Keeping the Command:
Karl Barth’s Moral Theology
in Dialogue with Late Medieval Scholasticism

by

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Abstract

Due to its dogged persistence in using the language of “divine command,” Karl Barth’s moral theology has, until recent years, been accused of being overly “voluntarist.” Recent scholars of Barth’s work, however, have attempted to exonerate his work, often by way of positive comparisons with the moral theology of Thomas Aquinas. Both perspectives, however, are inaccurate. Defenders and critics of Barth’s moral theology ignore the historical particularities of the voluntarist tradition of moral enquiry and thereby miss the positive contribution that it makes. Scholars interested in upholding Barth’s honor, therefore, need not presume that “voluntarism” is an a priori condemnation.

The present thesis examines the voluntarist tradition of moral enquiry both in its late medieval scholastic and Barthian articulations. A shared “grammar” of divine command both “from above” and “from below” is demonstrated to exist in the moral theologies of John Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Karl Barth. Theological voluntarism “from above” is explored vis-à-vis the dialectic of divine omnipotence, in which God’s absolute power and possibility is consistently balanced with an equally absolute divine constancy. And ethical voluntarism “from below” is investigated with regard to the role of deliberative reason, the ontological priority of the will and its freedom, the positive givenness of the divine command, and the transcendent realm in which the moral agent finds him- or herself upon
keeping that absolute command in love. Finally, Karl Barth’s eschatological definition of conscience is held up as the apex of the voluntarist tradition, reconciling a classical theology of divine command with the teleological tradition that the late medieval scholastics are purported to have lost. It is in Barth’s moral theology, then, that divine command “from above” and “from below” are dialectically synthesized to emerge “from within.”
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Chapter 1

Questioning the Command

So you shall keep my commandments and do them: I am the LORD.
—Leviticus 22:31, RSV

The good of human action consists in the fact that it is determined by the divine command.
—Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, 547

1 Introducing the Question

On March 9, 1927, Karl Barth delivered a lecture to the annual *Christliche Studentenkonferenz*, an organization that his father had co-founded thirty years earlier. The younger Barth had participated on multiple occasions, preparing the official report when he was an undergraduate himself, preaching there a decade later, and delivering an address there four years later. When, in the summer of 1926, he was invited to speak to the assembly once again, the request was that he speak on “The Basis of Ethics” (*die Grundlage der Ethik*). Several months after agreeing to speak on the topic, Barth wrote to say that although he would still keep to the general topic, he preferred the title “Keeping the Commandments” (*Das Halten der Gebote*) instead.¹

The change makes perfect sense from Barth’s perspective. That winter 1926–27 semester in Münster saw Barth deliver not only the lectures that were the basis for the prolegomena to his ill-fated *Christliche Dogmatik*, but also an exegetical series on Paul’s letter to the Philippians

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in which moral theological issues received the highest attention.  

The climax of the lectures on Philippians was his exegesis of the final two verses, in which Paul exhorts his audience to think on whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable—and then put that into practice.

But knowing about the Good is knowledge of God only when the Good is a commandment and when the commandment is kept. . . . Christianity is not ethics, nor does it have any special ethic. . . . Christianity is knowledge of God and just for that reason knowing about the commandments, being bound to them, and that means (whether man does justice to them or not) keeping the commandments.

Thus Barth was not pleased when less than three weeks later he learned that the students had not approved his title change. Instead (and perhaps due to a miscommunication with Eduard Thurneysen) they changed the title to “The Ethical Problem” (Das ethische Problem) and proceeded to print posters and the program book with the new title. Barth was furious and delivered a harsh response to the students in charge of the event. He eventually won his case, and in a letter to Thurneysen soon afterward, Barth lamented that due to the kerfuffle he now had “the difficult task of bringing something weighty” on his preferred topic.

He did not fail in this regard, as “Das Halten der Gebote” presents the broad outline of the way in which Barth was constructing his moral theology. Taking his cue from Luke 3:10,

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2 Francis B. Watson, “Barth’s Philippians as Theological Exegesis,” in Karl Barth, Epistle to the Philippians (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), xxxiv, n. 17: “[Barth’s] understanding of human agency seems to be more clearly stated in the Philippians commentary than in the Romans one—although the view that the earlier work allows no scope at all for human agency is untenable, as John Webster has rightly argued. . . . The ethical emphasis in Barth’s Philippians commentary provides further confirmation of Webster’s claim that ethics was fundamental to Barth’s entire theological project.”


Barth opens with what he sees as the “so-called ethical problem,” along with its answer: “What are we then to do? . . . No answer can be given, except this: Follow the command!”\(^5\)

And then he surveys a swath of related issues that would take up hundreds of pages for years to come: general and particular ethics; the distinction of moral from mathematical and metaphysical truth; moral epistemology; the divine command as both “claim” and “judge”; the meaning of human decision; the three uses of the law; faith enacted in practice and discipline in the context of community; and the relationship between justification and sanctification.\(^6\)

Barth reported to Thurneysen that he feared being sidetracked by too many issues and he preferred to lecture over the course of an academic term so that he could build upon those various issues and conclude with his main point.\(^7\) (Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a crowd of undergraduates enduring such a protracted discourse in an extracurricular setting!) But, as Robert Willis writes in what was the first English-language study of Barth’s ethics (and one of the few sources that looks at this early lecture), Barth makes two breakthroughs in “Das Halten der Gebote” that would advance his ethical reflection beyond the \textit{Römerbrief}: the unity of Law and Gospel and an emphasis on “the notion of command as a descriptive category embracing both the form and content of the ethical.”\(^8\)

This notion of divine command, however, has not had an easy run of things since Barth presented this lecture. Even Willis’s study was largely dismissive, and its argument that

\(^5\) Qtd. in Willis, \textit{The Ethics of Karl Barth} (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1971), 41.


\(^7\) Barth to Eduard Thurneysen, 26 February 1927, 465–66.

\(^8\) Willis, \textit{The Ethics of Karl Barth}, 46.
Barth’s “lack of clarity as to how the command relates to the empirical dimensions of the ethical context, and to the role of deliberative reason” was to shape both the lack of attention Barth’s ethics received in subsequent decades and the content of the discussion once that attention was finally renewed two decades later. Furthermore, recent moral theology has eschewed divine command theory in general, as “voluntarism” has become a pariah to be avoided at all costs. By weighting the discussion of the origin of goodness on the side of the divine will (rather than reason or nature), it is claimed that voluntarism places an inordinate and dangerous emphasis upon divine power, insufficient attention is granted to human freedom, and ethics are bound to an irrational and arbitrary command.

Alongside this condemnation of voluntarism there has emerged a censure of the voices of those scholastics who articulated and shaped the voluntarist tradition in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. In particular, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham have become scapegoats for the current state of Western modernity: its libertarian individualism and rampant consumerism, the fundamentalist excesses of its secularity, and its persistent entanglement with totalitarian politics (both within and outwith liberal democracies). That significant scholarly attention has been paid to revising such views of late medieval scholasticism has had little effect. Theologians are quick to criticize Scotus but slow to tackle the critical edition of his works, the first volume of which appeared in 1950 and has yet to be


Similarly, Ockham’s ethical thought is so often conflated with his metaphysical thought that a theologian as esteemed as John Milbank can charge the “inescapable imperative of nominalism—voluntarism” as the basis for the “the kinship at root of modern absolutism with modern liberalism”—and yet it is only the latter link that his critics challenge.\(^{12}\)

In such an atmosphere of theological inquiry, then, it is curious that Barth’s theology has enjoyed such a renaissance over the past quarter of a century. As will be shown below, interpreters of Barth’s ethics have either dismissed him due to his voluntarism or defended him from accusations of voluntarism. Very few studies, in fact, have been willing to engage and affirm Barth’s voluntarism.\(^{13}\) The question at the root of the present thesis aims to bring together Barth’s theology of divine command with the voluntarism of Scotus and Ockham. Specifically, this project asks: Given Barth’s use of divine command as the defining feature of his moral theology, how is that theology related to the development of divine command theory in the late medieval period?

2 State of the Question

No one can deny that the previous two decades have seen a renaissance in English-speaking studies of Karl Barth’s theology. Perhaps this is due to the need for a response to rising secularism, against which Barth’s theology provides such a strong bulwark. The rhetoric of


Barth’s voice alone is a clarion call for theologians to take confidence in their labors rather than acquiesce to relativist and conditional claims. Just as the second edition of Barth’s *Römerbriefe* roused so many from their dogmatic slumbers, theology in the early twenty-first century is, in many ways, caught in a situation where it must reassert that which is properly theological into public and/or ecclesial discourse.

One way in which scholars have defended the throne of the queen of the sciences is to wage war by genealogy, diagnosing where things went awry. Increasingly, developments in late medieval scholasticism are held to blame: nominalism and voluntarism are often lumped together, with the former held responsible for casting aside all things metaphysical and the latter for empowering humans with complete autonomy in moral, political, and creative spheres. Together this “inescapable imperative of nominalism-voluntarism” is charged with having led liberal modernity into both absolutism and nihilism.\(^\text{14}\)

Such a charge, if true, is a serious one and should not be dismissed. Unfortunately, as in media coverage of prominent court cases, accounts abound and with varying degrees of nuance and sophistication. Can nominalism and voluntarism truly be lumped together and charged as co-conspirators against an adequately theological account of the world in its truth, goodness, and beauty? Or is the “nominalism-voluntarism” conflation simply a rhetorical shibboleth lacking ground?

Studies of Barth’s ethics have not generally engaged the broader sweep of history and the development of moral theology. Paul Matheny’s *Dogmatics and Ethics* is an exception here,

but it the scope of its contextualization of Barth’s ethics is limited to nineteenth-century theological and philosophical trends. Matheny’s study, however, has received scant attention in subsequent years, perhaps, as some have claimed, a result of the fact that it presented an amiable evaluation of Barth during the silent interregnum following Willis’s study. Matheny himself sees his study of Barth’s ethics as a turn from the predominant approach at the time of studying Barth “within the history of theology.” Rather, Matheny aims “to lay out the way in which Karl Barth understands that ethics is theology and the way that dogmatics is ethics.”

With the exception of Matheny, the only attention paid to Barth’s ethics prior to 1993 was critical. To the credit of these studies, they affirmed the basic fact that Barth’s ethics follow a voluntarist inclination. Yet little patience was granted such voluntarism, as they eschewed any theory of divine command (but without engaging the late medieval shape of such theory). Anna Case-Winters prefaces her study of Barth with a study of Calvin as representative of the “classical model” before proceeding to a constructive “alternatives” based upon the process thought of Charles Hartshorne and feminist critiques of the doctrine of omnipotence as an exclusively male preoccupation. Davaney takes a similar approach, critiquing Barth from within a contemporary feminist perspective, arguing that he fails to use

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17 Matheny, *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 1. The present thesis, therefore, attempts a reconciliation of sorts, whereby Matheny’s aim is brought back into a broader history of theology.

sufficiently social and relational categories to understand the relationship between God and the world. Continuing the same line of criticism in the late 1990s, William Schweiker, after presenting a cursory overview of the history of voluntarism, claims that many such traditional positions (such as Barth’s) are “counterintuitive” from the perspective of contemporary ethics.

In the 1990s, three important trajectories emerged among scholars generally favorable toward Barth: an emphasis on Barth’s “special” ethics as a way to avoid the more explicit voluntarism of his “general” ethics; a revisionary account of the development of Barth’s theology that focused upon his actualist ontology; and, although considerably less pertinent to Barth’s ethics than the continuing debate over his rejection of natural theology, an exploration of connections between the theology of Barth and Thomas Aquinas.

Regarding the first development, Nigel Biggar ended the silent period on Barth’s ethics in 1993 with the publication of his doctoral thesis, *The Hastening That Waits*, composed at Yale under James Gustafson (the don of North American theological ethics throughout the 1970s and 1980s). Like Matheny’s study, Biggar’s appraisal of Barth’s ethics was positive, but it enjoyed a more congenial reception (perhaps due to Matheny priming the pump or Gustafson’s imprimatur). Biggar admits that Barth’s ethics have a strong voluntarist strain, but he goes on to demonstrate that this strain lacks consistency and that a rationalist strain appears occasionally—particularly in the later “special” ethics of creation and reconciliation.


This argument quickly gained ground, receiving support in the work of John Webster, Joseph Mangina, and the later Stanley Hauerwas.  

A second factor emerged in the mid-1990s that had significant impact on Barth studies in general, including studies of Barth’s ethics. The revised narrative of Barth’s theological development in Bruce McCormack’s *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* had immediate impact. In short, McCormack argues against the “Balthasar thesis” that Barth had two turning points throughout his career: his break from liberal Protestantism in 1915 and his methodological turn from dialectic to analogy in 1931. In its place, McCormack provides a single turning point in 1936, with Barth’s discovery in the doctrine of election that Christ is both its subject and its object. But it was not until McCormack’s essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* that the bait-and-switch had become evident. Here McCormack drew radical implications from Barth’s doctrine of election for the very being of God, claiming that election as an eternal decision is prior the triunity of God, that God’s act is logically prior to God’s being.  

This radical break with classical Christian theology proved much too strong for many Barth scholars to handle, precipitating a split between what George Hunsinger has called the

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“traditional” and “revisionary” schools of Barth interpretation. While only one subsequent study of Barth’s ethics has attempted to deal with McCormack’s thesis directly, each of them must be interpreted in light of their place in the aftermath. To be a “revisionary” Barth scholar has meant to emphasize Barth’s genius in breaking new ground, whereas the “traditional” Barth scholar has tended to draw lines of continuity between Barth’s work and the broader historical tradition.

The way in which such historical continuities have been drawn, however, has been largely determined by a third trajectory. With the publication of Eugene Rogers’s *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, Barth studies have increasingly sought connections with the thought of the Angelic Doctor. In turn, this has reenergized the debate initiated by Balthasar over Barth’s reading of natural theology and, in particular, the analogy of being. As the genealogical portrait of modernity’s demise following the apex of high medieval theology in Thomas began to find greater acceptance among Barth scholars, the tendency of studies of Barth’s ethics came to follow Biggar’s lead in demonstrating the fundamental rationality of Barth’s ethics, as opposed to any sort of arbitrary voluntarism. The cumulative effect of Milbank, Biggar, and Rogers then encouraged a significant portion of Barth scholars to defend Barth against the charges of voluntarist collusion.

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In the wake of these three trajectories, several book-length studies of Barth’s ethics have lapped onto the shore in recent years, each of which pay significant and specific attention to the issue of whether Barth may be considered a voluntarist. Each of these studies, however, presumes that voluntarism necessarily entails an irrationalist element that they wish to acquit Barth of entertaining. Matthew Rose’s *Ethics with Barth* offers a specifically Roman Catholic perspective (in the manner of Hans Urs von Balthasar) that values moral theology “in accordance with nature.” Gerald McKenny’s *The Analogy of Grace* looks to Barth’s own narrative of modernity and related critique, extending and correcting Biggar’s defense of Barth. While Barth is not a wholehearted voluntarist, McKenny argues, one should not reach that conclusion by simply claiming inconsistency or development in Barth’s works. McKenny’s Barth is one who struggles and goes to great length to be consistently non-voluntarist. Likewise, David Clough’s *Ethics in Crisis* emphasizes continuity between Barth’s earlier and later ethics, although his approach is more developmental and does not deal directly with the question of voluntarism.

David Haddorff’s *Christian Ethics as Witness* employs a different case in order to exonerate Barth of charges of voluntarism, categorizing Barth’s divine command theory as something entirely different from the thirteenth-century voluntarism. On the contrary, Haddorff argues, Barth’s use of divine command is directed against the anthropocentric ethics of nineteenth-

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26 Matthew Rose, *Ethics with Barth: God, Metaphysics and Morals*, Barth Studies (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010). Since the publication of his dissertation, Rose has adopted the perspective that critiques Barth according to the metanarrative of modernity found in MacIntyre, Milbank, et al. See Matthew Rose, “Karl Barth’s Failure,” *First Things* 244 (June/July 2014): 39–44.


century theology, in constant conversation with Brunner and Bonhoeffer. While this is indeed the case—Barth was indeed writing for a specific audience with a specific bête noire in mind—the assumption of a total disconnect between the twentieth and thirteenth centuries hampers the author’s reading.

Thus a significant trend among Barth scholars in recent years has been to defend Barth against charges of cooperation with the voluntarist tradition of Scotus and Ockham. Relatively few scholars, therefore, defend Barth’s moral theology while concurrently affirming that his moral theology is voluntarist. Paul Nimmo’s Being in Action, the rare “revisionary” scholar of Barth’s ethics, resists claims that Barth’s ethics are rational, suggesting that any apparent arbitrariness in the divine command would be on the noetic, rather than ontic, level alone—that is, from the perspective of human perception rather than sub specie aeternitatis. Yet the only contextual clues Nimmo provides are a couple of footnotes to Brunner and Bonhoeffer; the larger historical trajectory in which Barth’s ethics participate is ignored.

Such is the current state of the question of how to relate Barth’s moral theology and the central role that it pays to God’s command to the development of voluntarist ethics and moral theory in the late medieval period. In short, no study of Barth’s ethics has done so. The question of whether Barth is a voluntarist has received significantly more attention. Those who presume his voluntarism are generally critical of it and either (1) ignore or reject the

29 David Haddorf, Christian Ethics as Witness: Barth’s Ethics for a World at Risk (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010).

larger historical tradition or (2) presume a historical narrative that too quickly characterizes voluntarism without sufficient nuance. Those who defend Barth from such claims either (3) presume the same narrative or (4) ignore or reject the larger historical tradition. No such study, however, (5) acknowledges Barth’s voluntarism, (6) appreciates Barth’s voluntarism, and (7) attends to the larger historical development of voluntarism.

3 The Need for Another Answer

One commonality among the many studies of Barth’s ethics in recent years has been the need to acknowledge the many studies of Barth’s ethics in recent years. As has already been demonstrated, this thesis is no different. But the task remains to prove precisely why a new approach is necessary. The present thesis aims to introduce Barth’s moral theology in a broader historical context—specifically, in relation to late medieval scholastics such as Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. Why is such an approach needed?

First, Barth is not generally read in historical context but in systematic fashion, and any attention to historicality in Barth typically restricts itself to the question of Barth’s own development. Consider such classic readings as those of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Hans Frei, T. F. Torrance, and Eberhard Jüngel.31 In 1951 von Balthasar, after decades of revising his reading of Barth’s works, was the first to publish what soon became a standard narrative of

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Barth’s conversion from an earlier “dialectical” period to an adoption of “analogy.”

Around the same time, Hans Frei’s doctoral thesis on Barth’s borrowed the same narrative of a 1931 shift from “dialectic” to “analogy” and proceeded to interpret Barth’s doctrine of revelation prior to that conversion. A decade later T. F. Torrance’s Karl Barth repeated the standard narrative while focusing more on assessing the impact of Barth’s theology upon twentieth-century theology than contextualizing it historically. And, around the same time as Torrance’s study, Eberhard Jüngel attempted to resolve a theological dispute between his contemporaries Herbert Braun and Helmut Gollwitzer, by asserting the doctrine of the Trinity as the hermeneutical key to the Church Dogmatics as a whole. These classic studies set a precedent in focusing attention on systematic issues within Barth’s theology and, rather than looking to a larger historical context, restricted contextual readings of Barth to questions of his own theological development. Even Bruce McCormack’s landmark thesis, published in 1995, repeated this pattern of focusing upon development even while overturning the standard narrative.

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33 Frei, “The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of Karl Barth.”

34 The most historical context that Torrance does is to reproduce Barth’s own words regarding “an ancestral line which runs back through Kierkegaard to Luther and Calvin, and so to Paul and Jeremiah.” Quoted in Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 46.


36 McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*. Significantly, McCormack’s conclusion acknowledges that “the most pressing need in contemporary theology is a historical one” and that “it is high time that we subject the dominant historiography of nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology to critical scrutiny” (p. 466). Over twenty years later, this has yet to be addressed.
Similarly, most recent studies of Barth are systematic in their exposition of single doctrines, reflected in, for instance, the T & T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology series. The studies in that series have not been historical or comparative, but rather have treated Barth’s thought on select topics in seclusion from other theologians and traditions.\(^{37}\) Ashgate Publishing’s Barth Studies series is slightly better, with several studies including some introductory material on the historical development of a particular doctrine up to the twentieth century.

David Guretzki’s study of Barth’s position on the filioque clause, for instance, devotes less than seven pages to the historical background of that controversy, with the majority of his contextualization of Barth to twentieth-century ecumenical discussions, and Dustin Resch’s examination of Barth’s interpretation of the virgin birth dedicates twenty pages to select figures in the development of that doctrine.\(^{38}\) Outside of those two series, there have been several comparative studies. Matt Jenson’s study of the homo incurvatus in se compares and contrasts Barth with Augustine and Luther, and Tom Greggs sets Barth alongside Origen in his examination of the doctrine of universal salvation.\(^{39}\) The vast majority of such studies, however, limit their analyses to modern theologians, such as Matthias Göckel’s enquiry into Barth and Schleiermacher on election, and a recent edited collection of bilateral theological


dialogues, in which the oldest partners are Schleiermacher and John Wesley.\textsuperscript{40} The most promising extensions beyond modernity are Cornelis van der Kooi’s examination of Barth and Calvin on knowledge of God and Reeling Brouwer’s study of Barth’s relationship to post-reformation orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{41} None of these, however, examine Barth in relation to late medieval scholasticism. When Barth is read in historical context, it is typically with regard to the early church, the reformation, or nineteenth and twentieth century theology.

An emerging trend has appeared in recent years relating Barth to Thomas Aquinas. In addition to the aforementioned thesis of Eugene Rogers, a conference held at Princeton University in 2011 brought together Catholic and Protestant scholars, the proceedings of which were published in 2013.\textsuperscript{42} Thanks to Barth’s infamous comment regarding “the invention of Antichrist,” the weight of attention on this theological relationship with Aquinas has focused on the \textit{analogia entis}.\textsuperscript{43} There is indeed some fruitful work being done in this area, but—as important as Thomas Aquinas is (and with all due respect to the Leonine-Thomist emphasis in \textit{Aeterni Patris})—he is but one figure in a panoply of medieval scholastic theologians.\textsuperscript{44}


\textsuperscript{44} In 1879 Pope Leo promulgated his encyclical on the restoration of Christian philosophy, \textit{Aeterni Patris}, focusing the subsequent revival in medieval studies on Thomas Aquinas as “the chief and master of all towers” (§17).
With the bulk of medieval comparisons with Barth on Thomas and, therefore, on issues of truth, epistemology, and metaphysics, these areas have become the de facto hermeneutical lens through which Barth is understood in relation to the medieval era. Such a lens, however, clouds any vision that would see Barth (1) in the company of Scotus or Ockham or (2) as a figure whose moral theology intersects with medieval work in this area. Of course to explore such a direction is to acknowledge the inherently voluntarist tendencies in Barth’s theology—and that is something most theologians (at least those informed by the MacIntyre–Milbank metanarrative of modernity) would rather avoid.45

Yet Barth returned to moral theology time and time again, and—as this thesis will demonstrate—the contours of his moral theology bear striking resemblances to those of late medieval scholasticism. Yet Barth did not simply pick up where Scotus and Ockham left off. Karl Barth developed the issues in late medieval scholastic reflection on divine command ethics by (1) maintaining the absolute priority and exclusivity of God’s will in defining the good from above and (2) his articulation of the eternal dimension into which the human enters from below. By keeping God’s command (halten der Gebote) the human agent participates in an immediate submission to the divine will and enters into a teleological trajectory toward redemption—that is, Barth reconciles the voluntarist tradition with the very same teleological ethic that MacIntyre and Milbank have accused it of losing.

4 A Postliberal Method

When comparing and contrasting two perspectives—such as Barth and late medieval scholasticism—it is crucial to articulate the method by which one dares such an encounter. The present thesis does not bring these two together because one is directly influenced by the other. Indeed, as will be shown in the second chapter, Barth did not access the works of Scotus and Ockham directly and relied instead on secondary sources—as he did for much of his knowledge of medieval theology. Nor does the present enquiry insist that these two parties engaged identical questions and/or discovered the same answers. The world of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries envisioned issues of goodness, volition, and moral psychology in markedly different ways from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Barth does not inhabit the late medieval world. And, although many contemporary historiographies may argue the contrary, Scotus and Ockham do not occupy the late modern or postmodern world. Rather, the present thesis brings Barth and the late medievals into dialogue because they share certain family resemblances and articulate their moral theologies utilizing a common grammar regarding the relationship of the freedom and power of God to the miracles of goodness and human redemption.

The method out of which the present thesis unfolds may be described as broadly postliberal—that is, with an ecumenically-minded interest on a shared doctrinal grammar in the moral theology of Barth and certain late medieval voluntarist theologians. The genesis of such a method may be found in the later Wittgenstein, yet is the ecumenical perspective of George Lindbeck that provides the proper orientation and development of such a “postliberal” method. Finally, after applying such a method, the historiography of Alasdair
MacIntyre will provide both the frame and the canvas on which an account of voluntarism will be repainted.

4.1 An Ecumenical Interest

Barth himself took great measures to overcome ecclesial division and this thesis finds its home in the spate of recent work dedicated to examining Barth’s relations to Catholic theology. But two dialectical caveats should be made in the assertion that the present thesis has an ecumenical interest.

First, Duns Scotus and William Ockham are not Catholic. This simple but unfortunately contentious observation may be illuminated by a story told by Stanley Hauerwas of his introduction in 1970 to the largely Catholic theology faculty at the University of Notre Dame:

It did not occur to me to identify as a Protestant or Catholic ethicist. I simply thought I was doing Christian ethics. What that meant can be illustrated by an exchange during my initial interview for the position at Notre Dame. I was asked what I would like to teach. Among the courses I mentioned I said I would like to teach a course on Thomas Aquinas. In response I was asked why, as a Protestant, I wanted to teach Aquinas, because Aquinas was a Roman Catholic. I challenged that description, pointing out that Aquinas could not have known he was a Roman Catholic because the Reformation had not yet taken place. I then observed that I had no reason to think Aquinas was only of use to Roman Catholics. As a Christian ethicist I assumed Aquinas was fair game for anyone committed to doing Christian ethics in a manner that reflected what I thought to be the growing ecumenical commitments by Catholics and Protestants.

46 Amy Marga, Karl Barth’s Dialogue with Catholicism in Göttingen and Münster: Its Significance for his Doctrine of God (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010); Donald W. Norwood, Reforming Rome: Karl Barth and Vatican II (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015); Benjamin Dahlke, Karl Barth, Catholic Renewal and Vatican II.

Just as Hauerwas insists that Aquinas is not, strictly speaking, a *Catholic* theologian, due to his predating the Reformation, one may say the same about Scotus and Ockham. Perhaps *Aeterni Patris* is partially to blame here, as it was in the wake of that encyclical that many of Barth’s Protestant critics accused him of “going the way of scholasticism” and succumbing to “crypto-Catholicism” since he could “quote Anselm and Thomas with no sign of horror.”\(^{48}\) Barth’s contemporaries simply could not fathom a Protestant theologian’s engagement with such material. The restorationist argument of *Aeterni Patris* aside, the insistence that pre-Reformation voices are “Catholic” and not “Protestant” is simply mistaken.

Secondly—and almost in contradiction to the preceding observation—Scotus and Ockham are just as *Catholic* as Thomas Aquinas. To be sure, *Aeterni Patris* establishes the “immortal works” of the “Angelic Doctor” as a baseline for the restoration of Catholic philosophy.\(^{49}\) But that same Leonine movement that propelled Thomism as a force in the early twentieth century also inspired Franciscan-led initiatives toward publishing critical editions of the works of Scotus and Ockham.\(^{50}\) As promising as it is that so many Barth scholars are now turning to the work of Thomas Aquinas, a next step in such ecumenical engagement would be to approach Catholic theology in a broader (*kata-holikos*) perspective.

Christian theology—and Scotist theology, in particular—suffered a great loss when, following the Act of Supremacy, Thomas Cromwell’s commissioners destroyed any and all

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\(^{48}\) Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, xiii. This passage occurs immediately after Barth’s iconic condemnation of the *analogia entis*.


manuscripts of Scotus’s works that they could find in Oxford.\textsuperscript{51} One of the aims of the present thesis is to counteract that destruction and work toward reconciliation. By necessity, Barth, like so many others, knows the work of Scotus and Ockham only from secondary sources. With the advantage of critical editions now in publication, Barth scholars (as well as others) now have invaluable resources \textit{zuhanden}. The present thesis aims to take advantage of this to advance the cause of ecumenical theology and Barth studies, in particular. As G. K. Chesterton’s memorable quip about tradition as a democracy of the dead makes clear, theology in the Christian tradition must not begin with the Protestant Reformers, nor must it end with Thomas Aquinas.\textsuperscript{52}

4.2 A Grammar for Dialogue

In his later work, as exemplified in \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, Ludwig Wittgenstein turned from his earlier ruminations on mathematical logic and initiated the “linguistic turn” of twentieth-century analytic philosophy. Wittgenstein struggled with doing philosophy in such a way that philosophers were actually talking about the same thing, when so often they are doing different projects altogether. A focus point around which his linguistic turn took place is his notion of \textit{Sprachspielen}, or language games. He hesitates to define this term too strictly, however, as “these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use

\textsuperscript{51} William A. Frank and Allan B. Wolter, \textit{Duns Scotus, Metaphysician}, Purdue University Press Series in the History of Philosophy (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1995), 11, 16n39. Correspondence from Richard Layton to Cromwell describes pages of Scotus’s works being used, quite literally, as toilet paper. A very recently published history of Oxford, also describes a return visit of the commissioners, who “found the quadrangle filled with the leaves of Duns’ manuscripts, and a Buckinghamshire gentleman called Grenefelde gathering them up for ‘sewelles or blawnsherres to keep the deer within the wood, and thereby have the better cry with his hounds.” See L. W. B. Brockliss, \textit{The University of Oxford: A History} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 131.

\textsuperscript{52} Gilbert K. Chesterton, \textit{Orthodoxy} (New York: John Lane, 1909), 85.
the same word for all,—but that they are related to one another in many different ways.”

This notion of relation opened up for Wittgenstein space to talk about family resemblances (*Familienähnlichkeiten*): “I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc., etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family.”

As Margaret Lavin writes, “We can often see a striking resemblance between several generations of the same family. This resemblance is due to many features that overlap and criss-cross. The unity of games is like a family resemblance, and this is also the case with sentences and descriptions.” Wittgenstein’s definition of the language game, then, depends upon relationship but not necessarily the same kind of relationship. There are similarities between parents and children, amid siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles and nieces and nephews—and even among distant ancestors and their descendants. The range of resemblances is far too broad to reduce to precise definition. “How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that we should describe *games* to him, and we might add: “This *and similar things* are called ‘games’”. And do we not know any more about it ourselves? Is it only other people whom we cannot tell exactly what a game is?—But this is not ignorance. We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn.”

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54 Ibid., §67 [pp. 27–28].


in Lavin’s words: “Any attempt to give a precise formulation to a theory of family resemblance misses the basic point of the metaphor, first by interpreting it as something other than a metaphor and then constructing a theory which itself falls prey to the very snare the metaphor uncovers.” Wittgenstein continues, however, that definitions may be proposed, as long as they are preliminary for the purpose of philosophical investigation: “To repeat, we can draw a boundary—for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept unusable? Not at all!”

At this point Wittgenstein offers concrete examples of colors and leaves:

When someone defines the names of colours for me by pointing to samples and saying “This colour is called ‘blue’, this ‘green’ . . . .” this case may be compared in many respects to putting a table in my hands, with the words written under the colour samples.—Though this comparison may mislead in many ways.—One is now inclined to extend the comparison: to have understood the definition means to have in one’s mind an idea of the thing defined, and that is a sample or picture.

The sample cannot be exhaustive of the term, but it can provide guidance in one’s investigation. Here is where Wittgenstein’s linguistic functionalism—that is, language as use—becomes evident:

Here also belongs the idea that if you see this leaf as a sample of ‘leaf shape in general’ you see it differently from someone who regards it as, say, a sample of this particular shape. Now this might well be so—though it is not so—for it would only be to say that, as a matter of experience, if you see the leaf in a particular way, you use it in such-and-such a way or according to such-and-such rules. Of course, there is such a thing as seeing in this way or that; and there are also cases where whoever sees a sample like this will in general use it this way, and whoever sees it otherwise in another way.

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57 Lavin, 92.

58 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §69 [p. 28].

59 Ibid., §73 [p. 30].

60 Ibid., §74 [p. 30].
In order to properly investigate anything, then, it is of paramount importance to pay attention to how terms are used.

With respect to the present investigation of whether Barth is a voluntarist, then, it is paramount that the specific use of terms such as “voluntarism,” “divine command,” “will,” and “absolute power” be examined. As has already been shown in this introduction, there are many theologians who currently employ these as terms of disapprobation. The final chapter, in particular, will scrutinize the use of such terms among those theologians affiliated with the term radical orthodoxy. But, along the way, the intervening chapters will look to see how such terms have been understood according to a broader historical tradition. As Wittgenstein writes: “A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of the use of our words.—Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connexions’.”

A related arc within the later Wittgenstein’s “linguistic turn” is his focus on grammar and the “connexion” that he sees with theology, in particular. “Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.)” This “Theologie als Grammatik” has become a mantra for postliberal theology, most notably in George Lindbeck’s The Nature of Doctrine. To be sure, Lindbeck’s use of Wittgenstein is more implicit than explicit, with few substantive references to Wittgenstein—and his references are more to secondary studies of Wittgenstein than the enigmatic writings of the philosopher himself. Margaret Lavin helps

61 Ibid., §122 [p. 42].
62 Ibid., §373, [p. 99].
to unpack Wittgenstein’s use of “grammar” when she writes that “When Wittgenstein employs the metaphor of grammar, he is suggesting a form of life, a culture.”

Grammar refers to a form of life for the purpose of clarifying the games we play and the style of life we live. . . . An expression has meaning only in this stream of life, and the stream of life is caught up in the grammar of natural languages. Grammar, as a form of life, is public; it displays our forms of life. Our forms of life are in conventions and customs, but these must not be seen as arbitrary outcomes and, in theology, our grammar is not some other theory about religion but a way of showing the patterns of our religious behaviour.

In other words, grammar sets out the rules in which certain language games are played. But such games are more than mere play—they refer to the manner in which one lives and believes. Perhaps “lifestyle” could be one way of putting this, but that flirts with being too flippant. One’s “form of life” is shaped (or informed) by the rules and definitions that provide grammatical structure. Again, language is use and its grammar is therefore the world in which one lives—or, perhaps more appropriately, the limited but subjectively absolute world within one’s hermeneutical horizons.

It is this functionalist and clarificatory aspect of Wittgenstein’s linguistic turn that is adopted by Lindbeck for ecumenical purposes. Baffled by the claim of ecumenical dialogue partners who discover that, after years of separation and mutual anathemas, “positions that were once really opposed are now really reconcilable, even though these positions remain in a significant sense identical to what they were before,” Lindbeck sought to develop a theory of doctrine that would account for such seemingly impossible reconciliation. Unfortunately, many studies of Lindbeck’s theory fail to take this “ecumenical matrix” into proper

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64 Lavin, 90.

65 Ibid.

66 Lindbeck, 15.
account. Although attention is given to the issue of interreligious dialogue and Lindbeck’s approach vis-à-vis the fides ex auditu of Romans 10:17, this is done to the complete exclusion of intrareligious ecumenical dialogue.

As an exercise in ecumenical theology, the present thesis utilizes Lindbeck’s theory in its proper “ecumenical matrix” in order to determine points of agreement or, at the very least, “family resemblances” between the late medieval “voluntarism” and Karl Barth’s moral theology. A brief description of Lindbeck’s theory is therefore in order.

