say that he abandoned it in favor of expanded eternalism later in his career.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 428.
the cause of acts proceeding from [human] free will, especially sin. Therefore, it cannot be supposed that divine disposing provides a way of knowing future contingents.  

Aureole himself resorts to a denial of bivalence in order to save the Antichrist’s choice. Although he claimed to be able to preserve the prophetic tradition without allowing that there be true propositions about future-contingent states of affairs, his effort proved unconvincing to the majority of his readers. Thus, by the 1310s all the traditional solutions to the problem were under fire without recourse to any alternative.

But this changed with the advent of William of Ockham. Adopting Scotus’s temporalism and the commitment to free choice found in Aureole’s critique, he elaborated a solution which preserves bivalence. It involves a simple modal distinction. Given that the Antichrist will in fact come, the proposition, ‘The Antichrist will come,’ is contingently true at all times prior to this event; then, at the time of


18Gregory of Rimini, for example, accused him of heresy on the grounds that Christians are required to believe that everything in the Bible is true and the Bible contains future-contingent propositions. See his Lectura super Primum et Secundum Sententiarum, ed. D. Trapp (Berlin: V. Marcolino, 1979-1984), 251-2.
the event, the proposition, 'The Antichrist came,' becomes necessarily true forever afterwards. The difficulty about a proposition like, 'It was revealed hundreds of years ago that the Antichrist will come,' is that it has two modal components, i.e., the past revelation is necessary, but the future Antichrist is contingent. Ockham asserts that if God caused a prophet to believe that the Antichrist is going to come at some time in the past then we can infer that the proposition, 'God caused a prophet to believe that the Antichrist is going to come,' is now necessarily true. We cannot, however, infer that the embedded proposition, 'The Antichrist will come,' is true at all. So if the Antichrist doesn't come, then we are faced with an

19In recent literature this thesis has been construed in terms of a distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' facts. For a review of the discussion this construal provoked, see Nelson Pike, "A Later-day Look at the Foreknowledge Problem," Philosophy of Religion 33 (1993): 129-64.

20Quodlibetal Questions, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso and Francis E. Kelly (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 260-3. In his Tractatus de praedestinatione, where he originally elaborated his modal distinction, Ockham speculates that all prophecies are hidden conditionals [trans. Marilyn McCord Adams and Norman Kretzmann (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 44]. But he subsequently came to the conclusion that this analysis is inadequate. In the Quodlibetal cited here, Ockham grants that if the revelation consists in a direct vision of the future (which God is capable of producing) then the vision must be veridical. But in the case of indirect revelations, which any of the revelations in the Bible may have been, there is no guaranteeing their truth.
unfulfilled prophecy despite the fact that God, by hypothesis, must have known all along exactly what was going to happen.\textsuperscript{21} Worse yet, in the fourteenth century it was widely held that the coming of the Antichrist was not revealed by just any prophet but by Jesus himself when he predicted a time of great tribulation.\textsuperscript{22} Ockham never quite got around to drawing the conclusion, leaving it to his followers to admit that the non-coming of the Antichrist would mean that God or, if not he then Jesus, had lied.\textsuperscript{23}

Which brings us back to Mirecourt's predicament. There

\textsuperscript{21}One might wonder how God could know that the Antichrist will come given not just that the Antichrist can not come but also that he actually might not come. Ockham claims that God has contingent knowledge and admits that the mechanics of divine epistemology is a mystery to him. But we can define contingent knowledge easily enough as 'contingently-true belief.' This may sound like 'uncertain belief,' but this is only because contingency implies uncertainty for beings who acquire beliefs through the sensation of empirical evidence. Considering that God is not embodied, his knowledge of the present is fairly mysterious already. Ockham thought that since contingent knowledge of the future is not logically impossible it is equally attributable to God.

\textsuperscript{22}Matthew 24.

\textsuperscript{23}By the time this all came to light Ockham was already in trouble with the Pope for his view of transubstantiation, among other things. He was called away from Oxford in 1323 to answer to charges of heresy, whereupon he became fully immersed in politics. It was the English secular Richard Fitzralph who transmitted the thesis of divine deception to the continent through Gregory of Rimini, Mirecourt's fellow graduate student. Rimini struggles to avoid this "horrendous" implication (op. cit., 389-409), and Fitzralph abandoned it later in his career, but by then many others held it.
is something slightly odd about trying to save the prophetic tradition by contending that any revelation may have been an instance of divine deception. Given that the expanded eternalist view was already in wide circulation, and that the assertion that God has power over all of time is really not much more decadent than the assertion that he has knowledge of all of time, why would anyone in his right mind be so set against it that he was willing to risk, and indeed incur, an official condemnation in order to assert the opposite? As it turns out, the claim that God can lie is just the tip of a much deeper commitment on the part of Mirecourt to the sophisticated empirical approach we have already glimpsed through Bradwardine. In his defense of this view, Mirecourt shows why, although it cannot be proven that God does not have power over all of time, this hypothesis comes with an implication much more grave than the thesis of divine deception.

To discover what it is we need only examine the section of Mirecourt's Sentences Commentary which received so much attention from the University Heresy Squad. After distinguishing two senses of 'to make,' the first sense being the making of performing an action and the second sense being the making of producing some thing, he goes on to argue for five conclusions:

(1) It is not evident that God can will the world never
to have been.
(2) Nor is it evidently possible for the world not to have been.
(3) Furthermore, it is evident that God cannot make the world not to have been, conceiving 'to make' in the second sense.
(4) However, it is not evidently impossible for something past never to have been.
(5) And it is not evidently impossible for God to make the world never to have been, conceiving 'to make' in the first sense.24

These are not implausible conclusions. The products of creative causality can only be 'undone' through destruction and the act of destroying logically implies the prior existence of the thing destroyed; hence, it will always be true to say that the thing destroyed once existed. But if God causes something without creating any product outside of himself (i.e., he performs an action), then the act of undoing it cannot be described as the destruction of some thing. Hence it does not imply the prior existence of something of which it will always be true to say that it once

24See John of Mirecourt, Commentary on the sentences bk. I, q. 39. I am grateful to Massimo Parodi and Eugenio Randi for making available their unpublished transcription of Torino D, IV, 28 and Krakow Biblioteka Jagiellonska 1184 for my study. These conclusions are also, however, published in William Courtenay's study, "John of Mirecourt and Gregory of Rimini on Whether God Can Undo the Past," Covenant and Causality in Medieval Thought: Studies in Philosophy, Theology, and Economic Practice (London: Variorum Reprints), 1984 VIIIa, 248-53. For conclusion four, Courtenay translates "some past thing" and transcribes praeteritum aliquod rather than aliquod praeteritum (which is what Parodi and Randi have). On his interpretation Mirecourt is here arguing against his own position.
existed. It follows that he can make it never to have been. The Bradwardinian position is perfectly tenable – if you are willing to go so far as to admit that the world is something caused rather than a thing (or rather things) created.

Mirecourt proceeds to diffuse objections against those who are willing to go that far. It might be said that

if God is able to bring it about that the world was not it follows that God is able to bring it about that the world was not and that nothing exists without any change. By parity of reasoning, therefore, he is able to bring it about that my father does not exist and that I am in Rome without any change. It would even follow that he would be able to bring it about that I do not exist without destroying my being, and many other such things. The inference is evident because if he were to bring it about that the world was not, there would not be an end-from-which for the change nor an end-toward-which.\textsuperscript{25}

Mirecourt's response? These implications are not logically impossible, so those who hold the expanded eternalist view are welcome to accept them without apologies.

Needless to say, this is hardly charity from Bradwardine's perspective. He wants to maintain both that the past history of the world did not involve any change at the ontological level and that human beings are sturdy pieces of ontological furniture. The two ideas are not, however, consistent. Either creatures are things of which it will always be true to say that they once existed and did the

\textsuperscript{25}Because this was one of the 'suspect propositions' the Latin text is published in Stegmüller, op. cit., 49.
things that they did, or they are not metaphysical individuals at all.

Recall that all of God’s makings are successionless according to Bradwardine’s view. This is what enables him to avoid process theology, but what also forces him to admit in the end that the succession we experience is unreal. The problem with process theology, as he never tires of pointing out, is that it presupposes that anything real is in time, and that anything in time undergoes change, with the result that anything real, including God, undergoes change. Mirecourt, in contrast, thinks that “time is nothing other than permanent things,” where ‘the future’ is what they can become and ‘the past’ is what they have been. Granted, it was possible for God to have performed the world. But if he had, then he would have remained alone in the cosmos because, unchanged ex nihilo, human beings would not be beings at all. The expanded eternalist view implies that the empirical world around us must be explained exclusively in terms of the divine will. Thus, if it is correct, all of the choices we seem to make are really made by God and pure theological determinism is true.

John of Mirecourt believed passionately in the reality

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26A classic Ockhamist premise also implicated on the suspect list (ibid., 50, 67).
of free choice, and this is the reason for his stubborn resistance to the claim that God can undo the past. He and his fellow Ockhamists did not see their rival claim, that God can lie, as a challenge to the prophetic tradition at all. Mirecourt himself asserts repeatedly that he has faith that God never did lie, and hence that he firmly believes that the Antichrist will in fact come.\footnote{27Stegmüller, op. cit., 53, 193, 196.} But the Biblical proposition in question is only contingently true. To assert with Bradwardine that it will necessarily be fulfilled, that God’s knowledge of the fulfilment is intrinsically necessary, and that the past is just as contingent upon the divine will as the future\footnote{28Op. cit., 875-6.} would be to concede that the freedom of the Antichrist, and therefore of any of us, is an illusion.

If refuting expanded eternalism is Mirecourt’s objective, however, the question arises whether it is necessary to go so far as the thesis of divine deception. On the supposition that the Antichrist decides not to come, the proposition, ‘The Antichrist will come,’ was false all along. But how do we know that this is really what the prophets were trying to assert? Given that revelations are so often expressed in metaphorical language, and that they are often revealed by God in terms of images, it is hard to know what
they really mean. Considerations along these lines led another group of fourteenth-century philosophers to develop a third solution to the problem of unfulfilled prophecy.

2.4 The Thesis of the Contingency of Meaning

Peter Aureole was the first in line to criticize Scotus's determinism, as we saw above. Although his own denial of bivalence created more problems than it solved in the eyes of his successors, his argument for this view yielded an interesting by-product which took up an illustrious life of its own. If God has instantaneous knowledge of all of time, then it seems that his mind should contain only tenseless truths (i.e., 'The Antichrist comes at \( T^{2000} \)). Yet the future-contingent propositions uttered by prophets are supposed to express what is in the divine mind. Therefore, they must signify in two distinct ways.

In one way, prophetic propositions signify by convention and by the nature of the proposition, but in another way, they express the intention of the prophet. For according to their own nature and the signification they exhibit, they are neither true nor false. However, according to the intention of the prophet, they are true. For they express what is in the divine cognition, namely, a certain ineffable truth and a certain determination of the matter about which the propositions are formed. . . . Therefore, Moses spoke about that which "happens in many ways" because what is predicted
by God happens in many ways.29

Aureole makes a sharp distinction between the revelation itself and the prophecy about the revelation. Prior to the coming of the Antichrist, the former is eternally true, but for all practical purposes unintelligible, while the latter is perfectly intelligible but neither true nor false. After the Antichrist comes we will not be able to say that the intelligible thing was true all along, but we will be able to say that the true thing was about the coming of Antichrist all along (even though our temporal minds couldn’t have conceived it until now). In so far as the prophet meant to express the revelation, therefore, his meaning was contingent upon the future.

During the 1340’s, the idea that prophecies should be thought of as contingent representations of the future became a major contender in the debate. Gregory of Rimini seems to find it more attractive than the alternatives.30 But it was


30During his discussion of the prophecy problem, Rimini links the contingency of meaning solution, not to Aureole whom he thought was a heretic, but to Gerardus Novariensis in the margin of the following passage. After considering the solution that God can change the past and before rejecting the solution that God can lie, he says that another option is to say

just as some ancient doctors said, that it is possible for those words not to have been significative or not to have signified what ‘A will be’ signifies. Likewise it is possible for the assent not to have been an assent or
Thomas of Buckingham who took it to heart and organized a whole treatise in defense of it. He agrees with Aureole’s assertion that the future is inherently indeterminate. He even flirts with the thought that this implies that future-contingent propositions are neither true nor false. But

a judgement about ‘A will be.’ This is what we say about a judgement whereby I judge Peter to be sitting while he sits. If this were conserved in me by God after Peter got up it would not be a judgement whereby I would judge Peter to sit (translated from Gregorii Ariminensis, op. cit., 408).