Lindbeck utilizes a functionalist definition of doctrine as “communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action.” Such a “cultural-linguistic” approach views doctrine as the grammar that provides rules to regulate proper practice. This is precisely Lindbeck’s solution to the ecumenical enigma of reconciliation-sans-capitulation. “Rules, unlike propositions or expressive symbols, retain an invariant meaning under changing conditions of compatibility and conflict.” Thus the practices regulated by doctrine may change while doctrinal rules remain the same—just as a singular grammar may govern a sublime concatenation of words

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67 Michael Root, in a festschrift for Lindbeck, laments this lack of attention toward the ecumenical impetus at work, citing Gordon Kaufmann’s observation that Lindbeck should not have been “so intent to put his important insight so exclusively into the service of the theologically conservative enterprise of ecumenical debate, with its diverse parties all wishing to keep their theological cakes even at the very moment they are consuming them.” See Gordon Kaufmann, review of The Nature of Doctrine, by George Lindbeck, Theology Today 42 (1985): 241, cited in Michael Root, “Identity and Difference: The Ecumenical Problem,” in Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck, edited by Bruce D. Marshall (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990): 184n2.


69 Lindbeck, 18.

70 Ibid.
in an almost innumerable number of sentences. Lindbeck employs an analogy from the practice of driving an automobile. The British rule to drive on the left side of the road and the American rule to drive on the right—while “unequivocal in meaning and unequivocally opposed” are both binding, yet reconcilable under changing conditions.

Thus oppositions between rules can in some instances be resolved, not by altering one or both of them, but by specifying when or where they apply, or by stipulating which of the competing directives takes precedence. Similarly, . . . both transubstantiation and at least some of the doctrines that appear to contradict it can be interpreted as embodying rules of sacramental thought and practice that may have been in unavoidable and perhaps irresolvable collision in certain historical contexts, but that can in other circumstances be harmonized by appropriate specifications of their respective domains, uses, and priorities.71

Thus Lindbeck’s rule theory offers ecumenical theology a way to look at those “family resemblances” of Wittgenstein’s investigations. “The novelty of rule theory . . . is that it does not locate the abiding and doctrinally significant aspect of religion in propositionally formulated truths, much less in inner experiences, but in the story it tells and in the grammar that informs the way the story is told and used.”72 By turning to narrative and grammatical rules, then, ecumenical theology may host discussions between those who disagree on doctrinal propositions. “Doctrines regulate truth claims by excluding some and permitting others, but the logic of their communally authoritative use hinders or prevents them from specifying positively what is to be affirmed.”73

Such an approach is able to account for doctrinal change and development over time.

Religious change or innovation must be understood, not as proceeding from new experiences, but as resulting from the interactions of a cultural-linguistic

71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., 19.
system with changing situations. Religious traditions are not transformed, abandoned, or replaced because of an upwelling of new or different ways of feeling about the self, world, or God, but because a religious interpretive scheme (embodied, as it always is, in religious practice and belief) develops anomalies in its application in new contexts.\textsuperscript{74}

Lindbeck’s own example is that of Luther’s teaching on justification by faith—it wasn’t “invented . . . because he had a tower experience.” Rather, that experience “was made possible by his discovering (or thinking he discovered) the doctrine in the Bible.”\textsuperscript{75} But one may just as easily apply Lindbeck’s approach to teachings on moral theology, the divine will, the human will, the distinction between absolute and ordained power, and so on. The regulative grammar disclosed by an examination of the use of such terms will assist in understanding how the voluntarism of the late medieval period and that of modernity are different creatures—and, respective to the present thesis, that the emphasis on divine command in Barth’s moral theology emerges not from modern voluntarism but rather shares and develops several familial traits with the late medieval scholastics.

The \textit{common loci} (Aristotle’s \textit{topoi}, as borrowed by Melanchthon’s \textit{Loci Communes}) of the present thesis, then, are the moral theology of Karl Barth and late medieval scholastic moral theology. Therefore this project will examine primary sources from the works of Karl Barth and various medieval scholastics in their original languages and, if available, their English translation. It will also reference secondary sources in order to both clarify the primary sources and explicate the various issues and debates in current scholarly interpretation. Special \textit{loci} include voluntarism, rationalism, omnipotence (namely, absolute and ordained power), command, virtue, conscience, and deliberation.

\textsuperscript{74} Lindbeck, 39.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
In order to advance the claims stated above, this thesis will proceed along both historical- and systematic-theological lines, with consistent attention to the clarification of terms and ideas. Given the extent to which various key terms related to this project (e.g., “voluntarism” and “rationalism”) have been used rhetorically—for either pejorative or positive ends—but lacking specificity, the heuristic approach here will be to discover the meaning of terms in their use, rather than accede to the confusion and misplaced confidence that inevitably results from assuming all uses refer to the same object. Thus a cognitive-propositional approach is circumvented in preference for a postliberal, regulative theory of moral doctrine. A reconciliation-sans-capitulation will then be possible among Barthians, on the one hand, and contemporary critics of voluntarism on the other.

4.3 A Historiography of Tradition

Another approach to such reconciliation without capitulation may be found in Alasdair MacIntyre’s unique account of tradition in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, in which he develops the standard narrative of the Thomistic synthesis of otherwise distinctive Aristotelian and Augustinian traditions. But MacIntyre’s account of this synthesis is about more than Thomas. What MacIntyre accomplishes here is a meditation on the very nature of *tradicia*—that is, what it means to hand over something. Of course the common dictum *traduttore traditore* bears witness to the dialectic at the heart of translation. But, in MacIntyre’s telling, it is the very nature of tradition—in contradistinction to Enlightenment encyclopaedia and hermeneutic-of-suspicion genealogy—to gather multiple distinct voices into a coherent unity. In fact, it is precisely that dialectical approach to tradition that constitutes MacIntyre’s understanding of reconciliation-sans-capitulation.
In the introduction to *Three Rival Versions*, MacIntyre asks whether “the de facto failure” of advocates of antithetical presuppositions “to communicate with each other . . . is not simply an unfortunate accidental side effect of the specializations of the social structure of the contemporary university” or “is grounded in something more fundamental.”

MacIntyre is primarily thinking of advocates of Enlightenment encyclopaedia and Nietzschean genealogy, but he is also reflecting on the original audiences to whom his lectures were delivered in Edinburgh and Yale. Setting out his “key concepts” as *incommensurability* and *untranslatability*, MacIntyre proceeds to ruminate on the manner in which diametrically opposed perspectives may share in conversation.

Such perspectival reconciliation constitutes, for MacIntyre, the very definition of a moral enquiry of tradition. As the classical narrative of the Thomistic tradition goes, that tradition originated in a dialectical synthesis of the seemingly irreconcilable Augustinian and Aristotelian perspectives. On the one hand stood a neo-Platonic epistemology of divine illumination and revelation and the correction of the perverted will by means of grace—and on the other stood an Aristotelian teleology in which “the intellect discovers itself” in the gradual process of actualizing its potentiality and thereby rules the will by arriving at a rational knowledge of the good.

Such “rival traditions of enquiry” appeared to be irreconcilable, thus precipitating the outright condemnations of Aristotelian rationalism by Stephen Tempier, bishop of Paris, in

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77 Ibid., 105–11.
the latter thirteenth century. For MacIntyre, however, the Thomistic synthesis of both traditions constitutes the way in which traditions of moral enquiry proceed—by incorporating seemingly opposing perspectives and synthesizing them within a continuing conversation.

To be sure, MacIntyre’s metanarrative of modernity understands voluntarism and late medieval moral theology very differently from the present thesis. Nevertheless, the ecumenical, reconciliative impulse at the heart of MacIntyre’s historiography of tradition provides a necessary methodological procedure for the present project—that is, the dialectical engagement of differing perspectives in the furtherance of reconciliation and the advancement of moral discourse. Furthermore, as will be shown in the concluding chapter, the account of Barth’s voluntaristic moral theology provided in these pages offers a constructive supplement to MacIntyre’s account of the history of moral enquiry.

5 Procedure

Following the present chapter, this thesis is divided into three parts: divine command from above, divine command from below, and divine command from within. The second and third chapters will compose the first part on divine command from above, focusing on theological voluntarism in medieval scholasticism and Barth’s moral theology, respectively. Chapter 2 examines the advent of voluntarism within medieval scholasticism and, in particular, the distinction between the potentia absoluta and the potentia ordinata, referenced in contemporary scholarship as the “dialectic of divine omnipotence.” This distinction is important due to its potential for dialectically “rounding out” or nuancing various sorts of emphases on the divine will. Peter Damian, Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, and

78 Ibid., 105, 111.
William of Ockham each constructed very different forms of this distinction in their use of it, and this chapter will examine each in order to clarify and discriminate among them. After surveying the history of the distinction prior to the Condemnations of 1277—which for the purposes of this thesis serves as the linchpin between high and late medieval theology—the chapter will focus on distinguishing the positions of Scotus and Ockham on the various issues surrounding the divine will and divine power. As will be shown, Scotus and Ockham both worked to balance divine omnipotence with divine constancy—a balance that Barth will make explicit by means of a dialectical synthesis.

The third chapter will turn from late medieval formulations of theological voluntarism to examine Barth’s account of the divine command, will, and power. After briefly attending to Barth’s own reading of Scotus and Ockham in his early lectures on Calvin, this chapter will examine the early development of the divine command as a guiding principle for Barth’s moral theology and the consistent maintenance of that principle throughout the *Münster Ethics* (1928) and the *Church Dogmatics* (1956–75), such that ethics always follow from dogmatics. The account in chapter 3 will then focus upon the excursus in the *Church Dogmatics* II/1 in which Barth evaluates the distinction of divine omnipotence. Barth is keenly aware of the various uses of the distinction and responds to them accordingly. However, as the section on Barth’s reading of Scotus and Ockham makes clear, he was not as familiar with the primary literature and relied heavily on secondary sources. He is therefore able to critique the development of the dialectic of divine omnipotence while missing out on important nuances explained in the previous chapter. Ultimately, however, Barth advocates a radical theological voluntarism that emphasizes divine omnipotence as the source of the
good. Yet, like Scotus and Ockham, Barth is concerned to synthesize that omnipotence with divine constancy.

Likewise, the second part comprises chapters 4 and 5 on ethical voluntarism in medieval scholastic moral theology and that of Karl Barth. Chapter 4 begins with an account of ethical voluntarism up to the Condemnations of 1277, when the language of liberum arbitrium shifted to libertas voluntatis. This early section examines the work of Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas, in particular, and various debates regarding their moral psychologies. This chapter then turns to focus on ethical reflection among the late medieval scholastics—again, Scotus and Ockham, in particular. Scotus and Ockham each have their own unique moral psychology in which the will, conscience, deliberation, and the virtues receive varying degrees of attention and definition. It will be shown how Scotus struck a compromise between the positions of Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas on conscience and the virtues. It is Scotus’s depiction of moral deliberation as informed by conscience and the virtues, however, that is most pertinent to the chapter that follows. With his erasure of formal distinctions—such as that between the intellect and the will—Ockham has his own unique approach to moral psychology. There is a tension in Ockham’s ethical thought, however, as he cannot seem to resolve positive (revealed) and non-positive (philosophical) ethics. His interpretation of the former, however, bears a striking resemblance to Barth’s brand of ethical voluntarism.

Chapter 5 will then present Barth’s ethical voluntarism as a dialectical synthesis of the Scotist and Occamist approaches detailed in the previous chapter. It will be seen how Barth (1) takes a Scotist approach to moral deliberation by making it a transient, momentary step in the moral act following the acquisition of the virtues of the will and (2) resolves the tensions
in Ockham’s ethics by doing away with philosophical ethics altogether, adopting an eschatological development of Ockham’s approach to positive (revealed) morality vis-à-vis a unique interpretation of conscience and advocating entry into a transcendent realm of obedience to the divine command.

The final section is composed of a single chapter under the heading “Divine Command from Within.” After providing a constructive synthesis of the preceding chapters, chapter 5 will evaluate whether and to what extent Barth may be considered as having succumbed and contributed to the pitfalls of modernity—namely, inordinate emphasis upon power, insufficient attention to freedom, and irrational and arbitrary ethics. This chapter will defend Barth’s unique brand of voluntarist moral theology, as informed by developments in late medieval scholasticism, against a variety of alternative readings. In particular, this chapter will compare the resulting picture of Barth’s brand of voluntarism with several grand metanarratives of the Western world’s demise in modernity in which voluntarism has been implicated in bringing about that demise. The work of several contemporary and influential scholars, many of whom fall broadly within what has been called “Cambridge Thomism” will be examined and critiqued. Then the final chapter will turn from the methodological use of MacIntyre’s historiography of tradition to a substantive reformulation of it. In short, Barth’s voluntarism—principally, his eschatological definition of conscience—will be shown to reconcile a voluntarist tradition of moral enquiry with the teleological tradition that it has been accused of leaving behind. In conclusion, this final chapter will signal the broader implications for Barth studies, moral and political theology, liturgical theology, and specific systematic-theological issues such as analogical method and questions regarding the relationship between nature and grace.
Before proceeding with the first section on divine command from above, a note on the title is in order. There are three senses in which “Keeping the Command” is appropriate. The first—and most obvious—sense is how Barth uses it in *Das Halten der Gebote*. Barth’s moral theology is first and foremost about the moral agent *keeping* the command. The second sense looks to Barth’s role in the broader history of theology, as Barth *keeps* divine command as a viable—and *necessary*—way to do theological ethics. In the post-Kantian atmosphere where deontology defined the field, Barth was bold to maintain such a radically voluntarist method. The third sense, then, is about keeping divine command as the primary interpretive principle in studies of Barth’s ethics. It is the vogue among contemporary Barthians to re-envision Barth’s moral theology along the lines of a natural-law Thomism. But, just as Barth was not afraid to be wholly voluntarist, as this thesis will show, neither should his readers.
DIVINE COMMAND FROM ABOVE
Chapter 2
Theological Voluntarism in High and Late Medieval Scholasticism

I say, therefore, that God can act otherwise than is prescribed not only by a particular order, but also by a universal order or law of justice and in so doing he could still act ordainedly, because what God could do by his absolute power that is either beyond or runs counter to the present order, he could do ordainedly.
—John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, dist. 44

God cannot do anything inordinately.
—William of Ockham, *Quodlibet* 6, Q. 1, art. 1

1 Introduction

Contrary to the presuppositions of their critics, the medieval exponents of theological voluntarism did not advocate the arbitrary divine dictator so often ascribed to them. While entertaining the possibility that God might act differently than is the case, they ultimately affirmed that—of all the options available—God has chosen to remain constant. Given such presupposed constancy, then, medieval voluntarists also sought to affirm God’s sovereignty. This dialectic between power and constancy, then, necessitated a grammar that could bear its weight. Such a grammar developed over the course of about 150 years, eventually forging a syntax designed to simplify the task of conceptualizing the exercise of God’s power. That syntax has come to be known in recent years as the dialectic of divine omnipotence, and it consists simply of a distinction between two modes of considering God’s power: absolutely and with respect to what has actually been ordained.

As the present chapter will demonstrate, this scholastic syntax—the dialectic of divine omnipotence—employs a simple modal logic and thereby simplifies theological discourse
about God’s sovereignty and the relative contingency or necessity of the world.¹ The medieval debate over the legitimacy of such a syntax, however, demonstrates the dialectical difficulty in affirming both God’s power and God’s constancy. By the time of the late medieval period, the dialectic of divine omnipotence was well established. But in order to understand the delicate balance that this grammatical tool upholds, it is paramount to bear witness to the various concerns of the high medieval period in which the dialectic finds its genesis and early development. As will eventually be demonstrated, there are strong family resemblances between the concerns of the high medieval scholastics and that of Karl Barth—namely, the dialectical balance of omnipotence and constancy. But it is then in the late medieval scholastics, by their presumption of success in achieving that balance, that a crack is made in the foundation that will eventually bring it crashing down. That crack, first made by canon lawyers and then inadvertently exacerbated by Scotus, is the use of a juridical analogy between the power of God and the power of the pope. Yet, despite the destruction inflicted by such juridical language, Scotus and Ockham still affirm the strength of the original foundation. Their confidence in the dialectical balance of divine power and divine constancy is not threatened because that balance is a fundamental presupposition—much as it is for Barth.

The present chapter bears a significant debt to the work of William J. Courtenay, who since the 1980s has done more than anyone to bring the dialectic of divine omnipotence into scholarly investigation. In the words of Francis Oakley, it is Courtenay who has

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¹ By “simple modal logic” the present thesis intends to convey the sense of a reasonable examination of necessity and possibility in the historical world. The advanced calculus of modal logic that began with Leibniz’s enquiries into possible worlds and later canonized in the work of Saul Kripke, with its own semantic systems bearing names such as K and S5, although bearing certain family resemblances, is a quite distant relative to the “simple modal logic” implied here.
demonstrated to the scholarly world that “any reading of the potestia absoluta which took it to denote a presently-active or operationalized divine power whereby God might in fact intervene to change or contradict the order of things which by his ordained power, he had established” was “mistaken.” And it is Courtenay who first identified the shift that took place with the juridical corruption of the dialectic by late medieval canon lawyers.

But this account, as fascinating as it is and despite the significantly scholarly attention that it has received from the world of medieval studies, has yet to be brought into conversation with the MacIntyre–Milbank metanarrative of modernity and the voluntarism of Karl Barth. The pages that follow will begin by tracing the genesis and development of the dialectic of divine omnipotence in the high medieval period—up to the Condemnations of 1277—and then it will proceed to examine the dialectic as treated by late medieval canon lawyers, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham.

2 The Dialectic in the High Medieval Scholasticism

2.1 Peter Damian

The story of the dialectic’s development begins in the spring of 1067, as the Benedictine Peter Damian—prior of Fonte Avellana and recently retired cardinal bishop of Ostia—visited the mother abbey, Monte Cassino, on his way home from the post-Easter Synod. In accordance with the thirty-eighth chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict, there was a reading


during the meal. On this occasion, the reading was from St. Jerome’s letter on virginity, in which one particular passage captured the attention of Peter and the abbot of Monte Cassino, Desiderius: “I will say it boldly, though God can do all things He cannot raise up a virgin once she has fallen. He may indeed relieve one who is defiled from the penalty of her sin, but He will not give her a crown.” An argument ensued between Peter and Desiderius regarding the extent of God’s power. Of course this had not been Jerome’s intent; his interest was not God’s power—or any lack thereof—but rather the emphasis in his correspondence with the desert mother Eustochium was the importance of maintaining one’s virginity. After all, once it is gone, it is gone, and the intent of Jerome’s statement likely terminated with this elementary observation. His invocation of divine inability, however, provoked a debate there at Monte Cassino almost 700 years later. What Peter accomplished in his argument, however, would in turn shape the debate for centuries to come. In short, Peter’s contribution framing the issue of God’s ability and volition in terms that foreground the eternity of God and the relative temporality of the world.

According to Peter’s recollection of the discussion, Desiderius took Jerome’s statement at face value, buttressing it with a case that God’s inability to restore virginity is rooted in the fact that God does not wish or desire such restoration to virginity (Deum . . . nisi quia non vult). In a classic case of l’esprit de l’escalier, Peter returned home from Monte Cassino and

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4 The text here is from Jerome’s “Letter 22 to Eustochium,” Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers II.6, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1893). The Latin text may be found in Migne 22, column 397, 91, para. 5; Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 150: Audentur loquor: cum omnia deus possit, suscitare virginem non potest post ruinam. Valet quidem liberare de poena, sed non valet coronare corruptam.

5 Qtd. in para. 4, p. 346; Latin text may be found in Peter Damian, De Divina Omnipotentia, ed. Paulo Brezzi and Bruno Nardi, Edizione Nazionale Dei Classici del Pensiero Italiano V (Florence: Vallecchi, 1943), 54.
promptly prepared a more thorough response in a letter of 89 chapters. Although his primary concern in this work subsists in safeguarding divine freedom and omnipotence, Peter is also concerned with the dialecticians of his day who read classical sources much too literally. Against Desiderius, then, Peter asserts that “If God can do none of the things that he does not wish to do, he does nothing but that which he wishes; therefore he can do none of the things at all, which he does not do.” Clearly, he finds Desiderius self-evidently in the wrong; thus the sheer repetition of his presumption that the same—that God cannot do anything that does not actually transpire—as nonsensical. “It follows, therefore, that whatever God does not do, he is totally unable to do.” Surely, he argues, the God’s ability is not bound by historical events. For Peter this reduces Desiderius’s case to absurdity, as surely the almighty God is not restricted to compliance with history.

For Peter such inferences confine the dialecticians to absurdity. Granting that the divine will is indeed the source of all that occurs, Peter insists that their claim that the divine will is thereby bound to what occurs is misguided and fallacious. God is not bound by temporality; 

6 Courtenay observes that although Berengar of Tours was the favorite bête noire of the day due to his refutation of sacramental realism, no such position disputing omnipotence can be attributed to him. Courtenay concludes that there have been some specific monastic schools of which Damian was familiar that were arguing for a necessitarian cosmology. Resnick goes further and identifies contemporaries of Peter Damian—Manegold of Lautenbach, Sextus Amarcius, Ekkehards IV of St. Gaul, Hugo Metellus, Odo of Tournai, and the anonymous author of the Regensburg rhetorical letters—who argued against “dialecticians” who used syllogisms to disprove the ability of God to have brought about the virgin birth of Christ, although he also argues that Berengar remains a likely suspect given his position on the Eucharist as one of arguing against the very possibility of changing the substance of the elements, to which his critics—Wolphelm of Brauweiler and Eusebius Bruno—answered that “God’s will is the very definition of possibility.” See Courtenay, Capacity and Volition, 27; Irven Michael Resnick, Divine Power and Possibility in St. Peter Damian’s De Divina Omnipotentia, Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 31 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 54–56, 77.

7 Damian, De Divina Omnipotentia, para 5., p. 346; Brezzi–Nardi, p. 54: Si nihil, inquam, potest Deus eorum quae non vult, nihil autem nisi quod vult facit; ergo nihil omnino potest facere eorum quae non facit.

8 Ibid., sequitur ergo ut quidquid Deus non facit, facere omnino non possit
on the contrary temporality is contingent upon God’s primary causality. Thus when situations change, they do so precisely because of the divine will: “As the will of God is the cause by which the things that were not yet made, originally came into being, so it is no less the efficient cause whereby those things that have been lost might return to the integrity of their state.” As the primary cause of all change in the world, God’s will possesses an absolute freedom.

Anticipating the challenge of theodicy, Peter addresses the pressing question why God declines to reverse such evils as a virgin’s violation (i.e., rape). His answer attributes God not with the lack of power to do so, but rather “the natural goodness of his exceptional forbearance.” From the observation that God does not perform a particular action, it does not follow for Peter that God lacks the ability entirely. Central to his argument, however, is the disparity between the temporal order and God’s eternity:

Otherwise it could be said that before the coming of the Savior, God was not able to bring forth a son from the womb of the Virgin, something, indeed, which he had never done, and which was never to be done but once. And yet, even though he had never done it, he was able both to wish it and to do it simply because it was good.

Indeed, Peter argues that the key to God’s power to effect change resides within God’s eternity.

It is evident, therefore, that the omnipotent God encloses all ages within the treasure of his eternal wisdom in such a manner, that nothing can be added to him and that, through the alteration of time, nothing can pass away from him.

9 Ibid., para 11, p. 350: sicut voluntas Dei causa est ut, quae necdum sunt condita, originaliter fiant, ita nihilominus efficax causa est ut quae sunt perdita, ad status sui ordinem redeant

10 Ibid., para 14, p. 351: quod tamen nequaquam referendum est ad impossibilitatem, sed ad naturalem potius singularis clementiae bonitatem

11 Ibid., 15, p. 351: Alioquin poterat dici ante Salvatoris adventum quia Deus creare non posset ex utero virginis filium, nimirum quod numquam fecerat, sed ne quidem nisi semel facturus erat; tamen et si numquam faceret, et velle et facere poterat quia bonum erat.
And so, while enduring at the ineffable summit of his majesty, he contemplates in one simple insight all things marshaled in his presence for review, so that for him it can never happen that past events will completely disappear or that future things will come to pass. . . . He contains within himself the march of all time.12

Unlike the theatergoer who must pay attention to this or that action but cannot attend to everything at once, Peter argues, God “rises incomparable above” and thereby “sees all things as simultaneously present to his gaze.”13 And whereas time moves for everyone within it and therefore appears as an external given, time is encompassed by a greater God “in [whose] eternity a fixed permanence pervades all things that outwardly, with the passage of the ages, flows on incessantly in instability.”14

The power of God has, in fact, established that what he has ordered to have happened, is impossible not to have happened; and what he has ordained to be, so long as it exists, is unable not to exist; and what he has appointed to happen in the future, can no longer not happen in the future.15

Peter asserts further that if, in the act of creation itself God changed the laws of nature (58), then surely God can change the laws of nature at his discretion. “Indeed, the very nature of things has its own nature, namely, the will of God.”16 Here is a prime example of a robust voluntarism in the waxing years of high medieval scholasticism.

12 Ibid., 30, cap. 7, p. 358: Constat itaque Deum omnipotentem sic omnia saecula in aeternae sapientiae suae thesauro concludere ut nec ad se quid accedere, nec a se quicquam per temporum valeat momenta transire. In illa igitur ineffabili suae constitueta conspectu, uno ac simplici contemplatur intuitu, ut sibi numquam penitus vel praeterita transeant vel futura succedant. . . . intra semetipsium omnium cursus temporum claudit.

13 Ibid., 33, Ita omnipotens Deus, quia omnibus quae volvuntur incomparabiliter supereminet, omnia simul suis subiecta conspectibus praesentialiter videt.

14 Ibid., 37, cap ix, in aeternitate eius omnia fixa permaneant, quae non fixa exstrinsecus saeculorum volumina indesiumer emanant.

15 Ibid., 44, cap. ix, Potest facere Deusde praeteritis, ut quod factum est, non fuerit factum, vel de praesenti, quod nunc est, quamdiu est, ut non sit, vel quod omnino futurum est, ut futurum non sit.

16 Ibid., 59, cap. xii, Ipsa quippe rerum natura habet naturam suam, Dei scilicet voluntatem; Brezzi-Nardi, 120n4 indicates a dependence here upon Augustine’s City of God 21.8: “we say that all portents are contrary to nature; but they are not so. For how is that contrary to nature which happens by the will of God, since the will
At the height of his argument, Peter invokes a simple modal logic, asserting that in God there is always a “potential potency”:

if the potency to do all things is coeternal to God, then it follows that God could have caused things that have happened, not to have happened. . . . And hence we must firmly and surely assert that God, just as he is in fact said to be omnipotent, can in truth, without any possible exception, do all things, either in respect to events that have happened or in respect to events that have not happened.17

Absolutely contingent upon the will of God, the world can always be otherwise. If forced to choose between God’s omnipotence and constancy, then, Peter Damian would opt for the former.

2.2 Anselm of Bec—and Canterbury

It is unfortunate that no record of Desiderius’s case, emphasizing the side of divine constancy over omnipotence, exists outside of Peter’s own account. A decade later, however, Anselm of Bec would provide an argument on behalf of divine constancy in his Proslogion.18 Following his claim that God is a being than which no greater can be conceived (quo nil maius valet cogitari),19 Anselm describes the attributes of this greatest being. Under the heading of in what sense God is omnipotent, Anselm asserts that there are indeed many things that God cannot do—namely, “be corrupted, or lie, or cause what is true to be false (as, for example, of so mighty a Creator is certainly the nature of each created thing?” See Saint Augustine, The City of God, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 776.

17 Ibid., 80, cap. Xvi, si itaque omnia posse coaeternum est Deo, potuit igitur Deus ut quae facta sunt, facta non fuerint. Constanter igitur et fideliter asserendum est quia Deus, sicut omnipotens dicitur, ita sine ulla prorsus exceptione veraciter omnia potest sive in his quae facta sunt sive in his quae facta non sunt. “Potential potency” constans . . . posse) is at ibid., 78, cap. xvi.

18 It is difficult to determine whether Anselm was aware of Peter’s correspondence with Desiderius so shortly afterward, but manuscript evidence shows that Peter’s letter indeed circulated quickly into northern France. See Courtenay, Capacity and Volition, 33.

to cause what has been done not to have been done)." Anselm’s reckoning here is that these things are not abilities that God lacks, but rather weaknesses that God circumvents.

Furthermore, it is only due to the vagaries of language that we think of these things as abilities rather than liabilities.

Yet a funny thing happened on the way to Canterbury. In his later work in *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm prioritized Peter Damian’s voluntarism in the course of explaining the incarnation as a free choice of God. Anselm did not abandon his earlier argument regarding the inability of God to lie, but rather shifted the weight of that inability to rest on a prior decision of the divine will.

All power follows the will. For when I say that I am able to speak or walk, “if I will” is understood. . . . Thus we can say that Christ was able to lie, if we understand, “if he willed.” But since he could not lie against his will, and could not will to lie, it is no less possible to say that he was unable to lie. So, then, he both could and could not lie.

In a key passage, Anselm set the stage for what would become the distinction between God’s ordained and absolute power.

For this is not to be called necessity, but grace, since he undertook it and holds fast to it freely, and under compulsion from no one. It is true that if you promise today of your own free will to give something tomorrow, and give it tomorrow by the same free will, you have to do the latter, if you can, just as you promised, unless you are to be a liar. And yet the person to whom you give it does not owe you any less for the costly favor than he would if you had made no promise, since you did not hesitate to make yourself a debtor to him before the time of the actual giving. . . . Much more, then, if God performs for man the good work which he has begun, we should ascribe the whole to grace,

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20 Para. 7, in Anselm, 103: *corrumpi nec mentiri nec facere verum esse falsum, ut quod factum est non esse factum.*

even though it does not befit him to fail in a good undertaking, because he undertook it all for our sake, and not for his own, since he is in need of nothing. For what man was going to do was not concealed from him when he made him, but despite this, in creating man of his own goodness, he freely bound himself, as it were, to complete the good work once begun. In short, God does nothing of necessity, since nothing whatever can coerce or restrain him in his actions.\textsuperscript{22}

Anselm’s assertion that God would limit God’s own self through a free decision of grace would shape the discussion for centuries to come. As Courtenay writes, “This concept of a self-binding God, with the companion concept of contingent, relative necessity as opposed to absolute necessity, had a major impact on the idea of divine omnipotence, particularly on what came to be conceived as ordained power over against power conceived in the abstract, absolute sense.”\textsuperscript{23} In the later Anselm’s advocation of God’s grace freely given, then, we see a voluntarism that manages to balance omnipotence with constancy.

2.3 Peter Abelard and His Critics

Peter Abelard, however, would turn Damian’s argument on its head, emphasizing God’s eternity in order to assert that God cannot do other than what God does.\textsuperscript{24} Specifically, it was Abelard’s proto-nominalist interpretation of divine immutability that called the shots: “his writings contain the earliest instance of what comes to be known as the principal opinio

\textsuperscript{22} II.5, in ibid., 149–50; Non enim haec est dicenda necessitas sed gratia, quia nullo cogente illum suscepit aut servat sed gratis. Nam si quod hodie sponte promittis te cras daturum, eadem cras voluntate das; quamvis necesse sit te cras reddere promissum si potes, aut mentiri, non tamen minus tibi debet ille facere non es coactus. . . . Quare multo magis si Deus facit bonum homini quod incepit, licet non decaet eum a bono incoepto deficere, totum gratiae debemus imputare, quia hoc propter nos non propter se nullius egens incepit. Non enim illum latuit, quid homo facturus erat cum illum fecit, et tamen bonitate sua illum creando sponte se, ut perficeret incoepturn bonum, quasi obligavit. Denique Deus nihil facit necessitate, quia nullo modo cogitur aut prohibitur aliquid facere.


\textsuperscript{24} Deus non potest facere nisi quod facit, nec dimittere nisi quod dimittit. (Quaestiones Magistri Odonis Suessionensis II, n298; quoted in Courtenay, Capacity and Volition, 44).
Nominalium, namely, that whatever God at one time knew, willed, or was able to do, he always knows, wills, or is able to do.”25 The genesis of this theory had to do with a particular view of the noun (nomen) that reduced its ultimate significance to one fundamental meaning that unifies any and all forms of that noun based on case, gender, or number. Verbs were treated similarly, such that tense, voice, and mood were ancillary to the central meaning of a word.

Abelard applied this theory to propositional logic in a way that illuminated both faith and theology. In terms of the former, that which the prophets believed was identical to that which the apostles proclaimed. In terms of the latter, God’s knowledge, will, and power was acknowledged to be immutable: what God knows God has always known, what God wills God has always willed, and what God does God has always done (and will always know, will, and do in the future). “The object of God’s knowledge is not an event or a propositional statement about an event, but timeless truth to which those tense-differing statements attest.”26

Abelard’s proto-nominalism impacted his understanding of divine volition and power as well: “Like God’s knowledge, the will of God lies outside time, while that which is willed (like that which is known) is in time.”27 Thus, from Abelard’s perspective within the temporal order, there are no other possibilities—what God has willed is all that may be the case. Courtenay observes that Abelard’s interpretation here resolves a tension between

25 Courtenay, Capacity and Volition, 46.
26 Ibid., 48.
27 Ibid., 48.
Anselm and Peter Damian. Whereas Peter granted complete unbridled power to God to do anything regardless of the temporal order, Anselm withheld the power to change the past (if only by grace).

The nomen theory, then, enabled Abelard to resolve this tension without adopting something as radical as God changing the past. Instead, he “protected the unchangeability of the past by not denying God’s power over the past but by limiting the sphere or range of divine activity in any moment of time to what God in fact has done, is doing, and will do.”28 For Abelard, God cannot change the past because, quite simply, in God there is no past to be changed.

Hugh of St. Victor, however, would use Anselm to critique Abelard, accusing him of repeating the arguments of the very same dialecticians against whom Peter Damian sparred and caricaturing Abelard’s position as saying that “God can not make other than He makes, nor make better than He makes.”29 In his refutation of Abelard, Hugh makes use of a dual power theory that would form the basis of the distinction between capacity and volition: “He Himself cannot be better. But all that He has made can be better, at least if He himself, who has the power, should so wish.”30 Courtenay points out, however, that Hugh did not push this further, but defaulted back to Anselm’s linguistic approach, where God’s inability to do the impossible is not a weakness but rather a strength, since “the power to do the impossible would not be power but non-power.”31

28 Ibid., 49.
30 Ibid., 40.
31 Ibid., 41; Courtenay, Capacity and Volition, 51.
The critique of Abelard would pick up steam in the years ahead, as William of St. Thierry enlisted Bernard of Clairvaux’s assistance in clarifying matters for the church. The latter would convene a council at Sens in 1140, at which Abelard’s position on divine power was held in error. In less than two months Abelard was condemned as heretical at both a trial in France and a subsequent appeal in Rome.  

2.4 Peter Lombard and the Sentences

Abelard’s influence on the doctrine of divine omnipotence would not cease, however. When Lombard compiled his Sentences less than twenty years later, Abelard’s nominalium reasoning was incorporated into some of the material dealing with divine power toward the end of the first book. Specifically, distinctions 40–44 all deal with some form of reasoning related to balancing possibility with constancy, and the timelessness of God’s attributes is frequently invoked to this end. The third chapter of distinction 41, for instance, asks whether the object of God’s (fore)knowledge is always (fore)known and has always been (fore)known.  

Divine constancy is affirmed in response: “For God always knows all things that he knows at any time: for he always had, has, and will have all knowledge that he has at any time.” Lombard’s exposition of this point—culminating in his Abelardian ascription of Christian faith to Old Testament prophets—is worth quoting at length:

[God] knows the same even now about this man’s birth and the world’s creation as he knew before they happened, although it is necessary to express this knowledge of his then and now by different terms. For what was then future is now past; and so the words must be changed to designate this.

32 Courtenay, Capacity and Volition, 52–53.

33 Sentences 1, dist 41, 3: An ea quae semel scit Deus vel praescit, semper sciat et praesciat, et semper scierit et praescierit.

Similarly, when we speak at different times, we sometimes designate the same day by the adverb “tomorrow,” when it is still to come; sometimes we call it “today,” when it is the present; sometimes we call it “yesterday,” when it is past. And so, before the world was created, God knew it would be created; after its creation, he knows it has been created. And yet this is not to know different things, but entirely the same thing about the world’s creation. Similarly, the ancient Fathers [of the Old Testament] believed that Christ would be born and would die, but we believe that he has already been born and died; and yet they and we do not believe different things, but the same.\(^{35}\)

That is, divine constancy—as presumed by Lombard—is such that one cannot read temporal vicissitudes or change in God. But it is still necessary to speak of such temporality from a perspective within the historical nexus. The fact of God’s immutability \textit{sub specie aeternitatus} does not change the fact that theology is articulated \textit{sub specie temporalis}, and it is by this attention to the grammar of theological sentences that Lombard, following Abelard, is able to affirm such a dialectic between possibility and constancy.

Later, in distinction 44, Lombard continues to borrow Abelard’s proto-nominalist reasoning, applying it to God’s will and power, affirming how God is always able to do what he once did and what he will do, but God only does those things at \textit{particular} times.\(^{36}\) And yet Lombard uses Abelard’s method to reverse (again!) Abelard’s conclusion in order to affirm \textit{both} omnipotence and divine constancy:

\begin{quote}
And so let us profess that God is always able to do whatever he once could, that is, to have all that power which he once had, and the power of that entire thing which he once had; but he is not always able to do all that which he was at some time able to do: yet he can do or have done what he could at some time do. Similarly, whatever he wills he willed, that is, he even now has the whole will which he once had, and he even now has the will of whatever thing he once had; and yet he does not will to be or to be done all that at some time
\end{quote}

\(^{35}\) Dist. 41, 3.4 in ibid., 1:229.

\(^{36}\) Dist. 44, 2 in ibid., 1:239–40.
he willed to be or to be done, but he wills it to have been or to have been
done.\footnote{Dist. 44, 2, 4 in \textit{ibid.}, 1:240.}

Again, divine constancy is a given. But it must be reconciled with a syntax of verbal tense
that presumes past, present, and future. So Lombard insists that, while God’s omnipotence
remains, God’s constancy requires that one speak—ever so briefly—of a divine inability to
do something at a different time than when God actually does it.

Courtenay finds that Lombard’s balancing act here (re)introduces the dialectic of capacity
and volition, ability and will, as the framework for interpreting divine power. “For Lombard,
God’s actions do not exhaust the range of divine power. Building on Abelard’s critics . . .
Lombard attacked the aspect of Abelard’s teaching and reaffirmed the Augustinian
distinction between what God is \textit{able} to do and what God \textit{wills} to do.”\footnote{Courtenay, \textit{Capacity and Volition}, 54.}

That is, Augustine
provides a fundamental distinction between capacity and volition, “between what God is
theoretically able to do and what God actually wills to do.”\footnote{Ibid., 54.}

Perhaps the most interesting distinction in Lombard’s \textit{Sentences} in this respect is distinction
43, where Lombard adjudicates the opinion of Abelard (and Desiderius) that God is able to
do nothing other than what he does.\footnote{Dist. 43, 1, 1. Invectio contra illos qui dicunt Deum nil posse nisi quod vult et facit.}
In the penultimate paragraph, he quotes Augustine’s
\textit{potuit, sed noluit} (“he could but did not wish to,” referring to Christ’s ability to raise Judas as
he raised Lazarus),\footnote{Dist. 43, 1, 9., quoting Augustine’s \textit{De Natura et Gratia} 7.8. Lombard, \textit{The Sentences}, 1:238.}
which, according to Courtenay’s analysis, “utilized the different
meanings of two modal verbs, *posse* on the one hand and *nolle* or *velle* on the other.”

This division of ability and will is fundamental to the establishment of the dialectic of divine omnipotence. “God *can* do more than he actually *wills* to do; divine capacity exceeds divine volition.”

In effect, Lombard deconstructs Abelard, incorporating proto-nominalism in order to argue that God *can* change the past—but doesn’t wish to. The classic form of the dialectic of divine omnipotence—with terminology of *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*—does not yet make its appearance here in Lombard’s *Sentences*. But his devotion of an entire distinction to the question at the heart of that dialectic ensured that the issue would persist along the lines drawn in his exposition.

2.5 The Dialectic Takes Shape

The nominalist solution, however, would all but disappear after Lombard, as realists concerned with safeguarding a progressive, supersessionist account of salvation history asserted the present’s eclipse of the past. To affirm, with Abelard, that Jews believed the same as Christians denied the error of the former and the exclusive grace enjoyed by the latter. Thus the nominalist conflation of time receded from the discussion of divine omnipotence.

The classic form of the dialectic of divine omnipotence rapidly took shape in the early part of the thirteenth century. In 1200 an anonymous commentary on Romans would use *absoluta* to describe divine power considered in itself, over against what God has actually decided to do.

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42 Courtenay, “The Dialectic of Omnipotence in the High and Late Middle Ages,” 244.

43 Ibid.
In 1210 Godfrey of Poitiers used *absoluta* as an adjective modifying *potentia*, stating that there are things that God can do *de potentia absoluta* that God does not do and cannot do *de potentia conditionali*. In 1220 William of Auxerre distinguished between God’s power “purely considered” (*de potentia pure considerata*) and as it is revealed within the “established order” (*de potestate determinata*). Soon thereafter a string of writers—William of Auvergne, Hugh of St. Cher, Guerric of St. Quentin, Albert the Great, and the author of the *Summa Halensis* all used “absolute power” (*potentia absoluta*) and “ordained power” (*potentia ordinata*) as exclusive terms for denoting these two spheres of divine capacity and volition.

This is not to say that every scholastic theologian after this point adopted the formulation. Several early-generation Franciscans, including Bonaventure, refused to employ the dialectic due to an aversion to placing God within a temporal setting. Courtenay describes the reasoning well: “The distinction of absolute and ordained power hypothesizes a time before God acted, even before he willed—a time when God had before him the full range of possibility. . . . ascribing to God a moment of choice. . . . A God with freedom of choice is a deliberating God, if only for an instant.” The risk of a deliberating God is an arbitrary God lacking constancy. Possibility—and therefore omnipotence—opens up a space where God might do otherwise than God does. That many theologians would have an aversion to such a

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45 Courtenay, “The Dialectic of Omnipotence in the High and Late Middle Ages,” 246–47. Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition*, 23, however, points out the important observation that the *Summa Halensis* posits *potentia ordinata* not as a subset of the totality of possibilities within God’s *potentia absoluta*, but rather the latter contains all those things that God does *not do de potentia ordinata*.

46 Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition*, 92, 97.

47 Ibid., 78.
notion is understandable, but the syntax underlying the dialectic of divine omnipotence, as articulated by Lombard, the later Anselm, and even Peter Damian, denies the possibility of arbitrariness.

2.6 Thomas Aquinas

Thomas employed the distinction, although not in his commentary on distinctions 42–44 of Lombard’s Sentences. Rather, Thomas treats the question whether God can do other than he does in two places: in his lengthy disputation on divine power (De Potentia Dei) and in the Summa Theologiae. Curiously, Thomas does not use the terminology of potentia absoluta and potentia ordinata, although he does employ the conceptual apparatus of capacity and volition. He writes in De Potentia Dei: “For even as the divine goodness is made manifest through these things that are and through this order of things, so could it be made manifest through other creatures and another order: wherefore God’s will without prejudice to his goodness, justice and wisdom, can extend to other things besides those which he has made. . .

. It is clear then that God absolutely can do otherwise than he has done.” Capacity and volition, ability and will, are indeed distinguished in Thomas.

This is a far cry, of course, from any sort of voluntarism. Thomas insists that the divine will, which commands divine power, is directed by the divine intellect. “The intellect directs the will, and the will commands the executive power. The intellect, however, does not move except by proposing to the will its appetible object, so that the entire movement of the

48 De Potentia Dei 1:5; Thomas Aquinas, On the Power of God (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1952), 26–33; and Summa Theologiae I, Q. 25. Thomas also employs the formulation in the third book of his commentary on the Sentences, as he tackles the necessity of the incarnation.

intellect is in the will.""50 And the will has its own end to which it is bound: “Now the natural end of the divine will is the divine goodness, which it is unable not to will."51 Thus God’s willing something other than the good would commit a contradiction—the one limit on divine power that virtually every scholastic theologian affirmed (even God cannot make a round rectangle, for instance). Thomas, therefore, affirms a distinction between divine capacity and volition without prioritizing volition tout court.

In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas does invoke the language of *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*. In Ia Q. 25, art. 5, where Thomas asks whether God can do what God does not do, his first reply defines the distinction:

> What is attributed to His power considered in itself God is said to be able to do in accordance with His *absolute power*. Of such a kind is everything which verifies the nature of being. . . . On the other hand, what is attributed to the divine power, according as it carries into execution the command of a just will, God is said to be able to do by His *ordained power*. In this manner, we must say that by His absolute power God can do other things than those He has foreknown and pre-ordained to do.52

In the same reply, Thomas also invokes the divine constancy:

> But it could not happen that He should do anything which He has not foreknown and not pre-ordained that He would do. For His doing is subject to his fore-knowledge and preordination, though His power, which is His nature, is not. For God does things because He so wills; yet He is able to do so, not because He so wills, but because He is such in His nature.53

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50 Ibid., 30.

51 Ibid., 31.

52 *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 25, art. 5, ad 1, in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945) 1:267. Given Thomas’s use of the dialectic in this way, it is a curious observation that the Dominican Romanus Cessario makes in his *Introduction to Moral Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 60: “A realist theologian wants to avoid interpreting eternal law by appeal to the distinction between divine ‘absolute’ and ‘ordained’ powers that late fourteenth-century Nominalists such as Gabriel Biel introduced into Western theology.”

53 Ibid.
Thomas’s use of the dialectic of divine omnipotence, then, affirms God’s freedom and ability to do otherwise than God has done while refusing to deny divine constancy. Thomas resolutely rejects Abelard’s contention that divine power is restricted to the present order out of a prior commitment to wisdom and justice. Rather, “the order established in creation by divine wisdom . . . is not so equal to the divine wisdom that the divine wisdom should be restricted to it.”\textsuperscript{54} That is, the world may reflect the goodness of God’s power, but it does not exhaust that goodness. God’s goodness, wisdom, and power are greater than their manifestation in the created order.

Unlike some of his Franciscan contemporaries, Thomas did not avoid the dialectic of omnipotence out of a fear of positing a moment of divine deliberation. Thomas’s divine psychology, with its inner workings of intellect, will, and power, was sufficiently robust that it could handle such logical prioritization.

Thomas’s articulation of the dialectic of divine omnipotence is important for assessing the voluntarism of Karl Barth because Barth will ascribe his affirmation of the dialectic to that articulation in question 25 of the \textit{Summa Theologiae}. But Barth will also incorporate a set of juridical terms introduced by late medieval canon lawyers and appropriated by Duns Scotus in his own definition of the dialectic. It is to that shift that the present chapter now turns.

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Summa Theologiae} I, Q. 25, art. 5, resp, in \textit{Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas}, 1:267.
3 The Dialectic in Late Medieval Scholasticism

3.1 The Juridical Shift

The Parisian articles of 1277 did not address the dialectic of divine omnipotence, but they no doubt fostered an environment that welcomed its use. Courtenay argues, however, that they were not as important for the development of the dialectic as a seemingly unrelated debate over whether members of mendicant orders could hear confession. In the latter half of the thirteenth century, canon lawyers began to use the distinction between potentia absoluta and potentia ordinata to describe the relationship of papal power to canon law—that is, according to his “absolute power” the pope could suspend canon law, his “ordained power,” in order to make exceptions in extraordinary cases. “Thus, while the extraordinary actions of God outside the ordinary course of nature and moral law were placed within potentia ordinata by theologians, papal actions outside the law were, according to the canonists, expressions of potentia absoluta.” The canon lawyers, then, translated potentia ordinata and potentia absoluta not as volition and capacity, respectively, but as an agent’s action relative to its legal status.

Precedence for such a (mis)translation can be found in some earlier scholastic attempts to understand miracles according to modality. In the mid-twelfth century Gandulph of Bologna parsed how one may speak of the possibility of miracles, distinguishing possibile est secundum usitatum currsum naturae rerum (possibility according to the usual course of

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56 Courtenay, Capacity and Volition, 95–96.

57 Ibid., 94.
nature) from a larger realm of divine possibility.\textsuperscript{58} And soon thereafter Alain de Lille made the observation that while some things are possible for agents with inferior power, more things are possible for agents (like God) with superior power.\textsuperscript{59} But while these observations were valid (if benign) theological explorations of divine omnipotence, they never utilized the terminology of \textit{potentia absoluta} and \textit{potentia ordinata}. The closest one comes is Praepositinus of Cremona who, in the early thirteenth century, described Gandulph’s and Alain’s two realms of possibility in terms of common causes (\textit{causae communes sive consuetae}) and special, miraculous causes (\textit{causae speciales sive non consuetae}). As Courtenay notes, this leads in the direction of \textit{potentia ordinata} and \textit{potentia extraordinaria}, but does not apply to the dialectic explored thus far.\textsuperscript{60}

The move of the canon lawyers, however, effectively turned \textit{potentia absoluta} into a \textit{potentia extraordinaria}. And while this language may have been helpful in understanding human agency relative to law, it did not translate well back into the theological realm. Courtenay observes that “the potential arbitrariness in the exercise of any form of human sovereignty, an arbitrariness deplored but widely recognized in medieval society, contained serious dangers for the understanding of God and for the distinction of absolute and ordained power if applied to the concept of divine power.”\textsuperscript{61} It is this move of canon lawyers that opens the door for theological voluntarism to be charged with fostering an arbitrary God.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 69, 82n20.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 69, 82n21.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 70, 82–83n22.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 94–95.
3.2 John Duns Scotus

It is indeed Duns Scotus who inadvertently stumbles through that open door. Whenever Scotus uses the dialectic of divine omnipotence as a tool for answering theological questions, he employs it in a manner consistent with others—that is, as capacity and volition rather than the legal status of actions. But when Scotus actually defines the two terms while exploring distinction 44 in his *Ordinatio* commentary on Lombard’s *Sentences*, he imports legal language for illustration. Later Scotists would seize such language and “operationalize” the distinction such that God’s absolute power is that by which miracles—as exceptions to the ordained, natural order—are performed. But Scotus himself never understood the distinction in that sense.

First, Scotus changes Lombard’s question, “Whether God can do anything better than he does,” to the question asked by Thomas in *Summa Theologiae* Ia, Q. 25, art. 5: “Could God have made things otherwise than he has ordered them to be made?” In his reply he immediately defines the two powers:

In every agent acting intelligently and voluntarily that can act in conformity with an upright or just law but does not have to do so of necessity, one can distinguish between its ordained power and its absolute power. The reason is that either it can act in conformity with some right and just law, and then it is acting according to its ordained power (for it is ordained insofar as it is a principle for doing something in conformity with a right or just law), or else it can act beyond or against such a law, and in this case its absolute power exceeds its ordained power.

62 Ibid., 100–101.


Scotus’s syntax here bears a strong resemblance to the grammar of modality—a simple modal logic contrasting possibility and necessity—established by his predecessors. Yet the legal analogy, while not univocal, is risky. Scotus’s reference to “a right or just law” implies that there can be wrong and unjust laws, and God’s ordained power shares no such implication. Scotus continues:

And therefore it is not only in God, but in every free agent that can either act in accord with the dictates of a just law or go beyond or against that law, that one distinguishes between absolute and ordained power; therefore, the jurists say that someone can act de facto, that is, according to his absolute power, or de jure, that is, according to his ordained legal power.65

Where Scotus diverges from previous tradition is his use of the distinction not as a dialectic of divine power only but as one that regards every agent (omni agente).66 And it is upon that analogical foundation that Scotus imports the de facto–de jure distinction of the “jurists” (iuristae).67

Scotus recognizes that this only applies to lawgivers, and not just any agent, applying the analogy to “whenever the law and its rectitude are in the power of the agent” (quando in potestate agentis est lex et rectitudo legis).68 If they are not, then “its absolute power cannot exceed its ordained power” (potentia eius absoluta non potest excedere potentiam eius ordinatam)—that is, unless it acts “inordinately” (agat inordinate).69 Such an inordinate

65 Ibid.


67 This legal distinction of de jure and de facto had been introduced in the mid-thirteenth-century Decretals of Gregory IX and Hostiensis. See Courtenay, “The Dialectic of Omnipotence in the High and Late Middle Ages,” 267n43.

68 Ordinatio I.44.4, in Scotus, Opera Omnia VI, 364.

69 Ibid.
agent is indeed a poor analogy for an absolutely constant God, and it is precisely that contrast that Scotus highlights here.

If the law is under the agent’s power, then “the agent can freely order things otherwise than this right law dictates and still act orderly” (“potest aliter agens ex libertate sua ordinare quam lex illa recta dictet”).\(^{70}\) The lawgiver determines the law. Scotus then illustrates this with “a ruler and his subjects in regard to a positive law” (“principe et subditis, et lege positiva”).\(^{71}\)

Scotus’s choice of illustration is an interesting one. On the one hand, it is merely an illustration of the ability of a lawgiver to determine the law. The law is not its own authority, but rather it reflects the authority of its author. The pope, for instance, determines canon law by his implementation and execution of it. The pope can make exceptions—allowing members of mendicant orders, for instance, to hear confessions—and the law is not broken but rather expanded. A mendicant hearing confession without permission of a lawgiver would be breaking the law and inordinately so, but the lawgiver granting permission modifies the law ordinately. Similarly, then, God does not act outside of the potentia ordinata, because that power is ordained by God. There is no inordinate action by God, just as there is no illegal activity by an absolute monarch.\(^{72}\)

“I say, therefore, that God can act otherwise than is prescribed not only by a particular order, but also by a universal order or law of justice and in so doing he could still act ordainedly, because what God could do by his

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\(^{70}\) Ibid. I.44.5, 364–65.

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 365.

\(^{72}\) Van Den Brink, Almighty God, 79.
absolute power that is either beyond or runs counter to the present order, he could do
ordainedly.”  

Scotus will put this logic to various theological uses—in his exploration of justification and
grace, the beatific vision, and ethics. But, if only by way of illustration, he enters through
the door opened by the “jurists” and creates obfuscation in the process. Courtenay
conjectures that Scotus’s use of this illustration was intended to maintain the possibility that
Pope Boniface VIII could make a special exception regarding mendicant privileges. Indeed,
Scotus was among a small group of Franciscans who had sought permission to hear
confessions, but the Bishop of Lincoln denied that request on the basis of Boniface’s *Super
cathedram*. “Presumably the greater good of the church justified the discrepancy with
[Scotus’s] general usage [of the dialectic of divine omnipotence], with earlier Franciscan
theologians, and with the earlier theological tradition in general.”  

After Scotus, several Scotists repeated his incorporation of juridical language in
understanding God’s absolute and ordained powers—namely, Hugh of Novocastro and Peter
of Atarrabia. More on these figures will be presented following an account of William of
Ockham’s interpretation of the dialectic of divine omnipotence. As the preceding pages have
shown, however, Duns Scotus’s formulation of the dialectic of divine omnipotence bears
such strong family resemblances to formulations that preceded it. Like so many theologians

73 *Duns Scotus on the Will & Morality*, 259.


75 Ibid., 103.

76 Randi, “A Scotist Way of Distinguishing Between God’s Absolute and Ordained Powers,” 47–50; Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition*, 115–16
before him, Scotus merely wished to affirm a simple modal logic in which divine possibility may be articulated without compromising what God has indeed ordained to be the case. Omnipotence and absolute constancy are presumed here. Where Scotus deviates from his predecessors, however, is his adoption of legal terminology that opens up a risky analogy. One would be hard-pressed to insist that Scotus viewed such an analogy univocally—although contemporary scorn of Scotus is certainly along these lines.\textsuperscript{77} The juridical operationalization of the dialectic, at least as borrowed by Scotus, was merely an illustration. Scotus did not intend to open the door to the idea of inordinate divine action. As will be shown in the following pages, William of Ockham would also incorporate the political analogy, while insisting even more resolutely than Scotus the impossibility of multiple operationalized “powers” in God.

3.3 William of Ockham

William of Ockham incorporated the dialectic in many of his writings, often using per potentiam divinam or per potentiam Dei as substitute terms for potentia absoluta.\textsuperscript{78} Ockham’s use of the dialectic was fairly traditional, as a way to probe necessity and possibility. Ockham’s insistence on the absolute simplicity of God safeguards against the idea of two operationalized divine “powers.” The dialectic of divine omnipotence is for Ockham, rather, a tool to accommodate the limitations of human reason. Ockham’s use of the dialectic introduced a new interpretation.

\textsuperscript{77} Recently Daniel Horan has defended Scotus from Cambridge Thomist charges of univocity, while allowing for the possibility of such univocal interpretations among later Scotists. See Daniel P. Horan, \textit{Postmodernity and Univocity: A Critical Account of Radical Orthodoxy and John Duns Scotus} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

\textsuperscript{78} Courtenay, \textit{Capacity and Volition}, 119.
In his *Quodlibetal Questions*, Ockham defines the terms under the question whether a person may be saved without the infused supernatural virtue of *caritas*. His response is worth quoting at length:

> I claim that God is able to do certain things by his ordained power and certain things by his absolute power. The distinction should not be understood to mean that in God there are really two powers, one of which is ordained and the other of which is absolute. For with respect to things outside of himself there is in God a single power, which in every way is God himself. Nor should the distinction be understood to mean that God is able to do certain things ordinately and certain things absolutely and not ordinately. For God cannot do anything inordinately.\(^79\)

First, Ockham reclaims the nominalist simplicity eclipsed two centuries earlier and reduces the two powers to one singular *potentia*. Thus the distinction between the two is not in God but rather in human *considerations* of divine power.\(^80\) Secondly, Ockham maintains the impossibility of inordinate divine action. He continues, eventually incorporating a similar recognition of the papal analogy:

> Instead, the distinction should be understood to mean that “power to do something” is sometimes taken as “power to do something in accordance with the laws that have been ordained and instituted by God,” and God is said to be able to do these things by his ordained power. In an alternative sense, “power” is taken as “power to do anything such that its being done does not involve a contradiction,” regardless of whether or not God has ordained that he will do it. For there are many things God is able to do that he does not will to do, according to the Master of the Sentences, book 1, dist. 43. And these things God is said to be able to do by his absolute power. In the same way, there are some things that the Pope is unable to do in accordance with the laws established by him, and yet he is able to do those things absolutely.\(^81\)

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\(^81\) *Quodlibet* 6, Q. 1, art. 1, resp., in William of Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions*, 2:491–92.
Courtenay describes Ockham’s use as returning to Thomas’s use of the distinction, but (similar to Scotus) it is his definition that smuggles in risky political analogies. But, as Van Den Brink demonstrates, Ockham had his own political battles that encouraged the use of such analogies with human power. It was Ockham’s bête noire, Pope John XXII, who rejected the distinction in its theological usage—but not in its application to papal power, in which John was all too eager to claim the prerogatives of a potentia absoluta. After all, the theological distinction by this point could be taken to mean that those avenues ordered toward salvation—the church and sacraments—were not necessary.\(^82\) It was the pope’s rejection of the distinction within the doctrine of God that eventually allowed Ockham to accuse John XXII of heresy—due to its apparent return to an Abelardian determinism.

That said, Ockham indeed is more conservative—and less obfuscating—in his approach to the dialectic of divine omnipotence.\(^83\) Ockham demonstrates that, juridical analogies notwithstanding, a robust understanding of divine sovereignty and power vis-à-vis the distinction between potentia absoluta and potentia ordinata does not necessitate an arbitrary God who whimsically flits between various determinations of the good. As Armand Maurer ascertains, “Ockham does not portray God as a capricious monarch: his world is ruled by physical and moral laws which give it order and rationality, but they are contingent on his freely establishing them. The laws are necessary, though their necessity is not absolute but


\(^{83}\) Van Den Brink 1993, 82–83.
contingent on the divine will.” Ockham maintains the balance between divine omnipotence and divine constancy.

4 Conclusion

When Henry VIII employed the dialectic in order to facilitate a papal dispensation from his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, he was appealing to the legal—as opposed to the theological—use of the term. That Scotus and Ockham used legal analogies for theological purposes has proven to be most unfortunate for their reputations.

Hugh of Novocastro went so far as to add a third power: potentia ordinabilis—that is, in addition to (1) those things that God ordains to do and (2) those things that God could do but does not is added (3) those things that God can do (and perhaps does) outside of what God has ordained. In this way potentia absoluta was maintained as mere capacity or possibility, and potentia ordinabilis was operationalized as an actual power that God may perform (e.g., to perform miracles). Peter of Atarrabia (also known as Peter of Navarre) incorporates additional legal terminology, such that potentia absoluta is akin to the iudicium sententiale and potentia ordinata is patterned after the iudicium legale. One may receive a judgment of condemnation under the law, but a lenient judge may impose a sentence that does not conform to the legal judgment. Eugenio Randi—who uncovered these Scotist interpretations of the dialectic in the 1980s—suspects that Peter of Atarrabia articulates

85 Courtenay, “The Dialectic of Omnipotence in the High and Late Middle Ages,” 258.
“what Scotists thought about Scotus’s thought, even if someone today would find it a ‘misunderstanding’. **88** Furthermore, Randi argues, Peter’s depiction resonates with those whom Heiko Oberman would set as the “harvest” of the Middle Ages and the “dawn” of the Reformation—figures like Pierre d’Ailly, Gabriel Biel, and John Major. For it is in the work of these theologians that the doctrine of justification took on such legal terminology. While the present thesis cannot go into detail with these figures, consider Oberman’s discussion of Gabriel Biel:

Concerning Biel’s statement that God, *de potentia absoluta*, can accept someone who does not possess the habit of grace, the question arises: does the term not seem to imply that God can alternate between ordinate and inordinate behavior? To this Biel answers with the words of Occam that the *potentia ordinata* and *absoluta* should not be understood as two different ways of divine action, as God’s actions *ad extra* are undivided. Nor is it to be understood that God can act sometimes with, sometimes without order—this would contradict God’s very being. But the distinction should be understood to mean that God can—and, in fact, has chosen to—do certain things according to the laws which he freely established, that is, *de potentia ordinata*. 89

Thus, as Randi avers, the Occamist tradition’s concern to avoid any notion of dividedness in God sets it apart from the Scotist tradition. In response to Randi, Courtenay adds that the incorporation of juridical language that operationalized the distinction and opened the door to a God who operates “outside” the bounds of what is *ordinata* was not limited to first- and second-generation Scotists. Even a Dominican trained in canon law, Pierre de Palude, explained the dialectic in such a manner. 90

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88 Ibid., 49.
90 Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition*, 117.
The present thesis does not aim to cast blame, however, so adjudicating between contemporary medievalists on this issue is outside the scope of the present enquiry. What this discussion highlights, rather, is the syntactical development of a grammar of possibility, a simple modal logic, in which divine capacity and divine volition were understood in the late medieval period. As has been demonstrated, theological voluntarism did not begin with Scotus and Ockham, but rather may be seen throughout the high and late Middle Ages (and before that in the work of Augustine). Overwhelmingly throughout these centuries, a dual emphasis on the omnipotence of God and the freedom of the divine will was maintained in such a way that also presumed the absolute constancy of God.

As seen in the above survey, the distinction between potentia absoluta and potentia ordinata has a long and varied history as a way to describe divine omnipotence. Even granting significant changes in late medieval scholastic definition of the terms, however, even those theologians described as voluntarists consistently maintained a balance between divine constancy and omnipotence. God may indeed act differently than God does, they argued, but ultimately God only acts as God does. By utilizing a simple modal logic, then, theological discourse about divine sovereignty, the absolute freedom of the divine will, and the relative contingency or necessity of the world was facilitated.
Chapter 3

Karl Barth’s Theological Voluntarism

In virtue of the absolute power of this will the whole world might have been different. In fact, of course, God simply acts in accordance with his plan that aims at the saving of the elect, in accordance with his ordained power. He thus wills everything as it actually is. Nevertheless, and this is the decisive point, the possibility remains, and has to be considered, that God might have willed and acted differently.
—Karl Barth, The Theology of John Calvin, 54

What God is able to do de facto, He is also able to do de jure, and He can do nothing de facto that He cannot also do de jure. This can all be stated equally well in reverse. God’s moral and legal potentiality is also His physical.
—Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics II/1, 526

1 Introduction

As seen in the previous chapter, the voluntarists of late medieval scholastic theology balanced divine omnipotence with and infallible divine constancy. The dialectic of absolute power and ordained power provided a tool to highlight the freedom and sovereignty of God in relation to the world. Although many early Franciscans were reticent to use the dialectic due to hypothetical temporalities that it introduced into the Godhead, positing a time of deliberation as God decides a course of action from a range of possibilities, Scotus boldly incorporated the dialectic into his own exposition of divine omnipotence. Ockham followed Scotus’s lead, albeit in a more conservative fashion, while insisting upon a nominalist reduction of parts in God to simple aspects of a unified God.
Critics of voluntarism in recent years have focused upon Scotus and Ockham as the progenitors of a moral system enabling tyrants and delusional extremists. Yet, as the previous chapter has demonstrated, the voluntarism of Scotus and Ockham emerged from a struggle to maintain both the constancy of God and the contingency of the world. The vulnerability here is Scotus’s definition of the dialectic of divine omnipotence, in which he incorporates a political analogy bound to the historical particularities of his time but his use is consistent with tradition.

Karl Barth’s moral theology is indeed an heir to this voluntarist tradition. His own account of late medieval scholasticism is appreciative of these two figures, notably their emphasis on the absolute range of divine power and its relation to God’s ordained power. Barth saw Scotus and Ockham as theological allies, although his critique of their “intellectualism” (not in contrast with voluntarism) parallels his critique of nineteenth-century figures reformulating theology in the wake of Kant.

But apart from his own historiographical account, Barth’s moral theology takes its cue in a similarly balanced voluntarist fashion, establishing God’s absolute power alongside divine constancy in the attempt to achieve a proper synthesis of contingency and necessity. This chapter tells that story.

2 Karl Barth on Scotus, Ockham, and Reformation Historiography

As the development of the present thesis turns from late medieval scholastic reflection on ethics and the divine command to corresponding themes in Karl Barth’s moral theology, it is important to first examine Barth’s own historiographical views on the late medieval
scholastics. It will be shown that to a significant extent Barth credits both Scotus and Ockham with the theological turn that took place in the Reformation and that he finds this turn a theological necessity. Furthermore, Barth was not only aware of contemporary historiographical debates surrounding these figures and their relationship to the Reformation, but he contributed to those debates as well, forging his own unique reading of theological history.

In 1922, Barth delivered a series of lectures at Göttingen on the theology of John Calvin. This series opened with an examination of medieval theology in order to find both contrasts and commonalities. The historiography of the Reformation had been a contentious issue in the early twentieth century, with Troeltsch claiming the Reformation for the Middle Ages and Loofs and Seeberg claiming it for modernity.\(^1\) Within the latter camp, therefore, the question of the shift to modernity fell back to the role of late medieval scholasticism.

In 1913 Ernst Troeltsch published a brief study comparing the Renaissance and Reformation in the preeminent *Historische Zeitschrift*.\(^2\) Troeltsch takes note of those like Baur and Dilthey who see both movements together as “the producer of the modern spirit,” with the Reformation acting as a “religious renaissance.”\(^3\) However, Troeltsch concludes that the significance of their similarities is due more to the suppression of judgment and the blurring

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\(^3\) Ibid., 262–63: *die Erzeuger des modernen Geistes; religiöse Renaissance*. 
of differences. Unlike Dilthey’s conflation of the Renaissance and Reformation as a triumph of individualistic subjectivism over against the theological metaphysics of the Middle Ages, Troeltsch contends that it is only on this side of the Enlightenment that the lasting difference anticipated by the Renaissance was not “unfettered individualism” but “the progressive loosening from the beyond, from the church as an institution of grace, and from the monastic ideal.”

On this basis Troeltsch locates the Reformation as a sort of last hurrah of medieval metaphysics before its demise in the Enlightenment.

Friedrich Loofs, however, had critiqued Troeltsch’s reading of the historical development of Protestantism on several fronts, finding incredulous Troeltsch’s claims that Luther was medieval due to a privileging of Pauline theology over the Sermon on the Mount and that the Anabaptists were progenitors of the modern spirit. Loofs was also engaged in another debate, however, among those who agreed with him regarding the Reformation as having definitely broken from the Middle Ages. This debate was over where the Reformation found its impetus. How far back did the medieval–modern split go? Loofs found the modern spirit in those who “pointed beyond the Catholic understanding of Christianity,” identified as Bernard of Clairvaux and William of Ockham.

Reinhold Seeberg, however, saw the

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4 Ibid., 265: Urteilen zurückgedrängten und verwischten Unterschieden.

5 Ibid., 268: fessellosen Individualismus; zunehmende Lösung vom Jenseits und der Gnadenanstalt der Kirche und dem mönchischen Ideal.


Reformation prefigured in a broader range of influences, including William of Ockham but also German mysticism, conciliarism, and even Augustine.8

There was also a significant debate between Loofs and Seeberg regarding the theology of Scotus—particularly whether Baur was correct in asserting that the will of the Scotist God is arbitrary and random. Loofs held that “despite its erroneous form” Baur’s claim “is not without a grain of truth,” whereas Seeberg called it “quite one-sided” (ganz einseitig) and clarified that according to Scotus the human will and the divine will have their own respective fields-of-play (Spielraum).9

The reading list for Barth’s lectures on Calvin include all of these sources by Troeltsch, Loofs, and Seeberg.10 Although Barth’s selection of reading material appears to consist of secondary sources alone, Seeberg’s Lehrbuch is a multivolume collection of primary texts arranged according to doctrine. Of course the arrangement itself presents Seeberg’s own secondary reading of the development of doctrine, and Barth’s reading reflects his tertiary distance from the medieval scholastics. Of course Barth may be excused for not assigning broad chunks of non-edited primary material from the medieval scholastics in a course on Calvin. What is significant for the purposes of the present thesis, however, is that Barth’s reading of late medieval scholasticism is shaped by the debates present in these readings and

88 Ibid., 36.


10 Barth did not include Seeberg’s study of Scotus, but he does include the fourth edition of his Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1917).
that he forms his own interpretation of the Reformation as a response to those specific debates.\textsuperscript{11}

Ever the iconoclast, Barth concluded that the Reformation is neither modern nor medieval in its orientation, but rather is peculiarly “both antimodern and antimedieval.”\textsuperscript{12} Not only was the Reformation a break from the Middle Ages, but it was a break from the general trajectory of human history away from the gospel. For Barth the Reformation is much bigger than any particular theologian, doctrine, or shift in social or political paradigms. It is, rather, “a decision, a breakthrough, an event” that is about “not the genius or originality of the individual thinker but the quality of what all of them were thinking with more or less force and depth.”\textsuperscript{13} Even more than a collective movement, however, the Reformation indicates in somewhat Hegelian fashion the divine work on “this world’s stage,” with God “not directly visible” but evident nonetheless.\textsuperscript{14} In this respect Barth grants that the Reformers themselves were “only relatively and not absolutely different” from the continuum of human history. The Reformation is “at every point in continuity with what came before and what came after.”\textsuperscript{15} The difference that the Reformation makes is the drawing of an “antithesis . . . not that of Protestant and Roman Catholic but of God and humanity.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{11} Barth himself warns his students: “Use the literature on the subject, but with caution. For nowhere is it more obvious how much the historical position of the historian affects the picture given, as we see in the controversies regarding this problem over the last fifteen years.” Barth, \textit{The Theology of John Calvin}, 14.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 66.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 15.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 16.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 18.
As Barth contrasts the Reformation and the Middle Ages, he finds that the difference “cannot in any case be clear-cut or absolute.” Barth is highly critical of Protestant scholars who essentialize medieval scholastic theology and disparage it on such shaky rhetorical grounds.