Reviewing Rimini’s work a generation latter, Peter d’Ailly also discusses the contingency of meaning thesis. A century later when the debate was replayed at Louvain it was defended with a vengeance by Peter de Rivo against Ockhamist Henricus de Zoemeren.

What he actually says is that they are not knowable. He quotes the same Aristotelian text Aureole uses to support his denial of bivalence (“In those things which are of the future the truth is not determined” On Interp., ad. fin.) but he uses it to deny the possibility of contingent knowledge, not contingent truth. See his De contingentia futurorum, edited by Gene-François Genest in Prédétermination et liberté créé à Oxford au XIVe Siécle (Paris: J. Vrin, 1992), 281. One might raise the question, if future-contingent propositions are true then why wouldn’t they be (at least in principle) knowable, especially by someone like God who is supposed to know all true propositions? But Buckingham might answer, “because they are contingently true, and the idea of ‘contingent knowledge’ is as much of a contradiction as ‘uncertain certainty,’ especially in God’s immutable mind.” William Courtenay asserts that Buckingham was committed to the denial of bivalence. But the passage he adduces in support of this assertion is entirely consistent with the Ockhamist claim that future-tense propositions are contingently true: “Voluntas divina respectu futurorum contingentium quandiu sunt futura, est libera libertate contradictionis; sed cum fuerint praesentia in praeteritumve labuntur desinit esse libera huiusmodi libertate et incipit esse necessaria necessitate opposita respectu eorum, sine
his main goal is to show that the contingency of meaning thesis can be elaborated entirely independently of this controversial claim.

Spoken words are signs of what is in the soul and a man expresses a concept in his mind through words. So if the concept in his mind signifies something external, not necessarily or essentially but contingently, then after the utterance it is contingent whether it ends up signifying those things or something else through those words. So suppose I now have it in my mind through a proper and created notion that the Antichrist will come and, expressing my mind, I say, 'The Antichrist will come.' Suppose further that after the utterance, the notion in my mind never was signifying that the Antichrist will come but that Peter will come. Then it would be the case that through those words and utterances spoken outwardly I meant to express not that the Antichrist will come but that Peter will come.\textsuperscript{32}

A prophet can speak the truth through a false proposition.

One might wonder whether there is any point to such a prophecy considering that it yields absolutely no predictive power.\textsuperscript{33} I think the point can be clearly understood, however, by analogy with aleatoric art, a form of expression whose outcome depends on chance (\textit{alea} = dice in Latin). The

mutatione in Deo posita vel ponenda," \textit{Covenant and Causality} VIIIb, 151. Ockham, of course, would say that Buckingham's mistake was to conflate a modal concept (contingency) with an epistemic concept (uncertainty).

\textsuperscript{32}Translated from \textit{De cont. fut.}, 284.

\textsuperscript{33}As does Genest at the end of his introduction to Buckingham's text: "De sorte que le contenu de la révélation apparaît en définitive incommunicable aux tiers . . . Dans ces conditions, on se demande quelle peut être la fonction de la révélation" (\textit{Prédétermination et liberté}, 115-6).
aleatoric composer of music, for example, leaves blank spaces in her score to be filled in by instruments in accordance with the roll of the dice, or other more truly randomizing devices. The same can be done for paintings, dance, and poetry, the aim in each case being to produce something completely unpredictable. A prophecy of the contingent future could be considered an alietoric artifact (alietas is the word Buckingham uses for the 'otherwiseness' which is in the present and the future but not the past\(^\text{34}\)). Suppose that I have received an eternal vision about what will happen tomorrow. It might inspire me to utter something, the meaning of which I could nevertheless stipulate (by artist’s prerogative) to depend upon whatever happens, just as an aleatoric symphony named Tomorrow’s Roll is literally unfinished until then.

It is important to understand that, on both Aureole’s and Buckingham’s view, the prophet’s intention is not an approximation to the Word; it is the Word itself. And we cannot suppose that he meant anything other than what was on his mind when he said \(x\). So if not-\(x\) happens, then we must conclude that there were blank spaces in the original utterance into which a ‘not’ must now be retroactively inserted. Of course, Buckingham is open to the complaint

\[^{34}\text{De cont. fut.}, 268.\]
that he has given the prophet permission to claim the attainment of God-consciousness. He acknowledges, however, that his view employs neoplatonic elements of mysticism, and insists that it is not without precedent in the Christian tradition.\textsuperscript{35} I myself would have to agree that the thesis of the contingency of meaning has a lot going for it in so far as it seems to confirm the traditional portrayal of prophets as visionaries.\textsuperscript{36}

When Buckingham set forth this view, however, he was extremely cautious because he knew that it could easily be reduced either to the thesis of divine deception or to the

\textsuperscript{35}He refers specifically to Themistius (\textit{ibid.}, 289).

\textsuperscript{36}Mary Mothershill argues that a mystical vision may have great personal value even if it is ineffable, and that ineffability is not unique to mysticism:

I have, let us say, an experience that I take to be revelatory — my desire to understand everything has been for a moment gratified. But although some important secret has been disclosed, I am unable to say what the secret \textit{is}. Alternatively, what I can say sounds, even to me, somewhat fatuous. ("How marvelous that the world should be exactly as it is!") In a way, we are on familiar territory: to see the world \textit{sub specie aeternitatis} is to see it as beautiful. Why should it surprise me that I am inarticulate when a simple melody or a field of daisies can reduce me to the same state? One can recognize and appreciate what, because of lack of talent, training, and practice, one is unable to show. I am stymied — but Vermeer wasn’t, or Bach, or Emily Dickenson ["Some Notes on ‘What Can’t Be Said,’” \textit{How Many Questions?: Essays in Honor of Sidney Morgenbesser}, ed. Leigh S. Cauman, et al. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 222].
thesis that God can change the past. As to the former, the people who listened to Jesus's prophecy in the hypothetical case in which it was false went away believing a falsehood. How could Jesus let this happen? It seems that he must have been either grossly mistaken or some kind of deceiver.\textsuperscript{37} As to the latter, a revelation may cause a concrete reaction. For example, it is said that when Jesus prophesied his own death, his sweat became like drops of blood running down into the earth.\textsuperscript{38} Yet if he had been set free instead of put to death, then this is what he would have had in mind to foretell. So how can we explain his reaction? It looks as though it should never have happened.\textsuperscript{39} Buckingham grants that these are awkward cases but insists that they are not enough to refute his solution.

Nor is he alone in this conviction. Edward Wierenga has recently introduced this fourteenth-century approach into the twentieth-century literature.\textsuperscript{40} According to him, when Jesus uttered the words, 'Peter, you will deny me three times

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37}De cont. fut., 285.
\item \textsuperscript{38}Luke 22.
\item \textsuperscript{39}De cont. fut., 288.
\item \textsuperscript{40}"Prophecy, Freedom, and the Necessity of the Past," Philosophical Perspectives, 5, ed. James E. Tomberlin (Atascadero: Ridgeview, 1991) 439. (Wierenga is not, however, aware of the eminent tradition he is carrying on. He locates himself — mistakenly, in my view — within the Ockhamist camp.)
\end{itemize}
before dawn,' they became fixed in the past; meanwhile, the intentions which motivated the words did not.

What Christ intends to assert is closely tied to what he thinks is the case. And if what he thinks to be the case is not fixed and inevitable, then what he intends to assert is not either.\(^4\)

Wierenga makes it clear that he is committed to bivalence by asserting that if Peter decides not to deny, then the proposition Jesus uttered was false all along.\(^4\) At the same time, he maintains that Jesus never meant to say anything

\(^4\)Matthew 26; Mark 14; Luke 22; and John 18.

\(^4\)Ibid., 439.

\(^4\)His solution therefore most closely resembles that of Adam Wodeham. Unlike Buckingham, Wodeham insists that Aristotle never denied bivalence and emphasizes that God can communicate information about the future to prophets naturally. To hear a prophecy in eternal-speak is like listening to a friend babble at you in a foreign language: "I believe that what he is saying is true but I do not believe what he is saying because I do not conceive it. . . . It is simply impossible for Christ qua God to foretell something which will not happen. However, things do not always happen in the sense in which we understand the words expressed" Super Quattuor Libros Sententiarum Parrhisijis [microform], edited by John Major ([S.I.]: Venudatur Poceto Le Preux, 1512), fo. cxxii-iii. Wodeham agrees with Buckingham, however, that there is no way to avoid the conclusion that Jesus might have taught falsehoods "indirectly." And he agrees with Fitzralph that, given that God is able to certify that a particular utterance about the future is true, it is possible absolutely speaking for God to lie. But this is impossible with respect to God's ordained power, according to Wodeham, which is what ensures us that all of the prophecies in the Bible are true on the meaning they suggest. Evidently, God's ordination is the promise that guarantees all promises, but what guarantee do we have for it?
false. On the contrary, the whole solution is to insist that what he intended to say is what God intended to reveal, which is what Peter intended to do before dawn. Without this triple identity of intention we could not truly say that the prophecy represents what is going to happen.

But when the solution is put this way, the flaw in it becomes apparent. Wierenga asks us to accept that there exists a fact, that Peter denies Jesus at T3, which is related to three different minds in three different ways: it is what Peter intends to do, it is what God intends to reveal and it is what the prophet intends to foretell." The result in the case of a true prophecy is that what Peter intends to do exists in the mind of the prophet prior to any thought on the part of Peter about denial. Likewise, the Antichrist's intention to come exists prior to his very existence. Under these circumstances the hypothesis of Peter or the Antichrist intending otherwise requires the undoing of the past. If, on the other hand, no fact about Peter or the Antichrist exists in the mind of the prophet, then the prophecies really are meaningless mumble because there is no revelation there for them to represent.

"According to the complexe significable-theory of Adam Wodeham, the composition of terms in a fact is reducible neither to the things signified by each singular term nor to spoken or written sentence. See Dominik Perler, "Late Medieval Ontologies of Facts," The Monist 77:2 (1994), 150."
Those who concede the first horn of this dilemma capitulate into the Bradwardinian position: there is perfect modal symmetry between the past, the present, and the future. Meanwhile, those who concede the second horn give up the prophetic tradition — which is no small sacrifice. Take, for example, another divinely uttered future-contingent proposition, namely, Jesus's promise to his disciples, 'I will be with you always, to the end of the age.' The contingency of meaning thesis has it that the meaning of this proposition will be determined by whatever happens. Given that Jesus does not as yet intend anything by his words, he may as well have said, "Qué será será." Thus, solution number three is not the easy winner that it may at first glance have appeared to be.

2.5 Conclusion

We have seen that the problem of unfulfilled prophecy created a Bermuda Triangle of options for fourteenth-century philosophers. The most obvious way of maintaining that it is possible for the Antichrist not to come is to say that under these circumstances it never would have been true that he was going to come, and hence it never would have been prophesied.

45Matthew 28:20.
Because we think so comfortably in terms of ‘alternate possible worlds’ these days, it is easy to be lulled into complacency by this analysis. The medievals we have surveyed, on the other hand, were keenly aware that the following three claims form an inconsistent set:

1. It was revealed that the Antichrist will come.
2. The revelation is true.
3. The Antichrist will decide not to come.

When pushed, counterfactual backtrackers will resolve the tension by insisting that claim (3) is false. And they will be right. But they cannot save the freedom of the Antichrist without granting that he might decide not to come. This modal qualification is all we need to justify the question, ‘What if the Antichrist doesn’t come?’ Bradwardine bit the bullet and admitted that the backtracking counterfactual shows that the existence of the revelation, and by extension the entire past, is not a given at all.

A much easier way of denying (1) in the case that (3) is true is to separate the revelation itself from the prophecy about the revelation. According to the contingency of meaning theorists, human beings cannot know for certain what will happen on the basis of a divinely inspired prediction about a free agent. They are only entitled to dread and enjoy the idea of the Antichrist as a poetic vision of the end times. After it is all over, we will be able to see in
what sense it was true. Aesthetic appreciation aside, this solution does little to ameliorate the conflict. If we can retroactively interpret the prophecy then the revelation itself serves as an antecedent condition given which the supposition that the Antichrist doesn’t come is out of the question. The only way out of this bind is to admit either that it is possible for the past to be undone or that there are no divine revelations at the foundation of the prophetic tradition.

Ockhamists like John of Mirecourt find both options entirely unacceptable. If the past is not a given then human beings were not created but caused, and everything we do is nothing more than a projection of the divine will. If, on the other hand, we were created, then, although God has the power to destroy us at any moment, he does not have the power to undo us or the things that we have done. In exercising free choice, a human being brings it about that it will always be true to say that something other than God has existed in its own particular way. The importance of this ontological point made it well worth the risk of casting doubt on claim (2). To some, the thesis of divine deception sounded, and still sounds, like heresy. But I myself would

46 Alfred Freddoso, for example, abandoned Ockhamism in favor of Molinism due to the thesis of divine deception. See the introduction to his translation of Luis de Molina's *On Divine Foreknowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,
have to side with the Ockhamists. They are willing to accept the idea that God can lie if it means that he can make promises as well. *I will be with you always, to the end of the age.* The fact that Jesus said this is undoable on their view and it means exactly what it seems to mean. As to its truth, that is a matter for faith alone.

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CHAPTER III
THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

3.1 Introduction

William of Ockham is best known for his work in logic and speculative philosophy. Yet virtually all of this was accomplished while he was still a student at the University of Oxford. It is not commonly realized that Ockham was summoned to the papal court to answer to charges of heresy before he could even complete his degree.\(^1\) After remaining under house arrest in Avignon for nearly four years, during which time his accusers struggled in vain to make a case against him, he escaped to Germany where he spent the rest of his life as a political activist (d. 1347).\(^2\)

\(^1\)According to Francis Kelly, John Lutterell, the rector at the University of Oxford who was responsible for reporting Ockham to the pope, was trying to improve his own reputation by ruining someone else’s. See his article, “Ockham: Avignon, Before and After,” From Ockham to Wyclif, ed. Ann Hudson and Michael Wilks (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 1-18.

\(^2\)Ockham was originally investigated for his view of divine causality in transubstantiation. See David Burr,
The aspect of Ockham's political thought which is most revealing of its spirit as a whole is his view of heresy. He devoted an entire treatise to the subject, which constitutes Part One of his opus magnum, A Dialogue Concerning the Powers of the Pope and the Emperor. What is particularly

"Ockham, Scotus, and the Censure at Avignon," Church History, 37 (1968), 144-59. According to C. K. Brampton ["Personalities at the Process against Ockham at Avignon, 1324-26," Franciscan Studies, 26 (1966), 4-25], Pope John XXII prolonged the investigation and never pronounced a sentence because the commission was not able to find sufficient evidence of heresy in his teachings. When Ockham finally defied the order to remain in Avignon, the pope had what he wanted: cause for excommunication.

"I wish the work to be divided into three parts. The first is to be called On Heretics, the second, On the dogmas of John XXII, and the third, On the Deeds of Those Who Quarrel about the Orthodox Faith" [translated from Guilielmus ab Occam, Dialogus de potestate papae et imperatoris (Torino: Bottega d'Erasmo, 1959) pro., p. 396, ll. 19-20]. Pending the critical edition currently being undertaken by John Kilcullen and John Scott under the auspices of the Medieval Texts Editorial Committee of the British Academy, I have relied primarily on this reprint of Melchior Goldast's 1614 edition. (My page numbers refer to Bottega d'Erasmo's bottom center pagination since Goldast's pagination on the upper corners is inconsistent.) But I have also checked all quoted passages against the edition entitled Dialogus de imperio et pontificia potestate (Lyon: 1494-6), yielding no significant differences. It should be noted that the work as a whole is called a Dialogue because it is staged as an extended conversation between a teacher and a student. In spite of this convention, it is rarely difficult to discern Ockham's own view (often introduced by the teacher with the words, "They say . . ."), as is attested by A. S. McGrade in The Political Thought of William of Ockham: Personal and Institutional Principles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 18, and by John Kilcullen in "Ockham and Infallibility," Journal of Religious History, 16 (1991), 387-409 at p. 390.
interesting about this text is that it circulated widely, despite the fact that it was officially banned, and was epitomized by two philosophers of importance in their own right. The first epitome, about thirty pages in length, was written by Pierre d’Ailly sometime during the last decades of the fourteenth century. We cannot be sure what occasioned d’Ailly’s work on Part One of the Dialogue, but considering that he was one of the nominalists proscribed in the Royal Edict of 1474, it is not surprising to find that he was interested in the subject of heresy. The other epitome, more than two-hundred and fifty pages in length, was made by

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Henricus de Zoemeren almost a century later.⁶ It was occasioned by an impending heresy trial at Louvain which was specifically directed against his Ockhamist solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge and future contingents.⁷ Evidently, the Dialogue was more than an academic exercise for its two epitomists.⁸

There may, however, have been a significant difference in interpretation between them. De Zoemeren used Ockham's theory in self-defense against the fraudulent charges of Louvain's champion Aureolist, Peter de Rivo. D'Ailly, in

⁶Henricus de Zoemeren (a. k. a. Heinrich von Echerbroech), Epitoma primae partis Dialogi de haereticis a Guilielmo de Ockam. This work was commissioned by Cardinal Bessarion, completed in 1465, and published in Louvain by John of Westphalia (a. k. a. Johann de Paderborn) in 1481. It now resides at the British Library and is available in microform from the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago (MF-7711, reel 235, item 6).

⁷According to the "Defense of Nominalism," "he was accused before the faculty of theology of having called Christ a liar" (Thorndike, op. cit., p. 359). It was shown in the last chapter how the thesis of divine deception relates to the problem of foreknowledge and future contingents. Details of the de Rivo-de Zoemeren conflict are reported by Leon Baudry in The Quarrel over Future Contingents (Louvain 1465), trans. Rita Guerlac (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989).

contrast, ended up working for the prosecution. Having served on the examining board which found Jan Hus guilty of heresy on 7 June 1415, he is reported to have said:

We cannot judge in accordance with your conscience, but only in accordance with what has been proved and deduced against you and what you have confessed.9

Of course, any Ockhamist would have opposed Hus' theology. It is clearly traceable through John Wycliff to Thomas Bradwardine, who had vigorously opposed the Ockhamists at Oxford fifty years earlier. But if d'Ailly's condemnation can be considered an interpretation of Ockham's Dialogue at all, then I for one would argue that he got it all wrong. In what follows, I will endeavor to explain how Ockham's theory of heresy works and why I think it is still relevant to the perennial problem of free speech.

3.2 Ockham's Theory of Heresy

Ockham's theory of heresy can be characterized at a glance by comparison to that of Thomas Aquinas, who devotes just a few articles of the Summa Theologicae to the subject. His discussion culminates in what he takes to be a lenient policy

toward heretics.

But on the side of the Church is mercy which seeks the conversion of the wanderer, and she condemns not at once, but after the first and second admonition, as the Apostle directs. Afterwards, however, if he is yet stubborn, the Church no longer confident about his conversion, takes care of the salvation of others by separating him from the Church by excommunication, and furthermore delivers him to the secular court to be removed from this world by death.\(^1\)

A little more than fifty years and a lot more than fifty condemnations later, Ockham takes a direct stance against this influential 'three strikes and you’re out' approach, by putting the following words into the mouths of the characters in his *Dialogue*:

**STUDENT:**
What if someone were to defend heresy which she said she thought was consonant with the orthodox faith in front of the pope?

**TEACHER:**
They say that if she were to defend heresy a thousand times unknowingly with the express or implicit protestation that she is prepared to be corrected as soon as she recognizes her opinions to contradict the catholic faith, then she should not be judged a heretic, even in front of the pope.\(^1\)

What was once a simple question of authority has become a complicated question of conscience.

It is difficult at first to see how there could be such a thing as heresy on Ockham’s view. On the one hand, he tells us that heretics are those who knowingly contradict the

\(^{10}\)IIa IIae, q. 11, art. 3, trans. Thomas Gilby O. P. (Cambridge: Blackfriars, 1975) vol. xxxii, p. 89.

\(^{11}\)I Dial. bk. 4, chap. xx, p. 457, l. 49-52.
catholic faith; on the other hand, he tells us that the
catholic faith consists in truths which are self-evidently
revealed by God, and that the faithful are not required to
assent to them on human authority.

STUDENT:
What if the pope and/or a general council says that some
truth was revealed to them and/or inspired by God? Are
the rest of the faithful required to believe?

TEACHER:
They say that they are not to believe without a manifest
miracle. For it does not suffice to make the naked
assertion that truth was revealed to them and/or
inspired in them. Rather, it is fitting that such a
revelation or inspiration be appropriately confirmed
through the working of a miracle.\(^{12}\)

Ockham's epistemic requirement is derived from his
interpretation of a New Testament passage in which Jesus
indicates that he would not have asked anyone to believe in
him had he not confirmed his entire doctrine with miracles.\(^{13}\)
If not even the son of God expected blind obedience, then how
can those who claim to be his followers? Such an
uncompromising evidentialism seems to leave no room for
heresy. Either the faith is manifestly true, in which case
proper exposure to it should be sufficient to cause assent,
or it is not manifestly true, in which case any 'wanderers'
should be excused due to ignorance.

\(^{12}\)Ibid., 2.xxv, p. 427, ll. 34-7.

\(^{13}\)Ockham cites John 15. See I Dial., 2.xxx, p. 431, ll.
23-34.
Ockham's libertarian\textsuperscript{14} account of human agency, however, reveals a third possibility. Free will, on his view, consists in an active power over opposites. Because it is not passive in any way, the will cannot be constrained by anything, including rationality. On the contrary, Ockham insists that

no matter how much reason dictates a given thing, the will is still able to will that thing, or not to will it, or to will against it.\textsuperscript{15}

So even if a miracle were sufficient to confirm the faith, it would not be sufficient to cause assent to the faith. The will might will against assent of its own accord. Human beings are notoriously good at turning their attention away from truths which they do not want to hear and even deceiving themselves into believing what they once knew to be false. The unfortunate byproduct of freedom is a capacity for perversity.

Ockham defines heretical perversity in terms of three identifiable types of pertinacious error. As the teacher explains,

\textsuperscript{14}By 'libertarian' I mean someone who asserts that the doctrine of determinism (for everything which happens there were antecedent conditions sufficient to guarantee that it would happen exactly as it does) is incompatible with human freedom.

The first is if, in spite of the miracles which are heard to have been done to confirm the faith, someone thinks that the faith is false or uncertain. The second is if someone believes in general that the whole faith is true, yet adheres so strongly to some particular error (which he does not know pertains explicitly to the faith), that no matter how clearly it were shown to him that this error does pertain to the faith, he would consider the faith false before he relinquished it in this way. . . . Thirdly, someone can be mentally pertinacious in error if he adheres to some error and neglects how and when he ought to seek the truth. For such a person is not prepared to be corrected but persists in an error which he should relinquish for the sake of salvation. 16

When members of the faith community lose their faith, they can be held responsible to the precise degree that they know (or could have known) better.

The problem with such a crime is that it is not publicly observable. Certain people might know better than to reject some truth of faith due to capacities and opportunities which are lacking in others. Surely one cannot be held responsible for failing to believe something because it is manifest to someone else. 17 Ockham must face the question, therefore, as

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16I Dial., 4.ii, p. 444, ll. 27-40.

17Of course one might take someone else's word for it, but not if one has reason to think that he or she may be wrong. "It is not because of this itself, that some saint asserted that something is to be believed, that it is to be approved by all of the faithful as consonant with the truth. . . for it is not necessary to think that something is true because of this, that some people who are able to err believe it. . . . but saints are able to err even against catholic truth while they are still saints" ibid., 2.iv, p. 412, ll. 44-56.
to whether there can ever be a legitimate condemnation. His answer is to distinguish two kinds of heresy.

One is mental, namely, when someone pertinaciously adheres in his heart to heretical wickedness or pertinaciously doubts catholic truth. The other is external pertinacity which consists in an exterior deed or word. We cannot convict anyone of the first kind of pertinacity other than through a probable or violent presumption. For in such matters what is on the outside does not necessarily correspond to what is within.\(^\text{18}\)

External pertinacitity, on the other hand, is a convictable crime according to Ockham because of its corrosive effect on the community. If someone insists upon acting like a heretic, then he can legitimately be judged a heretic, regardless of his actual mental state. The community protects its own future by imposing constraints upon such individuals.

But the crucial question remains: what counts as acting like a heretic? Ockham answers it by identifying two levels of external heresy in the Dialogue. The first concerns forms of expression which directly contradict the truths of faith. For anyone properly raised in the faith community, Ockham says, such things are easy to know. Therefore, any community member who pertinaciously denies one of these truths will, under normal circumstances, come across as incorrigible.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{18}\)Ibid., 4.ii, p. 444, ll. 20-5.