“Highly critical terms, such as ‘formalism,’ ‘pedantry,’ ‘credulity,’ ‘artificial reconciliation of reason and revelation,’ and the like, come almost automatically to our minds and on our lips when we hear the word ‘scholastic.’ Though there is naturally some truth in them, they are polemically crude, reminding us with some aptness of the foxes who could not get at the grapes.” And Barth is particularly incisive toward his confrères who fail to live up to their own standards:

We can hardly complain of formalism if we ourselves have no form at all, nor of pedantry if we want to establish our supposedly better truth no less perspicaciously or simply than the scholastics could do, nor of credulous submission to authority if we are not to ignore the serious problem of authority but be willing to think it out to the end, nor of the way of combining reason and revelation unless we have better counsel to offer on the relation. We have here presuppositions that in general are missing among modern Protestants.

Barth reveals his admiration for medieval scholastic theologians, particularly their “ability to think,” their “pleasure in thinking,” and their “dialectical courage and consistency,” and bemoans those of his contemporaries who refuse to respect either scholasticism or the Catholic church in general.

17 Ibid., 25.
18 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 26.
Where Barth draws the distinction between reformed and medieval theology is in the turn away from a “theology of glory.” The theology of glory is not hampered by epistemological challenges, but recognizing those challenges it proceeds “to the heart of the mystery” without reservation. “It is venturesome in the way in which it sets its goals and tries to reach them. It is youthfully fresh and healthy and robust and sparkling in all that it does. As readers we feel that we are in the hands of guides who with absolute certainty and confidence know what they want.” Medieval theologians leave no room for “banalities, generalities, or obscurities,” or even “the basic uncertainty . . . whether theology itself is necessary or useful, nor for the related teeth-chattering question whether and how far theology is a science.” On the contrary, the medieval theology of glory according to Barth operates on the assumption of continuity between God, the world, and humanity. Neither does it see a difference between reason and revelation, nor between the authority of the Bible and that of the church.

Barth is not entirely dismissive of a theology of glory, adding that “before we dismiss it with the catchword semi-Pelagianism, we need to consider its basic and helpful and consistently observed practical aim of showing there really is a path from earth to heaven, of giving visibility to eternal paradoxical truth, expounded in time and basically divested of its paradoxical character.” Nor does Barth think with so many other Protestants of his time that

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21 Ibid., 27–32.

22 Ibid., 27.

23 Ibid., 27.

24 Ibid., 31–32.

25 Ibid., 33. The later Barth, of course, would emphasize that a theology of the cross is not at the expense of a theology of glory. The two are coterminous. Consider the following words articulated regarding the importance of honor in his ethics of creation:
the Reformation was precipitated upon a genuine revolution in soteriology, instead finding the imputation of merit and infusion of grace in Thomas and Scotus just as “illuminating or credible” as anything in the Reformers. Barth marvels before “the great harmony, the mixture of boldness and sagacity, of profundity and common sense” that he sees in medieval theology, comparing it to “the harmony of the monastery garden” and “of the Gothic cathedral.”

Despite its ultimate continuity with medieval theology, Reformation theology for Barth begins with “the emergence of a totally new style, the outbreak of a total restlessness.” The Reformation was a change in attitude, the “deliberate and angry rejection” of the medieval “intellectual habitus,” a deconstruction from within whereby “the glory of God itself brought disaster to the theology of glory.” The new thing ushered in by the Reformers was this: “It made the discovery that theology has to do with God.”

Such a non-sequitur may seem inappropriate for intelligent theologians such as Thomas and Scotus, but Barth also emphasizes that this failure of theology to attend to its subject belongs

How high is the honour of man even as the creature of God and object of His world sovereignty is revealed in the inconceivable fact that God Himself becomes man in Jesus Christ-man in all the limitation in which every other man is also man. . . . how can this honour be overlooked, forgotten or denied in face of this foundation? How can “dignity” be denied to even the most miserable of men when the glory of God Himself was the honour of this man nailed in supreme wretchedness to the cross?


26 Barth, The Theology of John Calvin, 33–34.

27 Ibid., 36.

28 Ibid., 39.

29 Ibid.
not just to Middle Ages. It is the same critique that Barth has of modern theology, and this is where his unique approach to historiography comes to the fore. Modern theology also fails to make this radically theocentric turn, which only sharpens Barth’s charge of hypocrisy toward those of his colleagues who decry the speck of glory in the medieval eye while ignoring the logs in their own. “May it not be that much of what we have thus far regarded as our supremely modern striving, our whole modern style of religion even with its Christian coloring, is at its deepest level medieval?”

Barth then goes on to identify five points in which the contradictions between the gospel and the theology of glory could have bubbled up into something like a Reformation, but instead simmered back down into the status quo: Western monasticism (St. Benedict, the Cluniac reforms, St. Francis of Assisi); various Augustinian theologians (John Scotus Erigena, Anselm of Canterbury, Bonaventure, and Meister Eckhardt among many others); the late medieval theologies of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham; mysticism (returning to Bonaventure and Eckhardt but also including Hugh of St. Victor, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas à Kempis et al); and the Renaissance humanists (Erasmus and various biblical scholars).

For obvious reasons, the central of these five points—Scotus and Ockham—are of importance to the present thesis.

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30 Ibid., 40.
31 Ibid., 50–67.
Barth reads these two late medieval figures as “questioning the unity of the path of knowledge, of the stairway from reason to revelation.” His brief assessment of their contributions is worth quoting in full:

> Theology is a practical, not a speculative, discipline, said Duns, and Occam agreed that we cannot know God’s existence, essence, or reality intuitively from ourselves or from the things of nature. God cannot be an object for us. Occam went further, however, when he showed that our reason not only cannot prove dogma but might make it appear absurd. Reality consists only of individual things, said Duns, and again Occam went further with his even sharper thesis that this is the reality originating in the idea of God, whereas the terms or names or concepts out of which reason constructs science exist only in the soul of the knowing subjects, so that logic is the only real science. This thesis explains the historical use of the term Nominalism for the Occamist school, though the name by no means exhausts the significance of the school.

Although Barth does not examine the specifically moral theology of late medieval scholasticism, what he calls attention to is the radically theocentric turn evident throughout their work. Barth particularly admires Ockham’s doctrine of faith as “a free gift by which the mind believes on account of God and against itself.” This “fundamentally nonmedieval insight” leads into their doctrine of God, which Barth similarly appreciates vis-à-vis the depiction of God as absolute will: “Over against the whole system of causal necessity that we call the world God stands contingently as himself an indeterminate first cause, as free will in the absolute, as will that has its norm only in itself.”

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32 Ibid., 52.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 53, although Barth’s source actually attributes this to Pierre d’Ailly, a disciple of Ockham. See 53n11.

35 Ibid., 54.
Barth is particularly impressed with the theological voluntarism of Scotus and Ockham as seen in their use of the dialectic of divine omnipotence: “In virtue of the absolute power of this will the whole world might have been different. In fact, of course, God simply acts in accordance with his plan that aims at the saving of the elect, in accordance with his ordained power. He thus wills everything as it actually is. Nevertheless, and this is the decisive point, the possibility remains, and has to be considered, that God might have willed and acted differently.”

He even affirms Ockham’s claim that, in Barth’s words, “God could have made the morally good other than it is in fact, that hatred of God, theft, and adultery could be meritorious, had not God's command ordained the opposite.” And in support of Scotus he writes that “in both the religious and the moral sphere . . . things are pleasing to God only because of his acceptance of them on the basis of his free will . . . and that when we speak of God in the forms of the age, when we speak of what he did, does, or will do, the now of eternity that we mean is the truth of what we say.”

To everything else that is not divine, God “stands in a basically contingent relation; he is free relative to it.”

Barth further answers those historians who—like Loofs and, before him, Baur—read Scotus and Ockham as advocates of a “capricious God.” Barth specifically takes Seeberg’s side in that dispute. “As these theologians studied and deepened the concept of power, their unsettling reminder of God’s absolute power was meant to anchor the more firmly the

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 55.
authority of the truth that holds good by God’s ordained power.” Barth was thus not only aware of debate around the dialectic of divine omnipotence, but he was conversant in precisely how Scotus and Ockham resolved this dialectic.

Here we see the extent to which the early Barth was willing to go down the path of theological voluntarism. He saw Scotus and Ockham as allies, albeit those who would not ultimately sacrifice the theology of glory for a theology of God. His ultimate indictment of them consists in what he sees as a “charming and playful intellectualism,” not unlike what he finds among modern theologians: “We recall with shame and anger how 19th-century theologians sat at the feet of Kant in order that with the help of his critique of reason they might justify instead of challenge modern Christianity. Theologians have always been adept at ingeniously toying with the most radical and dangerous thoughts and feelings and then devaluing them in an attempt to justify and confirm contemporary religious thoughts and feelings.” Barth believed that Scotus and Ockham could have instituted a proper Reformation, but their “tragic merit” was that they did not, but instead ironically worsened the situation by making the continued “treason” of the theology of glory both more entrenched and yet also more bewildering. And it is against such an unacceptable disarray that Luther finally revolted.

As is evident in these pages from Barth’s lectures on Calvin, the early Barth was well aware of Scotus, Ockham, and various debates surrounding their theology. Furthermore, he

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 55–56.
43 Ibid., 56–58.
contributed to those debates in a unique way, placing the Reformation neither in the Middle Ages nor in modernity, but over against a historical-theological continuum that includes both of those eras. On this basis he had a mixed opinion of late medieval theology, applauding it for its radically theological and voluntarist turn but admonishing it for its failure to finish the job. From this point Barth would continue to develop a notion of divine command into a robustly voluntarist moral theology.

3 The Development of the Divine Command in Barth’s Early Theology

Barth’s early theology reveals a tension in his attempts to articulate the external, theological basis of ethics. He finally locates this in the notion of God’s command, which becomes the primary leitmotif in the ethical sections of his later dogmatic work. The development of this leitmotif emerges from his struggles to put ethics on a truly theological footing.

From the very first edition of the Römerbriefe, the notion of divine command guided Barth’s ethics. Yet the use of divine command as a formal principle for understanding theological ethics required development. Whether that development occurred organically or in steps is up for debate, but it is clear that between 1919 and 1927 divine command emerged as the locus around which Barth’s ethics would coalesce.

Bruce McCormack claims that between the two editions of the Römerbriefe Barth overcame an inconsistency present in the first edition, where the first edition included both a “a realistically conceived ‘divine command’ ethic (in the realm of interpersonal relationships)
and an idealistic ethic (in the realm of politics).”\textsuperscript{44} By “idealistic ethic” McCormack means a “conception of consciousness as structured by the autonomous generation (and realization) of tasks,”\textsuperscript{45} thus invoking the Kantian idealism of moral autonomy, where the rational will freely imposes its own legislation. McCormack blames this inconsistency on Barth’s undeveloped doctrine of analogy, “which might have made it clear how human action could ‘correspond’ to divine action without setting aside the distinction between them.”\textsuperscript{46} The second edition of the \textit{Römerbriefe}, however, provided the opportunity to cast off such idealism and embrace a robust, “critically realistic” ethic of “witness to the divine command.”\textsuperscript{47}

McCormack argues that the nascent ethic of divine command in the first \textit{Römerbriefe} did not portray God’s will as arbitrary and capricious, but with “a definite \textit{Tendenz}.”\textsuperscript{48} That is, the God of Romans I was dependable and not prone to command anything unusual. Barth was conscientiously vague here, however, as he did not wish to construct an ethic too certain of itself. “Barth wanted to force his readers to look away from ideals to a realistically conceived and actualistically realized will of God.”\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 167.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 166.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 171.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 172. A similar concern is found in Gerald McKenny’s response to William Werpehowski’s contention that Barth’s ethics are neither intuitionist nor deliberationist. Werpehowski claims that “particular hearings of the divine command can be understood after the fact but can never be \textit{definitely anticipated} before the fact.” McKenny, like McCormack, is wary of an overconfident hearing even “after the fact.” McKenny and Werpehowski are responding to the later Barth’s articulations regarding conscience, which will be examined in detail in chapter 5. See Gerald P. McKenny, \textit{The Analogy of Grace: Karl Barth's Moral Theology} (Oxford:
Yet McCormack also shows how Barth admits to “confused situations,” mostly within politics, in which “all of the options open entail involvement in some sort of sin.”

McCormack attributes this to a specific situation that Barth had in mind: the Bolshevik Revolution. In this case Barth preferred to work within the state system rather than revolution, as long as one does not attempt to justify that preference—such complicity remains a form of sin. No political cause may be equated with God’s will—this is the point at which Barth broke from the Swiss political radicalism of his contemporaries. McCormack argues, however, that even on this point Barth “had not really broken free from the bourgeois (and idealistic) self-understanding according to which the human being is the subject of history.” And “in emphasizing the critical distance separating political action from the struggle for the Kingdom of God, he failed to address adequately the question of their relation.”

Despite Barth’s critique of idealistic ethics, McCormack avers, his discovery of “a more positive starting-point in Christology” was still to be realized. With a proper doctrine of analogy, Barth could begin to work with the “divine command” as divine being and action could be seen to hold correspondence with human being and action. It is thus in the second

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50 McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 172.
51 Ibid., 178.
52 Ibid., 179.
53 Ibid.
version of the *Römerbriefe*, according to McCormack, that “ethics is grounded in Christology.”

Yet even in Romans II, the concept of command was not to enjoy the primacy of place as it held in Barth’s later ethics. In his comparison of Barth’s earlier and later ethics, David Clough takes pains to emphasize continuities in order to support his thesis that Barth’s later ethics should not be removed from the theology of “crisis” found in his earlier work. But the development of divine command is one of the few contrasts that Clough cannot avoid: “Barth describes the operation of grace as a command in *Romans* II, but in the *Dogmatics*, the command of God becomes the controlling metaphor for how Christians learn the will of God.” Divine command is indeed present in the first two editions of the *Römerbriefe*, but it is not the formal principle.

That principle began to take shape in a succession of lectures that Barth delivered in five German cities in September–October 1922. With the demands of a professor’s first teaching year—Barth was just concluding his Calvin lectures in Göttingen—Barth decided to give the same lecture to each of these five audiences: *Das Problem der Ethik in der Gegenwart*, or “The Problem of Ethics Today.” In this early work Barth’s attention is

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54 Ibid., 275.

55 This contrast does not weaken Clough’s thesis, however, as Barth’s later use of command is “in continuity with the central ethical concerns of *Romans* II.” See David Clough, *Ethics in crisis: interpreting Barth’s ethics*, Barth Studies (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 64–65.


drawn to the question “What are we supposed to do?” and it is the significance of this question that guides his examination of contemporary ethics.

In these lectures Barth argues that the good is by definition the truth. There is no purpose in first ascertaining truth so that one may then deduce the Good, such as in some versions of natural law. Quite simply for Barth they are the same:

When the logical question, namely the question of that-which-is, is grounded as a critical one within the question of that-which-might-be, namely the question of the Good and the ethical problem, it is then no longer something that can be called into question. Therefore it makes no sense, no sense whatsoever, to logically subordinate the question of the Good to the question of the True right from the start, as if it were not the question of truth already in itself, as if it did not ground the first question (of the Good) in itself first.

Thus Barth holds the Good up as an ontological priority: before all else, there is the Good. Morality does not arise as an afterthought of creation, but it is already there by definition.

Furthermore, Barth emphasizes that the subject of ethics is not the human person in either historical or psychological perspective. Rather, the subject of ethics is that ontologically prior Good. “The problem of ethics fundamentally reaches out beyond its temporal emergence. . . . Indeed all real and possible content of human action, every occurrence in the fulfillment of time in the history of the individual and in society is called into question with the question of the Good.” This decentralization of ethics away from the human will be explored further in the following chapter, but for the purposes of the present chapter it is helpful to note that such insistence upon the prior reality of the Good is what

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58 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q. 90, art. 1: “Now the rule and measure of human acts is the reason, which is the first principle of human acts.”


60 Ibid., 136.
David Haddorff calls the “postmodern realism” of Barth’s ethics. Barth insists upon the real existence of goodness, albeit an existence that emerges from outside the conventional realm of moral ontology as considered by modern ("liberal neo-Kantian") accounts.\textsuperscript{61} Indeed, as Matheny has argued, “Barth conceived theological ethics not as religious ethics but as a theological realism.”\textsuperscript{62} This moral-theological realism stands in sharp contrast to modern ethics (since Kant), and it is fundamental to the version of divine command that Barth constructs.

It is in the final section of his commentary on Philippians—a passage already introduced in the opening pages of the present thesis—that keeping the divine command emerges as the basic premise of Barth’s later ethics:

\begin{quote}
But knowing about the Good is knowledge of God only when the Good is a \textit{commandment} and when the commandment is \textit{kept}. . . Christianity is not ethics, nor does it have any special ethic. . . . Christianity is knowledge of God and just for that reason knowing about the \textit{commandments}, being bound to them, and that means . . . \textit{keeping} the commandments.\textsuperscript{63}
\end{quote}

Although Barth’s commentary on Philippians was published in 1928, the original lectures were delivered at Münster in the winter semester of 1926–27. And, again, it was in March 1927 that Barth delivered his lecture entitled “Keeping the Commandments” (\textit{Das Halten der


\textsuperscript{62} Paul Matheny, \textit{Dogmatics and Ethics: The Theological Realism and Ethics of Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics} (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1990), 3.

The thesis which shall be represented and explained in this lecture is as follows: Regarding the so-called ethical problem, which is always both an old and a new question: What are we then to do? . . . No answer can be given, except this: *Follow the command*, understanding both ideas in their plainest and deepest meaning, as they are understood in the Bible.  

Several other themes from Barth’s later ethics would emerge here as well: the distinction between types of truth, the “wholly unproblematic reality” of ethics, the concreteness of the divine command, the unity of law and gospel, the priority of God’s love, justification of human decisions in faith, and the careful distinction between justification and sanctification.  

But for this chapter’s purposes, what is most important to highlight is the central imperative in Barth’s moral theology to keep the divine command.

4 Karl Barth on Divine Command in the Years 1928–42

4.1 The Basic Structure of Barth’s Moral Theology

The outline of Barth’s ethical corpus appeared in his summer 1928 lectures on ethics (hereafter the Münster Ethics), later published as simply *Ethics*.  

Barth would follow the same structure (or “Way of Theological Ethics”) throughout his *Church Dogmatics*—God, creation, reconciliation, redemption—placing one section on the divine command at the end of each volume. With the *Church Dogmatics* left incomplete at the time of Barth’s death in 1968, the divine command appears in his summer 1938 lectures (the Zürich Ethics), later published as simply *Theology*.  

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64 Qtd. in Robert E. Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), 41 n. 5.

65 Ibid., 42–46.

1968, reconciliation ethics were never finished and redemption ethics never begun. But at least in the earlier Münster Ethics, the original vision of the whole is intact.

Between the 1928 lectures and that which Barth prepared in 1939–40 (CD II/2), very little changed in terms of the ethical material itself.\(^{67}\) Barth himself stated that the latter was “radically reshaped” from the former,\(^{68}\) but the basic material is similar. Any differences are mostly formal, and in Barth’s added use of protracted excursus on biblical or bibliographical material.

In the prolegomena to Barth’s Münster Ethics, he sets up ethics as an “auxiliary science” and a “special elucidation to the doctrine of sanctification.” The theological aspect of such ethics is that it depends entirely upon the Word of God in its sanctifying work. That Word of God is understood precisely as a command that claims humans as created by God, reconciled by God, and redeemed by God. Readers of the Church Dogmatics will no doubt recognize the three-part structure of volumes III–V on the doctrines of creation, reconciliation, and redemption.

In the prolegomena Barth is eager to explore this command in itself and without recourse to external (non-theological) reflections on ethics. “It cannot serve the cause of clarity if we begin with the concept of the divine command and then try to continue with thoughts about the individual and society or the unrolling of a psychological schema or the variation of a

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67 Of course McCormack’s much-debated revision of Barth’s theological development hinges upon a discovery regarding the doctrine of election articulated in Church Dogmatics II/1. But the ethical section retains its basic form from Münster. Paul T. Nimmo’s Being in action: the theological shape of Barth’s ethical vision (London: T&T Clark, 2007), however, views the ethics entirely through McCormack’s election-centric lens.

table of Christian duties and virtues. For our basis of ethics can hardly serve as a basis for this, and the concept of the divine command as the basis of ethics can only be obscured by entry upon divergent paths of this kind.”69

Barth is at pains here to articulate both the multiplicity and the simplicity of the commanding Word of God. Emphasizing a nominalist simplicity of God’s trifold action, he writes: “It is only in appearance that we are indicating herewith three parts or steps of truth or knowledge. For in reality, just as in the doctrine of the divine triunity, which is the secret root of this order, here, too, the one total thing is said three times, and Jesus Christ, who is the very Word of God, stands at the controlling center of the thought of reconciliation, and is thus also the presupposition and quintessence of the thought of creation and the thought of redemption.”70

But then Barth quickly emphasizes the multiplicity as well: “We are obviously in no position, however, to waive this threefold movement of our Christian knowledge or to state this thrice-determined Christian truth in a single word. The one Word is God’s own Word which we cannot speak but can only hear spoken to us. And what we hear is threefold.”71 Even the division, then, of the divine command (and, in his later Church Dogmatics, the latter three doctrines/volumes), is a dialectical, nominalist balance of divine reality and human perception. “This is why we cannot make of it a system. If it were a system, we should have to be able to trace it back to one word. A system has a central point or cardinal statement from which all the rest can be deduced. The reality of God’s Word is, of course, the central

69 Barth, Ethics, 52.

70 Ibid., 53.

71 Ibid.
point on which everything turns here. We, however, have no word for this reality.” Barth settles, then, on the symbolic language of a “way” through which one may traverse and explore the Word of God. “They do not denote a system but a way.”

Barth lays out the *scopus* and *ductus* of his exploration of the commanding Word of God. Each of the three movements of the divine command may be understood in terms of their standpoint, knowledge, content, and fulfillment. The command of God the creator first means the command of life; second, it reveals itself as calling; third, it demands order; and fourth, it provides faith. The corresponding waystations on the exploration of the reconciling command are law, authority, humility, and love, and those of the redeeming command are promise, conscience, gratitude, and hope.

### 4.2 The Divine Command Specified

Before Barth traverses this territory in chapters 2–4, however, his first chapter explores the reality of the divine command. It is here that Barth repeats the fundamental ethical question that concluded his commentary on Philippians and his 1927 lecture, “*Das Halten der Gebote*”—“What shall we do?”—examining each word of that question in turn. But it is the dialectical contrast between divine reality and human perception, or between divine command and human hearing, that guides his exploration. “We have shown . . . how it is and must be with the revelation or knowledge of the truth of the good . . . if the question ‘What shall we do?’ is seriously meant and put in all its parts. *If* there is such a thing—?! So long as

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72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., 55–61.
we ask generally and theoretically whether there is such a thing, we can in fact only ask hypothetically. . . . We have not found it, for what we find is conditioned truth, conditioned by ourselves and having neither the right to raise a claim to our existence nor the strength to enforce such a claim. No, it has found us.”

The tenuous character of modern ethics cannot be a part of theological ethics for Barth. Rather, a robust theology of divine command must without question assume that the good has, in fact, been commanded.

A corollary of this presupposition is that the divine command is concrete and individual. Such a command stands in contrast to the general Kantian categorical imperative. “If we take seriously the positive givenness of the command against which there is no appeal, then it cannot be just a rule, an empty form, to which we must give content by our action, so that the form of the action stands under the command and its content under our caprice.”

Barth quotes the Critique of Practical Reason in order to contrast the categorical imperative with the reality of the divine command: “When the command comes to man, it does not say: ‘Act in such a way that your action can be the principle of general legislation,’ or something similarly abstract and general.” Rather, “it says: ‘Do this and do not do that in this unique situation which will not be repeated.’ In this wholly concrete: ‘Do this and do not do that,’ and not in its formal distinctiveness as an imperative or as an attempt to grasp in general the fulness of concretions, the possibilities of the this and that, it is a real imperative.”

Barth is not interested in general rules, but rather the specific and concrete command of God to each

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75 Ibid., 73–74.
76 Ibid., 76.
77 Ibid., 78.
individual. In the *Church Dogmatics* Barth will further elucidate this point to claim that ethics that focus upon such general rules are those that advocate an arbitrary and capricious God.

Before moving on to the *Church Dogmatics*, however, the first chapter of the Münster Ethics makes one further set of definitions that are important for understanding the nature of Barth’s brand of theological voluntarism. Having described how general rules do not adequately characterize the specifics of the divine command, Barth emphasizes that the command belongs to God and not to human judgment. “What makes this view [of morality as descending from general moral truths] impossible is that it ascribes to man the dignity of judge. The good, the command, is not true but *becomes* true as it is *spoken* to us as the truth, as it meets us speaking as truth.”

Such moral-theological actualism understands the divine command as a verb, an action, rather than a static package of moral content. God *commands* and it is in that commanding that one encounters the divine will. “Where the real command is, there is absolute, personal, living will distinct from ours.”

Barth parses out this phrase. In the first place, God’s will is “*absolutely* imperious.” It is an absolute ought that claims relative moral agents. Secondly, God’s will is distinct from the human will, which “in turn depends on our having to understand it as act and not as being.”

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78 Ibid., 85.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 86.
82 Ibid.
As act, God’s will is entirely outside of human control and is something received from that external, divine realm. Idealist ethics are “impossible,” and “we can only see with Kant and better than Kant that moral knowledge is unattainable without transition to worship.”

Thirdly, the divine command entails that God’s will is personal, which means that something specific is willed through direct, personal address. “A thunderstorm or earthquake may shake and startle a man and become part of his experience. To be addressed is something different. . . . At a pinch a flower or waterfall or work of art might be a form of address. The command, however, claims us.” The personal aspect of God’s will entails a further specifying move.

Finally, Barth describes how God’s will is a living will, which is another way of emphasizing its actualism, as well as its ontological priority to our own living. “It is not as though man were first alive and then the command of God followed him into the richness of his existence.” Rather, the initiative is always in the hands of the living God.

4.3 The Divine Command after the Doctrine of God

With his massive dogmatic project off to a premature start in 1927, Barth abandoned the *Christlichen Dogmatik* soon after his Münster Ethics. The traditional rationale behind this

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83 Ibid.

84 Ibid. This list of impersonal forms of address bears a striking resemblance to Barth’s narrowing of the range of proclamation in *Church Dogmatics* 1/1: “God may speak to us through Russian Communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub, or a dead dog. We do well to listen to Him if He really does. But . . . we cannot say that we are commissioned to pass on what we have heard as independent proclamation.” See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1/1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 2nd ed., trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 55.

85 Barth, *Ethics*, 87.

86 Barth, *Prolegomena zur Christlichen Dogmatik: Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes* (München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1928); later published as *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, vol. 1, ed. Gerhard Sauter (Zurich: Theologische Verlag Zürich, 1982).
restart is Barth’s own—that his 1930 study of Anselm forced him to reassess his prolegomena volume on the Word of God.\(^8^7\) Bruce McCormack’s revisionary account of Barth’s development, however, holds that the *Christliche Dogmatik* and the first volume of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* are not substantively different and that Barth “exaggerated the difference between the two.”\(^8^8\) Although it is conceivable that later volumes of a hypothetical *Christliche Dogmatik* could have followed the trilateral “way” of moral theology that Barth established in his Münster Ethics of 1928, the later volumes of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* clearly followed that precedent. But it would not be until 1942 that he would begin lecturing on the first of those three parts, the doctrine of creation.\(^8^9\) In the meantime, Barth revised his doctrine of the Word of God and, beginning with his lectures in the summer of 1937, the doctrine of God.\(^9^0\)

Originally published in 1940 and 1942, the two part-volumes of Barth’s doctrine of God provide both an exposition of divine omnipotence and the first dogmatic treatment of divine command, respectively. The former resides within an examination of the perfections of God, with omnipotence alongside such divine attributes as wisdom, holiness, and omnipresence. It is quite telling that Barth only gets to the command of God after his treatment of divine attributes, for to understand God’s command one must first have knowledge of the reality of God.

\(^8^7\) See Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4, xii; Balthasar, 64–167, and Torrance, 193.

\(^8^8\) McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 442.

\(^8^9\) Busch, *Karl Barth*, 315.

\(^9^0\) Ibid., 284.
For the purposes of the present chapter’s evaluation of Barth’s theological voluntarism, Barth’s treatment of the dialectic of divine omnipotence in II/1 will be examined, followed by his definition of divine command in II/2.

4.3.1 Omnipotence and Constancy, Absolute and Ordinary Powers
Barth’s treatment of the absolute and ordinary powers of God comes in the midst of his dialectical treatment of divine love and freedom and, more specifically, his synthesis of omnipotence with divine constancy. Within the perfections of divine freedom, Barth describes at length how “by constancy we denote first the perfect freedom of God and by omnipotence the perfect love in which He is free.”91 Constancy is the attribute that protects an omnipotent God from charges of arbitrariness or capriciousness. Barth prefers “constancy” to “immutability,” as the latter emerges from a contrast with human mutability, a contrast that compromises a real participation of divinity and humanity with one another: “It is no less a speculation . . . when the distinction between Creator and creature is drawn in a dualistic fashion, so that in abstracto immutability is ascribed to the Creator, and mutability to the creature. Thus this involves both the denial of a real participation by the Creator in the existence and essence of the creature moved by Him, and the corresponding denial of a real participation by the creature in the immutability of the Creator.”92 As Barth moves from an emphasis on constancy to an emphasis on omnipotence, he is very careful to leave room for contingency over against necessity. God is not bound to do things in any one way.

91 Barth, Church Dogmatics II/1, The Doctrine of God, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 490.

92 Ibid., 501.
In this respect Barth takes five concrete steps regarding divine power. First, such power is not just any power—it is God’s power. “Power in itself is not merely neutral. Power in itself is evil.”93 But the power of God is held in check by the one who holds it. This in turn leads to the second step—namely, that the possibilities within God’s power are not simply physical, but moral and legal as well. Holiness, righteousness, and wisdom are all determined by God. It is at this point that Barth utilizes the legal terminology that Scotus had incorporated into his definition of the dialectic of divine omnipotence.

What God is able to do de facto, He is also able to do de jure, and He can do nothing de facto that He cannot also do de jure. This can all be stated equally well in reverse. God’s moral and legal potentiality is also His physical. His potestas is complete potentia. His holiness, righteousness and wisdom is almightiness. What He can do de jure He can also do de facto. And there is nothing He can do de jure that He would not also do de facto.94

Because of the first step, however, Barth is able to avoid any charges that the legal analogy opens the door to political tyrants. Immediately following this excerpt he continues: “In this context our interest is in the first statement that God’s potentia is in all circumstances potestas. It cannot be otherwise, if as we stated first, this power is God’s power, and not merely any kind of power.”95

Barth’s third step in exploring divine power is to assert that omnipotence is greater than mere omnicausality. God’s freedom remains alongside God’s constancy—that is, God binds God’s own self to his work of creation, reconciliation, and redemption, but God may do otherwise.

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93 Ibid., 524.
94 Ibid., 526.
95 Ibid.
God will not do otherwise—because God is constant—but God may do otherwise. This is the freedom with which God’s love is expressed.

Absolutely everything depends on whether we distinguish His omnipotence from His omnicausality: not to the glory of an unknown omnipotent being who is beyond and behind His work; but to the glory of the omnipotent God who is present to us in His work and is known to us by His self-revelation; to the glory of His divinity, of the freedom of His love, without which His love would not be divine love or recognisable as such.96

The fourth step reiterates the theme of concreteness that Barth emphasized in his Münster Ethics. “The omnipotence of God, which is peculiarly His own, which is not to be confounded with any power in itself, and which does not exhaust itself in His omnicausality, is a very specific capacity, i.e., a power which is not empty but has real content, not neutral but wholly and utterly concrete.”97 God does not do everything that is in God’s power, even though everything is, in fact, in God’s power. God exercises power in specific ways and not in some universal generality.

Finally, the fifth step maintains the fundamental observation that “God’s power is power over everything.”98 This is omnipotencia, and it is at this point that Barth provides his excursus on potentia absoluta and potentia ordinata.

Barth states that his definition of the potentia absoluta and potentia ordinata is borrowed from Thomas Aquinas, rather than Scotus, defining the former as “the power of God to do that which He can choose and do, but does not have to, and does not actually choose and do” and the latter as “the power which God does actually use and exercise in a definite

96 Ibid., 528
97 Ibid., 532.
98 Ibid., 538.
ordinatio.” Thus Barth does not succumb to the confusion regarding contradictions between the two powers. Here in Barth’s treatment of the two powers we see the theological basis for the importance of the divine decision. “God would not have power . . . if it amounted only to His omnicausality . . . to what He actually chooses and does; if His actual choice and action were not a real decision and did not take place in freedom; if the capacity which He actually uses did not contrast with the different capacity which He does not use.” Thus Barth endorses the distinction “insofar as it reminds us that God’s omnipotence is His own power and therefore free power.”

Barth withdraws from a “different meaning” that the terms have taken since Thomas, whereby potentia absoluta becomes potentia extraordinaria and potentia ordinata becomes potentia ordinaria. This distinction, Barth explains, places supernatural miracles within the former and considers the latter as comprised of the “ordinary,” natural order of things. Such a misunderstanding leads to the conclusion that God’s omnipotence is only really used in the miraculous, rather than in the ordinary as well. But “miracle is not the proof of a special divine omnipotence. It is a special proof of the one divine omnipotence.” God’s power undergirds the whole of reality, Barth contends, not just the extraordinary circumstances that surprise us.

After countering this misreading, Barth then critiques late medieval nominalism and Luther, in particular, for having taken the distinction in a similarly misguided direction. Barth is

99 Ibid., 539.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid., 540.
uneasy with Luther’s conflation of what God could-have-done-but-did-not-do (absolute power) with the *Deus absconditus*.¹⁰³ This conflation leads to an undue emphasis on an alternative order of things of which we are not aware and is thus, for Barth, “completely intolerable.”¹⁰⁴ The point of the *potentia absoluta* is not the *potentia inordinata*, but rather the transcendence of God above the *potentia ordinata*.

Now that God has in fact chosen and acted as He has, now that He has revealed His capacity, it is both true and important to maintain with Thomas that this capacity is most certainly to be understood as free, but it is completely invalid to ascribe to Him a capacity different from that which He has in fact revealed in His work, and one which contradicts it. God neither was nor is bound to the one possible way. He chose it, and it must always be understood as His free choice that He remains faithful to this particular way, that He wills and does and therefore can, as we actually see Him according to His revelation.¹⁰⁵

Thus, for Barth, Luther’s emphasis (and speculation?) on whatever alternative realities may lie hidden in God loses the point of the distinction as he sees it properly employed in Thomas Aquinas. “We are no longer free but forbidden to reckon on an essentially different omnipotence from that which God has manifested in His actual choice and action, as if God could exercise a different choice and action and capacity from what He has done.”¹⁰⁶ Whether or not Barth’s vision is accurate to Thomas’ construal, however, it is strikingly similar to the point made by Scotus—namely that “God is the power over all things. But here too we can and must accept the fact that it was and is His business to decide what

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¹⁰³ See Rustin E. Brian’s *Covering Up Luther: How Barth’s Christology Challenged the Deus Absconditus that Haunts Modernity*, Veritas (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013).

¹⁰⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 541.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 542.
‘everything’ is and also what ‘nothing’ is, so that the latter exists in the sphere of His power only in its ‘nothingness’. “

For Barth, then, the dialectic of divine omnipotence is a useful tool in its classic form, but one that erred in late medieval and early modern transformation. He does not comment upon any political analogies, such as that found in Scotus’s definition of the term. Rather, Barth shares the medieval concern that the dialectic may be misunderstood to account for ordinary and extraordinary, miraculous events.

Again, Barth’s treatment of the absolute and ordinary powers of God emerges in the context of his dialectical treatment of divine love and freedom and, more specifically, his balance of omnipotence with divine constancy.

4.3.2 The Way of Theological Ethics, Again

In the second part-volume of the Church Dogmatics, Barth reiterates much of what he had established in the Münster Ethics—namely, his turn from general, philosophical conceptions of ethics, his insistence that a truly theological basis for ethics be found in the Word of God, and the tripartite division of such theological ethics into an ethics of creation, reconciliation, and redemption. “[The task of theological ethics] will be an exact repetition of the same movement which dogmatics itself executes on the road indicated by its basic concepts. There is only one difference—and it is not one of matter or method, but merely of fact and practice. It is simply that in it special attention is given to the question of the character of the Word of

107 Ibid., 542. In his own defense of Barth against the charge of voluntarism, Matthew Rose similarly emphasizes God’s faithfulness to God’s own nature and how Barth is “serenely untroubled by the question whether an alternative standard of values could exist.” Rose does not, however, look to Barth’s distinction of divine powers, but rather to the constancy of God. See his Ethics with Barth: God, Metaphysics and Morals, Barth Studies (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 106.
God as the command of God, and therefore of the claiming of man.”

Barth introduces his subsequent procedure of discussing ethics “in a concluding chapter to each of the different parts of dogmatics.”

The specifics of Barth’s general ethics at the end of II/2 and his specific ethics of creation will be examined in a following chapter on Barth’s ethical voluntarism. Before entering into that discussion, however, there is one more aspect of Barth’s theological voluntarism that we must consider—his definition of the term.

Barth himself rarely uses the term, so it is important to highlight those instances where he does. One important way in which Barth uses Voluntarismus is in his nominalist insistence that God’s knowledge and will are ultimately the same.

If God’s knowledge is God Himself, and again if God’s will is God Himself, we cannot avoid the further statement that God’s knowledge is His will and God’s will His knowledge. But this further equation must be made with caution. It cannot mean that God can be deprived of the particular characteristic of either knowledge or will; that if possible His knowledge and will are to be understood only as figurative; that they are to be expunged from the divine essence as anthropomorphisms in favour of a higher third thing which as such is neither real knowledge nor real will. But again, the equation cannot mean that God’s will is to be reduced to His knowledge if the thinker’s taste is intellectualistic, or His knowledge to His will if it is voluntaristic; that a so-called primacy is to be ascribed to the one, while the other is thought of as merely a figurative description of the essence of God. On the contrary, we have to take quite seriously both that God knows and that God wills.

Such a reduction of divine attributes to simple divine singularities is consistent with the (early and late) medieval tradition of nominalism. Ockham is frequently cited as the

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109 Ibid.

110 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 551.
progenitor of this erasure of formal distinctions within God, but as we have seen in the previous chapter, there was already precedence in the proto-nominalist work of Abelard.

Finally, then, before moving on to an examination of ethical voluntarism, we must conclude that Barth’s theological voluntarism does not rely upon an irrational good defined by the whims of an arbitrary God. “What this God determines is not a whim, and what He presents to man to do or not do is not the product of the fickle caprices of a tyrant whose right consists in his might. . . . God is faithful and constant.”

William Schweiker has articulated concerns about power in ethics of divine command—namely, that it valorizes omnipotence, and in turn glorifies the exercise of power qua power—not a welcome development given the history of violence in late modernity. “My deepest concern is to combat the glorification of power as defining the good by reconstructing a form of theological discourse that has too easily and too often been identified with precisely this form of human devotion.” Schweiker’s concern is that an ethics of divine command cannot validate itself from within its own internal logic, but must also “assert that God is good or loving. Yet that claim, strictly speaking, cannot be formulated within the discourse of divine commands.”

As this chapter has demonstrated, however, Barth’s moral theology of divine command does manage to assert that God is good, loving, and constantly so. Barth says it best himself:

111 Barth, Church Dogmatics II/2, 676–77.


113 Ibid.
When God wills something from and for man, when man’s will is claimed by God, there can be no question of an arbitrary and purposeless control which God can exercise just because He is God and therefore superior to man. On the contrary, what God wills from and for man stands or falls with, and is revealed and revealed only in, what the same God will do and has already done for us and in us.\textsuperscript{114}

That is, divine command can only be properly understood through the lens of grace. God is \textit{for} us and therefore God’s claim is good for us. To be sure, this may only be known by revelation. But Barth’s ethic of divine command relies on just such a theology of revelation.

5 Conclusion

The above considerations have demonstrated that Barth’s moral theology is a voluntarism “from above.” His starting point in a robust doctrine of divine command bears striking resemblance to the voluntarist moral theology of the late medieval scholastics. Significant differences in theological environment notwithstanding, Barth retrieves the medieval dialectic of divine omnipotence, borrowing Scotus’s juridical language while critiquing the political analogy that followed in later Scotistic tradition. Barth and the late medieval scholastics, then, may be seen to share a particular grammar of moral theology “from above,” in which the absolute power and possibility enjoyed by God—and God alone—presupposes an absolute divine constancy.

\textsuperscript{114} Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics} II/2, 562.
DIVINE COMMAND FROM BELOW
Chapter 4

Ethical Voluntarism in High and Late Medieval Scholasticism

Although the will by reason of its liberty could determine itself to act, nevertheless in virtue of its action it receives an aptitude that directly inclines it to a similar act. . . . and it is in this way that it is determinable by a habit.”

An act that is necessarily virtuous . . . is an act of the will, since an act by which God is loved above all things and for his own sake is an act of this sort. For this act . . . is the first of all good acts.
—William of Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions* III.14

1 Introduction

The previous two chapters have examined *theological* voluntarism, rather than *ethical* voluntarism, in its medieval development and in the work of Karl Barth. That is, the focus has been upon the primacy of the divine will in determining the good, as opposed to natural law as the primary source for morality. But “voluntarism” is a multivalent term, and—in order to assess the extent to which Barth’s moral theology may be “voluntarist” in relation to late medieval scholastic theology—the present chapter will attend to medieval construals of *ethical* voluntarism. That is, the present exposition must now explore how medieval theologians assessed human agency with respect to the human will.
Such “ethical” voluntarism is opposed to intellectualism, so that the two categories differ on “whether primary importance is placed on the intellect or the will in human agency.”¹ In his survey essay on the topic for *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, Tobias Hoffmann writes that “Although intellectualism and voluntarism are apt terms . . . not every writer fits neatly into one of the two main camps.”² Such an important (though not infrequently ignored) observation explains the abundance of articles inquiring whether this-or-that medieval scholastic is one-or-the-other.

2 Ethical Reflection in High Medieval Scholasticism

It is during the high medieval period that patterns of moral theology later recognized as “intellectualism” and “voluntarism” emerge. Scholastic theologians of this period, however, do not fall neatly into either camp. Such distinctions were only beginning to appear, and it was not until 1277 that the lines, however tangled, were drawn. To be sure, moral freedom and agency, broadly conceived, were upheld, and nuances between various psychological and moral faculties were explored. But the detail with which late medieval figures like Scotus and Ockham would approach these topics was yet to be realized.

With this in mind, contemporary interpreters of Thomas Aquinas (and those who find resonances between Thomas and Barth) would do better to understand the Angelic Doctor in relation to these high medieval discussions—rather than anachronistically forcing him into later debates. As will be shown in the following pages, the moral theology of Bonaventure

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² Ibid., 414.
provides a more fitting comparison-and-contrast with Thomas than does that of Duns Scotus or William of Ockham. The claim being made here is that the so-called intellectualism or voluntarism in the moral theologies of both Bonaventure and Thomas operate at a merely psychological level, rather than at the level of fully developed ethical theories. This is not to say that neither of them articulated ethical theories—they most certainly did. But to characterize either ethical theory in terms of its intellectualism or voluntarism is inappropriate. Rather, the intellectualist and voluntarist tendencies of Thomas and Bonaventure concern, respectively, their psychological theories.

The following section will explore the emergence of such intellectualist and voluntarist tendencies in relation to emerging anxieties related to the freedom of moral agency and its corollary in moral responsibility and in relation to high medieval understandings of psychological faculties—namely, deliberation and conscience. Again, any “intellectualism” or “voluntarism” exhibited by the high medieval scholastics under consideration remains at this psychological level, rather than determining the character of any specifically ethical theory.

2.1 Free Choice in the High Medieval Period

Bonaventure and Thomas both emphasized freedom of choice as a dual freedom located in both reason and the will. They were hardly original in this, however, as they merely reiterated distinctions made before them in the work of Lombard and others. In his late-1250s disputed questions on truth, De Veritate, Thomas quotes the following statement: “Free
choice is a capability [facultas] of will and reason.” The editors of the English translation note that other passages in this section may be found in both the *Summa Sententiarum* and Lombard’s *Sentences*, and indeed this statement may also be found in both places. The *Summa Sententiarum* states that “free choice is an ability [habilitas] of will and reason.” Lombard, however, employs *facultas*, as does Thomas: “Free choice, however, is a faculty of reason and will, by which the good is chosen with the assistance of grace, or evil without its assistance.” Lombard places this statement within a larger case that it is freedom that enables humanity to do the good: “Here is to be considered what that help given to man at creation was by which he was able to remain steadfast, if he so willed.—That was assuredly a freedom of choice [libertas arbitrii] free from all stain and corruption, and an uprightness of will, and a wholeness and liveliness of all the natural powers of the soul.”

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7 Ibid.: *Hic considerandum est, quod fuerit illud adiutorium homini datum in creatione, quo poterat manere, si vellet. Illud utique fuit libertas arbitrii, ab omni labe et corruptela inimicus, atque voluntatis rectitudo et omnium naturalium potentiaria animae sinceritas atque vivacitas*. Ibid.
This “freedom of choice” (*libertas arbitrii*) has been translated in a variety of ways: freedom of judgment, freedom of will, or freedom of decision.\(^8\) Such question-begging translations, however, immediately skew the term into either a voluntarist or intellectualist interpretation characteristic of later debates. Lombard and the author of the *Summa Sententiarum*, however, insisted that such freedom belongs to *both* reason and the will, and Lombard carried this statement further to split the concept between the two faculties. “And it is called ‘free’ in regard to the will, which may turn itself to either [good or evil]; but ‘choice’ in regard to reason, whose faculty or power it is, and to which it also belongs to discern between good and evil.”\(^9\)

Bonaventure reiterated Lombard’s dual freedom in his own *Commentary on the Sentences*, such that free decision belongs to both the intellect and the will, and he similarly parsed this out further such that “decision belongs to reason, freedom to will.” But he immediately adds “for the other powers in us have to be moved at the nod and command of the will.”\(^10\)

Bonaventure appears to incline toward a voluntarist position here, as it is the will that commands the “other powers.” But since the majority of distinctions within ethical voluntarism had yet to appear, one should hesitate to attribute too much to Bonaventure here. Indeed, Bonnie Kent refrains from categorizing Bonaventure as an “ethical voluntarist,” but


prefers the term “psychological voluntarist,” which she defines as “little more than a general emphasis on the affective and volitional aspects of human nature.”

Thus in relation to basic moral agency, or “free choice,” Thomas and Bonaventure borrow from previous voices on the issue and articulate a dual answer that is neither wholly intellectualist nor wholly voluntarist. One may discern in Bonaventure at this point an inclination toward the latter, but, as Kent argues, this is “little more than a general emphasis.”

2.2 Conscience and Synderesis in the High Medieval Period

Since Odon Lottin’s landmark study in the mid-twentieth century, it has been commonplace to refer to the “moral psychology” of high medieval scholastic theology. Indeed the psychological constitution of the human moral agent is a fundamental element in the ethical reflection of the medieval scholastics. While specific ethical directives (love, honesty, sacramental observance) were not ignored, the basic building blocks of the agent’s moral faculties elicited some of the most rigorous scholarship in the arts, philosophy, and theology.

Nowhere is this psychological orientation more evident than in the attention spent on the faculty of the conscience. Due to a somewhat enigmatic passage in Jerome’s commentary on Ezekiel, conscientia was rarely considered apart from its relation to synderesis. When St. Jerome introduced the concept of synderesis, he identified it with the eagle, the fourth face on the Ezekiel’s tetramorph. The human face was reason, the lion was emotion, the ox was

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11 See Kent, Virtues of the Will, 94; Kent follows here a distinction made by Vernon Bourke, who does not use the term “psychological voluntarism,” but distinguishes an earlier version of voluntarism emphasizing psychological simplicity over against the “ethical voluntarism” that emerges in the later thirteenth century. See Vernon J. Bourke, History of Ethics (Garden City, NY: Image, 1970), 1:138, 147.

12 Odon Lottin, Psychologie et morale aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles, 6 vols. (Louvain: Abbaye du Mont César, 1942–60).
appetite, and the eagle was that “which the Greeks call *synteresin*: that spark of conscience which was not even extinguished in the breast of Cain after he was turned out of Paradise, and by which we discern that we sin, when we are overcome by pleasures or frenzy and meanwhile are misled by an imitation of reason.”\(^{13}\) Taken by itself, this statement appears to equate synderesis with conscience.\(^{14}\) And, indeed, prior to Lombard’s *Sentences*, it had been customary to treat these two terms as synonymous. But in distinction 39 of the second book of the *Sentences*, Lombard quoted the passage from Jerome’s commentary on Ezekiel, thus immortalizing synderesis for later commentators. Lombard, however, seized on other passages in Jerome that indicated that although synderesis may never be obliterated, this is not the case with conscience. So synderesis became truly the spark of conscience, distinguished as a separate entity that initiated the acts of conscience.\(^{15}\)

Just as Bonaventure split *libertas arbitrii* between the intellect and the will, he also used this division of faculties to parse conscience and synderesis. Bonaventure thus assigned conscience to the intellect and synderesis to the will.\(^{16}\) As such, conscience for Bonaventure is dynamic, changing with experience and building over time, not unlike virtue.\(^{17}\)


\(^{14}\) While most scholars since the 1950s have agreed that Jerome’s use of *synderesis* is a corruption of *syneidesis*, the equivalent Greek term for conscientia (co-knowledge or knowledge-with), Potts avers that Jerome was rather using the Greek term *synteresis*, from *tereo*, which means “to preserve,” such that Jerome was indeed positing a spark-like entity in addition to conscience itself. The majority opinion appears to prefer the corruption hypothesis. Regardless of its origin, however, scholastics after Lombard treated them as two separate entities. See M. B. Crowe, “The Term Synderesis and the Scholastics,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 23 (1956), 151–64, 228–45; Potts, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy*, 10.


\(^{16}\) Langston, *Conscience and Other Virtues*, 25.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 29.
however, functions as the individual’s innate desire and drive for the good.\textsuperscript{18} With the initiating spark of synderesis assigned to the will, then, Bonaventure thus assigned a psychological priority to the will.

Bonaventure’s reflections on conscience and synderesis demonstrate a consistent psychological voluntarism, where the acts and abilities of the will initiate those of the intellect. But this was the extent of Bonaventure’s examinations into moral agency. As Hoffmann notes, practical deliberation is “conspicuously absent” in Bonaventure’s writings.\textsuperscript{19} So Bonaventure’s voluntarism consists in his view of the will as the site of agential freedom and the psychological workings of the conscience-initiating synderesis.

For Thomas, conscience functions less as an evolving set of rules (as in Bonaventure) and more like an ongoing activity. Likewise, Thomas understands synderesis to be less of an active instigator (as in Bonaventure) and more like a habit. Synderesis for Thomas is the habit of holding to first practical principles and conscience is the act of applying knowledge to an individual case. “Wherefore, properly speaking, conscience denominates an act. But since habit is a principle of act, sometimes the name conscience is given to the first natural habit—namely, ‘synderesis’.”\textsuperscript{20} As in Bonaventure’s moral psychology, then, synderesis in that of Thomas functions as a kind of natural inclination that somehow brings the human agent to the good. And conscience, for both, is sparked by this innate and inalienable gift.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 30–31.

\textsuperscript{19} Hoffmann, “Intellectualism and Voluntarism,” 415.

\textsuperscript{20} Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae} 1a, q. 79, art. 13.
But while Bonaventure sees synderesis as that by which the agent desires the good, Thomas sees it as that by which the agent knows the good. The conscience then follows.

However, Thomas also holds that synderesis and conscience are rather general and “empty of material content.” They do not specify what particular acts are good, but only orient the agent to do the good when it is presented. That presentation is the job of the virtue of prudence. Prudence is the one intellectual virtue that cannot exist without moral virtue.

2.3 Moral Deliberation in the High Medieval Period

This lack of specificity provided a catalyst by which Thomas Aquinas added considerable nuance. Thomas would place a good deal of emphasis on deliberation as an act of the intellect, such that reason, rather than the will, would ultimately become for him the cause of human freedom. For Thomas, “the will cannot desire or choose contrary to what the practical intellect judges in a particular instance to be the best and most suitable,” and so “the choice of the will is informed by the judgment of reason resulting from deliberation.” From this Hoffmann concludes that the ineluctable blending of the acts of intellect and will in Thomas exonerate him from charges of either extreme. Of course there is no lack of argumentation that Thomas was either a complete voluntarist or an intellectualist.


22 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae IaIIae, q. 58, art. 5. See also Langston, Conscience and Other Virtues, 42.

Michael Sherwin defends Thomas’s brand of intellectualism as one that never succumbs to intellectual determinism.\(^{24}\) In taking the reader through the *Prima secundae*, Sherwin demonstrates the “structural priority” of the intellect at each stage in free moral activity.\(^{25}\) The three acts of will directed toward the end—volition, enjoyment, and intention—each presuppose a prior work of the intellect.\(^{26}\) Likewise, acts of will directed toward the means—consent, choice, and use—follow upon prior activity of the intellect in counsel, judgment, and reference of the principle to be used.\(^{27}\) Sherwin also notes that, despite the fact that the will may be seen as prior given its “natural inclination” toward an end, the intellect remains an “informing” power: “although the intellect does not (efficiently) cause the will’s first motion, it nonetheless informs this motion.”\(^{28}\) Furthermore, the will is free in that it moves *itself*.\(^{29}\) The “informing” power of the intellect is eventually unpacked by means of natural law: “Strictly speaking, since a law is an ordinance of reason, natural law properly exists only in the intellect. Nevertheless, in Aquinas’ view the natural inclination of the will participates in a certain way in the natural law: the will’s natural inclination enables the principles of practical reason to function. . . . The natural principles of intellect and will, therefore, together underlie and regulate human action.”\(^{30}\) Thus for Sherwin, a certain metaphysics of participation concerning natural law and eternal law, the latter of which only


\(^{25}\) Ibid., 19–24.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 22; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IaIIae qqs. 8–12.


\(^{28}\) Sherwin, *By Knowledge & By Love*, 23n29.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 43–44.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 59.
exists within the divine intellect, provides the principle by which he may defend an intellectualist position while maintaining the freedom of the will over against the voluntarist charge of determinism.\(^{31}\)

Daniel Westberg, in *Right Practical Reason*, argues that prudence has retreated from moral-theological discourse, due largely to misunderstandings of the psychology of action.\(^{32}\) Thus Westberg prescribes a clarification of the relationship between reason and the will, which he likens to the relationship between form and matter, or between voltage and current. That is, determining the “relative importance” of each depends upon which specific aspect is under consideration. In addition, Westberg recommends recovering the *spiritual* dimension of both the intellect and the will.\(^{33}\) Most unique to his account, however, is a four-stage theory of human action, each stage of which is further comprised of both an intellectual and a voluntarist component: intention (apprehension and intention), deliberation (counsel and consent), decision (judgment and choice), and execution (command and use).\(^{34}\)

Westberg’s primary discomfort is the Kantian transcendentalizing of the will, noting that “Kant’s placement of the will in a noumenal sphere separate from the material world is fundamentally different and (from a Thomistic point of view) fatal. But the split between

\(^{31}\) Denis Bradley also invokes the participation of natural law in the eternal law, which exists within the divine intellect, in order to explain the compatibility of human freedom with the priority of the intellect. However, like Bonnie Kent (as will be shown below), Bradley reads Thomas as combining both intellectualist and voluntarist concerns. See Denis J. M. Bradley, in *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas’s Moral Science* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 355–61, 365. See also John Rhiza, *Perfecting Human Actions: St. Thomas Aquinas on Human Participation in Eternal Law* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 213–14.


\(^{33}\) Ibid., 24, 258–60.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 130–35.
knowledge of reality and the freedom of the will had already been decisively made by Duns Scotus, who considered the intellect a natural power (and therefore moved by objects) but denied this of the will, which was for him entirely self-moved.”\textsuperscript{35} Thus Westberg wishes to demote the freedom of the will from its contemporary exaltation, most notably found in scholars described in the following section of this paper. The alternative he recommends is an intellectualist reclaiming of the priority of prudence as practical reason.

There are other scholars, however, who read Thomas in a more voluntarist direction. David M. Gallagher, for instance, defends Thomas from those who would see in him an intellectualist inclination against the freedom of the will.\textsuperscript{36} So Gallagher freights the will with being the source of human freedom: “To . . . understand the will is to take it as free-will (\textit{liberum arbitrium}), the term [Thomas] assigns to the will when it is considered precisely as the source of free or fully voluntary action.”\textsuperscript{37} Gallagher locates Thomas’s supposed prioritization of the will in a generalizing tendency in the will’s “natural inclination,” toward beatitude in general. That is, the will only chooses specific goods in concrete and particular situations because they exist within a range of possible actions that may reflect the perfect good. “In each case the will (as rational appetite) is directed first to some generality, and then, by deliberation, seeks the instantiation that best fits that generality.”\textsuperscript{38} One problem with Gallagher’s account, however, is that Thomas does not view deliberation as an act of the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 54n44.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 70. Gallagher’s translation of \textit{liberum arbitrium} as “free-will” is unique—and, most likely, mistaken.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 74.
\end{itemize}
will. The three acts of the will, rather, are “to choose, to consent and to use.” These all follow upon a prior counsel, or deliberation, on the part of the intellect. Thus Thomas agrees with Aristotle in stating that “choice is the desire of what has already been counselled.” It seems quite difficult, therefore, to go along with Gallagher’s reading of Thomas.

James Keenan, another scholar who reads Thomas in a more voluntarist direction, distinguishes between goodness and rightness, attributing the former to the will and the latter to reason. Between the writing of the Prima Pars and the Prima Secundae, Keenan argues, Thomas developed the notion that reason serves as the formal, but not the final, cause of the will’s movement. Keenan attributes this shift—first discovered by Odon Lottin in the 1920s—to the condemned articles of 1270. In turn, then, Thomas modified his moral psychology to confer a significant degree of autonomy to the will, constrained only by God (who has come to replace reason as final cause) and a transcendent, universal goodness. “The only object that can move the will necessarily quantum ad determinationem is the universal good. For this reason, we long for beatitude.”

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39 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae IaIae, q. 13.
40 Ibid., q. 14.
43 Ibid., 40. The most succinct English-language presentation of Lottin’s claim is to be found in Albert E. Wingell’s dissertation, “The Relationship of Intellect and Will in the Human Act according to St. Thomas Aquinas” (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1966), 4–10, 21–25.
44 Keenan, Goodness and Rightness in Thomas Aquinas’ Summa Theologiae, 47. Sherwin presents a convincing case of how Keenan’s account depends upon Josef Fuchs’s appropriation of Rahner’s transcendental method. See Sherwin, By Knowledge & By Love, 12–13.
Regardless of the merits (or demerits) of these various readings of Thomas—and there are many more besides the four surveyed here—what soon becomes clear is that categorizing his thought as either intellectualism or voluntarism of the ethical type is a difficult task. While each reading deserves its own careful attention, the very fact that such a multitude of conflicting interpretations exists says something about both what is at stake and the ease with which Thomas may be (mis)read in so many directions. What is at stake is whether the Condemnations of 1270 and 1277 apply to Thomas (more on this below). And the ease with which so many readings occur indicates that perhaps any ambiguity seen in Thomas’s writings has more to do with the anachronistic application of later categories than a lack of coherence in his work.

And yet ambiguities remain in Thomas’s exploration of these issues, and thus further questions and distinctions arose in the decades following his death.\(^45\) In this respect, then, borrowing from Kent’s terminology, Thomas may be considered a *psychological* intellectualist—that is, the priority of psychological faculties is *weighted toward* the intellect, but the intellect is not wholly determinative of one’s psychological constitution. Although he is typically contrasted as the quintessential intellectualist over against the voluntarism of Duns Scotus, Thomas is better contrasted with Bonaventure and left to Kent’s “psychological” realm.\(^46\) Thomas wrote prior to the Condemnations of 1277 (and much of his

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\(^{45}\) Hoffmann, “Intellectualism and Voluntarism,” 416–17, 427. Hoffmann also notes a current debate regarding whether Thomas is an intellectualist or voluntarist, with Jeffrey Hause arguing the former, David M. Gallagher arguing the latter, and Robert Pasnau arguing for “compatibilism” in Thomas.

\(^{46}\) One Thomist critic of voluntarism, in particular, has recognized this more accurate contrast of Thomas and Bonaventure, leading him to condemn *Bonaventure* as the source of all modern ills. See Rik Van Nieuwenhove, “Catholic Theology in the Thirteenth Century and the Origins of Secularism,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 75, no. 4 (2010): 339–54.
writings were prior to those of 1270) and therefore operated in an entirely different league. Due to those Condemnations, late medieval reflection on ethics was indeed predominantly voluntarist. Regardless of whether those who put forth the Condemnations truly understood Thomas (and regardless of whether those Condemnations actually applied to his writings), legitimate concerns about freedom and responsibility arose in the late thirteenth century and the church responded. The game changed, and the players along with it.

3 Ethical Reflection in Late Medieval Scholasticism

Up until 1270, the language used to describe freedom was always this freedom of choice—that is, *liberum arbitrium*. After 1277, however, the language used turned to describe more directly the freedom of the will, or *libertas voluntatis*.

The former category, as elucidated by Lombard and his later commentators, included both will and intellect within the process of making decisions freely. Yet the latter category, quite obviously, indicates an increasing concern with the will.

In March 1277, in response to a request by Pope John XXI (formerly a master at Paris) to inquire into scholars who may have been committing formerly condemned errors, the bishop of Paris condemned 219 further propositions considered heterodox by a commission of sixteen theologians. Largely an extension of thirteen articles condemned by the same bishop in 1270, these propositions included more than fifteen relating to the will, the primary concern of which is to protect the freedom of the will and position the intellect as an external

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47 Kent, *Virtues of the Will*, 98–99. The distinction here makes Gallagher’s translation of *liberum arbitrium* above all the more puzzling.

power that does not restrict that freedom. 49 Three of these, propositions 163–65, are particularly important for consideration here:

“That the will necessarily pursues what is firmly believed by reason and that it cannot abstain from that which reason dictates. This necessitation, however, is not compulsion but the nature of the will.”

“That man’s will is necessitated by his cognition, like the appetite of a beast.”

“That after a conclusion has been made about something to be done, the will does not remain free; and that punishments are provided by the law only for the rebuke of ignorance and in order that the rebuke be a source of knowledge for others.”

All three clearly demonstrate a concern to liberate the will from any type of internal necessitation of the will.

In the months following the publishing of these condemned propositions, William de la Mare composed his Correctorium fratris Thomae, in which he—using the condemnations alongside other authorities—refuted Thomas on multiple points, thus accusing Thomas of espousing officially condemned doctrines. 51 De la Mare insisted that Thomas’s affirmation of the will’s determination by reason disallowed the will to pursue anything contrary to reason, thus restricting the will’s freedom. 52 Furthermore, De la Mare argued that Thomas’s placement of command under reason contradicts the freedom of the will, citing John of

49 Bonnie Kent, Virtues of the Will, 99.

50 Qtd. in ibid., 77.

51 William de la Mare, Correctorium fratris Thomae, in Les premières polémiques thomistes I: Le Correctorium Corruptorii “Quare”, ed. P. Glorieux (Le Saulchoir: Bibliothèque thomiste, 1927).

52 Kent, Virtues of the Will, 81–82. See Thomas, Summa Theologiae, IaIae, q. 19, art. 3, and De la Mare, Correctorium, 232.
Damascus, Bernard of Clairvaux, and even Aristotle in opposition. Thus the ethical voluntarism that initiated the shift to late medieval scholastic reflection was primarily concerned with asserting the primal activity of the will in opposition to a perceived tyranny in the case of reason’s prior activity—and that such tyranny was believed to be found in the moral theory of Thomas Aquinas.

The intellectualist side of the debate was originally voiced by those who wished to defend Thomas from the charges of William de la Mare. John Quidort (John of Paris) argued that the will’s freedom was entirely compatible with the intellect’s necessitation, because such compatibility is the only way to distinguish voluntary appetite from sense or animal appetite. Godfrey of Fontaines pushed this compatibility further by claiming that it is the will that sets the parameters of the intellect’s deliberation toward possible ends to begin with. Likewise, Thomas of Sutton and Nicholas Trivet located the freedom of the will within the necessitating deliberation of the intellect—i.e. the sovereignty of reason guaranteed the will’s freedom, derivatively speaking. For them the primacy of the intellect’s activity did not obviate human freedom. These early “intellectualists,” of course, only emerged after the early voluntarists had declared Thomas anathema. The freedom of the will was universally presumed to be a proposition worth upholding, and the intellectualists came to bear the burden of proving their (and Thomas’s) legitimacy.

53 Kent, *Virtues of the Will*, 83–84. See also Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* IaIIae, q. 17, art. 1, and De la Mare, *Correctorium*, 233–35.


55 Ibid., 108–9.

56 Ibid., 109–10.

57 Ibid., 106–10.
It is thus evident that there were several intellectualist defenders of Thomas in these years—and they are all worthy of investigation, to be sure. But history has largely sidelined them to focus on the work of Duns Scotus, the critical edition of which is yet to be completed.\textsuperscript{58}

Given the plethora of voices on either side of the intellectualist–voluntarist debate at the turn of the fourteenth century, many scholars have seen the contribution of Duns Scotus as mitigating the radical extremes and, rather than advocating an extreme voluntarism (for which many blame him today), preserving the best elements of Thomas’s theology into a new scheme for a post–1277 world.\textsuperscript{59} In her study of the development of ethical voluntarism in the late thirteenth century, Bonnie Kent so aptly declares:

To compare the views of Scotus with the views of Aquinas is rather like comparing the views of a professor tenured last year with the views of one who died in the early 1960s. Even if the earlier professor’s teachings continue to be highly influential, the intellectual milieu has changed radically. His successor has seen the protests of `68, the rise and fall of structuralism, the end of the war in Vietnam, the advent of deconstructionism, the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the trend toward political correctness, and other developments probably undreamed of by his older counterpart. Perhaps the pace of change was slower in the Middle Ages, but thirty year gaps should still give one pause to wonder, and worry.\textsuperscript{60}

The remainder of this chapter, then, will explore how Scotus and Ockham understood the human will, conscience and synderesis, deliberation, and virtue, in order to prepare the way for examining Barth’s understanding of the same.

\textsuperscript{58} Etienne Gilson is said to have remarked: “Waiting for the critical edition of Duns Scotus is like waiting for the beatific vision!” Qtd. in Allan B. Wolter, \textit{Scotus and Ockham: Selected Essays} (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2004), 173.

\textsuperscript{59} Much of Scotus’s effort was directed toward reigning in the radical voluntarism of Henry of Ghent. See Langston, \textit{Conscience and Other Virtues}, 53.

\textsuperscript{60} Kent, \textit{Virtues of the Will}, 2–3.
3.1 John Dun Scotus’s Ethical Voluntarism

3.1.1 Challenges in Scotus Scholarship

There is no issue more contentious in Scotus studies than determining a definitive position of Scotus on the will. Blame may be placed at the feet of Thomas Cromwell for the wanton sixteenth-century destruction of Scotus’s works in Oxford.\(^{61}\) Due to that travesty in 1535, a comprehensive account of Scotus’s development has been practically, if not virtually, impossible to attain. The account that follows will focus upon what is generally agreed upon as Scotus’s early work, which formulated what has been called a more “moderate rational voluntarism.”\(^{62}\)

The problem with determining Scotus’s later work is that the only record is in the form of reportatio—student reports of his lectures in Paris on Lombard’s Sentences. Perhaps once the critical edition of these reports is complete, some key debates in contemporary Scotus studies may be resolved. But, again, these are student reports, and the only edition that Scotus personally examined—the Reportatio examinata—is on the first book of Lombard’s Sentences and not the second book in which moral psychology, including the faculties of intellect and will, is explored. It is in the second book that the determinative question of the will’s role in moral act is addressed. As it stands, however, Scotus scholars are divided on whether, in addition to the “moderate rational voluntarism” of the early years in Oxford, there was ever a shift in Scotus’s thinking such that he adopted the more radical ethical voluntarism widely attributed to him in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (prior to

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\(^{61}\) See chapter 1, note 51, above.

the advent of the Scotistic Commission’s work and for which the MacIntyre–Milbank metanarrative holds him responsible today). The irony is that dedicated Scotus scholars throughout the latter half of the twentieth century would not recognize the radical voluntarist depicted by MacIntyre, Milbank, et al. It is only with the recent work of Thomas Williams and Stephen Dumont that Scotus scholars have begun to entertain the notion of the radically voluntarist Scotus that so many of his critics presume to be the case.

The specific issue at the heart of this question of Scotus’s voluntarism is whether the will is the total efficient cause of volition—that is, whether in the act of volition the will is unaccompanied by any influence from either the intellect or the object upon which the volition is based. The text that overturned the radical voluntarist reading in order to establish Scotus’s “moderate rational voluntarism” was, for the majority of the twentieth century, believed to be a later text and therefore a more reliable witness to the mature Scotus’s views. Bonnie Kent’s reading of Scotus, which heavily influences the present chapter, is based upon this text. In the early 1990s, however, it became clear that this text is actually from the Lectura, Scotus’s notes for his very first set of lectures on the Sentences, delivered in 1298–99 as a bachelor theologian in Oxford. Given the questionability of this text as representative of the mature Scotus’s views, the following account can only be preliminary. There may indeed be a Scotus radically more voluntarist than is presented here. Regardless of the extent of Scotus’s voluntarism in relation to this question, however, the following account will show that even Scotus’s earlier and more moderate brand of voluntarism condenses the work of deliberation in the moral act into a momentary decision that may appear as rash compulsion. Thus it will be demonstrated that the grammar regulating Scotus’s voluntarism is one that preserves a fundamental moral freedom at the heart of the mental faculty known
as “the will” and that, on the basis of such freedom, locates virtue—as the resource by which one may act morally—within the agency possessed by the will. Such voluntaristic virtue is distinguished from rational virtue and therefore obviates any need for extended rational deliberation over a course of action.