\(^{19}\)Ockham goes so far as to say that Christian people can be expected to stick to Christianity.
Nevertheless, Ockham is always quick to add that an individual is justifiably pertinacious, and therefore not an enemy of the faith, if she does not understand why she errs. Just as *being* willing to be corrected counteracts internal heresy, *showing* a willingness to be corrected counteracts external heresy. Ockham's goal no doubt is to make it possible for people like himself to disagree with the community without fear of persecution. Hence his invocation of second-order external heresy, which someone commits by persecuting those who disagree.²⁰ Forcibly silencing someone

Whoever is appropriately raised among Christians and holds the Christian faith to be false, or that Christ was not crucified, or was not incarnate, or any such thing concerning which no Christian should be ignorant, cannot be excused through ignorance. For he is explicitly held to believe that the Christian faith is true, and that Christ was crucified, and things of this kind which are easy to know and publicized amongst Christians [*ibid.*, 4.xviii, p. 456, ll. 20-4].

Even if one disagrees with the specifics of Ockham's medieval community standards, the analysis can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to the twentieth century. For example, it is easy to know that the Holocaust happened. Therefore, it is wrong, and deeply offensive, to deny it. (Lawyer Doug Christie argued *unsuccessfully* that James Keegstra and Ernest Zundell were men with theories just like anyone else.) It is just as hard for us to imagine exceptions to this intuition as it would be for Ockham to imagine exceptions to his catholic intuitions.

²⁰In a footnote to his discussion of Ockham's treatise, A. S. McGrade summarizes the specific kinds of heresy (found in *Dial. 4*) which I am calling second-order.

[A] person can be convicted of pertinacity if he tries to compel others to defend his error by commands,
who is trying to speak the truth is an extremely effective

threats, penalties, rewards, promises, oaths, or in any other way (c. 22); if he forces someone to abjure catholic truth (c. 23); if he pursues, molests, or impedes those defending catholic truth or attacking heretical depravity (c. 25); if, in favor of heretical depravity, he forbids the reading of catholic scriptures or the preaching or publishing of catholic truths (c. 28); if, as pope, he solemnly defines that an error to be held by all Christians (c. 29); if he consents to such a definition by counseling or cooperating in the process (c. 30); or if, as an inferior bishop, he defines or determines that an error should be held (c. 30); or, finally, if, having the power to do so, he does not resist heretical depravity (c. 31). In none of these cases is the errans allowed any extenuation [op. cit, pp. 63-4].

McGrade thinks Ockham’s notion of a legitimate correction makes it possible to proceed against “the powerful as well as the weak.” I agree that it puts investigation of first and second order heresy on equal footing. The same does not hold for conviction however. The passage generally relied upon to prove that Ockham supports conviction of first order heretics is as follows:

TEACHER:
It does not suffice for someone to deny that his opinion has been proved heretical. Rather, he is forced to withstand the judgement of the experts. If they deem it sufficiently proved that his opinion is heretical then he is required to revoke it or be judged heretical and pertinacious [I Dial. 4.xx, p. 457, ll. 57-60].

Ockham seems to me only to be repeating the point that someone who continues to deny that 2+2=4 will be considered incorrigible, and rightly so. That Ockham does not think that ‘the experts’ should hold the power of official condemnation is evident when the student objects that they may err. The teacher agrees that they may in fact condemn an innocent man. He unenthusiastically mentions the possibility of an appeal but concludes that the only thing to do when everyone is against you is to commit yourself to the grace of God. The entire passage sounds more like a description of the way things are than the way they ought to be.
way of showing that you are unwilling to be corrected. Moreover, unlike first-order heresy, second-order heresy cannot be excused due to ignorance. The reason is that coercive gestures are only justified under conditions of certainty. If the pope condemns the truth, it is no use for him to claim that he did not know any better, because then he had no business condemning in the first place. Thus, on Ockham’s view, the practice of speech regulation has far more potential for polluting the community with heresy than does the speech which it is intended to regulate.

It seems to me that Ockham’s analysis shows not only that official condemnation is a risk but also that it is an unnecessary risk. The church is charged with the responsibility of checking first-order external heresy so that perverse expressions do not corrupt the community. Given the danger of second-order heresy, however, it will be up to this very same community to keep a check on the church. Hence we are faced with a dilemma. Either community members are incapable of recognizing perversity when they see it, in which case they are helpless against second-order heresy, or they are capable of such judgements, in which case they do not need coercive protection against first-order heresy. Official condemnation may be necessary if community members are not expected to think for themselves, but it is only a liability if they are. By making heresy a question of
individual conscience, therefore, Ockham initiates the undoing of its official existence.\textsuperscript{21}

3.3 Ockham's Reductio of Institutional Authority

The picture I have presented rests on the assumption that it is up to every individual to decide for herself what is worthy of belief, and to try to correct her community if she thinks that it errs. There can be no doubt that Ockham saw his own situation in this light. But what are the limits of conscience on his view? It might be objected that Ockham thought of his dispute with the papacy as a special exception while condoning the condemnation of Pelagians, Arians, and the like. The fallibility of the people who hold ecclesiastical offices does not necessarily imply that the institution of doctrinal definition is fallible. If the church has a reliable procedure (e.g., ex cathedra pronouncement, expert testimony, democratic vote, etc.) for

\textsuperscript{21}It might seem more accurate to say that Ockham's view leads to the conclusion that there is no such thing as heretics. This would actually be less accurate, however, since Ockham thought of heresy as an act of the soul, and believed that there are people out there committing such acts. What I think he challenges is the idea that there are sets of written inscriptions and vocal sounds for a given time and place such that, no matter whosoever were to articulate them, he or she would thereby be a morally perverse individual. Everything depends upon the intention of the writer/speaker.
determining which beliefs are above correction, then it seems that there is no place for conscientious objection to them.

It is true that Ockham recognizes a role in the community for doctrinal definition, but it is not at all clear that it retains its institutional character on his view. John Kilcullen has recently suggested that the key to Ockham's understanding of church authority lies in his use of Jesus's promise to his disciples that he would be with them always, to the end of the age.22 A popular medieval interpretation of this promise was that the catholic church, as represented by the pope, could never err. Ockham's innovation, according to Kilcullen, is to transfer infallibility from the pope to the totality of catholic believers.

It follows from Christ's promise, then, that if some proposition is being taught generally as a truth which all Catholics must believe and none of the Catholics of the day protests that the proposition is an error — or, at least, that it should not be imposed as something Catholics must believe — then it is indeed Catholic truth. It follows also that if at some 'day' in the past some proposition was taught as Catholic truth without protest, then that proposition is Catholic truth even if some who are or seem to be Catholics now reject it: otherwise the Church of that past day would have erred.23

22Matthew 28:20. Quoted by Ockham at ibid., 2.xxv, p. 427, l. 44; 4.ix, p. 448, ll. 29-30; 5.iii, p. 470, l. 54&59; 5.xxv, p. 492, l. 62; 5.xxv, p. 493, l. 30; 5.xxix, p. 498, ll. 20-21, etc.

According to Kilcullen, Ockham thinks that it is impossible for the church to institutionalize error. This is to say that Christ's promise guarantees that no falsehood will survive as church doctrine for longer than it would take for the catholic believers of the day to make known their protest. Hence there is no need for the church to leave its official, time-tested truths open to correction.

The problem with this interpretation, however, is that in book five of the Dialogue, Ockham indicates that he thinks it is possible for the church to institutionalize error. Here he argues that the minimum required for Jesus to fulfill his promise is that at least one individual remain faithful at any given time. Nor is this person's faith necessarily identifiable with official church doctrine. On the contrary, Ockham develops a long and intense argument culminating in the conclusion that the entire faith community could be preserved in a single baptized infant.

Infants have the disposition of faith. Therefore, if the whole multitude of Christians having use of reason erred, it would be possible to preserve the promise of Christ through baptized infants.\(^{24}\)

I submit that Ockham's razor leaves us with precious little

\(^{24}\)I Dial., 5.xxxv, p. 504, ll. 40-43. Ockham points out that keeping the promise through babies or illiterates would be to the greater glory of God since it would "show that our faith is not in the wisdom of the men called to the general council, but in the strength of God" ibid., 5.xxv, p. 493, ll. 35-7.
institution, and hence precious little official church doctrine that is not open to correction.

Suppose that the totality of true believers actually was reduced to a single infant and that she grew up amidst heretics, never accepting their heresy, nor publicly protesting it for some good reason.\textsuperscript{25} We can imagine a faith community surviving underground in this way for generation upon generation. In fact, preserving his disciples in secret while the rest of the world has gone to hell would be one very plausible way for God to fulfill his promise to be with them always and forever. So how do we know that this apocalyptic scenario (to which Ockham explicitly refers\textsuperscript{26}) has not taken place? The only solution is to judge for

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{25}Ockham tells us that there are circumstances in which lay people are excused from the duty to resist heretical depravity. See, for example, \textit{ibid.}, 7.lvi, pp. 712-3.

\textsuperscript{26}After angrily describing the spiritual chaos which rampant heresy, war, and property mongering has caused throughout Christendom, Ockham asserts that Christians should not be so sure that things can only get better.

Some say that during the time of the Antichrist there will be such a persecution and extinction of Catholics that every region in the entire world will be occupied by infidels or apostates. And they say that it is not possible to know through the divine scriptures or the doctrine of the universal church whether something similar will or will not happen \textit{before} the time of the Antichrist [\textit{ibid.}, 5.xxxiv, p. 503, 11. 43-7].

This line of reasoning comes to the surface again, for example, at \textit{ibid.}, 5.xxiv, p. 490, 1. 51ff.
\end{quote}
oneself whether or not the church has institutionalized error. As far as I can see, this analysis applies to the teachings of the saints, the record of sacred history, and the Bible itself, since any of these things might conceivably have been made official while the true believers were powerless to prevent it.\(^{27}\) Of course, Ockham assures us that this has not in fact happened; all of the time-tested doctrines of the church are indeed true – at least, if interpreted in the right way.\(^ {26}\) But the procedure for interpreting, defining, and making them official is not infallible. So although those who disagree may be heretics, it will ultimately be up to every individual member of the community to decide.

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\(^{27}\)Ockham himself only recognizes falsehoods in the first of these categories (\textit{ibid.}, 2.iv, p. 412, 11. 46-7). With regard to the others, however, he insists that it is not the approval itself but rather the truth of the thing approved which requires us not to dissent (\textit{ibid.} 2.v, p. 414, 11. 17-22). Such truths would be truly catholic even if there were no church (\textit{ibid.}, 2.xii, p. 418, 1. 4).

\(^{28}\)What objective basis does he have left for making such a judgement? Reason and experience. These human tools cannot prove that Christianity is true (except perhaps in the case of a direct revelation), but they can tell us when certain interpretations of it are false. This is a matter of conscience, as outlined in chapter one.
3.4 Ockham’s Legacy

If this reading of the Dialogue is valid, then the question arises, why does Ockham stop short of advocating freedom of speech in general as do modern liberals? Why not just get rid of the concept of heresy altogether rather than slinging the mud which was slung at him back at the slingers?

First of all, it should be noted that Ockham does explicitly advocate a general free speech policy when he says that “assertions, especially in physics, which do not pertain to theology should not be officially condemned or prohibited by anyone because in such things everyone should be free so that they may freely say what they please.” Only when it comes to theology – the fount of community values – does he agree with his own persecutors that it would be wrong simply to shrug and say ‘anything goes.’

Second, the liberal defense of freedom of speech has received a great deal of worthy criticism of late at the hands of feminists, communitarians, and perhaps most engagingly, Stanley Fish. I cannot hope to do justice to any of their contributions to the vast literature on this topic here. But it would be worthwhile to pause briefly to consider the strikingly medieval element in Fish’s anti-

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liberal campaign.\textsuperscript{30}

Fish argues that the First Amendment has always been a dead letter in the United States because restriction is what creates the very conditions for assertion.