Following this account, a grammar resembling that in Scotus will be identified in the moral theology of Ockham and, in the following chapter, in that of Karl Barth.

3.1.2 The Cause of Volition

In distinction II.25 of the *Lectura*, Scotus first reports two extreme positions regarding the cause of volition. On the one hand, there are the opinions of Godfrey of Fontaines and Thomas Aquinas that the object, as perceived by either the intellect or the imagination, is the cause of volition. On the other hand is the radical voluntarist Henry of Ghent, who claims that the will is the total efficient cause of volition and the perceived object is merely an indispensable cause (*sine qua non*). This latter view was the position of many Franciscans at the time. But Scotus disagreed and struck a middle way.63

After his refutation of the views of Thomas Aquinas and Godfrey of Fontaines by defending the will as an active, rational potency capable of producing effects, Scotus tackles the extreme voluntarist position of Henry. First, Scotus argued against the idea of a *sine qua non* cause altogether.64 For him Aristotle’s four causes—material, formal, efficient, and final—


64 Dumont shows that Scotus’s argument against Henry’s *sine qua non* causality is actually borrowed from Godfrey. See Dumont “Did Duns Scotus Change his Mind on the Will?” 749–50.
are enough to bring about an effect; there is no need to posit an accomplice. All causality falls within one of those four categories. “In the whole world there is not to be found such a cause *sine qua non*, as that is called a cause *sine qua non* without the action of which the agent does not act, and yet which exercises no causality on it or its act.”

Scotus preferred to simply place such causes within the larger rubric of efficient causality, as part of the interaction of external things upon that which is changed. For Scotus, Henry’s position is comparable to considering fire as merely a *sine qua non* accessory, while wood makes up the total efficient cause of its own burning. On its own, such a position is nonsense. But, secondly and more importantly, applied to volition such a demotion of the object’s causality can have dangerous consequences. In Kent’s words, “If the will is the total cause of volition and has in its power all acts that it is possible to will, then it will have infinite power.” Thus even Scotus—the early Scotus, at least—argued against a will with unmitigated causality.

Scotus wished neither to sacrifice the will’s freedom by making the object the total cause of volition nor enter into the nonsensical and dangerous world where the will is its own total cause. The middle way struck in his early *Lectura* consists in affirming the partial causality of both: “Both the will and the object concur in causing an act of willing, so that the act of willing is from the will and from the object known as from an efficient cause.” This partial causality is not indicative of cooperation in the sense of two people pulling a boat (for if one

65 Qtd. in Kent, *Virtues of the Will*, 145.


67 Kent, *Virtues of the Will*, 145.

68 This latter view, however, is the “unmitigated” voluntarism that Thomas Williams ascribes to Scotus.

69 Qtd. in Kent, *Virtues of the Will*, 146.
worked less the other would compensate), nor is it like the cooperation of a baseball player and a bat in knocking a ball through the air. Rather the concurrence of partial causes here is such that both are necessary but one is “the more principal agent.” In the act of volition, the will is that primary agent, but it cannot exercise its partial causality without the object’s involvement. The will is primary due to its freedom, as compared to the neutrality of the object. The intellect participates as a “natural agent,” one that possesses reason and is thereby capable of a variety of judgments, but it is ultimately determined by the impressions of the object and, more importantly, the free choice of the will.

In other texts Scotus describes how the freedom of the will’s act consists in two capacities for self-control: first, the will may choose one object (velle) over another (nolle)—or simply accept (velle) or reject (nolle) a single object—and, second, the will may restrain itself from willing (velle) or not (non velle) altogether. Scotus also holds that the will’s primacy over the intellect is due to love as the “highest habit of the human person, and love is a habit of the will, not of the intellect.” It is therefore in the will that one is free to love, according to Scotus. And in his commentary on the Metaphysics Scotus takes Aristotle’s statement that “some potencies will be nonrational but others will be with reason” and concludes that “the

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70 Scotus employs an analogy of two parents being involved in bearing a child, “though one is more principally active.” Qtd in ibid., 146–47.
71 Ibid., 147.
72 Ibid., 147–48.
will is distinct from nature precisely because it is a power that can act at any given moment and under any set of external circumstances in more than one way, whereas natural powers or potencies, given all preconditions for acting, are determined by their very nature to act in the way they do.”\textsuperscript{75} Again, for Scotus, the will is the locus of agential freedom.

The early Scotus mitigates his voluntarism by claiming that without the intellect, the will would be blind. Thus the intellect contributes to the will’s freedom, even if it is not itself the source of such freedom.\textsuperscript{76} As stated above, however, Scotus’s middle way in the \textit{Lectura} may or may not have given way to a later defense of the unmitigated voluntarism of Henry of Ghent.\textsuperscript{77} At least according to \textit{Reportatio} IIA, Scotus’s treatment of the issue in Paris maintained his prior criticism of Thomas and Godfrey, but omitted his criticism of Henry of Ghent and actually defended the latter’s understanding of the \textit{sine qua non} causality of the object.\textsuperscript{78} Ingham and Dreyer suggest that such a defense does not necessarily entail complete acquiescence to Henry’s radical voluntarism, but that Scotus likely found that the object’s

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Metaphysics} IX.2, qtd. in Wolter, \textit{Scotus and Ockham}, 174.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Lectura} II, dist. 25, which asks “Regarding the will’s freedom, the question is whether the will’s act is caused by the object moving it or by the will moving itself. See Ingham and Dreyer, \textit{The Philosophical Vision of John Duns Scotus}, 163, 167–68.

\textsuperscript{77} Ingham and Dreyer, \textit{The Philosophical Vision of John Duns Scotus}, 167–72; Dumont, “Did Duns Scotus Change his Mind on the Will?”

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Reportatio} IIA is one of two \textit{reportationes} on Scotus’s lectures on the second book of the \textit{Sentences}, and a critical edition has yet to appear. The “current” edition is that published by Luke Wadding in 1639 and reprinted as the Wadding-Vives edition in the 1890s. Due to the shortcomings of the \textit{Reportatio} in the Waddings-Vives edition, which in 1921 the Vatican Library called a “\textit{mélange contaminé},” the Scotistic Commission was formed to create a critical edition. See Wolter, “Scotus and Ockham,” 9–10. There is also a \textit{Reportatio} IIB, created by another student, which only exists in manuscript form. See Dumont, “Did Duns Scotus Change his Mind on the Will?” 747n93.
sine qua non causality to be helpful in articulating the necessary presence of the object alongside the will.\textsuperscript{79}

Thomas Williams argues on this basis, however, that the later Scotus adheres to a more robust strand of “unmitigated” voluntarism, precisely the kind for which Scotus has been either condemned by contemporary anti-voluntarists or defended against by those sympathetic to late medieval Franciscan theology. “His critics have seized on these passages and accused Scotus of believing that the moral law depends simply on ‘the arbitrary will of God.’ His most sympathetic interpreters, however, have devoted great ingenuity to showing that Scotus did not mean anything unpalatable by these statements.”\textsuperscript{80} Like the present defense of Barth’s voluntarism, Williams wishes to portray Scotus as an unmitigated voluntarist and defend such robust voluntarism against its critics.

Allan Wolter, however, considers Williams’s account as “an excellent example of how easy it is to take certain of his statements out of context.”\textsuperscript{81} Wolter argues that Scotus “modeled his view of the divine will upon the perfection he ascribes to the human will” and finds that the human will “possess that superabundant sufficiency to determine itself that is characteristic of the divine will.”\textsuperscript{82}

With the human will as a pattern for understanding the divine will, Wolter emphasizes that the affection for justice is “the will’s natural propensity to follow the dictates of right

\textsuperscript{79} Ingham and Dreyer, \textit{The Philosophical Vision of John Duns Scotus}, 170.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 317–18.
reason.” And Wolter points out that for Scotus the divine will follows this same pattern. Thus “the divine will can only will according to right reason and . . . only do to it what justice to his divine goodness requires.” 83

Wolter also argues that Williams’s use of the Wadding edition is problematic—or at the very least “must be used with extreme caution.” 84 The very texts that Wolter and Williams’s argument rests have yet to be published. 85 “Consequently, claims to be quoting the unmitigated Scotus today can be almost as risky as an attempt to traverse a minefield and can easily open the unwary scholar to the charge of presumption.” 86 Thus there is plenty more to be done in order to advance the cause of Scotus studies. A critical edition of Reportatio II would go a long way in putting the discussion on constructive grounds.

On this side of a definitive account of the historical Scotus, however, the present study may still affirm that even in the earlier Scotus whose voluntarism is of the “moderate rational” variety, the role of deliberation is restricted due to virtue residing within the will. Before narrating that story, however, the present account must first attend to Scotus’s unique development of a doctrine of conscience and synderesis, for conscience, along with virtue, provides the freedom in which the will acts.

83 Ibid., 318–19.
84 Ibid., 319.
85 Ibid., 319–20n16.
86 Ibid., 320.
3.1.3 Scotus on the Conscience and Synderesis

Both Scotus and Ockham say relatively little about conscience and synderesis, but—as Douglas Langston has argued in his study of conscience from Bonaventure to MacIntyre—this is actually “an indication that the focus of the discussion of these issues . . . changed to issues about the virtues.” As this brief section demonstrates, Scotus’s approach to the conscience and synderesis synthesizes both Thomas’s emphasis on an intellectual, *a priori* synderesis and Bonaventure’s empirical, *a posteriori* conscience. Before examining the conscience and synderesis directly, however, it will be helpful to look first at Scotus’s use of Anselm’s theory of dual affections.

In his *De Concordia Praescientiae et Praedestinationis et Gratiae Dei cum Libero Arbitrio* (The Harmony of the Foreknowledge, the Predestination, and the Grace of God with Free Choice), Anselm writes that “the instrument-for-willing has two aptitudes, which I am calling inclinations. One of these is the inclination to will what is beneficial; the other is the inclination to do what is right. To be sure, the will which is the instrument wills nothing except either a benefit or uprightness. For whatever else it wills, it wills either for the sake of a benefit or for the sake of uprightness; and even if it is mistaken, it regards itself as referring what it wills to these two ends.” Thus, according to Anselm, the will may pursue one of two ends—its own advantage or a higher justice.

The “dual affections” of the will, which Scotus borrows from Anselm, consist of the affection one has for one’s own advantage (*affectio commodi*) and the affection one has for

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87 Langston, *Conscience and Other Virtues*, 53–54.

justice, or the good of others (affectio iustitiae).\textsuperscript{89} Scotus’s use of Anselm’s dual affections sees both as innate and the ability to choose between the two thereby comprise the basis for moral freedom.\textsuperscript{90} Scotus writes: “this affection for justice . . . is the liberty innate to the will, since it represents the first checkrein on this affection for the advantageous.”\textsuperscript{91} As a rational power, the indeterminate will is capable of determining itself for either one action or its opposite (or not at all). This has the appearance of being a contradiction: a will that is not determined is determined by itself.\textsuperscript{92} Scotus answers this objection by claiming that the indeterminacy of the will is an “indeterminacy of superabundant sufficiency” (indeterminatio superabundantis sufficientiae) that contains “unlimited actuality” (illimitatione actualitatis).\textsuperscript{93}

Lee claims that the dual affections are “hierarchically ordered” such that the affectio commodi is corrected by the affectio iustitiae. This correction is the specific exercise of the will’s superabundant sufficiency: “for Scotus superabundant sufficiency is not understood as some general power but rather as a specific ability—namely, the ability to transcend the pursuit of one’s advantage.”\textsuperscript{94} Thus the freedom of the will does not transcend all inclinations, but rather the “natural, generic inclination” of the affectio commodi.\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{89} Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality, ed. Allan B. Wolter, 178–79.
\textsuperscript{90} Langston, Conscience and Other Virtues , 56.
\textsuperscript{91} Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality, 468–71.
\textsuperscript{93} Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality, 152–53.
\textsuperscript{94} Lee, “Scotus on the Will,” 52.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 53. Lee’s primary contribution is to argue against John Boler’s interpretation that Scotus’s use of the affection for justice “appears to have been motivated by the wish to resist explanations of morality couched in
Turning now to Scotus’s treatment of the conscience and synderesis, then, the primary text is his *Ordinatio* II, dist. 39. Here Scotus writes that “conscience is not an appetitive habit generated by a single [appetitive] act, but is produced deductively by way of a practical syllogism; conscience represents an evident conclusion inferred from the first practical principles and hence is not an acquired appetitive habit at all. It is also clear that it is not something innate, nor a part or power [of the soul].” Conscience is rather “the habit of making proper practical conclusions, according to which a right choice of what is to be done is apt by nature to follow.”

With conscience as a habit within the will, Scotus follows Thomas in placing synderesis within the intellect: “If synderesis is assumed to be something having an elicited act that necessarily and at all times inclines one to act justly and resist sin, then since nothing of the sort is in the will, we cannot assume it to be there. Consequently, it is in the intellect, and it cannot be assumed to be anything other than that habitual knowledge of principles which is always right.”

As stated above, Thomas’s understanding was that synderesis is supplied by the intellect for its own use by the conscience. Scotus continues: “I reply to these questions: If synderesis is assumed to be something having an elicited act that necessarily and at all times inclines one to act justly and resist sin, then since nothing of the sort is in the will, we cannot assume it to

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96 *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, 199–201.

97 Ibid., 203.

98 Ibid., 201.

be there. Consequently, it is in the intellect, and it cannot be assumed to be anything other than that habitual knowledge of principles which is always right.\textsuperscript{100}

In following Thomas on the synderesis, however, Scotus has not abandoned Bonaventure, since the will remains superior to the intellect.\textsuperscript{101} Scotus, like Bonaventure, assigns the conscience an active role that develops with experience.\textsuperscript{102} The virtues, then, are found \textit{within the will}, and the will is inclined to follow \textit{their} dictates—as opposed to the dictates of the intellect.\textsuperscript{103}

Scotus, in effect, transfers the role of Bonaventure’s synderesis to the affection for benefit (\textit{affectio commodi}).\textsuperscript{104} The affection for benefit is tempered by the affection for justice (\textit{affectio iustitiae}), thus providing the agent with the opportunity for free choice.\textsuperscript{105} Synderesis—as general practical principles in the manner of Thomas Aquinas—is then applied by the conscience in order to deliberate upon the proper choice to be made. The will then chooses to follow that dictate of conscience (again, a virtue built over time)—or not. Thus the freedom of the will is maintained as its moment of agency arrives only after the workings of conscience and the virtues.

\textsuperscript{100} \textit{Ordinatio} II.39, in \textit{Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality}, 201.

\textsuperscript{101} Langston, \textit{Conscience and the Virtues}, 55.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 57.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 59.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
3.1.4 Virtue and Deliberation

In an important passage, Scotus writes in a supplement to *Ordinatio* III, dist. 33:

> Although the will by reason of its liberty could determine itself to act, nevertheless in virtue of its action it receives an aptitude that directly inclines it to a similar act. For this unique determination of the will is not the sort of natural form that one finds in fire, for instance, as regards the way it behaves, but it comes from a free action stemming from a potency that is undetermined, and it is in this way that it is determinable by a habit.”

Here one sees that for Scotus virtues—as habits or aptitudes that incline one to a particular act—reside within the will. Such an account of virtue, however, does not mitigate the ultimate freedom of the will. Against the objection that virtue presents an impingement upon that freedom, Scotus replies, “For an agent needs a disposition even more for some action in its power than for anything else, for if it does not have this in its power, then it will not be credited with any praise or blame when it acts or in regard to the way it acts.”

Kent observes that while virtue as a habit contributes to, but does not determine, the free moral act, for Scotus it is (like the object perceived by the intellect) a “partial efficient cause.” In this sense, then, Kent argues that Scotus, in effect, *naturalized* virtue. “Although they are

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106 *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, 328–29; 228. The *Ordinatio* consists of a later revision of the *Lectura* that Scotus prepared for publication. Two layers of redactions have been identified, one prior to Scotus’s departure for Paris in 1302 and another while lecturing in Paris prior to his departure for Cologne (prior to 1307). Unfortunately for the debate described above, there is a lacuna in *Ordinatio* II precisely at the question of the will’s role in the act of volition. A comprehensive account of Scotus’s works is provided in Thomas Williams, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, ed. Thomas Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6–13.

107 *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, 328–29; 228.


produced by free acts of will,” she writes, “virtues themselves operate psychologically as other natural causes do.”\textsuperscript{110}

On this basis Ingham and Dreyer go so far as to claim that Scotus “effectively removes the need for virtue.”\textsuperscript{111} While this is perhaps overstated, what is important to maintain is how the proverbial movement of truth to which it all comes down is the act freely willed. So it is helpful that Ingham and Dreyer moderate this to conclude that “Scotus only displaces virtue, he does not eliminate it from the moral domain.”\textsuperscript{112} Virtue indeed matters for Scotus, but it only matters because of the moral act of the will that it informs.

Ingham writes that “because of the centrality of freedom for his moral perspective, Scotus separates the notion of virtue as natural inclination from that of the moral dispositions of the will which relate directly to the exercise of deliberation and choice.”\textsuperscript{113} In other words, virtue’s impact upon the will shapes the type of rational deliberation involved. Virtue, as habit, is an immediate resource that enables the will to act without the kind of extended ruminations typically expected of moral deliberation. Ingham continues: “The actual operation of decision making and choice unifies moral living around the will. This operation involves virtues, yet not in a way which compromises the will’s innate freedom for self-determination.”\textsuperscript{114} With this in mind, then, the final examination of Scotus’s ethical

\textsuperscript{110} Kent, \textit{Virtues of the Will}, 361.

\textsuperscript{111} Ingham and Dreyer, \textit{The Philosophical Vision of John Duns Scotus}, 191. See also Ingham, \textit{The Harmony of Goodness}, 74.

\textsuperscript{112} Ingham and Dreyer, \textit{The Philosophical Vision of John Duns Scotus}, 193.

\textsuperscript{113} Ingham, \textit{The Harmony of Goodness}, 83.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
voluntarism will focus on the exercise of moral deliberation as an immediate implementation of the virtues of the will.

Regardless of the inclinations of the virtues of the will, according to the earlier Scotus, the moral agent must still freely choose. As Kent writes: “The requirement of choice should not be construed as a requirement that someone continue to engage in the extensive deliberation that she did as a moral beginner, lest she lose moral credit for her own virtuous actions. Scotus recognizes that virtue can lead the agent to deliberate and choose with such speed that she herself doesn’t notice the time involved.”¹¹⁵ That is, with the virtues of the will ready-at-hand, the moral agent acts so immediately that deliberation appears to not have taken place at all. Rationalist critics of such a position will of course counter that this is not moral expertise but rather carelessness. As Kent adds, however, “his theory in no way downgrades the swift, easy choices of a moral virtuoso. It aims rather to deny moral credit for truly ‘compulsive’ actions.”¹¹⁶ Or, according to another Scotus scholar, “Self-determination . . . is not the same as arbitrary determination, and much less as lack of determination.”¹¹⁷

Even Scotus’s earlier and more moderate brand of voluntarism posits an immediacy in which the will freely acts. That freedom, informed by conscience and virtue, enables decisions to be made in the immediacy of the moment. Such immediacy may indeed appear to the external observer as no different than compulsion, acting out of mere habit. But habits may be based on years of conscientiousness just as much as they may be based on reckless vice.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 361.
¹¹⁷ Bonansea, Man and His Approach to God in John Duns Scotus, 67.
Scotus’s ethical voluntarism demonstrates a grammar of moral theology in which the will is the locus of freedom and moral responsibility. In a manner resembling Barth, Scotus greatly reduces the role of deliberation. But it is Ockham who resembles Barth with respect to the radical obedience demanded by the divine command.

3.2 William of Ockham’s Ethical Voluntarism

3.2.1 Positive and Nonpositive Ethics

When examining Ockham’s theological ethics, the first thing that one must highlight is his distinction between “positive moral knowledge”—as that which “contains human and divine laws that obligate one to pursue or to avoid things that are good or evil only because they are prohibited or commanded by a superior whose role it is to establish the laws”—and “nonpositive moral knowledge”—as that which “directs human actions without any precept from a superior, as principles that are either known per se or by experience direct them.”

Ockham thus distinguishes between revealed and philosophical ethics. Either one receives a command posited by some authoritative source, or one figures out the best course of action on one’s own.

Although Ockham treats both approaches to ethics at great length, it is the former that enjoys an ultimate moral priority. Lucas Freppert calls Ockham’s moral theology “a system which holds that the will of God is the highest norm of morality.”


knowledge “is not a demonstrative science,” but rather proceeds on the basis of having received it as a given.120

Nonpositive moral knowledge, for Ockham, may come either from self-evident truths or through experience.121 Ockham explores nonpositive moral knowledge at great length, holding as he does that right reason or “prudence,” on the basis of human freedom, is able to bring about a moral act (as a partial efficient cause).122 The human freedom presupposed in and necessitated by such a stance, however, must also be explored here—as the “liberty of indifference.”

3.2.2 From Indifference to Obedience

Like Scotus, Ockham also defines the will as a self-determining power for opposites, where the will may choose either velle, nolle, or non velle. Ockham adopts this as the doctrine of the liberty of indifference.123 That is, the will is placed in a position of neutrality that yields a certain objective perspective. Such a perspective is rightly criticized by those who would instead advocate that true freedom comes from God rather than from a disinterested self. Ockham’s approach to the will’s liberty of indifference, however, does not curtail the absolute importance of the good being from God’s command. In fact, Ockham affirms an ethic of obedience over a subjective weighing of consequences and insists that the moral agent enters into a transcendent moral sphere in the act of doing good by God’s command.

120 Ibid., 16.
121 Ibid., 17.
122 Ibid., 32–33, 62.
Even more, Ockham holds that such liberty of indifference is a prerequisite for entering that transcentent state.

The originality of Ockham’s ethic of divine command is described well by Armand Maurer, who states that, unlike his predecessors, “Ockham . . . severs the bond between metaphysics and ethics and bases morality not upon the perfection of human nature (whose reality he denies), nor upon the teleological relation between man and God, but upon man’s obligation to follow the laws freely laid down for him by God.”\(^\text{124}\) While Ockham leaves room for intellectual deliberation as a constituent factor in the moral appraisal of volition, he insists that, ultimately, it is the divine command that defines whether something is good. As Peter King writes, “The goodness or badness of the agent’s will . . . depends on its conformity to the dictates of right reason in the first stage and to God’s will in the final stage.”\(^\text{125}\)

Ockham provides an example of walking to church. In itself such an act is morally neutral, for one can perform such an action either with the intention of worshipping God or for vainglory. If the latter is the case, then no merit may be attributed to the act.\(^\text{126}\) Thus mere performance does not affect moral evaluation; the completion of an otherwise good act is, in fact, evil apart from its intention.\(^\text{127}\) Ockham even borrows Augustine’s explanation in De libero arbitrio of how imagined adultery is as reprehensible as actual adultery: if the only

\(^{124}\) Qtd. in ibid., 245.

\(^{125}\) Peter King, “Ockham’s Ethical Theory,” 227.


thing lacking is the opportunity to commit such a crime, then the guilt remains.\textsuperscript{128} Ockham even goes so far as to hold that divine commands, such as that found in the Decalogue, apply to the intentions \textit{behind} the acts prohibited and not to the acts themselves.\textsuperscript{129} It is not enough to honor father and mother or abstain from murder, adultery, stealing, and covetousness; one must do so precisely because they are commanded.

Peter King describes the situation well when he writes that “Ockham holds the rightness or wrongness of an act to depend not on any feature or characteristic of the act itself or its consequences but on the agent’s intentions and character.”\textsuperscript{130} That is, “all acts are morally neutral, neither good nor bad in themselves,” but such acts become good or bad based on intention.\textsuperscript{131}

Any given act for Ockham may be deemed virtuous (or vicious) only “by an extrinsic denomination,” which is whether it is commanded by God.\textsuperscript{132} While the will is certainly primary at the level of personal agency and enjoys a certain “liberty of indifference,” it must ultimately subordinate itself to God.

3.2.3 From Obedience to Transcendence

The lone exception, for Ockham, among the commandments the fulfillment of which is only good when done out of obedience—the one divine command and the one act of the will that

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\textsuperscript{128} Ockham, \textit{Quodlibetal Questions} I, q. 20, art. 2, 1:89.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 227.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 229.
\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Sentences} III.11, qtd. in ibid., 230.
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is “necessarily and intrinsically virtuous”—is the great commandment, the love of God.\textsuperscript{133} As King describes it, “The act of loving God above all else for his own sake is good in itself and generates or tends to generate a virtuous habit in the agent’s will (properly identified as the virtue).”\textsuperscript{134} Any other good act must be performed out of obedience to be considered good. Loving God, however, is unique in that such love is the source of the very ability to be obedient. The moral evaluation of all other acts of will—that is, all other intentions—depend on this primal good.

An act that is necessarily virtuous . . . is an act of the will, since an act by which God is loved above all things and for his own sake is an act of this sort. For this act is virtuous in such a way that it cannot be vicious, and this act cannot be caused by a created will without being virtuous—both because (i) everyone in his own time and place is obliged to love God above all things, and, as a result, this act cannot be vicious; and because (ii) this act is the first of all good acts.\textsuperscript{135}

Or, in Peter King’s formulation, “This act is good, . . . and it is the intrinsic good on which the goodness of other acts depends, including the goodness of other acts of will.”\textsuperscript{136} And Marilyn McCord Adams describes Ockham’s position: “If loving God above all and for God’s own sake is intrinsically virtuous, Ockham claims it is intrinsically vicious to will to pray for the sake of vainglory.”\textsuperscript{137} Ockham is wary of any ethic that risks elevating the moral agent above God. One must first love God—and then obey God. Such a construal of divine command is a necessary component for Ockham’s “indifferent” will, and it is a component that the critics of voluntarism often overlook.

\textsuperscript{133} Ockham, \textit{Quodlibetal Questions} III.14, 1:211–15.

\textsuperscript{134} King, “Ockham’s Ethical Theory,” 232.

\textsuperscript{135} Ockham, \textit{Quodlibetal Questions} III.14, 1:213).

\textsuperscript{136} King, “Ockham’s Ethical Theory,” 232.

What scares such critics of the Ockhamist brand (indeed, *any* brand) of voluntarism is the capacity for arbitrariness. As Adams observes:

> Persistent is the worry that liberty of indifference is power to act outside the bounds of reason. Why does Ockham want to allow that reasons underdetermine divine action in creation, that creatures can act contrary to the dictates of right reason, indeed even make rebellion against reason’s norms their aim? How can the capacity for arbitrary and perverse action be an excellence in the best of agents? The heart of Ockham’s answer, I believe, is that the liberty of indifference is a necessary condition of self-transcendent aseity.¹³⁸

What is such “self-transcendent aseity”? It is the fifth and final stage of moral virtue. In *De connexione virtutum* Ockham identifies five stages for moral virtue. Peter King finds Ockham’s account “misleading” in that “the first four stages are sequential [and] the fifth is not clearly like the others.”¹³⁹ It is certainly true that the fifth is significantly different. That difference, however, should not serve to diminish its importance. On the contrary, along with the fourth stage it is the hermeneutical key to Ockham’s moral theology (distinguishing it from mere “ethics”). The first stage is that the agent wills to perform a just work that is “in conformity with right reason.”¹⁴⁰ In the second stage, the agent remains committed to right reason, rather than abandoning it for immoral reasons.¹⁴¹ The third stage is where the agent “wills to do such a work . . . precisely and solely *because* it has been so dictated by right reason.”¹⁴² The fourth stage consists of all of the above, but “precisely for the love of

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¹³⁸ Ibid., 266.


¹⁴⁰ Qtd. in ibid., 233.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Qtd. in ibid., 234. Emphasis added.
God.”143 The fifth and final stage is the act itself, performed “in a way that far transcends the ordinary human condition, either by supererogation or heroic perseverance.”144 Thus the good act that is performed indeed out of obedience and for the love of God ultimately brings its agent into a transcendent dimension of beatitude.

As Adams’s statement—that such “self-transcendent aseity” requires a prior “liberty of indifference”—makes clear, the indifferent will is only indifferent toward everything but God. First and foremost for Ockham is the requirement that the agent love God. That primal love of God is the presupposition that allows for and subsequently demands the will’s liberty of indifference. What the good will cannot do, however, is love God and then restrict one’s options based on anything other than that fundamental love of God.

3.2.4 The Precarious Place of Deliberative Reason

As Ockham’s first three stages in the acquisition of moral virtue make clear, however, such ethics of divine command is not irrational. Ockham does not excise the rational altogether—after all, “no one can will or nill what he or she never actually thinks of.”145 Adams cautions against overly arbitrary readings of Ockham’s use of divine command theory. The intellect still deliberates and the will implements.146 Practical reason is normative, functioning “as a rightful regulator of the agent’s will.”147 Reason has its place in the Ockhamist system.

143 Qtd. in ibid.
144 Ibid., 235.
146 Ibid., 246.
147 Ibid., 254.
But deliberation and judgment for Ockham pale in comparison to loving God. As Ockham writes in his *Dialogus*: “Wanting to tell the truth for the sake of God is much more perfect an action than wanting to tell the truth only because right reason dictates [that] the truth should be told, even as God is more perfect than right reason, and so this truth is more imperfect than the other.”  

Or, as Peter King restates: “God and right reason each prescribe telling the truth. . . . The difference lies in where one puts one’s trust for a source of truth—God or reason.”  

### 3.2.5 A Conformative Voluntarism

Ultimately, then, the moral agent must conform its will to the will of God. Peter King unpacks Ockham’s elucidation of the ways in which such voluntarist conformity may occur. “The first and most important distinction is that one will can conform itself to another in three ways: (1) to will what has been willed by another will; (2) to will what another will wills it to will; (3) to will something in a way similar to that in which another will wills it.”  

Ockham avoids elucidating the third option and instead concentrates on the first two—that is, how one’s will may conform to the divine will either by taking a long-range view and doing something that furthers God’s purposes or by doing precisely what God commands without a view to the long-range consequences.

Of the first option Peter King writes, “The natural way of interpreting the phrase “loving what God wants to be loved” is in line with (1), where the agent adopts the will of another.

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148 Qtd. in King, “Ockham’s Ethical Theory,” 235.

149 Ibid., 235.

150 Ibid., 237.
Brown wants to make Smith happy; Jones, who wants to conform his will to Brown’s, adopts the desire to make Smith happy.” Such an approach, while deferential to the divine will, ignores the importance of obedience and overestimates one’s particular place within God’s overall purposes.

Ockham prefers the second option where, in Kings’s words, “the agent takes his will to be directed by the will of another and not merely to adopt whatever desires the other has.” Moral action is not about adopting God’s values or even loving what God loves, but rather pure and simple obedience.

Thus, the appropriate desires on the part of those conforming their will may differ systematically from one another, and any or all desires may differ from the will of the one to whom they conform their wills. For example, Brown may want to make Smith happy but want Jones to do something that would make Smith sad (perhaps so that Smith can thereafter be made happy by contrast); Jones, in conforming his will to Brown’s, should thereby want to make Smith sad rather than happy.

In other words, God’s command of an individual may seemingly contradict the bigger picture of God’s purposes. But it is not the place of the individual to pursue that bigger picture. Such moral initiative, seemingly laudable as it may be, overestimates the ability of the moral agent to determine precisely how to further God’s ends. This is the risk of moral deliberation. Right reason cannot be ignored, but neither should it be overrated.

King describes two scenarios, one from salvation history and one from general experience, that Ockham employs to illustrate this: “God from eternity willed the death of Christ and yet wanted the Jews not to want Christ’s death in the way they brought death upon him; God

\[151 \text{ Ibid.} \]
wills my father to die and yet wants me not to want my father’s death. To love God above all else, then, involves willing what God wants one to will.”

Marilyn McCord Adams writes that Ockham “weaves a complex tapestry of continuity and innovation.” Indeed, Ockham develops a theory of divine command in conversation with—but also with significant departures from—his predecessors. His voluntarist reputation, however, often precedes him. Adams also writes that his critics “drastically overestimate the consequences for ethics,” although perhaps one cannot overestimate the importance that the theological distinction of loving God above all else makes—but one can certainly misread it. The “liberty of indifference” through which he understands the will presupposes, rather than circumscribes, the prior divine definition of the good. And it is only by such indifference that the moral agent may truly love God, commit to the divine will absolutely, and enter into that blessed state of “self-transcendent aseity.”

4 Conclusion

While both Scotus and Ockham are frequently lumped together as ethical voluntarists, their brands of voluntarism are hardly identical. The former upholds a formal distinction between the intellect and the will, and the latter distinguishes between the operations of intellect and will but does not hold them to be formally distinct mental faculties. The former

152 Ibid., 237–38.
154 Ibid., 246.
155 Langston, Conscience and the Virtues, 62.
understands moral worth in terms of external actions, and the latter insists that it is only in the inner intentionality behind the act that matters.\textsuperscript{156}

What Scotus and Ockham share is the sublimation of deliberative reason to the will. In the former, this is to the human will, in which the virtues reside. In the latter, this is to the divine will that one must simply obey. There are indeed family resemblances in the respective voluntaristic grammars of Scotus and Ockham, but they cannot be reduced to a single catchphrase. Furthermore, many of the criticisms hurled at them—a will possessing infinite power, a total lack of a role granted to reason, a relativistic freedom of indifference that lacks grounding in God—are, upon inspection, simply false.

As the following chapter will show, there are further resemblances to Karl Barth’s ethical voluntarism. Barth abbreviates the role of deliberative reason in deference to simple obedience to the divine command. As the present chapter has shown, however, such a voluntaristic grammar does not deserve the wholesale condemnations that it so often receives.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
Chapter 5
Karl Barth’s Ethical Voluntarism

Decision does not lie in deciding the question whether this or that is the good, whether the command wants this or that of me, whether I should do this or that. An ethics which asks questions like this makes no more sense than a dogmatics which asks whether there is a God.” —Karl Barth, Ethics, 80.

“In conscience, our own voice is undoubtedly God’s voice.” —Karl Barth, Ethics, 480.

1 Introduction

Having reviewed the ethical voluntarism of John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, then, it is now appropriate to turn to the ethical voluntarism of Karl Barth. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the ethical voluntarism of Scotus and Ockham revolves around the subordination of deliberative reason to the will. To be sure, these two late medieval scholastics are distinct in their brands of ethical voluntarism. One upholds a formal distinction between the intellect and the will, while the other denies it. One is interested in the intrinsic moral worth of actions, and the other is only interested in moral worth insofar as it involves the intentions of the moral agent. But a shared grammar of ethical voluntarism, in which the exercise of human reason cannot compare with the absolute givenness of the divine command, has been shown to exist among them both.

The Condemnations of 1277 created a theological atmosphere in which it was paramount to demonstrate the freedom of the will. Without such freedom, it was assumed, there was no basis for personal moral responsibility—and without personal moral responsibility the
Christian narrative of salvation is meaningless. The work of Thomas Aquinas, as revered as it is today, was held suspect in the latter two decades of the thirteenth century due to interpretations that hinged upon those Condemnations. In this respect Duns Scotus (at least in his early years) worked to maintain, over against the position of Henry of Ghent, the contribution made by the intellect in providing direction for the will. Despite various disagreements regarding whether Scotus changed his mind on this point, it appears that Scotus advocated a moderate rational voluntarism in which partial causality is ascribed to both the will and its object, alongside the natural agency of the intellect. Similarly, Scotus synthesized the Thomistic and Bonaventurean understandings of the conscience and synderesis such that the latter is the a priori inclination toward one’s benefit and the former, having gained a greater awareness through experience, is oriented toward justice. Through the acquisition of virtues, then, the Scotistic moral agent has the ability to deliberate but only momentarily.