It may seem paradoxical [he writes], but free expression could only be a primary value if what you are valuing is the right to make noise; but if you are engaged in some purposive activity in the course of which speech happens to be produced, sooner or later you will come to a point when you decide that some forms of speech do not further but endanger that purpose.\textsuperscript{31}

Americans are engaged in the purposive activity of maintaining a nation. As such they cultivate certain basic values which, like all values, are constituted by an act of exclusion. To say 'we are for this' is implicitly to say 'we are against that' and it would be foolish to hope that what we are against will simply disappear all by itself. In fact,

when it happens that the present shape of truth is compelling beyond a reasonable doubt, it is our moral obligation to act on it and not defer action in the name

\textsuperscript{30}Fish makes for a particularly apt comparison to Ockham in virtue of his localist methodology. Many a commentator has found Ockham's approach to politics unscientific, \textit{ad hominem}, and sophistical. Even in the midst of his ardent defense of Ockham, A. S. McGrade admits that many of his arguments "look like fanatical attacks" (op. cit., p. 49). Fish cheerfully owns up to such adjectives on the grounds that politics is a deeply personal struggle and that it is nothing but pretense to abstract from one's own immediate investment in the issues.

of an interpretative future that may never arrive.\textsuperscript{32} Fish echoes Ockham in suggesting that the imposition of constraints is itself the interpretative act which determines what our collective future will be like.

But why legal constraints? That is, why attempt to enforce the standards we would like to impose upon one another with coercive authority? Fish seems to think that speech regulation is a necessary evil in circumstances where we cannot afford to trust each other, or even ourselves, to cling unswervingly to the truth. He contends that the degree of toleration in a responsible liberal is directly proportional to her degree of confidence that the truth will win out in the end. John Milton, for example, was not afraid of the corrosive effects of ideological diversity. But his confidence was directly attributable to an outmoded religious progressivism. For all we know, in contrast, human beings are on a downward slide toward utter depravity. Toleration is irresponsible, Fish concludes, "in the context of a politics that puts its trust in the world and not in the Holy Spirit."\textsuperscript{33}

While understanding Fish's vision of a fundamentally unified society in a way which would escape many moderns,

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., p. 113.

\textsuperscript{33}Ibid., p. 110.
Ockham is nevertheless in a good position to locate the flaw in his reasoning. Why does Fish think that we cannot afford to trust individuals to recognize and protect their own values? Because the context of deliberation is cultural and where this is true, "the outcome of deliberation cannot help being influenced by whatever notions are current in the culture."34 This assertion is either trivially true or deeply disturbing. Of course individuals are influenced by the cultural context. The marketplace of ideas creates the underlying fabric which makes communication possible in the first place. But how strong is its influence? If it is strong enough to prevent individuals from thinking for themselves then Fish has replaced Milton's theological determinism with an equally unfounded social determinism.

On Ockham's view, not even a manifest miracle is strong enough to cause assent in a human being. The freedom of the will is what makes perversity possible but it also guarantees that we will never be passive victims of perversity. If we assume that every community member comes equipped with the ability to judge for herself what is worthy of belief, then legal constraint is a self-defeating strategy. Anyone who can assent to a proposal for speech regulation does not need speech regulation to do the work which she can do better for

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34Ibid., p. 118.
herself.

Of course, reliance on coercive authority might still be appealing if it were true that we had nothing but the world to put our faith in. Considering the rampant abuse of speech, even a self-defeating effort at improvement begins to look like the only responsible alternative. But this is where Fish has radically underestimated our resources. Ockham appeals again and again to the Apostle Paul's statement, "Our faith is not in human wisdom but in the truth of God." Yet to believe in the workings of the Holy Spirit is not necessarily to believe in an inevitable progress toward utopia. On Ockham's view, God promised that he would be with his people always, to the end of the age. It is on this basis that he infers the principle that it will never be the case that everyone goes wrong, but that there is no way to avoid having to figure out for oneself who is right. I

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35 I Corr. 2. Quoted, for example, at I Dial., 2.xii, p. 418, ll. 1-2; 2.xxx, p. 431, ll. 54-58; 5.xxv, p. 493, ll. 35-6; 5.xxiv, p. 498, ll. 10-11.

36 As John Ryan points out, a faith community organized around this principle will never amount to the usual conception of a church.

Ockham's Church is finally no definable, tangible socio-historical entity. An invisibly shifting number of believers with fundamentally indeterminable arrangements of authority and responsibility do not a Church make, in any empirically understandable sense of the word, certainly from the point of view of the believer of that time [The Nature, Structure, and Function of the Church in William of Ockham (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979),
think that plenty of people still believe this, or something like it, and that this is why there is (and always should be) such a thing as free speech.

3.5 Conclusion

In his *Dialogue* Ockham departs from the tradition according to which heresy is defined as willful disobedience of authority. The only authority he recognizes is the truth; thus, the only heresy he recognizes is a willful disobedience of the truth. This is possible on a libertarian metaphysics according to which even manifest miracles may fail to motivate assent. The resultant perversity is not an observable crime since individual access to the truth varies. Given that every community considers certain beliefs undeniable, however, someone who insists upon denying them will tend to appear incorrigible. We may wish to enforce our negative reactions to such individuals. Nevertheless, to condemn them through the law would only be to institutionalize the same incorrigibility.

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I disagree with Ryan's conclusion, however, that Ockham must therefore be dismissed as a "transitional figure" between Catholicism and Protestantism. The universal church consists in concrete individuals. This is not only empirically understandable but self-evident from a nominalist point of view.
By showing that it is impossible to escape the responsibility of thinking for oneself and the reliance on others to do the same, Ockham refutes the new speech-regulation enthusiasts who argue that a community which succeeded in upholding an absolute commitment to free speech would be a community without a commitment to the truth, and therefore not a community worth belonging to, if it could even be called a community at all. This line of thought ignores the fact that speech regulation is just another kind of speech which itself needs regulation, especially in virtue of its coercive nature. Who will regulate the regulators? If our answer is every individual conscience, then it seems that free speech is the only policy we can consistently support.
4.1 Introduction

In his interesting and informative history of the University of Oxford during the third quarter of the fourteenth century,¹ William Courtenay uncovers a mystery. It has long been alleged that little philosophical work of merit comes to us from the late Middle Ages. The years from 1350 to 1375, however, suffer an unmistakable drop in both quantity and quality, especially in England. Courtenay surveys what remains of this work and reports that it speaks of an age of rather mediocre realism. Nominalist innovation, which had occupied the previous generation, is virtually undetectable and the once infamous British terminists are devoting their energy to dime-a-dozen textbooks for beginners. Meanwhile, the one figure who constitutes an exception to the general

scholastic decline makes a truly puzzling remark. John Wycliff claims to have been surrounded by "doctors of signs." Courtenay explains that this comment would most naturally be taken as a reference to nominalist logicians if it were not for the fact that we are unable to name a single Oxford doctor who might plausibly be thought to meet this description during this period. He not unreasonably comes to the conclusion that Wycliff must have been talking about something else.²

I do not wish to challenge Courtenay's conclusion on historical grounds, but only to explore an alternate hypothesis for the sake of philosophical speculation. It is, after all, logically possible that Wycliff's Oxford was teeming with nominalists, but that the evidence of their presence has not survived. If we add to Wycliff’s comment the fact that the only two nominalist works we do have from the Oxford of his day were published anonymously³ and the fact that nominalism was actively suppressed at various times and places throughout late medieval Europe,⁴ then we have enough excuse to at least entertain the thought that

²Ibid., 352.

³See ibid., 342, 362-3.

nominalism was alive and well, though not being pursued or preserved in official venues.

But why advance such a hypothesis? As one of my colleagues recently remarked, "Nominalism wasn't dangerous, it was just plain stupid." I think this assessment is false on both counts, and deserving of an answer. In what follows I would like first to explain where the heart of the disagreement between fourteenth-century nominalists and realists lay, to argue that nominalism is more successful than realism in solving a particular logical puzzle, and then to show how the very same logic applies directly to one of the most intense political controversies of the day.

4.2 Supposition Theory

The debate between nominalism and realism has taken many different forms throughout the course of history. It is most broadly characterizable as a disagreement over the ontological commitments which underlie philosophical discourse. Do abstract objects have to exist in some way in order for abstract statements to be true? As the techniques of logical analysis change, so too does the focus of the disagreement. Whereas today quantification theory sets the agenda for the kinds of questions which are asked and answered, in the fourteenth century, supposition theory (the
central component of accounts 'of the properties of terms,' also known as 'terminist logic') drove the debate.  

Quantifier logic is much more sophisticated than suppository logic from the point of view of mechanical linguistic analysis. Once a statement like 'I throw you a ball' is symbolically quantified, for example, as:

$$\text{(Ex)} (Bx \land Tx)$$

(to be read: 'There exists an object x such that x is a ball and x is thrown to you by me), it is easy enough to ascertain its truth conditions and its deductive relation to other statements. Nevertheless, such translations must be made on the basis of sound semantic theory, and it is here that the late medievals made unsurpassed contributions. Take the case of a more complicated statement like 'I promise you a horse.' In asserting this sentence, do I presuppose the existence of

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5In making this comparison I do not mean to suggest that supposition theory aspired to be a set of axioms and rules of inference adequate for proving all the valid formulae containing quantifiers in a given language, nor even to be a method for generating truth conditions for sentences containing general terms. Rather, what quantification theory and supposition theory have in common at a much more basic level is that they help us understand what sentences containing words like 'all,' 'some,' 'none,' and the like mean. For a review of various attempts to evaluate supposition theory by contemporary standards, see Marilyn McCord Adams, William Ockham (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 317-382. She argues that these attempts are anachronistic and misguided and comes to the conclusion that supposition theory was developed and used for fallacy detection. My argument in section 4.4 below may be considered support for this view.
some particular horse and impose upon it the property promised-to-you-by-me? Supposition theory turned questions like this, which are easily marginalized in the interest of technical elegance, into debates between proponents of ontologically opposed camps.

But all such debates depend upon a lot of common ground which serves both to generate and to highlight specific points of departure. So in order to understand what was at stake between realists and nominalists in the fourteenth century, the first question we must ask is, what exactly are the basic tenets of supposition theory from a neutral point of view?

Medieval philosophers were more or less agreed that a word like 'horse' signifies naturally.\textsuperscript{6} The natural signification of a word is what it means independently of any context in which it is used. To say that 'horse,' signifies naturally is to say that it has the power to evoke the concept of a horse or horses in the mind of anyone who knows English, upon hearing or seeing the word. It is, of course, by convention that the five letters 'h,' 'o,' 'r,' 's,' 'e,' and the sound of pronouncing them signify the animal which

they signify—a fact evident in the difference between different languages. Nevertheless, anyone with linguistic ability either has or could have the concept of horse to which spoken and written signs can then be conventionally assigned. This suggests that language consists in three levels: written, spoken, and mental. As Aristotle and Augustine both attest, linguistic analysis begins with this general metaphysical observation.7

But words do not convey thoughts unless they are employed as elements in a sentence. The fourteenth-century logicians with whom we are concerned held that, although sentences are the basic units of communication, assertoric sentences at least are themselves composed of more basic linguistic units, namely, subject and predicate. These elements or 'terms' of the sentence bear variable properties beyond signification. For example, the word 'horse,' when appearing all by itself, evokes the concept of horse, but when it is used in the sentence, 'I hereby give you my only horse, Brownie,' it also refers to a particular object in the world. We communicate by making terms stand or 'supposit' for the very things we are talking about. Because there are many different ways to talk about objects in the world, there are many different modes of supposition, and hence a whole

7De Interpretatione I, 16a, 3-8 and De Trinitate XV, 10-11, respectively.
theory designed to account for them.

Supposition theory varies slightly from author to author, but most recognize the divisions represented in the following diagram:

![Supposition Diagram](attachment:image.png)

**Standard Divisions of Supposition Theory**

It will be useful to examine these divisions individually and in order.

The first division, between proper and improper supposition, is meant to capture the difference between metaphorical and literal speech. There may be a sense in which it is true that some bit of news came 'right from the horse's mouth.' But the statement asserting that it did is

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6This diagram is modeled on the one presented by Paul Spade in "The Semantics of Terms," in Norman Kretzmann et al., eds., op. cit., 196. The positions of personal and common supposition have been reversed, however, in order to more accurately reflect the views of Ockham and Burley in particular, whom we will be examining in the next section.
false if taken literally— or, as the medievals would say, de virtute sermonis, 'on the strength of the words.' Being alert to the difference between proper and improper supposition became crucial to philosophical analysis in the late Middle Ages. Once it is pointed out, for example, that in the statement, 'God sees the future,' the word 'sees' supposits improperly for the act of someone who does not have eyes, then the question arises, exactly what does someone who explicates divine foreknowledge in this way really mean? Many apparent solutions to philosophical problems must be dismissed as literally false when interpreted precisely.

The next division, between material and formal supposition, is meant to capture the difference between first and second order discourse which counts as proper supposition. We use language to talk about things in the world, but bits of language, like spoken sounds and written words, are things in the world which can themselves be talked about, just like anything else. If I assert that 'horse' has five letters, then I am using the word 'horse' to supposit for itself without any reference to the thing(s) in the world which the word signifies. This is material supposition, as opposed to formal supposition, by which we use a word to stand for something other than itself.

Proper formal supposition divides between simple and
personal supposition. In simple supposition, the term 'horse' is used to refer to the universal, horse, something which all horses have in common. In the sentence, 'horse is a species,' for example, the term 'horse' exhibits simple supposition because it is true only if 'horse' stands for the species itself.

Personal supposition, in contrast, is a way of referring indifferently to individuals which fall under the universal in question. But there are two types of personal supposition: discrete and common. In the statement, 'This is my horse,' the term 'horse' supposits discretely because it is used to refer to a specific horse on this occasion even though it could equally well refer to any other horse I may have. Common personal supposition, in contrast, is a way of referring to a number of individuals at the same time, and it comes in both determinate and confused varieties. In the sentence, 'A horse is in the field,' the term 'horse' exhibits determinate personal supposition because it stands for any horse in the field. This is evident in that we can 'descend' from it to a disjunction of statements exhaustively referring to all of the horses that there are: 'This horse is in the field, or that horse is in the field, or that horse is in the field,' etc. If some horse (at least one) is in the field, then the general statement is true. For confused personal supposition, on the other hand, we descend to an
exhaustive disjunction of terms rather than statements. In the statement, 'Every mare is a horse,' for example, the term 'horse' supposits confusedly since it is true only if the statement, 'Every mare is this horse, or that horse, or that horse,' (and so on for all the horses that there are) is true. Furthermore, it is not possible to 'ascend' from any instance to the general statement, as it is in determinate supposition.

Confused personal supposition may be merely confused, as in the above example, or distributively confused in cases where direct descent to a conjunction of particularized statements is possible. The statement, 'Every horse is an animal' can be considered equivalent to 'This horse is an animal, and that horse is an animal, and that horse is an animal' and so on for all of the horses there are. A statement like, 'Every horse besides Brownie is in the field' is more complicated, however. We cannot descend to the statement, 'This horse besides Brownie is in the field, and that horse besides Brownie is in the field,' etc. Hence, the occurrence of 'horse' in this statement is called 'immobile' as opposed to 'mobile' distributive supposition. But we need not get into any further details at this level of division in order to proceed with the present inquiry.

It was with regard to the metaphysics of simple and personal supposition that the main disagreement between
realist and nominalist logicians arose. As we have seen, simple supposition of the term 'horse' refers to the universal, horse, which all horses have in common. But what is the nature of this shared feature? Is it only a name existing in our minds or is it an extra-mental thing in which individual horses 'participate'? William of Ockham and Walter Burley, two philosophers working at Oxford during the first half of the fourteenth century, developed polar positions on this issue in response to mutual criticism. By contrasting their views we can see how the answers to the above metaphysical questions make an important difference for linguistic analysis.

In his *Summa Logicae*, Ockham defends the quintessential nominalist position.

It is always a case of personal supposition [he writes] when a term supposits for its significatum. . . . Simple supposition occurs when a term supposits for a mental intention but is not held significatively.9

We can understand the distinction Ockham wishes to draw through an example. In the statement, 'Rational animal is the definition of human being,' the term 'human being' might be taken as an instance of simple or personal supposition. According to the former it is true (if human beings are in fact rational animals), since a mental intention is the sort

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of thing which can be defined; according to the latter it is false, since extra-mental individuals are not. Hence, it would be incorrect to say that the term 'human being,' when taken as a true instance of simple supposition, stands for its significatum (i.e., all the particular human beings it signifies). Conversely, in the statement, 'The human being is a rational animal,' the term 'human being' must supposit personally if the statement is true because it is only individual human beings, and not a mental intention, which can be accurately described as rational animals. To say that such individuals 'participate' in humanity would be to say that the species exists both in our minds and in extra-mental things, which is impossible.

In direct opposition to Ockham, Burley advances the realist alternative.

Personal supposition [he writes] is when a common term supposits for the things which fall under it. . . . Simple supposition, in contrast, is when a common or aggregate singular term supposits for that which it signifies.10

To Burley it seems obvious that in a true instance of personal supposition the term does not stand for what it signifies. In the statement, 'The human being is a rational animal,' for example, the term 'human being' stands for the

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10 Translated from Walter Burleigh, De puritate artis logicae tractatus longior, ed. Philotheus Boehner (St. Bonaventure: The Franciscan Institute, 1955) 3.
particular individuals which fall under the general category. But this is not what the word 'human being,' taken alone, signifies. It signifies the universal, human being. Therefore, in the statement, 'Rational animal is the definition of human being,' the term 'human being' supposits simply and thereby stands for what it signifies. Keenly aware of the nominalist opposition to this view— which he finds valde irrationabiliter— Burley adduces three arguments on its behalf.11

First, terms exhibiting personal supposition cannot stand for what they signify. For the person who asserts the statement, 'Human being is a species,' and the person who hears it may each know that it is true. Yet neither of them know Frank or Rosie whom 'human being' allegedly signifies on the nominalist view. So, on this view, the speaker and the listener do not know what they are talking about after all, which is absurd.

Second, terms exhibiting simple supposition must stand for what they signify. For general knowledge of the world is made possible through the positing of shared features. If universals were not extra-mental things (or 'second substances,' according to Aristotle), then nothing but individuals could be signified by the subjects of sentences,

11Ibid., 8-9.
whether mental, spoken, or written, and we would have no science.

Third, consider the true sentence, 'Every white thing is a substance.' In it the subject term supposits personally, yet it cannot signify that which it supposits for (i.e., all the white things). If it did, the statement would be false because all existing white things are either accidents or aggregates of subject and accident, neither of which count as substance. The nominalist will reply, of course, that 'white thing' just signifies Frank, Rosie, and all the other white things. But this cannot be correct either since then if Frank and Rosie and all the other white things turn black, signification would completely fall away from the word 'white thing.' What then shall we do with the person who falsely believes that something is still white? It seems her belief is completely meaningless. All of these considerations go to show that a word like 'whiteness' must do double semantic duty: the written/spoken instance signifies the concept as well as the common nature of white things.

Ockham's mantra, throughout his entire career, was that any view which implies the existence of a universal which is present both in the extra-mental individuals and in the mind of the language-user is patently false.\(^{12}\) But this claim

\(^{12}\)Ockham responds to Burley's response to the *Summa* in his *Quodlibetal Questions*. See especially Quodlibet 5.10-20.
begs the question if the criteria for truth and falsehood are determined by supposition theory itself. And Burley’s approach offers a considerable epistemological advantage over Ockham’s. It seems that the need for abstract objects of knowledge is sufficient reason to reject nominalism.

4.3 The Case of the Promised Horse

But we have yet to see Ockham’s theory at work on some of the knotty problems which face any attempt to formalize natural language. The Summa Logicae was intended as an introduction to logic. As such, it deliberately leaves some of the details of its development and defense as exercises for students. Although Ockham doesn’t say so, I think that it is possible to show that certain cases of what is today called ‘referential opacity’ reveal an insurmountable difficulty with realism.

How does the supposition theorist explicate a statement like, ‘I promise you a horse’? When I assert such a statement, I do not mean to be promising you the written word ‘horse’ or its spoken counterpart. Hence, the term ‘horse’ cannot be said to exhibit material supposition. It seems to exhibit determinate personal supposition in so far as it converts with the statement ‘A horse is promised to you,’
which has the same logical form as 'A horse is in the field.' Yet with respect to any particular horse which ever exists, if you say that I have promised it to you, I can always respond that I never promised you that horse. This is to say that the requisite descent to a disjunction of statements, 'This horse is promised to you, or that horse is promised to you, or that horse,' etc. is not possible. Hence, it seems that 'horse' must not supposit personally after all. The only option left is simple supposition. But it is absurd to suppose that I have promised you nothing but a bit of mental language. So it appears that the nominalist at least is left without an analysis of indefinite promises.

Ockham proposes two ways of answering this challenge. The first way is to deny that 'I promise you a horse' converts with 'A horse is promised to you.' This makes it possible to assert that 'horse' exhibits (a slightly irregular case of) merely confused personal supposition. For we can validly descend to the following disjunction of terms: 'I promise you this horse, or that horse, or that horse,' and so on for all the horses there are or ever will be (even though 'horse' does not explicitly fall under the scope of a universal quantifier, as it normally does in merely confused personal supposition).

13See pp. 114-15, above.
Alternatively, one can deny that the term 'horse' supposits in this statement at all. Upon further consideration it is evident that 'horse' is less accurately considered a term than an inseparable part of the complex predicate, promise-you-a-horse. For the linking verb in the statement, 'I promise a horse to you,' is not transparently transitive in the way that the linking verb in the statement, 'I throw a ball to you' is. Rather, verbs like 'promising' incorporate a hidden future-contingent statement.

Thus, [Ockham writes] the statement, 'I promise you a horse,' by the strength of this verb 'promise' denotes that the statement, 'I am giving you a horse (or something similar)' will be true (or ought to be true) at some time. And it does not denote that something like the statement 'I am giving you this horse' (where some horse is pointed out), will or ought to be true. On this account, the following inference is invalid: I promise you a horse, therefore I promise you this horse, or I promise you that horse.'

If the statement, 'I am giving you a horse,' does not come true, then I will have made a false promise; if it does, then I will have made a true one. In this way, Ockham preserves the indefiniteness of the commitment without rendering it meaningless.

Burley thinks that realism can solve the problem equally well. Because he is not committed to the view that universals are nothing other than intentions of the mind, he can avoid having to rely on the resources of personal

\footnote{Op. cit., 220.}
supposition altogether. He writes,

When it is asked, in virtue of what supposition is this true: 'A horse is promised to you,' I posit that someone promises you a horse as follows. By sustaining that there is some unity outside the soul other than numerical unity, it should be said that the statement, 'A horse is promised to you,' is true because the subject has absolutely simple supposition. For I do not promise you this horse nor that horse, but simply a horse. And because a universal is not able to exist per se, neither is it consequently able to be handed over except in some singular. On that account, she who promises you a horse is held to hand over to you some singular horse, otherwise she is not able to hand over the promised thing to you.15

According to Burley, when I promise you a horse I am literally promising you some unidentified bit of the common nature, horseness.

But can this alleged indefiniteness in the promised object secure the indefiniteness of the promise? Burley thinks it can because an obligation undertaken through his interpretation of simple supposition descends to a disjunction of terms. For example, suppose that you try to sue me for Brownie on the grounds that she is the horse that I promised to you.

Then I say [Burley writes] that in that case it is supposited that this horse is promised to you but indeterminately and under disjunction. Because of this it is not possible to sue for this horse or that horse determinately, but under disjunction. And in this way every horse is promised to you and is owed under

disjunction and indeterminately.\textsuperscript{16}

As this passage indicates, Burley wants to minimize the difference between the realist and the nominalist analysis of the language of promising. Ultimately, his solution comes to the same as Ockham’s, he contends, but without his having to deny convertibility. The statement, ‘I promise you a horse (i.e., horseness)’ is perfectly convertible with ‘A horse (i.e., horseness) is promised to you by me.’

There is reason to think, however, that Burley’s contention is incorrect. When I assert the statement, ‘Horseness is promised to you by me,’ I assert the existence of some object called horseness and impose upon it the property promised-to-you-by-me. This does not immediately prove that the promise is a definite one. For to say that a particular universal is promised is only to say that a horse, as opposed to a bottle of wine, for example, is promised. Nevertheless, predicating this property of a universal proves problematic. Suppose that Ockham gives you Brownie, and you say, ‘Is this the horse that you promised me?’ He can justifiably answer ‘no’ while still discharging the obligation since, on his view, it is not the case that any particular object was promised. What would Burley’s answer be? On his view, horseness was promised. Is Brownie this

\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Ibid.}, 15.
horseness? Yes and no. Yes, in that she is horseness essentially; no, in that a concrete individual is not a universal. So has he discharged the obligation or not?

In order to do so he needs to give you the thing to which he ascribed the property promised-to-you-by-me. But, as Burley himself admits, this is impossible. For the thing to which he ascribed that property also, by his own stipulation, possesses the property of indefiniteness, and any horse he hands over is as definite as can be. (If A has property x and B does not, then A and B are not identical.) Hence, he concedes that, although horseness was promised to you, something else, namely Brownie, will have to suffice as a substitute, which is tantamount to denying that indefinite promises can be discharged.