Modifying Scotus’s moral picture, William of Ockham places the human will in a state of indifferent liberty whereby it may choose one among multiple options for action. Paramount for Ockham, however, is the ability to make the right choice for the right reason. And that right reason is following the divine command. When that is achieved, the moral agent enters into a state of “self-transcendent aseity,” a state of blessedness that transcends the human condition. This does not mean that Ockham discounts the intellect. On the contrary, the intellect, as prudence and right reason, is necessary for regulating the will. Ultimately the moral agent must commit to the divine command, but prudence is necessary for nonpositive moral science—that is, ethics for those things lacking the benefit of revelation.
There is a tension here in Ockham’s ethics between positive and nonpositive morality. Barth resolves this tension by doing away with nonpositive morality altogether. This leads to a critique that Barth is not interested in deliberation. But Barth’s understanding of deliberation is along the lines of Scotus—it is there, even if only momentarily, due to the acquisition of a certain voluntarist kind of virtue—while his understanding of following the divine command is closer to Ockham’s positive moral theology.

To be sure, these family resemblances are not like those of identical twins. The late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries are a far cry from the twentieth-century environment that Barth inhabits. Barth operates in a post-Kantian world where the challenges of epistemology and skepticism cast immense doubt over any distance imposed between morality and the careful, deliberative reasoning that purports to prove the moral agent’s sobriety and protect against that agent’s insanity. But the resemblances between these moral theologians remain, and those resemblances reside within a grammar that rules out (1) any moral initiative in the human agent apart from hearing God’s command and (2) any hesitation or doubt that the divine command is indeed the good. The present chapter will proceed, then, by looking first at the resemblances between Barth and Scotus regarding moral deliberation, moral formation, and the virtues of the will. Finally, Barth’s eschatological definition of conscience will be highlighted as the locus of his reclamation of teleology within a voluntarist ethic, and the latter will be shown to resemble Ockham’s “self-transcendent aseity.”

2 Deliberation, Formation, and Virtue

As seen above, Scotus does not ignore the intellect in his moderate brand of voluntarism, but rather condenses the intellect’s role such that the acquisition of virtue shapes the will in such
a way that deliberation is a momentary, though necessary, step in the moral act. As this section will show, Barth holds to a similar position.

From his early lectures on ethics in Münster, Barth is adamant regarding the specificity of the divine command, which has implications for his understanding of ethical deliberation. Such deliberation compromises the exclusivity of the divine command; it is an attempt to fill out the empty space provided by minimalist moral principles. The divine command “cannot be just a rule, an empty form, to which we must give content by our action, so that the form of the action stands under the command and its content under our caprice.”¹ On the contrary, the divine command supplies both form and the content for understanding the moral life. “The concreteness of the real command spoils our little game of filling out and fulfilling in which we are on our own.”² The good, then, is not a set of rules that contain an otherwise free game within a few minimally defined boundaries. Rather, doing the good is more like a Sudoku puzzle or Rubik’s Cube in which there is one precise combination of answers will suffice. There is a specific set of actions in a particular order that God knows and God commands humans to follow: “we do not have in mind what we might do after an intervening moment of free reflection but what we will in all circumstances do the very next moment—or what we will perhaps not do, but then under the whole judgment of nonfulfillment or transgression of the command.”³ Therefore there is no occasion for moral deliberation. One either obeys and thereby does the good—or one does not. “I have again no time at my disposal, no

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² Ibid., 94. A significant corollary of this is that humanity’s acts under the command “are always deviation, addition, or subtraction.”
³ Ibid., 71.
intervening moment, no neutral place in time where I might first consider the good in its being and take up an attitude toward it. I cannot put off the decisive decision, but it stands directly at the door.”

Such an immediate approach to moral theology indeed flies in the face of an approach that values rational deliberation, the careful consideration of means and ends, benefits and loss. But Barth’s approach to moral decision-making is something else entirely: “Decision does not lie in deciding the question whether this or that is the good, whether the command wants this or that of me, whether I should do this or that. An ethics which asks questions like this makes no more sense than a dogmatics which asks whether there is a God.” One may wonder whether such an attitude constitutes a wholesale rejection of intellectualism for voluntarism. After all, Barth insists that his approach to moral self-examination “has nothing whatever to do with theory or contemplation. It does not form an empty moment between one choice and decision and another. On the contrary, it belongs to every choice and decision and therefore to the practice of every moment.” The immediacy of decision-making in Barth’s moral theology does, at first glance, appear to confirm its many criticisms.

But Barth’s approach is not wholly lacking reflection; rather Barth redefines what moral reflection should look like. Barth defines such reflection as “the examination of what we are and will and do and do not do, of the mutual relationship between the command of God and our existence. It consists in our attitude to the fact that we are responsible and are objectively

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 80.
involved in responsibility. It also presupposes that we know this and have therefore been shown our true situation.”

Moral reflection does indeed exist for Barth, but it is based upon a properly theological assessment of who humans are in the light of God and God’s grace in Christ: “the relation between God and man is not that of a parallelism and harmony of the divine and human wills, but an explosive encounter, contradiction and reconciliation, in which it is the part of the divine will to precede and the human to follow, of the former to control and the latter to submit.” This encounter is immediate, to be sure, but in order to be based upon theological knowledge, it requires—and presupposes—formation in the Christian scriptures and tradition.

Perhaps another way to state Barth’s position vis-à-vis moral reflection is that it is based upon prior moral formation in Christ and the scriptures. Such formation must be consistently renewed in each and every moral act, however, as Barth writes in the context of describing moral reflection: “the law which governs the life of the Church is repeated in every individual life. The Church is most faithful to its tradition, and realises its unity with the Church of every age, when, linked but not tied by its past, it to-day searches the Scriptures and orientates its life by them as though this had to happen to-day for the first time.” Thus even the immediacy of moral decision-making presupposes spiritual growth and continuity. Barth reconfigures the process of moral reflection such that it enables the decision to obey prior to receipt of the divine command, rather than following upon that command with deliberation before proceeding to obey.

7 Ibid., 643.
8 Ibid., 644.
9 Ibid., 647.
Again, Barth does not conceive of the moral agent as a completely blank slate waiting for the engravings of a divine chisel. Nor does Barth envision a car in neutral waiting for God to put it in gear and drive it in a particular direction. Like Ockham’s “liberty of indifference,” then, a prior, cumulative formation of the moral agent is presupposed in each and every moment of encounter with the divine command. Such a resemblance with Ockham only works, however, if that indifferent freedom is understood as Ockham actually articulated it rather than as so many of his contemporary critics assume.

Gerald McKenny affirms that Barth’s careful navigation of divine command is able to steer away from an irrational and haphazard ethical voluntarism: “Barth will answer . . . by arguing that the Word of God prepares us for the encounter with God by instructing us concerning it. Ethical reflection, if it is to be genuine, presupposes ethical instruction, that is, approximate though not definitive knowledge of what God commands.”10 McKenny is wary of any ethic that is too certain of itself, but he also understands that the moral agent in the moment of command is not without content.

Thus Barth’s approach does not lack reflection. Nor, it should be added, does Barth’s moral theology rely upon an irrational good defined by the whims of an arbitrary God. “What this God determines is not a whim, and what He presents to man to do or not do is not the product of the fickle caprices of a tyrant whose right consists in his might. . . . God is faithful and constant.”11 Such an affirmation of God’s goodness confirms Schweiker’s point mentioned

11 Barth, Church Dogmatics II/2, 676–77.
above in chapter 3, that an ethic of divine command alone cannot exempt itself from the charge of arbitrariness. It must also affirm that God is good—which Barth does here.

When God wills something from and for man, when man’s will is claimed by God, there can be no question of an arbitrary and purposeless control which God can exercise just because He is God and therefore superior to man. On the contrary, what God wills from and for man stands or falls with, and is revealed and revealed only in, what the same God will do and has already done for us and in us.\footnote{Ibid., 562.}

That is, divine command can only be properly understood through the lens of grace. God is for us and therefore God’s claim is good for us. To be sure, this may only be known by revelation. But Barth’s ethic of divine command relies on just such a theology of revelation.

Thus it has been shown that Barth’s moral theology—while voluntarist in its focus upon the divine will as expressed through command and the human will in deciding to obey—avoids the so-called “voluntarist” pitfalls such as irrationalism and arbitrariness. In addition, Barth’s brand of voluntarism does not assign the moral agent an ontological space devoid of Christian formative content. Even in its earlier expressions in the Münster Ethics and so-called “general” ethics of Church Dogmatics II/2, Barth’s depiction of the divine command and the human commanded is shaped by specific parameters of the Word of God. \textit{Pace} Nigel Biggar, whose defense of Barth insists that one must look to the later “special” ethics to find evidence exonerating Barth of irrationalism and arbitrariness, Barth consistently maintains a formative and specifically Christian ethic of divine command grounded in the Word of God.

Likewise to the analysis provided here, McKenny holds that Biggar’s focus on the special ethics falls short “in ignoring the kind of activity concrete moral inquiry is for Barth and the
relation of human choice or decision to the divine decision of election.” McKenny holds that Barth’s uniqueness is in his refusal to allow human judgment to determine the good. Rather, it is only the divine command itself that decides what is good and right, extending beyond the event itself to encompass the human moral agent in past, present, and future decisions, “so that God’s decision on an action at any moment is inseparable from God’s decision on our life as a whole.”

This connection between ethics and soteriology is fundamental to McKenny’s study and, for him, explains why Barth consistently uses the language of “decision.” Such language is not merely for bracketing out any rational deliberation, but rather to bring the matter of moral deliberation “into proper connection with election.” Humans have the decision to obey, but it is the prior divine decision that determines the good and how it will be specifically enacted in the moral nexus. “This connection [between decision and election] means that the divine decision as the criterion or measure of our present actions—that which distinguishes them as good or evil—is the expression of God’s decision from eternity, fulfilled in time, to be gracious to us in Jesus Christ.” It is still “our free decision that God decides on,” but God’s decision is an assessment, “judging it as to its witness to the grace of election.”

This, of course, begs the question how the human and divine decisions relate without either mitigating human freedom or positing God’s decision as bound by the actions of humans. It

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 227.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
is on this point that McKenny concludes that both earlier and later critiques of Barth’s ethics fail in that “they shift the focus away from this encounter [of both the divine and human], whether to the divine decision alone . . . or to the human decision. . . .” But this is precisely the point where Barth differs from all other moral theologies. “Where other theories of ethics speak of moral reasoning, deliberation, or discernment, Barth speaks of ethical reflection as the attitude and practice in which we encounter God and of ethical instruction as the moral knowledge we pursue in order to prepare ourselves for this encounter.” This distinction between reflection and instruction, so fundamental to McKenny’s reading of Barth, underscores the fact that Barth’s brand of voluntarism does not succumb to either irrationalism or arbitrariness. The moral agent has at his or her disposal the Word of God and his or her formation within that divine content. That agent may not have absolute certainty regarding the specific actions to take and must, therefore, hasten and wait for the divine command in each and every moment, but such hastening and waiting is not in the proverbial dark.

Such an understanding of moral formation standing in the place of deliberation, providing a substantive resource with which the will may proceed to act, shares a certain family resemblance with a Scotistic approach to the virtues of the will, as described in the previous chapter. Barth, however, avoids talk of “virtue” for fear that it distracts from the divine command. Early in the Münster Ethics he writes that “it cannot serve the cause of clarity if we begin with the concept of the divine command and then try to continue with thoughts about the individual and society or the unrolling or a psychological schema or the variation

18 Ibid., 228.

19 Ibid., 229.
of a table of Christian duties and virtues.”  

And Barth considers virtue one of many “positive concepts” that belong to the realm of philosophical ethics. The most that Barth wants to say about the virtues is an affirmation of the theological virtues described by Paul in 1 Corinthians: “Thus faith, love, and hope are the good in human conduct and are therewith the answer of theological ethics to the ethical question—the goal that we have to reach in this last development of our thinking. Understood with a pinch of salt, this is our equivalent of teaching about ‘virtues.’”  

Indeed, Barth’s criticism of Roman Catholic ethics consists in what he considers its propensity to allow philosophical ethics equal room alongside theological ethics, with Aristotelian virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation standing alongside the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.  

Barth’s only treatment of virtue in the Church Dogmatics appears in volume III/4, the ethics of creation, in which Barth examines vocation. Here Barth understands virtue not so much as a habit, but more of a charism or aptitude that predisposes one toward a certain quality or type of action. “Every man has, in the comprehensive sense of the term, his ‘virtue’ or strength (virtus). He cannot do many things which others do. But he can do something, perhaps quite a few things, which no one else can do, or do as he can. This is the personal aptitude in respect of which he is useful as none other.”  

Indeed, Barth quickly abandons the term “virtue” and elucidates “aptitudes” instead, stating that “they are of great importance for

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20 Barth, Ethics, 52.

21 Ibid., 43.

22 Ibid., 61.

23 Ibid., 29.

his greater or lesser role and task in society. But who can really say how far they are effective in their true compass and manner, or genuinely visible even to himself, let alone others? Whence do we have the knowledge and standard to absolutise them and their opposites, whether in relation to ourselves or others?”

Barth does not consider such aptitude apart from the divine command but rather as the personal element of the agent’s vocation: “The personal aptitude of every man is the internal and subjective element in his vocation in relation to which and in view of which the calling of God claims him. What he does, he will do as one who is enabled, endowed and equipped in body and soul by God Himself. He must do it as such, for this also is part of his obedience.”

Barth’s construal of virtue, then, while avoiding such terminology for fear of importing “philosophical ethics,” substitutes a language of “aptitude” that allows him to adopt a virtue ethic of divine command that bears a striking resemblance to Scotus’s own virtues of the will.

Thus Barth’s ethic of divine command bears resemblances to Scotus in its approach to moral deliberation, formation, and virtue. It also bears a resemblance to Ockham’s “liberty of indifference,” as long as such freedom is rooted in specifically Christian ground, rooted in the Word of God. The present chapter will now turn to explore the resemblance to Ockham’s “self-transcendent aseity” vis-à-vis Barth’s unique understanding of conscience.

3 Hearing the Command in Conscience

As seen above, there is a tension in Ockham’s moral theology between positive (revealed) morality and nonpositive (rational) morality. Those who advocate a reasoned, unradically

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25 Ibid., 625.
26 Ibid., 625.
voluntarist interpretation of Ockham emphasize the nonpositive elements, but it is precisely those elements that confuse the issue when placed alongside the positive elements.

Karl Barth’s purely positive approach to morality through a radical commitment to the divine command, then, maintains that part of Ockham’s moral theology that focuses on revealed morality, and yet departs from Ockham (for a more Scotist approach) at the point where the moral agent must deliberate.

Like Ockham, Barth is not interested in a formal distinction between the intellect and the will. As he writes in Church Dogmatics III/2:

> The real life-act of real man can and will never consist in pure perception or pure activity. Perception is itself wholly and utterly human activity. Without desiring and willing I cannot sense and think. But again all my activity depends absolutely on the fact that I perceive. Without sensing and thinking I should not desire and will. A perception which had nothing to do with my activity, or stood in contradiction with it, would not be real, or at any rate would be incomplete. If my activity took place without my perception or stood, wholly or partly in contradiction to it, then it would reveal that it was either not at all or only incompletely my real activity. All distinction between perception and action, all abstraction to the advantage and disadvantage of one or the other, all action and reaction between vita contemplativa and vita activa, between “intellectualism” and “voluntaryism”—all these, so far as they succeed, can only lead to all kinds and forms of inhumanity. But the enterprise is impossible on both sides. The really human person is the one who both perceives and acts in each of his life-acts. This reality will always be the refutation of all the distinctions and oppositions which are futilely proposed and championed in this connexion.\(^\text{27}\)

Like Ockham, then, Barth has very little patience for even formal distinctions between intellect and will. Barth’s brand of voluntarism cares not for so many of the psychological delineations on which so many high and late medieval scholastics cogitated.

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Despite conflating the intellect and the will into a single moral agent, however, Barth’s interpretation of conscience is an epistemological one. The clearest exposition of conscience is in the final quarter of Barth’s Münster Ethics, under the aegis of the ethics of redemption—which of course Barth never got to in the *Church Dogmatics*. It is important for Barth that one cannot begin with conscience. As a human moral faculty, conscience cannot be a starting point, but one can only begin to talk about conscience at the very end, *after* the doctrines of God, creation, and reconciliation. For it is precisely in God’s final *redemptive* activity that the conscience begins to make sense. Even the prelapsarian Adam and Eve had no conscience.  

Conscience only comes with “concrete fellowship with God the Redeemer.”  

It is in the conscience that the moral agent finally *participates* in God.

Barth understands conscience (*Gewissen*) as the Latin *con-scientia* and the Greek *syn-eidesis*, utilizing hyphens to parse out their etymological components. With an emphasis on knowing-with, then, Barth defines conscience as a co-knowing, or knowing with, God. In fact, he prefers the term *Mitwissen* to *Gewissen*.  

“Conscience (*Gewissen*) means syn-eidesis, conscientia, our human knowing (*Mitwissen*) of what, not merely according to our own presuppositions, God alone can know as he who is good, as the giver of the command and the judge of its fulfillment, namely, of the goodness or badness of the act which I am about to commit or upon which I look back as already committed.”

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28 Barth, *Ethics*, 476.

29 Ibid., 477.

30 Unfortunately this is not clear in the English translation, as the many instances of *Mitwissen* are rendered sometimes as knowledge or knowing and sometimes as co-knowledge or co-knowing.

Citing 1 Corinthians 2:11, Barth insists that “To have a conscience is no more and no less than to have the Holy Spirit. . . . To have a conscience is to know what is in God, to know his judgment on our conduct. To have a conscience is to look and reach beyond the limits of our creatureliness and our reconciliation, as we do in prayer.”32 That is, it comes not in the doctrines of creation and reconciliation, but at the end, in redemption.

Barth’s interpretation of the conscience is indeed an epistemological one. But, even more—and this is his unique contribution—the conscience is also eschatological. “As we carry through the primal and basic eschatological act of prayer, we have a conscience that tells us the truth.”33 This is why conscience can only be understood at the very end, within the ethics of final redemption. “In the superabundance of this action [prayer] we have concrete fellowship with God our Redeemer, we have a conscience, the command of promise claims us in the form of our own co-knowledge and our own speaking with ourselves, and in order to hear we must listen to what we tell ourselves.”34

Barth contrasts conscience with law, which “is not a voice within us but an alien voice that speaks to us from outside.”35 Despite the conscience’s participation with God, it remains the moral agent’s own voice. But it is equally important for Barth to recognize a dialectical truth here, that conscience presents God’s voice as well. “In conscience, our own voice is

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32 Barth, Ethics, 477.

33 Ibid., 478.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 476.
undoubtedly God’s voice.”36 Barth’s resolution of this dialectic is perhaps his most unique contribution to moral psychology. The conscience is both the voice of the moral agent and it is the voice of God. The participation entailed here is an eschatological one, such that it is a future self speaking to the present self. “When my conscience speaks to me, I am addressed. Someone encounters me, coming from outside into my present reality. But this someone is not another person, a fellow human. . . . The someone is myself.”37 And again:

When conscience speaks, I find that I am on both sides, both listening and speaking. When conscience speaks, I find that I am in a dialogue. The two partners are very dissimilar—on the one side I am in my present state, which recapitulates all my past, while on the other I am in a state of pure futurity which is a fact even though I can neither perceive nor grasp it—yet I am both the partners.38

The voice of conscience, while fully our own, has authority precisely because it is a voice that participates in the divine command. “We have conscience as a judicial authority within us to the extent that God has us in his Word.”39 In that respect, then, conscience is the divine command. “When conscience speaks we have an unconditional command or prohibition or an unconditional judgment.”40

With conscience as the moral agent’s own voice, then, one may be tempted to read in Barth a kind of intuitionism. William Werpehowski states that such a charge entails “two related

36 Ibid., 480.

37 Ibid. Contemporary science fiction provides the image of the elder Leonard Nimoy providing the younger Zachary Quinto with sage counsel in J. J. Adram’s Star Trek (2009). Such an illustration fails to convey the truly eschatological aspect of the Barthian conscience, but it may suffice to express the shared identity of the moral agent and the voice of conscience.

38 Barth, Ethics, 480.

39 Ibid., 481.

40 Ibid.
points”—that “knowledge of what ought to be done is immediate, a matter of ‘instant discernment’” and that “no determinate reasons can be offered by the agent for an action, beyond claiming that the action is right because commanded by God, or that the action is right because, in some unspecific way, it is a reflection of God’s gracious action.”

Werpehowski defends Barth against an intuitionist interpretation of “the sovereignty of the divine decision,” but such an interpretation may equally be placed on Barth’s understanding of the conscience. If the conscience is the voice of the moral agent him- or herself, does not that compromise the task of external validation? Werpehowski highlights how Barth defends himself against such charges by emphasizing “the alien quality of the ‘ought’,” but does not Barth’s identification of the divine command with the intrapersonal conscience abrogate such alienation? How can one provide external validation if the command is received in one’s own voice?

McKenny charges Werpehowski with an unjustified confidence that Barth’s moral agent can truly know the divine command on “this side of the eschaton.” Werpehowski is correct in his counterargument that one cannot simply succumb to moral agnosticism. While Barth’s voluntaristic grammar rules out, on the one hand, any moral initiative in the human agent apart from the receipt of the divine command, that grammar equally rules out any skepticism that what is commanded is indeed the good. Thus Barth’s contention that the conscience consists of the eschatological self brings together these two perspectives. One may indeed


42 Ibid., 24.

43 McKenny, The Analogy of Grace, 284.

44 Werpehowski, Karl Barth and Christian Ethics, 29n51.
have confidence in the command of God in conscience precisely because it is a voice from the other side of that eschaton, where one has a complete and realized knowledge of the command.

Barth further unpacks his eschatological definition of conscience vis-à-vis a dialectical balance of freedom and authority.

Conscience is the freedom of man to the extent that in its pronouncement he makes an unconditional decision about himself. He does this in virtue of his being as a child of God, as which alone he has a conscience that establishes his freedom and does not destroy it. As a captive to the Word of God, he is free. As authority and freedom do not compete in God but are one and the same, so the freedom of conscience finds no competitor in the authority of God but is freedom in virtue of this authority.  

Conscience, for Barth, is both internal and external; it is both human and divine, self-referential and externally imposed. “The obedience of the redeemed person, of the future child of God, but the future child within the present, is freedom; not because God is no longer authority, but because this is God’s authority.”

Barth insists, however, that such a perspective is not the ingenious invention of science fiction but rather a recovery of ancient doctrine. The church has lost the eschatological perspective, and Barth sees himself as simply retrieving it. “All this is not just the Protestant doctrine of conscience but the Roman Catholic doctrine too. But there, because of the dreadfully pervasive deeschatologizing of the whole of Christianity, it is present so modestly, as such a half-suppressed secondary statement, that at first glance one might think that Roman Catholicism knows only authority as God’s Word and only subjection to it as

45 Barth, Ethics, 482.
46 Ibid., 483.
obedience.” Barth then qualifies this assessment with quotes to the contrary from Karl Adam and Bellarmine. Barth also insists that his eschatological conscience is consistent with Protestantism:

The Reformation was a reawakening of an awareness of the eschatological character of Christianity, and it was thus a rediscovery of the Pauline liberty of the children of God, and very logically it was thus a rediscovery also of freedom of conscience, not in the much too simple and direct sense in which this concept was later used and was then fatefully confused with the Reformation view, but freedom of the conscience that is captive to the Word of God, yet still—and this is in no way to be undermined or retracted—freedom of conscience.48

At this point Barth addresses the theme of moral deliberation, albeit within the context of the dialogue between the conscience (future self) and the moral agent (present self): “as a hearer of conscience I differ greatly from myself as its spokesman, so that I have every reason to take a very critical stance in relation to what at any given time I may regard as the conviction of my conscience. When everything is taken into account it is better not to speak of an erring conscience. Conscience does not err. But we err in our hearing of it.”49 Thus, as McKenny and Werpehowski both insist, one should avoid a vain confidence in how one hears the divine command. Humility is indeed warranted. But the grammar of Barth’s voluntarism cannot include agnosticism, either.

Turning, then, to the content (Inhalt) of the conscience’s pronouncements, Barth continues with the eschatological theme of participation. “But what do we co-know with God in conscience? The answer is that if conscience is really the voice of our future I in the present, then its command has to do specifically with the relation of our acts to the coming eternal

47 Ibid., 484.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 484–85.
kingdom of God.”\textsuperscript{50} And, again, “Conscience is the living and present message of the coming kingdom of God.”\textsuperscript{51} It is in the conscience that one is able to see the realm of good, true moral action. “Conscience is such an uncannily restless thing precisely because it points beyond the pain of sin as this is comforted by divine forgiveness, beyond repentance before God and service to one’s neighbor.”\textsuperscript{52} And so it is not only the command of God but also the promise of God that one hears in conscience. “The distinctive thing that conscience declares to us is the command of God the Redeemer, the command of promise.”\textsuperscript{53}

So it is in Barth’s understanding of the conscience that he resolves freedom and necessity, intellect and will, human and divine.

In conscience we co-know with God that we belong unconditionally to him. We co-know his absolute rule over all people and things, the rule that we do not yet see actualized here and now in God’s creation or even in Christ’s kingdom. . . . The voice of conscience has its origin in our unconditional belonging to God, in the absolute kingdom of God. In conscience I hear my own voice as that of the redeemed child of God.\textsuperscript{54}

It is within this examination of the content of conscience, that Barth takes up his dialectic between hastening and waiting, which of course has been at the center of attention in studies of Barth’s ethics since Biggar’s landmark study.\textsuperscript{55}

When conscience speaks to people, it involves a categorical command to wait. Why? Because it proclaims their future in God and demands that they seek it wholly and utterly in God and expect it from God. . . . When conscience speaks to people, it also involves a categorical command to hasten. Why?

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 485.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 487.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 485.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 486.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

Because conscience proclaims to them *their future* in God and demands that they seek it in God, not just expecting everything from God but really expecting *everything* from him. Thus they cannot be content with things as they are.\(^{56}\)

And, as that secondary literature has acknowledged, *prayer* is the site where these two poles meet. “We are asked whether our conduct lies along the lines of the prayer in which we have found the primal and basic act of human conduct as it is eschatologically determined.”\(^{57}\)

Prayer is the site of the conscience’s mingling of present and future, human and divine. “All the more important is it for all of us, then, to realize that it is the one revolutionary voice of conscience, the voice of hope, which on two sides points and pushes those who hear it beyond things as they are in the kingdoms of nature and grace.”\(^{58}\)

Prayer and the conscience is where one must both hasten and wait. And if this strikes one as a kind of mystical state, one would be correct. “This busy waiting (*geschäftige Warten*) for the Lord is what has obviously been the point of the mysticism of all ages and types with its drive to cultivate the life that hid with Christ in God.”\(^{59}\) Barth invokes medieval monasticism here, along with the ascetic Lutheranism of Paul Gerhardt and the Eastern church, in order to then defend Pietism along similar lines.\(^{60}\) “We have to *breathe* in the atmosphere of the redemption hidden in the future. We have to *act* in the experience of the coming Redeemer.”\(^{61}\)

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\(^{56}\) Barth, *Ethics*, 487.

\(^{57}\) Ibid.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 488.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 489.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 489–90.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 490.
Barth’s moral agent, when following the divine command, enters into a transcendent state similar to Ockham’s moral agent.

The form of the divine claim as it is made upon man corresponds to the eschatological content of conscience which, as we have seen, gives to its word, as to God’s Word, the distinctive character of the transcendent, of that which reaches across the limits of the situation of man as a creature and as a “righteous sinner,” and which makes obedience to this word impossible for those who want to avoid at all costs any suspicion of mysticism or enthusiasm.62

Ockham does not attend to conscience nearly to the extent of Scotus and other medieval scholastics.63 The transcendent state of aseity, for Ockham, occurs when one performs a moral action precisely because it has been commanded; deliberation only occurs outside of revealed morality. Barth’s formulation of the conscience, however, resolves that tension by focusing on morality as revealed by the future self. “The possibility of conscience, real ability to introduce it as a power, and then necessarily as a power superior to all other powers, the powers of our own present and of that of others—this prophetic possibility is a real one, but not for us, for it does not lie in our own power but is the possibility of the miracle of God.”64

At the end of Barth’s treatment of the conscience in the Münster Ethics, he makes three points related to the “hiddenness of conscience.”65 The first is that the conscience is a personal, individual faculty. “We all have conscience only as our own conscience, and

62 Ibid., 492.
63 Langston, Conscience and the Virtues, 53.
64 Barth, Ethics, 493.
65 Ibid.
therefore we all have what it says to us only as what is says to us."

A corollary of this personal, individual aspect is that one cannot force the dictates of one’s own conscience upon anyone else. “On the basis of conscience, we think we are in the position of having something to say to others. . . . But precisely in this respect modesty is enjoined. God’s speaking to me does not give me God’s power over others.” Such an imposition would prohibit others from exercising their own consciences: “The limit of the task that I may have is marked by my being able to give them occasion to hear their own consciences. In this way alone will they hear God, and it is God that they ought to hear and not me.”

The second, and perhaps most controversial, point in Barth’s final comments on conscience is that it is a purely occasional event.

Connected with this is . . . the strictly occasional nature of conscience as our co-knowledge of God’s truth. What I mean is this: what conscience tells us relates, strictly speaking, only to the present in the strict sense, only to the given moment. Like God’s command in general—and on the basis of conscience one may say this of God’s command in general—it is a Word that God speaks personally. It is thus an event and not a thing. It does not exist; it takes place.

Here Barth uses the imagery of the manna in the wilderness that had to be consumed immediately and would only spoil if kept longer. “As conscience, however, is not a kind of organ but the event in which we have to tell ourselves something as the children of God, so there is no store of hoarded truths of conscience.”

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66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 494.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 495.
70 Ibid.
Barth’s third and final point in his concluding remarks on the conscience is that the conscience presents “the great disruption” into the present order of things. 71 “What is called a good conscience . . . is not another phenomenon of conscience which is experienced alongside a bad conscience or in alternation with it, but is rather something negative, an expression for the absence of a bad conscience, the latter filling up the total possible range of phenomena that offer themselves for observation.”72 And, again: “To the extent that conscience speaks into our present, how can it come as anything but a disruption, a warning, and a criticism, and how can a good conscience really signify anything other than a cessation of this disruption?”73

Unfortunately Barth’s placement of the conscience within the doctrine of redemption postponed a more mature exploration of the issue in the Church Dogmatics. One may conjecture what Barth would have stated in the final part of a fifth volume on the “ethics of redemption” only on the basis of Barth’s treatment in his earlier Münster Ethics. Barth’s only treatment of conscience in the existent volumes of the Church Dogmatics is in the ethics of creation (III/4), as Barth examines “freedom for life.” There he writes in an excursus: “we cannot have joy at the expense of our conscience, our συνεξεσθεσθε or agreement with God. We cannot have it in accidental and arbitrary acts, nor in virtue of the future forgiveness of sins, as if we had a cheque on this account in our pocket.”74 A life of freedom and enjoyment is, for the mature Barth, neither random nor overconfident. It is a life that presupposes the

71 Ibid., 497.
72 Ibid., 496.
73 Ibid.
74 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/4, 382.
divine command as heard within the conscience, as the redeemed self provides counsel for that same self on this side of the eschaton. Such is the grammar that rules the Christian way of life.

4 Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, then, Barth’s brand of voluntarism “from below” shares certain family resemblances with the ethical voluntarism of the late medieval scholastics. First, Barth takes a somewhat Scotist approach to moral deliberation by reducing its exercise to a transient, momentary step in the moral act following the acquisition of virtues of the will. Second, Barth presumes Ockham’s distinction between positive and nonpositive ethics in order to argue for an absolute adoption of revealed morality and the wholesale rejection of philosophical ethics. Third, Barth’s voluntarism resembles Ockham’s “liberty of indifference” in that, ultimately, the indifference is only toward the world and does not abrogate the absolute authority of the divine command and the true freedom that comes from obedience to that command. Finally, Barth’s eschatological depiction of conscience allows the agent to participate in the moral life alongside that agent’s own future, redeemed self, thus bearing a resemblance to Ockham’s “self-transcendent aseity,” another realm set apart from this side of the eschaton where sin and uncertainty no longer reign.

The following chapter of the present thesis, under the broad heading “Divine Command from Within,” finally answers the question whether Barth is a voluntarist. Indeed, he is—as he combines a voluntarism both “from above” and “from below.” Barth’s unique brand of voluntarist moral theology will be defended against the critiques of the “Cambridge Thomist”
school of thought, and then will be shown to provide an alternative solution to the modern loss of the classical medieval synthesis as diagnosed by Alasdair MacIntyre.
DIVINE COMMAND FROM WITHIN
Chapter 6

Answering the Question

Every culture is characterized in part by what it conceals and obscures from view, by what its habits of mind prevent it from acknowledging and appropriating. We err therefore in so largely, sometimes exclusively writing the history of ideas, of science, of art, of culture in general in terms of positive achievement. Culture is present also in failure and it can in crucial respects blind the educated to what needs to be seen. So it was with the failure to understand the work of Aquinas in the late Middle Ages. So perhaps it may be with us.


1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters divine command in the moral theology of Karl Barth and the late medieval scholastics has been explored both from above and from below. From the first viewpoint, divine command “from above,” theological voluntarism has been explored with reference to the dialectic of divine omnipotence. The dialectic between absolute and ordained power became a helpful syntactical tool among late medieval scholastic theologians, assisting them in affirming the absolute freedom and omnipotence of God alongside divine constancy. The late medieval scholastics insisted that God *may* indeed act differently than God has ordained, but ultimately God only acts as God has ordained. This simple modal logic enabled a basic discussion of possibility and necessity and the relationship of the moral world to God’s absolute freedom and sovereignty.
Unfortunately, the importation of juridical language compromised the integrity of this grammar of theological voluntarism, allowing for an analogy of political power and the legal sovereignty of an absolute monarchy to eventually distort the dialectic’s insistence upon divine constancy into a meditation on divergences from that constancy. In a manner quite foreign to the integrity of the distinction, miracles constituted exceptions to the rule rather than witnesses to the ultimate unity of God’s absolute and ordained power.

Thus the story of the dialectic of divine omnipotence is a narrative of the syntactical development of a grammar of possibility, a simple modal logic in which divine capacity and divine volition were explored. The fundamental assumption of such a grammar—the ruling out of any “exceptions” to divine constancy—was eventually compromised. That late compromise, however, highlights the remarkable consistency with which the dialectic intended otherwise. Contemporary criticisms of the language of “absolute power,” then, are misdirected. The grammar of the dialectic itself is sound, and it is only misunderstandings of that dialectic that enable dangerous implications. Overwhelmingly, the dialectic of divine omnipotence entails a dual emphasis on the omnipotence of God and the freedom of the divine will in such a way that necessarily presumes the absolute constancy of God.

The third chapter turned to Barth’s reading of this history alongside his own account of divine command, will, and power. With the theme of command guiding the way of Barth’s theological ethics, from his earlier work on through the Church Dogmatics, Barth maintains the idea that ethics follow from dogmatics. Chapter 3 also examined Barth’s interpretation of the history of the medieval dialectic of divine omnipotence. While Barth was not as familiar with the primary literature, relied heavily on secondary sources, and thereby overlooked
some of the nuances in the voluntarism of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, Barth inherits their concern to balance omnipotence with divine constancy.