Burley attempts to disguise this result by claiming that there is a certain relation, something less than numerical identity yet more than absolute difference, which makes it possible to say that the indefinite thing just is the definite thing. But in order to block the retort that then Brownie just is the subject of that sentence in the very same sense of the word 'is,' he needs to maintain that the promise is not to be treated as a singular statement. He may do this by asserting that 'I promise you a horse' should be converted with 'A horseness is promised to you by me.' But in so doing
he undermines his claim to have secured indefiniteness anyway. For according to the logic of supposition, a sentence of this form descends to a disjunction of statements. Yet if I promise you a horse then it should be invalid to infer 'this horseness is promised to you, or that horseness is promised to you, or that horseness is promised to you' – which would only be a valid rendering of 'Some horseness is promised to you.'

It seems that the best move available to the realist at this point would be to concede that the thing promised was identical to Brownie all along at the metaphysical level but that, because no one knew this, the promise was indefinite at the epistemological level. After all, it seems that the only

17 Conflating 'a' with 'some' (in the sense of 'a certain one') is a popular realist move. P. T. Geach considers it an "amusing paralogism" which proves that a cat who watches a mousehole will not catch what she waits for. Critical of Russell's solution that when Jemima catches Minnie, she has caught an individual identical to a disjunction in rebus, Geach proposes the following:

"Minnie is identical with a mouse from that hole", "with m₁-or-m₂-or-m₃", may very well be taken to coincide in import with "Minnie is identical with some mouse from that hole" – "Minnie is identical with m₁, or Minnie is identical with m₂ or Minnie is identical with m₃" – which is comparatively unproblematic [Reference and Generality (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 70].

But of course the following disjunction of statements is false: "Jemima was waiting for m₁, or Jemima was waiting for m₂, or Jemima was waiting for m₃." Hence, the alleged paralogism is a valid inference after all.
reason I promised you a horse rather than Brownie herself was because I was not sure yet which one I would be able to give you. If I were omniscient, I wouldn't have needed an indefinite promise in the first place. In other words, a true indefinite promise is nothing but a definite promise made under conditions of ignorance.

Although this solution may seem to do the trick for the isolated case of promising, it is not adequate for the general linguistic phenomenon which Ockham has hit upon. This phenomenon, referential opacity, is discussed in detail by W. V. Quine.\(^\text{18}\) He uses the example of the verb, 'to hunt.' When I hunt lions, is it really accurate to say that I am hunting all along, unbeknownst to me, the lion which I eventually shoot? Clearly not. There are two distinct ways of explicating the statement, 'Ernest is hunting lions.'

\[(1)\] Ernest is endeavoring that some lion is such that Ernest shoots it.

\[(2)\] Some lion is such that Ernest is endeavoring that Ernest shoots it.

Sentence (1) is equivalent to:

\[1^{*}\] Ernest is endeavoring (-to-cause) himself to shoot a lion.

While sentence (2) is equivalent to:

\[2^{*}\] Ernest is endeavoring (-to-cause) himself and a

(certain) lion to be related as shooter and shot. In each case, the first is an indefinite formulation and the second is definite. That the first is a more accurate explication of hunting lions is evident in that one can truly hunt lions even if it turns out that there are no such things.

Ockham seems to want to say that 'I promise you a horse' is equivalent to the statement:

(3) I am endeavoring that some horse is such that I give it to you,

and hence:

(3*) I am endeavoring (-to-cause) myself to give a horse to you,

as opposed to the relative formula:

(4*) I am endeavoring (-to-cause) myself and a (certain) horse to be related as giver and given-to-you.

(4*) provides the relational construction one would need in order to preserve convertibility. In it, 'I promise you a horse' is conceived in three parts:

[I] [promise you] [a horse],

which can be rearranged into the passive:

[A horse] [is promised to you] [by me],

without any semantic difference. In order to confer truth-value on this statement we are forced to identify something which bears the requisite relation to me. If it is not Brownie, then it is horseness, which is not identical in any
relevant sense to the determinate thing which is needed to discharge the obligation. (3*), in contrast, presents an opaque predicate:

[I] [promise you a horse].

It is convertible only with:

[promising you a horse] [am I],

a statement in which no entity other than my endeavoring mind itself is presupposed. Yet it seems correct to say that when (and if) Brownie is finally handed over, I will have endeavored successfully.

A similar analysis can be applied to the epistemic verbs of knowing, believing, and the like. Suppose I assert that I know that human being is a species. On Ockham’s view, the term, ‘human being’ exhibits simple supposition in the statement, ‘Human being is a species,’ and thereby does not signify what it stands for. Rather, it signifies all the individual human beings while standing for the mental concept or universal, human being. Burley claims that knowing that the human being is a species will therefore entail knowledge of the individuals signified. The assertion of knowledge in question, however, may be explicated in one of two ways19:

(1) I know a human being to be a species.

(2) I know that a human being is a species.

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19This explication is based on Quine’s convention in *ibid.*, 150.
In the first explication, the embedded statement retains its relative structure, and hence, 'human being' supposit. It could be restated as:

(1*) I know a human being and a species to be related as identical.

Under these circumstances we have presupposed identifiable individuals independent of the knower. In the second explication, on the other hand, what is known becomes an opaque part of the predicate. To know-that-a-human-being-is-a-species is a mental act which logically presupposes the existence of nothing other than the knower herself.

Burley thinks that Aristotelian science requires that knowledge has for its object extra-mental universals, which on his view are signified in simple supposition, when a term signifies what it stands for. But if personal supposition is conceived as when a term signifies what it stands for, then we can have knowledge of things in the world without positing shared features. The statement, 'Sugar is soluble in water,' for example, states that all the individual bits of sugar that did, do, or might exist were, are, or would be soluble in water. In this way, we can make accurate analyses and predictions without having to posit abstract objects. Likewise, he who believes that a white thing is a substance

\[20\text{Past- and future-tense verbs involve the notion of ampliation, which was part of the theory of the properties of terms, but is not crucial to the present discussion.}\]
even when there are no white things believes that anything
which could be white would be a substance if it were. So it
seems that realism does not carry any epistemic advantage
after all.

We have seen that supposition theory provides a way of
interpreting quantified sentences. It is much more closely
bound to ontological issues than twentieth-century quantifier
logic, however. To say that 'I promise you a horse' can be
formalized as, 'There exists an x such that x is a horse and
x is promised to you by me' is not supposed to commit one to
a position on the existence of abstract entities. But
supposition theorists cannot analyze this claim without
laying their cards on the table. The realist (who thinks
that, in simple supposition, terms signify what they stand
for) will construe the statement as a convertible relative;
the nominalist (who thinks that it is only in personal
supposition that terms stand for what they signify) will
construe it as an opaque reference. Even Walter Burley,
however, who is an excellent representative of the former
approach, fails to give us any reason to prefer it to the
latter. We may conclude, therefore, that Ockham's
alternative deserves more attention than it has received.²¹

²¹According to E. J. Ashworth, [''I Promise You a Horse,''
Vivarium XIV (1976): 62-79, at p. 68] Ockham's solution was
scarcely mentioned by subsequent supposition theorists. Even
Quine, a self-styled nominalist himself, denies that
4.4 The Case of the Promised Christian

But does it really matter? What is the worst that could happen if we were forced to concede that it is impossible for language-users to make true yet metaphysically indefinite promises, and that the apparent indefiniteness of certain cases is to be explained in terms of an epistemic limitation? Do those who cling obstinately to mainstream Aristotelianism have anything of value to lose?

Biblical exegesis is one instance in which accurate linguistic analysis makes a significant difference. Most logicians in the Middle Ages, including Ockham, were also—or rather first and foremost—trained theologians. Although Ockham seems to have thought it important to keep these universes of discourse separate in so far as possible, a

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universals are nothing but intentions of the mind [op. cit. ss. 55]. He ends up with something much closer to Buridan's ratios—equivalence classes based on resemblance or similarity. As Geach points out, however, ["A Medieval Discussion of Intentionality," *Logic Matters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972)], the Buridanian analysis still illegitimately presupposes the existence of a thing promised (a point painfully absent in his discussion of Jemima, as indicated in note 18, above). Geach proposes the following relational construction instead: 'I promise-you-something-under-the-ratio-evoked-by-the-definite-description horse' [p. 137]. But what is the definite description other than part of the act of promising itself? We may as well slide to the non-relational formula, 'I promise-you-something-under-the-ratio-evoked-by-the-definite-description-horse,' or better yet, simply, 'I promise-you-a-horse.'
specifically nominalist flavor pervades his theology, and therefore his application of theology to other philosophical questions. In fact, it is possible to show that there is a sense in which the case of the promised horse lies at the very foundation of his political theory.

Ockham's political theory is, in truth, more of an anti-theory. His work in this area of philosophy was conceived from beginning to end as an attack on existing institutions and the specific people and events of his world are never far from his mind, even when he speaks at the general level. What got him into politics was the problem of heresy - first the allegation that he was a heretic and then his own conviction that the reigning popes, John XXII and his successors, were. Hence, it is not surprising to find that he devoted Part One of his longest and most systematic political treatise, the Dialogus de potestate papae et imperatoris, to a thorough examination of heresy, both as a moral concept and as a criminal charge.

One of Ockham's primary goals in this work was to show that the successors of Peter should not be granted the power to condemn heretics as they please because they are not immune from the danger of committing heresy themselves. The main opposition to this claim was derived from a particular interpretation of the traditional catholic belief that the
universal church could never err. This tradition grew up around the Scriptural passage in which Jesus promised his disciples that he would be with them always, to the end of the age.\textsuperscript{22} These words were considered a reaffirmation of the covenant between God and his people, who, with the advent of Jesus, consisted in all and only Christians. It seemed to many that, since the disciples were the first bishops, Jesus had meant to say that the covenant would be carried out through the institutional church. But no institution is entirely blameless, and there were various differing views as to exactly whom among the official heirs of the Apostolic charge Jesus had promised to be with. Was it the highest bishop or Pope alone, all of the catholic priests, the college of cardinals, the general council, the city of Rome, or someone else?

Ockham rejects all of these suggestions in a climactic argument occupying the whole of book five of the \textit{Dialogus} on the grounds that the promise in question is an indefinite one. What Jesus meant to say is that it will never be the case that the holy spirit withdraws from the human race entirely. What he meant to say is, 'I promise you a Christian.'

Just as it is rash to say \[\text{[Ockham writes]}\] that the whole multitude of clerics will not err against the faith, so

\textsuperscript{22}Matthew 28:20.
also is it rash to say that the multitude of clerics — either in the time of the Antichrist or at any other time — will err against the faith. For it should not be firmly held concerning some congregation or gathering of many that it will never err against the faith except in so far as this can be gathered from the words of Christ when he promised his apostles that the catholic faith is going to persist until the end of the age. In this promise, although Christ was speaking to his apostles, who were bishops, he was not speaking precisely for them but for future [disciples]. And among those future [disciples], he makes no special mention of clerics. Nor are his words to be understood of some special group of Christians, but of the whole multitude. For this never will be true: that the whole multitude of Christians errs in the faith. But whether it will be true that the whole multitude of clerics errs in the faith is not known by us but by God who knows all future things.23

Ockham goes on to show that it cannot be held for certain that some man, nor even that some adult human being, will always be the bearer of Jesus’s promise since the holy spirit might survive in a single baptized infant.24 Moreover, it is on the grounds that any human being — including simpletons, madmen, and women — might be the sole keeper of the faith at any given time that Ockham makes his pioneering demand for freedom of speech.

I think Ockham’s argument is a good one. In saying, 'I will be with you always, to the end of the age,’ Jesus was


24 I Dial., 5.xxxv, p. 504, 11. 40-43.
using the word ‘you’ to supposit improperly for some indefinite group of people. Thus, any inference to the claim that this is the person (or these are the persons) to whom Jesus was referring when he renewed the covenant, must be fallacious.\textsuperscript{25} It is not just that human beings cannot know whom Jesus was talking about (i.e., that the promise was epistemically indefinite); it is rather that Jesus was not talking about any particular individuals at all (i.e., the promise was metaphysically indefinite).\textsuperscript{26} Hence, if we are

\textsuperscript{25}In the interest of maximal accessibility, Ockham uses an analogy rather than supposition theory to make his point.

Suppose, for example, that some temporal lord were able to conserve some monastery by preventing all alike from being killed. He would will to defend no one singular person, as long as there are many. But if it should happen that all were killed besides one, then he would defend that one until another were joined to him in the same monastery. And at that point he would relinquish that one from himself. Such a lord would conserve the monastery and nevertheless would conserve no one in the monastery, except for a time [\textit{ibid.}, 5.v, p. 474, 11. 4-10].

\textsuperscript{26}It is also possible, of course, that he made a false promise (i.e., that he lied). As I pointed out in chapter two, both the Ockhamists and the Aureolists are committed to this implication. There is evidence that their battle with the Bradwardinians during the 1340s specifically involved the possibility that the promise reported in Matthew was an instance of divine deception. Aureolist Thomas Buckingham, on the defensive after the publication of Bradwardine’s heresy-smashing \textit{De causa dei}, writes:

I think it can be said in a sufficiently catholic manner that after Christ informed the Apostles about the faith it was possible that he did not instruct them truthfully and did not tell them the truth. Perhaps his words were
correct to think that realist supposition theorists were in no position to make sense of indefinite promises, then we may conclude that they were in no position to make sense of the New Testament.

But surely the realist could make an equally compelling argument out of epistemic indefiniteness. Jesus qua God was talking about Mary, and Frank, and Rosie, and all of the others whom he foresaw to be filled with the holy spirit. Moreover, we must preserve freedom of speech because no human being can be absolutely certain that a given expression is not an expression of genuine Christian faith. To condemn heretics at will would be to presume an epistemic privilege to which human beings are not entitled.

I think this argument is a bad one, and I think Ockham would have thought so too. First of all, it makes the defender of free speech into a skeptic. But it is very implausible to suppose that human beings are in no position to say that certain sorts of behavior are perverse and unacceptable. Indeed it is a moral responsibility to make just this sort of judgment, and to speak out against the occasion for believing a falsehood. For it was thus with Jonah who believed that Nineveh would be destroyed [translated from de contingentia futurorum, ed. Jean-François Genest, Prédétermination et liberté créé à Oxford au XIVe Siècle (Paris: J. Vrin, 1992), 285].
perversity whenever it is detected so that it does not corrupt the community. Ockham clearly saw his own attack on the pope as an instance of such a responsibility. Human beings freely choose to do and say evil things. Although we cannot predict when this will happen, we can — and often do — know it when we see it.²⁷

Second, the case of the promised Christian is slightly more complicated than the case of the promised horse in that it involves free will on the part of the promised thing. For what it means to be a Christian, on Ockham's view, is to love God in the same way that he loves us, i.e., in such a way that there can be no antecedent conditions sufficient to guarantee that we will. If God were able hundreds of years ago to supposit truly with a present tense verb for all of the individuals who were going to choose to do this (i.e., 'Mary is promised, and Frank is promised, and Rosie is promised,' etc), then he would have predicated a property of those individuals at that time. Hence, the past would determine the future, and the referents of that sentence would not be able to choose after all.

Evidently, freedom of the will lay at the root of the

²⁷One who takes this view need not claim infallible judgement, nor support official condemnation. On the contrary, one might argue, as I did in the last chapter, that it is counter-productive to maintain the limits of the faith community with coercive authority.
controversy between Ockham and Pope John XXII, who had defended determinist views in print. Those who saw things his way asserted that the holy spirit, and any official expression thereof, is a work of God and that it is therefore indestructible. Ockham replies that

many works of God are able to be dissolved by men. For charity and the other infused virtues of the wayfarer are works of God, and nevertheless they are able to be dissolved through the freedom of the will. For she who first has charity and the virtues is able to sin mortally and through mortal sin charity is expelled.

Ockham apparently believed that baptism was the moment at which the holy spirit is infused into the human mind for the first time. So long as the baptized individual refrains from hating God, it stays — though somewhat precariously, unless the individual actively returns God’s love. Once she does that, she experiences a taste of beatitude, and the memory of

28 "John XXII teaches and argues that everything happens of necessity because everything is preordained by God, and it is not possible to impede the ordination of God. It is because of this that, in his bull Quia vir reprobus, he holds expressly that Christ, in so far as he was a man, was not able to renounce temporal rule and ownership of things in general. For he would have done something against the ordination of the Father if he had. For this reason also he opposes the distinction of the theologians between the absolute and ordained power of God. Moreover, it is because of this that he says that God of necessity predestined the elect to eternal life and not at all contingently. Thus, he plainly thinks that everything happens of necessity — something which nevertheless plenty of Popes deny" [Dialogus 5.ii, p. 468, ll. 10-16].

29 Ibid., 5.xxiv, p. 490, ll. 47-50.
it will call her back when she is tempted to stray. But the holy spirit will not stay where it is not wanted, and there is absolutely no way to determine in advance that any particular human beings, including those with special titles, will decide that they do or do not want it. Ockham writes:

Christ did not say for the Pope but for the church militant: "I will be with you always, to the end of the age." Again, Christ did not only mean that he would persist with the church militant until the end of the age through faith only, but also through charity and good life. It is agreed, however, that Christ is not with the Pope through charity and good life since the Pope exists nefariously outside of charity. Therefore, those words should not be understood to be about the Pope.

Neither the bishops, nor the general council, nor the college of cardinals, nor the city of Rome, nor any particular Christian gathering can count on unconditional divine support.

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30 This is the call of conscience, as discussed in chapter one.


32 Again: "Although God assists in a special way those gathered in one place in the name of Christ, they are not at all confirmed in grace and faith, even while they remain at the same place. Rather, they are able through free will to fall from the grace of God and from the faith" [ibid., 5.xxv, p. 493, 11. 10-12]. Nor does this line of reasoning prove that God was out of place in promising something over which he had no control. First of all, he has the power to baptize and (perhaps even rebaptize) any human being at any time without the help of institutional intermediaries. Second, if innocents were so scarce and fleeting that even God was unable to keep a Christian in stock, then perhaps that would be the 'end of the age.'
So it seems that Ockham’s talent for logic gave him sharp insight into one of the most bitterly disputed political issues of the day. We may insist that God’s covenant with human beings is sincere, meaningful, and the foundation of the most precious thing on earth, namely, the universal church. It would be bad faith, however, to deny that the actual constitution of this thing is, was, and always will be radically contingent.\(^3\)

4.5 Conclusion

We have seen that the salient dispute between realists and nominalists in the fourteenth century had to do with the metaphysics of supposition. Do general terms stand for extra-mental universals or not? By answering in the affirmative, Walter Burley lost his ability to provide a plausible account of indefinite promises. By answering in the negative, Ockham paved the way for a conception of the faith community more revolutionary than Protestantism. Is this why Wycliff complained of being surrounded by doctors of signs?

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\(^3\)Given that Ockham conceives verbs of knowing as non-relational (see section 4.3, above), it is possible to say that God foreknows who the Christians will be without predicking a property of them. Hence, he can know exactly who will fulfill his promise, while at the same time not promising any one of them.
That would be quite a lot to spin from such an offhand remark – which is why I do not claim to be offering an account of what was. I am only theorizing about what could have been, and about what can be. For no amount of logic will necessitate a particular kind of political activism. But one must be careful not to underestimate its suggestive power. William Courtenay contends that the labels nominales and opinio nominalium were only reintroduced in the fifteenth century (possibly associated with the revival of Albertism and Thomism) to describe a position in logic or, more accurately, a way of teaching logic. Similarly, the words terministae and via moderna are fifteenth century in origin and concern logic, not epistemology, metaphysics or theology. When in the fifteenth century, Ockham’s name occurs in a list of nominales (the Royal Edict of 1474, which proscribed the use of certain authors at the University of Paris), the intent was to indicate that he shared with others a particular approach to logic, not that all those named in the list belonged to a school of which Ockham was the founder.34 Courtenay is correct to perceive that the nominalist spirit could never be contained in something so well-behaved as a school of thought. However, logic does not exist in a vacuum. Ockham’s, at least, is built upon a distinctive view of the nature of the human mind, and is conducive to a theology with political ramifications. This may go a long

way to explain why his followers repeatedly found themselves in trouble with the authorities, and in particular, why they are detectable only in the shadows of Oxford during the third quarter of the fourteenth century.\footnote{It should be noted that Courtenay also has good arguments against the assumption that the Black Death and the Hundred Year's War are responsible for the scholastic decline during this period. They may have had an indirect effect, however. It was (and still is) widely believed that such catastrophes were sent by God to punish the wicked. Controversial doctrines are unlikely to survive under that kind of pressure.}
I know a man who treasures a certain photo of his daughter. It is a snapshot taken at a party when she was about three or four years old. In it she is wearing a fancy dress and sitting next to another little girl who has a large bow in her hair. This second girl is turned away from the camera, distracted by something off to the left. Meanwhile, the first girl is reaching toward her. Mid-reach, however, she has become aware that the eye of the camera is upon her. She turns to look just as the picture snaps. It is not clear exactly what she was about to do, but the look on her face betrays the fact that she was up to no good. She knows her plan is indefensible; she fully intends to carry it out anyway, just as soon as she gets the chance. Pictures of children rebelling against their parents are as common as they are uninteresting. This photo, however, depicts a child rebelling against herself. Her father treasures it because it records the emergence of conscience.

Conscience is commonly defined as the knowledge of one’s
own acts as right or wrong. At first this definition may seem adequate to cover the phenomenon captured in the photograph. But upon further consideration, the idea of being able to confer negative judgement upon one’s own action raises difficulties. Surely an agent only performs an action and considers it her own if she deems it right in some way. Is it possible for someone to perform an act while at the same time knowing that it is wrong? We can imagine her performing an act which she has been told is wrong, or which she used to think wrong, or which she will regret later. But in imagining such cases we imagine that the agent now deems it right and that this is why she is doing it. So it is not clear that we can ascribe conscience to her at all. How can someone who makes a false judgement about her action be in a state of knowledge with regard to it?

This is a very old puzzle which many philosophers have addressed in a variety of ways. There are only two main types of solution, however. The first is to concede that it is not accurate to say that the agent knows that her action is wrong while she performs it. She who does something wrong is ignorant in some way: either she has underestimated the long term damage of a short term benefit, or her judgement is clouded by emotion, or she lacks sufficient information about the situation, or the like. What these answers have in
common is the thesis that what is right for the agent is what is good for the agent; thus, if she had perfect knowledge, she would never have done anything wrong in the first place. The second solution, in contrast, is to assert that an agent can knowingly do something wrong because she can choose something good at the expense of something right. Personal interest does not necessarily coincide with moral rectitude. Hence, it is possible to do wrong without erring in any way.

It would be vain to seek an argument which succeeds in proving that one of these two solutions to the puzzle conscience poses is correct. However, it is worth noting that the first is not so much a solution as a dissolution: it solves the puzzle by claiming that a circumstance which seems to arise never does in fact arise; it is not the case that the little girl in the photograph is defying her own better judgement. The second view, on the other hand, not only accounts for the appearance of her internal conflict, but also shows why this is such a valuable landmark in her development. She has revealed that she understands the difference between right and wrong and hence is capable of being her own master.

The four essays contained in this work are about conscience and the freedom that it both requires and implies. In contemporary Western philosophy, metaphysical libertarianism is often traced to and assessed in terms of
Epicurus's eccentric insistence that human life is a swerve in the void. I have endeavored to portray the doctrine at its best in the nominalist philosophy of William of Ockham.

Human beings are said to choose when they have sufficient reason for preferring one thing to another. But their choice of preferences implies that there are pre-preferential choices: circumstances in which the perceived value of the options leaves a decision underdetermined. And it is by being decisive under these circumstances that individuals make their own distinctive mark on the world. If there are antecedent conditions, known or unknown, sufficient to guarantee that we will choose exactly as we do, then this decisiveness is an illusion. When the antecedent conditions are unknown, the choice may feel like self-determination. But at the metaphysical level, such conditions function as sufficient reason. In the deterministic theories of B. F. Skinner and Jean Calvin, for example, Mother Nature and God set the agenda whether or not human beings are aware of why they must do the things that they do. The libertarian claim, in contrast, is that each of us sets our own agenda in such a way that we might have done otherwise in a morally significant way, and this is why we are held responsible.

Morally responsible individuals are those who try to align their own personal preferences with what is right. Conscience is what happens when these two things come apart.
In those little moments of chaos it asks the agent to choose between competing kinds of good, and thereby forces her to determine what kind of person she will be. How can someone who is both rational and without any internal randomizing device make such a totally undetermined decision? Ockham maintained that human beings are able to perform such actions in virtue of the will. The notion of a power which defies the principle of sufficient reason may seem a bit mysterious. Nevertheless, Ockham makes his most profound contribution to the history of philosophy on the basis of this hypothesis. In some ways his entire twofold career can be understood as a defense of the ultimate choice: to believe or not to believe that we are free.


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