Bearing such a resemblance to the voluntarism of late medieval scholasticism, then, Barth’s theology of divine command also works within a grammar that rules out either divine constancy alone or divine possibility alone. Barth himself may have critiqued the so-called “intellectualism” of the late medieval scholastics, but he ultimately saw Scotus and Ockham as theological allies over against the presumptuousness of the liberal Protestantism of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Barth was remarkably ecumenical for his time, encouraging his Reformed colleagues to engage the writings of such “Catholics” as Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham in order to diagnose the failings of their own progressive theology.

For Barth, a theology of divine command is the only acceptable moral theology available to Christians. The command of God and salvation by grace alone are coterminous; both may only be known by way of the Word of God as revealed in Christ. Indeed, Barth’s theological voluntarism, synthesizing divine omnipotence with God’s absolute constancy, presupposes just such a theology of revelation.

From the second viewpoint—that of divine command “from below”—we have identified the contours of ethical voluntarism in both medieval moral theology and that of Karl Barth. The fourth chapter began with an account of ethical voluntarism up to the Condemnations of 1277, when the language of liberum arbitrium shifted to libertas voluntatis. After briefly attending to the high medieval scholastic reflection on ethics in Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas through their approaches to free choice, conscience and synderesis, and moral deliberation, the focus turned to consider similar topics in the thought of the late medieval
scholastics Scotus and Ockham. While these two latter figures are frequently conflated to a reductionist (and incorrect) reading of voluntarism, their respective moral theologies are quite distinct—even if they share some family resemblances and a certain grammar of ethical voluntarism. Scotus struck a compromise between the positions of Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas on conscience and the virtues, enabling a reading of moral deliberation that strongly resonates with the work of Karl Barth. And while Ockham’s attempted deconstruction of the intellectualist–voluntarist dialectic through the erasure of formal distinctions between reason and the will would resonate with Barth’s work, Ockham inserted another polarity into moral theology—between positive, or revealed, morality and nonpositive (philosophical) ethics—that would find resolution in Barth (albeit a rather one-sided resolution). It was also shown how Scotus understands moral worth in terms of external actions, vis-à-vis the role of the will (and, at least in the early Scotus, other faculties as well) in the act of volition, while Ockham insisted that only the inner intentionality of the moral agent possesses any moral worth.

A grammar of ethical voluntarism shapes the discourse of both Scotus and Ockham. What the thought of these two figures share is the sublimation of deliberative reason to the will. In the former, this is to the human will, in which the virtues reside. In the latter, this is to the divine will that one must simply obey. There are indeed family resemblances in the respective voluntaristic grammars of Scotus and Ockham, but they cannot be reduced to a single catchphrase. Furthermore, many of the criticisms hurled at them—a will possessing infinite power, a total lack of a role granted to reason, a relativistic freedom of indifference that lacks grounding in God—are, upon inspection, simply false.
Chapter 5 then presented Barth’s ethical voluntarism and its family resemblances to that of Scotus and Ockham as presented in the preceding chapter. The resemblance between Barth and Scotus’s moral theology was shown to be the reduction of the exercise of moral deliberation to a transient, momentary step in the moral act following the formative acquisition of virtues of the will. The same chapter also demonstrated multiple resemblances between Barth and Ockham’s respective ethical voluntarisms. First, Barth and Ockham share an insistence that a revealed morality of divine command provides an infinitely better resource for ethics than reasoned philosophical discourse on morality. Second, Ockham’s “liberty of indifference,” which turns out to be neither indifferent toward the divine command nor a post-Enlightenment sense of the self’s moral autonomy, bears a striking resemblance to the predisposition of Barth’s moral agent following the formative influence of the Word of God in Christ and the scriptures. Third, Barth’s uniquely eschatological definition of conscience, in which the moral agent hears the divine command in the voice of the eschatological self, is not unlike Ockham’s fifth and final stage of moral virtue, in which the moral agent enters into a higher, eternally transcendent state of being.

The moral theology of Karl Barth, then, operates within a grammar of theological voluntarism in which infinite possibilities are available to God alone while the absolute constancy of God prevents such open-ended possibilities from confusing the moral sphere sub specie temporalis. Moreover, Barth’s moral theology also utilizes a grammar of ethical voluntarism in which that theological constraint of moral possibility reduces the role of ethical deliberation on the part of the moral agent, preserves the role of faithful, ethical formation, and opens up a space in which the moral agent may transcend his or her own
temporal perspective in order to participate in a teleological, eschatological hearing of the divine command.

Again, from looking at divine command both from above—theological voluntarism—and from below—ethical voluntarism—several things become clear. First, in neither late medieval nor Barthian forms of voluntarist theology has omnipotence been viewed apart from the necessity for divine constancy. Second, while exaggerated notions of power in modern totalitarianism have been attributed to Scotus and Ockham’s use of the dialectic between God’s absolute and ordained power, we have seen that any analogy in their work between human power and divine power was merely illustrative, rather than participatory. Third, the quasi-immediacy of moral deliberation in the ethical voluntarism of Duns Scotus and Karl Barth requires a prior acquisition of virtue over time. Fourth, Barth’s concurrent adoption of Ockham’s emphasis on positive morality and rejection of Ockham’s construal of nonpositive ethics exemplifies and bears witness to the extent of Barth’s voluntarism—that is, Barth is even more committed to an ethics of divine command then the infamous William of Ockham. Fifth, Barth extends Ockham’s understanding of the conscience as a site for epistemological engagement with the divine by incorporating an eschatological presence of the self.

From these five lessons learned in the process of comparing and contrasting the moral theology of Karl Barth and that of the late medieval scholastics, one may conclude that Barth is indeed a voluntarist of the highest order. Not unlike late medieval figures like Scotus and Ockham, Barth inherits, adapts, and reconfigures the voluntarist tradition canonized by Stephen Tempier in the Condemnations of 1277. Voluntarism, indeed, finds an ally in the moral theology of Karl Barth.
So how is it that so many scholars are trying to make Barth into something else? Why is it that Barth’s voluntarism has become something to avoid or explain away? At this point, then, having explored divine command from above and divine command from below it is important to examine divine command from within.

2 Metanarratives of Modernity

Over against postmodern incredulity toward metanarratives, the past three decades have witnessed the advent of numerous narratives chronicling—and lamenting—the genealogy of modernity. A common theme in many of these tales of woe is the so-called triumph of the will, in which humanity’s assertions of power have displaced the divine and claimed a new absolute sovereignty. Such narratives place blame at the feet of late medieval voluntarists—namely, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. Yet such blame is at odds with the account of voluntarism provided in these pages. It is necessary, then, to counter these narratives directly in order to keep divine command in moral theology today.

The most outspoken critics of modernity are those of so-called radical orthodoxy, termed “Cambridge Thomism” by a recent defender of Scotus. As fundamental as the Cambridge Thomists are to the contemporary denunciations of voluntarism, however, their narrative is hardly novel. What is unique is the collective force that their various articulations of the antivoluntarist narrative have exerted on the contemporary theological scene. Ironically, however, this group would do better to find an ally in Barth in the struggle against secular

1 Daniel P. Horan, Postmodernity and Univocity: A Critical Account of Radical Orthodoxy and John Duns Scotus (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014). While the present thesis certainly finds an ally in this recent work’s defense of Duns Scotus over against the radical orthodox, it is wary of joining in too rigorous a defense of Scotus’s doctrine of univocity. Barth’s caution toward a Thomistic doctrine of analogy is probably better aimed at Scotistic univocity, but such a debate is outside the scope of the present defense of voluntarism.
modernity. Barth’s emphasis on the need for genuinely theological discourse is something that the Cambridge Thomists appear to share.\(^2\) And yet their dogged persistence in criticizing all things voluntarist prohibits them from engaging his work.

At times it is unclear whether the Cambridge Thomists are more disturbed by the voluntarism or nominalism of the late medieval period. John Montag, for instance, brings voluntarism into his criticism of nominalist accounts of revelation, making a sweeping claim without exposition or clarification:

Nominalism, and its attendant voluntarism, at least preserved the transcendent otherness of ‘what has been made apparent,’ but did so by emphasizing an absolutely inscrutable divine will, and by consequently restricting the meaning of *revelatio* to ‘the exposure of a hidden reality,’ an objective ‘unveiling’ of a thing, as it were, rather than the richer and broader multiplicity of meanings available to patristic and early medieval thinkers.\(^3\)

More articulate in his exposition of the relationship between nominalism and voluntarism is David Bentley Hart, who writes that “nominalism largely severed the perceptible world from the analogical index of divine transcendence, and thus reduced divine freedom to a kind of ontic voluntarism . . . such that creation and revelation could be imagined only as manifestations of the will of a god who is, at most, a supreme being among lesser beings.”\(^4\)

Yet even here Hart fails to identify the problem with such a focus on divine will. That God

\(^2\) The genuinely *theological* agenda that Milbank articulates over against liberalism is indeed shared by that of Barth. Such a reading of Milbank is defended in John Berkman and Frederick C. Bauerschmidt, “Absolutely Fabulous and Civil: John Milbank’s Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” *Philosophy & Theology* 9 (1996): 435–46.


would be reduced to one being among many is a valid concern, but it remains unclear why the divine will is in itself an insufficient lens for examining divine freedom.

William Cavanaugh, building upon Milbank’s position in *Theology and Social Theory*, writes that “modern politics is founded on the voluntarist replacement of a theology of participation with a theology of will, such that the assumption of humanity into the Trinity by the divine *logos* is supplanted by an undifferentiated God who commands the lesser discrete wills of individual humans by sheer power.”5 It is this issue of power that primarily concerns Milbank and his associates, finding univocal metaphysics to exhibit greater ontological violence than difference.6 Yet the assertion here that a metaphysics of participation has been replaced by a theology of will ignores any nuances within the voluntarist tradition. One poorly phrased (and uncharacteristic) analogy in the whole of Scotus’s corpus should not sully the entirety of the tradition and the insights it has generated. Furthermore, Cavanaugh fails to identify sufficiently those voices proclaiming an “undifferentiated God.”7

Cavanaugh’s rejection of the voluntarist tradition holds it responsible for the power politics at play in modern *laissez-faire* economics: “In the early modern era, the Aristotelian suspicion of the right of exchange over use gave way to an absolute right to control one’s person and property. This movement was the anthropological complement of the voluntarist theology: humans best exemplify the image of God precisely when exercising sovereignty.

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7 If his critique is aimed at the emphasis on divine simplicity in the work of Ockham, his rhetoric is unfortunately too oblique to carry this through.
and unrestricted property rights.”\(^8\) Barth would no doubt agree with Cavanaugh, as evidenced from as early as his pro-labor sermons in Safenwil. That an economics of unmitigated libertarian construal of ownership can be placed at the feet of voluntarism, however, has not been proven—but only assumed.

Catherine Pickstock’s complaint against voluntarism holds it responsible not for the loss of participatory trinitarian relations or the 2008 mortgage crisis, but rather for the loss of an ethic rooted in teleology: “Whereas for the tradition, the ‘voluntary act’ was defined by the compulsion of the good, Scotus effectively definalized and de-eroticized the will by asserting the excess of its autonomy over the attraction of a particular goal.”\(^9\) Thus it is not the emphasis on the will itself that is voluntarism’s error, but rather a repositioning of the will away from teleological participation into a bald freedom. “By detaching the will from the lure of the good, and subsuming it within the dominant *fiat* of divine volition, the principle directing practical reason is transposed from the ambiguous and medial synthesis of divine will and human freedom, whereby to tend *away* from God’s will paradoxically denies the full potential of human freedom, to a dialectic of active and passive.”\(^10\) This has further consequences for sacramental theology, particularly that of the Eucharist, as the elements are seen to participate in Christ’s body and blood only insofar as they are *forced* to do so.

\[T\]he new Scotist emphasis on absolute divine power has a bearing on his understanding of the way in which Christ’s body is present in the Eucharist. Christ’s body is in the Host *not* because the latter is joined to the divine person of the Logos, as for Saint Thomas, for whom Christ is not an individual but only hypostatic as coincident with Being as such, and therefore

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\(^8\) Cavanaugh, “The City,” 187.


\(^10\) Ibid., 136.
ubiquitous. Instead for Duns Scotus, Christ’s body can be ontically in two or more places simultaneously, in heaven or on earth, simply because God wills in this case to allow Christ’s Body to have extension in the sense of containing parts in a whole without those parts occupying different spaces.\textsuperscript{11}

Pickstock unfortunately misreads the dialectic of divine omnipotence, as demonstrated by her assumption that God’s absolute power is separate from God’s ordained power. As demonstrated in the second chapter, Scotus and Ockham—not unlike other medieval scholastics—were adamant to maintain divine constancy as a presupposition. It is not clear how God’s exercise of the divine will (as opposed to, say, the divine intellect) toward real presence in any way diminishes the reality or possibility of real presence.

Conor Cunningham appears to holds voluntarism \textit{more} directly responsible for secularism than nominalism. By making creation powerless in the face of the all-powerful Creator, the created world is reduced to a merely posited reality lacking derivative traces back to God.

This conception of God in voluntarist terms (however slight) marks . . . the first moment in an intellectually re-enacted fall. This world without intermediary causes becomes ‘emptied’, despite the fact that this ontological abandonment is carried out under the misguided aspiration of protecting God’s freedom and within the discipline of theology. The world is emptied of God precisely because it becomes subject to his absolute sway (any ordained powers methodologically deferring to absolute power).\textsuperscript{12}

For Cunningham the adoption of a voluntarist theology is but the first step in an “intellectually re-enacted fall,” followed by a process of \textit{anaplerosis}, in which an “empty ontic realm acquire[s] an absolute immanent space, a form of existence without God, a realm

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 133.

\textsuperscript{12} Conor Cunningham, “Language: Wittgenstein After Theology,” in \textit{Radical Orthodoxy}, 82.
before (or beyond) the sacred,”¹³ and the final step of “ontologising,” whereby “the finite, without God, occupies the reality of its own space.”¹⁴

If God is God purely because of quantitative omnipotence, then a Nietzschean remains ‘holy’ in his hubristic rebellion, as it is only a matter of amount which separates creator from the created. God in effect is immanentised because God is only one more ontic entity struggling for ‘expression’.”¹⁵

What Cunningham fails to explain, however, is how the first step leads necessarily to the second and third steps. Can there not be a voluntarist recognition of and emphasis on divine omnipotence without usurping that power and granting it to the Übermensch? No doubt Karl Barth would be a helpful ally in the fight against such “hubristic rebellion.” Barth would never assert that there is merely a quantitative difference between divine and human power; his adoption of Kierkegaard’s “infinite qualitative distinction” should be sufficient evidence for that. And yet, as has been shown repeatedly above, Barth is wholeheartedly within the voluntarist tradition, thus giving the lie to Cunningham’s “intellectually re-enacted fall.”

Frederick Bauerschmidt’s essay on aesthetics provides the most plausible critique of voluntarism—largely because the polarizing rhetoric characteristic of radical orthodoxy is conspicuously absent.

Traditionally, for Christians, submission to the master narrative of scripture, as Augustine knew so well, meant the surrender of our free will (our capacity to choose) so as to possess a freed will (our capacity to do the good). Part of the modern project—and perhaps its defining feature—has been the valorization of the contentless freedom of the will, the sheer capacity of human self-assertion against any external imposition.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid.
¹⁴ Ibid., 83.
¹⁵ Ibid.
The voluntarist Barth would no doubt agree with Bauerschmidt’s Augustinian moral theology. And that is precisely why Barth emphasizes an ethic of divine command—so that “human self-assertion” does not run amok but is brought under the proper “external imposition.”

Laurence Paul Hemming’s enlistment of Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology also tackles the medieval dialectic of divine omnipotence, albeit through his engagement of the work of Michael Gillespie.

In Gillespie’s view it was William of Ockham’s rejection of the scholastic reconciliation of theology and philosophy that laid the basis for an understanding of the divine that leads, in fact, to nihilism. Gillespie notes that for Ockham ‘omnipotence means the supremacy of God’s potentia absoluta over his potentia ordinata and of theology over philosophy’. For Ockham, God is the only necessary being, and so there is (considered in one way) a fundamental difference between the being of God and the being of created things: creation in this sense is contingent, which means that every creature or created thing is radically dependent for its existence on the will of God.17

Radical dependence upon the will of God should not appear to be a theological problem, but Hemming continues:

This in turn means that no creature is in any sense dependent on or explained by creation in general, but is explicable only in consequence of the Divine will. Gillespie concludes: ‘for Ockham, the idea of divine omnipotence thus means that human beings can never be certain that any of the impressions they have correspond to an actual object’. Ockham’s position is in fact the radical assertion of interiority.18

Hemming’s engagement with Gillespie is critical only insofar as Gillespie casts Augustine as a precursor to Cartesian subjectivity. Hemming, rather, prefers to place the modern Cartesian subject squarely at the feet of Ockham, for it is the latter whose “denial of the meaning of creation” leads to understanding “God . . . as a being apart from any human being, and most

18 Ibid.
particularly, apart from me."\(^{19}\) It is a univocal metaphysic that is the culprit here, as “the very separation of the human from the divine in this way (with its concomitant devaluation of creation) actually has the effect of bringing Creator and creature under the same determination, that of ‘being’.\(^{20}\) Hemming is noncommittal toward Gillespie’s critical depiction of Ockham’s emphasis on omnipotence, but the force of the implication is clear:

> If Michael Gillespie is correct, and nihilism is what comes about in response to the need to establish the self, my ‘I’ in the face of an omnipotent (and so potentially capricious) God, then nihilism is itself a way of being towards God (as being-apart), and the unfolding of nihilism as a history (specifically, the history of subjectivity) bears within it the trace of this being-with.\(^{21}\)

Thus Hemming makes the curious implication that a doctrine of divine omnipotence, rather than putting humans in their unomnipotent place, paradoxically creates the conditions for their rebellion—that is, God’s power is just *begging* to be challenged.

More recent work by Michael Allen Gillespie has critiqued ethical voluntarism’s emphasis on the human will as if it is univocal with the divine will:

> Nominalism presented not only a new vision of God but also a new view of what it meant to be human that placed much greater emphasis on the importance of human will. . . . For scholasticism the will both in God and man could therefore either do everything or nothing. . . . In emphasizing the will, however [Scotus and Ockham] also gave a new prominence to and justification of the human will. Humans were made in the image of God, and like God were principally willful rather than rational beings.\(^{22}\)

But, as the preceding chapters have shown, the voluntarist tradition is both theological *and* ethical, seeing divine command both “from above” and “from below.” The divine will enjoys

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 93–94.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 94.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 100.

the singular distinction of absolute power (with absolute constancy); the human will has only
the freedom of choice in obeying or disobeying the prior divine command.

Of all the essays in the *Radical Orthodoxy* collection, Phillip Blond makes perhaps the most
cogent case for voluntarism’s complicity with secularism, precisely because it follows upon
his critique of a metaphysics of univocity. Blond provides an account of modern thought in
order to support his claim that realism is only acceptable within a theological outlook. “Much
of what constitutes modern realism allies it with atheism, as secular accounts of reality fail to
capture reality’s essential aspect, its dependence on and participation in God.”23 Modern
secular realism, with “its ability to discard God when describing the real,” is directly
attributable to the univocity of being in the thought of Duns Scotus. “When wishing to give
to human cognition the possibility of knowing God, [Scotus] elevated a neutral account of
being above the distinction between the Creator and his creatures, allowing both God and
finite beings to share in this being in due proportion, since for Scotus rationality required that
the same substance be shared by both God and his creatures if each were to know the
other.”24 According to Blond, Scotus’s univocity of being, which sets being above God and
world alike, “marks the time when theology itself became idolatrous.”25 Whereas Aquinas
spoke of an analogy of being and attacked any use of univocity, preferring instead an
ontology of participation (whereby one who participates in being thereby participates in
God), Scotus’s affirmation of univocity compromises the entire theological enterprise: “For
theology, therefore, the very possibility of any secular realism derives from the Scotist belief

24 Ibid., 233.
25 Ibid.
that the ground of both God and created objects is the same. Whereas for theology no created object stands on the same ground as God, and as there is nothing higher than God any transcending of the Creator–creature distinction will, as Aquinas pointed out, only idolatrously posit some higher third entity which both God and creature will have to share as derivative terms.”26

After establishing the a-theological, secular corollary of the univocity of being, Blond comes closer to spelling out a connection to voluntarism. The world not only abandons God, but God in turn abandons the world “since the assumption that both God and his creatures share in some prior term meant that God could assert himself as God only by claiming to have a greater degree of this prior quality and hence, from the perspective of man, a greater power.”27 Thus the univocal God is just like humanity—only more powerful. “Consequently this quantitative distinction between man and God, by reducing to the level of an unequal participant in the being that man also shared in, meant that man could see God only as a greater and more powerful version of himself. Perhaps not surprisingly, God then became an object of fear and loathing for a humanity that began to wish for a usurpation of his station.”28

With the object of critique now shifted to divine power, then, Blond moves to place blame on that other voluntarist of the late Middle Ages: “For Ockham accepted that God was defined on the basis of his overwhelming power, and that he was so powerful that there was the real possibility of God’s malignity of will and of our utter defencelessness and lack of guile in the

26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
face of such deception. . . . Since the only source of certainty was God’s omnipotent will, then all other beings (since man cannot share God’s consciousness) are incapable of certain knowledge.”

Blond’s argument—that a univocal metaphysics ultimately begs a merely quantitative (rather than qualitative) distinction between divine and human power—is a plausible one. But the directionality of the argument is that the metaphysical error (univocity) precedes the moral error (voluntarism)—or, rather, that it is the metaphysical error that brings voluntarism down with it. Without the ontological flattening of the divine onto the horizontal plane, as a being among beings, it is not clear that Blond would have any qualms with assertions of divine omnipotence and command. For Cunningham, however, the direction of apostasy runs the other way, from voluntarism to univocity and, ultimately, atheism. Cambridge Thomism’s variations on the theme of modernity’s original sin are similar, and yet they differ in their details. Does theological and moral voluntarism lead inexorably to univocity, nihilism, atheism, totalitarian dictatorships, and global financial crises? Or does an assertion of univocal metaphysics drag otherwise innocent theological claims down into the depths of its apostasy?

What is curious in all of the Cambridge Thomist denunciations of voluntarism is that omnipotence is never outrightly denied. It is the “overwhelming power” (Blond) and “sheer power” (Cavanaugh) and “absolute sway” (Cunningham) of the “potentially capricious” God (Hemming) that threatens to destroy the idyllic peace between God and creation, but nowhere do the Cambridge Thomists actually assert that God lacks the power for any particular act.

29 Ibid., 233–34.
It is John Milbank, manning the helm of Cambridge Thomism, who has specifically taken up Barth’s moral theology within the radical orthodox critique of voluntarism. He writes, “Barth’s continued and heterodox reduction of Christ’s personal, and expressively imaging, character to a mere conveyance of the Paternal will betrays the fact that he projects God as the supreme instance of what a post-Kantian philosophy, as Fichte correctly realised, must logically understand human existence to be: namely, a willed positing of reality without other constraining grounds of necessity.” That is, Barth reduces the incarnate Son to a “mere conveyance” of the divine will, and this reduction reveals Barth’s transcendental presuppositions in that God turns out to be the Kantian idealist self.

As this thesis has shown, however, Barth stands within a voluntarist tradition that extends far beyond the Enlightenment. Cambridge Thomists will counter that this is precisely the problem—that Kantianism also originates in the early thirteenth century’s denial of a metaphysics of participation. But those within the radical orthodox camp refuse to engage with the nuances of the voluntarist tradition—depending instead on questionable secondary sources—and fail to articulate a concrete and coherent historical genealogy of precisely how voluntarism leads to univocity (or vice versa).31

Another critique of radical orthodoxy has recently appeared, one that defends not Scotus’s voluntarism, but his account of univocity. In short, Daniel Horan argues that Scotus never

30 John Milbank, “Knowledge: The theological critique of philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi,” in Radical Orthodoxy, 22.

31 In particular, Milbank’s critique of Scotus is exclusively based on Etienne Gilson’s book on Scotus, which by the author’s own admission was outdated before it was ever printed, due to the then-recent work begun by the Scotistic Commission on a critical edition of Scotus’s works. See Etienne Gilson, Jean Duns Scot, Introduction à ses positions fondamentales (Paris: Vrin, 1952). Furthermore, Gilson himself had very little patience for those who cried “voluntarism” without even understanding what it is—not unlike Barth’s lack of patience for those who too quickly dismissed either medieval Catholicism or Schleiermacher.
intended for univocity to define metaphysics, but rather it was merely a logical tool. Such an interpretation would be consistent with William Courtenay’s assertion (described above in chapter 2) that Scotus’s political analogy was not an endorsement of absolute monarchies and totalitarian dictatorships, but rather had a more modest aim of illustration. It is outside the scope of the present thesis to adjudicate Horan’s assessment of Scotus, but it is worth calling attention to one point that he makes:

While I have serious concerns about the post-Scotus genealogical narrative Radical Orthodoxy posits, my focus here is not to contest the possibility that how Scotus’s thought was subsequently received, interpreted, and used might have led to the conclusions Milbank and others suggest. How the subtle doctor’s thought was or was not interpreted and used after the fact is not something for which the medieval Franciscan himself can be held accountable. Nor should the real or imagined interpretations and subsequent usages be read into the subtle doctor’s work per se.32

What is helpful for the present thesis, however, is the attention that Horan calls to Cambridge Thomism’s dependence upon the work of Gilson—namely, that they cite Gilson often but curiously Gilson’s historical-critical approach to Thomas “does not appear to be of any great interest.”33 As Horan eloquently puts it: “When it comes to Radical Orthodox engagement with scholastic texts and modern commentators, it is only within the context of Scotus that Gilson’s work is so heavily relied upon and not, as one might expect, within the context of Aquinas.”34

Lastly, before moving on from the Cambridge Thomist critique of late medieval voluntarism, it should perhaps be asked whether it is not those very critics who have introduced the idea of

32 Horan, Postmodernity and Univocity, 9.
33 Ibid., 135–36.
34 Ibid., 136.
the divine as a power-mad totalitarian dictator. As the preceding chapters have shown, such accusations against Scotus and Ockham are akin to the construction of straw men. To be sure, the political analogies of the later Scotists and early modern royalty are the Achilles’s heel of the voluntarist tradition of moral enquiry. That this minority voice within the tradition has come to represent it as a whole is indeed unfortunate, and it is the responsibility of contemporary theological scholarship to fulfill its responsibility and set the record straight.

Of course concerns about power are shared by those outside of Radical Orthodoxy as well. William Schweiker, whose perspective has appeared intermittently in the preceding chapters, argues that the problem with divine command is that it valorizes omnipotence, and in turn glorifies the exercise of power qua power—not a welcome development given the history of violence in late modernity. “My deepest concern is to combat the glorification of power as defining the good by reconstructing a form of theological discourse that has too easily and too often been identified with precisely this form of human devotion.”

Schweiker’s concern is that an ethics of divine command cannot validate itself from within its own internal logic, but must also “assert that God is good or loving. Yet that claim, strictly speaking, cannot be formulated within the discourse of divine commands.” As has been shown in the chapters above, however, the voluntarist tradition does indeed “assert that God is good or loving.” It may not be “within” the “discourse of divine commands,” but divine constancy has indeed been an integral component within the tradition of the dialectic of divine omnipotence.


36 Ibid.
Another critique aimed squarely at Barth was that his voluntarist focus on the will bears a too *punctiliar* vision of the moral life. This is the critique of Barth’s ethics as expressed in, for instance, in the early Hauerwas, who asks “whether Barth’s concentration on the language of command and decision does justice to his theological argument concerning the importance of continuity.” And “The agonizing thing about Barth’s ethics, therefore, is not that he failed to appreciate the importance of the idea of character, but that he really does not integrate it into the main images he uses to explicate the nature of the Christian life. By describing the Christian life primarily in terms of command and decision, Barth cannot fully account for the kind of growth and deepening that he thinks is essential to the Christian’s existence.” It is here in the early Hauerwas that one finds perhaps the best articulation of the issues surrounding voluntarism: a “concentration on the language of command and decision.” In his later work Hauerwas has softened his critique of Barth’s “punctiliarism,” specifically in regard to the event of revelation. But the punctiliar critique also pops up in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, to whose metanarrative of tradition this final chapter will now turn.

3 Voluntarism and the Reconciliation of a Moral Tradition

Alasdair MacIntyre blames the advent of such punctiliar focus on the will’s choices on the loss of a moral telos. Characterizing the Reformation position in his 1967 history of ethics, MacIntyre writes: “The only true moral rules are the divine commandments; and the divine

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38 Ibid., 176.

39 To his credit, Hauerwas does not use the potentially misleading term “voluntarism,” but addresses the issues themselves.

40 Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: the Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 188n32.
commandments are understood in an Occamist perspective—that is to say, they have no further rationale or justification than that they are the injunctions of God.”\textsuperscript{41} For MacIntyre this leads to the loss of natural law, virtue, and a teleological view of ethics. Instead, God’s commands are separated from nature and reason, and God becomes an “arbitrary omnipotence.”\textsuperscript{42} Luther and Calvin together, for MacIntyre, lead Western civilization to divorce the secular world of governance and commerce from the moral sphere, which is internal and psychological: “Luther, like Calvin, bifurcated morality; there are on the one hand the absolutely unquestionable commandments, which are, so far as human reason and desires are concerned, arbitrary and contextless, and on the other hand, there are the self-justifying rules of the political and economic order.”\textsuperscript{43} This is the argument against voluntarism in a nutshell—that by separating morality from nature and reason and toward an internal psychological faculty prone to arbitrariness and irrationality, the world was left to fend for itself and eventually took that internal will along with it. Moral, political, and economic autonomy left God behind and, of their own volition, began to chart their own courses into modernity.

Yet it is precisely this danger that Barth’s voluntarism overcomes. To gain a better picture of Barth’s solution, it is helpful to look further into MacIntyre’s critique of modernity. In his 1988 Gifford Lectures, published as \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, Alasdair MacIntyre presents another metanarrative of history’s fall from grace in modernity. Many

\textsuperscript{41} Alasdair MacIntyre, \textit{A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century}, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 121.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 123.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 124.
elements of this critique—the breakup of the medieval synthesis, the loss of teleology, the inclination toward arbitrary exercises of power—are taken up in the Cambridge Thomist metanarrative. The framework in which MacIntyre sets his account, however, by contrasting “encyclopedia” and “genealogy” over against the Thomistic “tradition,” provides a theoretical model in which one may also understand Barth’s moral theology. Of course, as an heir to the Reformation and voluntarist traditions, Barth is not likely to enjoy MacIntyre’s approval. But Barth’s unique brand of voluntarism resurrects important elements of the lost tradition over which MacIntyre grieves.

As the first chapter briefly presented, MacIntyre understands the value of the Thomistic tradition to reside in its dialectical synthesis of two rival traditions of moral enquiry, the Augustinian and the Aristotelian. Whereas the former consists of a Christian neo-Platonic epistemology of divine illumination that understands the fall to have perverted the will, which now requires the intervention of divine grace, the latter comprises an Aristotelian teleology in which “the intellect discovers itself” in the gradual process of actualizing its potentiality and, by rationally knowing the good, is able to guide the will into proper moral action.

MacIntyre’s historiography of tradition differs from that of the encyclopaedist and the genealogist in that the latter two “contending parties agree . . . in the way in which they conceive of the history of philosophy from Socrates up to the nineteenth century.”44 The former sees history as “the progress of reason” whereby “rational enquiry [is] given
definitive and indefinitely improvable form by Descartes.” And the latter views history “as one in which reason, from the dialectic of Socrates through to the post-Kantians, both serves and disguises the interests of the will to power by its unjustified pretensions.” MacIntyre’s historiography of tradition, however, sees a definitive break. “Where the encyclopaedist sees a unified history of progress, the genealogist sees a unified history of distorting and repressing function. But both at least agree in ascribing a unified history.”

Thus MacIntyre’s reading of the history of moral enquiry identifies a time in which the Thomistic tradition successfully reconciled the Augustinian and Aristotelian traditions, as well as a time in which that reconciliation was lost. “Both therefore are at odds with any view which understands the history of philosophy in terms of a fundamental break, so that philosophy has a divided history, a before and an after such that the characterization of the before is a very different task from that of the after.”

MacIntyre attributes this latter view to Joseph Kleutgen, Jesuit philosopher and ghostwriter of *Aeterni Patris*. MacIntyre insists, however, that Kleutgen “mislocated the rupture.”

Instead of understanding it . . . as deriving from the failure of Aquinas’s immediate successors to have appreciated and appropriated that in Aquinas’s thought which had transcended the limitations of previous Augustinianism and previous Aristotelianism, Kleutgen overrated later Scholasticism’s genuine debt to Aquinas. So he placed the breach in the history of philosophy much too late and failed to distinguish adequately the positions of Aquinas and Suarez, thus doing both an injustice.

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45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 58–59.
47 Ibid., 73.
48 Ibid.
Thus MacIntyre attributes the rupture and subsequent loss of a dialectical tradition of reconciliative moral enquiry to those late medieval scholastics who immediately followed Thomas Aquinas.

As the present thesis has shown, Barth is in many ways an heir to the tradition of those late medieval scholastics. His robustly voluntarist moral theology synthesizes their own forms of voluntarism into a new tradition of (post)modern Christian voluntarism. Yet the loss of teleology that MacIntyre mourns is something that Barth brings back into the voluntarist discourse. Barth’s eschatological rendering of conscience retrieves a sense of progressive moral formation, one rooted in a Christian soteriology and thus responsive to a theology of divine grace. Karl Barth’s voluntarism, then, provides an invaluable resource for moral enquiry, reconciling two lost traditions—the Thomistic synthesis and the voluntarism of the late medieval scholastics—in order to forge an ecumenically Christian moral theology.

4 Conclusion

Several conclusions may be reached from the above litany of voices. First, the connection between emphasizing the human will and emphasizing the divine will has not always been evident. Studies either tend to focus on one or the other or they conflate the two without adequate clarification or nuance. Secondly, voluntarism is often criticized for presenting a too punctiliar model of the moral life, as in the critiques emerging from the early Hauerwas and MacIntyre that wish to uphold virtue ethics over against deontological, utilitarian, or situational ethics. Finally (and relatedly), critics of voluntarism are mostly concerned with granting the will too much autonomy—the human will’s autonomy from God and the divine
will’s autonomy from nature and reason. It is this latter point that drives the contemporary theological attack on voluntarism.

Yet given Barth’s popularity among those defending the theological over against modern secularism, it is odd that Barth would be implicated as a traitor, allowing the purported evils of voluntarism to infiltrate modern theology through a hole in its trenches. Critiques of voluntarism—whether directed toward Karl Barth or the late medieval scholastics—would do well to attend to the specific grammar that regulates such theologies of divine command. Such attention will reveal that an authentically voluntarist tradition of moral enquiry (1) only affirms absolute divine power and possibility alongside an equally absolute divine constancy and (2) only subordinates the will of the moral agent to his or her intellect precisely because of the absolute priority of the divine command—which, by definition following (1), is the good.

Thus a moral theology devoted to consistently hearing and keeping the divine command both “from above” and “from below” articulates a distinctly voluntarist grammar “from within.” Such a consistent grammar has implications not only for the field of Barth studies, but also for moral and political theology, liturgical theology, and specific systematic-theological issues such as analogical method and questions regarding the relationship between nature and grace. And, as the method applied herein has shown, such a reconciliation of rival traditions of moral enquiry has significant implications for ecumenical engagement. Like Barth’s insistence to the organizers of the 1927 Christliche Studentenkonferenz, focusing on “the ethical problem” does not get us very far. But devoting our attention to Das Halten der Gebote, or “keeping the command,” opens up space for hearing and heeding the voice of another.
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