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Saying 'No' to God: The Emergence of Metaphysical Freedom

SUPPOSE A DISTINGUISHED GROUP of outer space aliens asked you to name the greatest idea in the history of Western civilization. What would your answer be? Mine would be freedom. Freedom is a truly great idea. It has all the official marks of greatness: it makes its appearance in all the great books, inspires all the great leaders, and, by mere association, sells billions of dollars of merchandise every year.

There are many different kinds of freedom, the broadest division lying between the political and the metaphysical. Political freedom is the ability to carry out one's personal choices, while metaphysical freedom is the ability to make those choices in the first place.

Medieval thinkers were not very interested in political freedom. Their persistent neglect of democracy and individual rights is one of the main reasons behind the epithet 'Dark Ages.' They were, however, very interested in metaphysical freedom. Not only was the notion of metaphysical freedom invented in the Middle Ages, it enjoyed exploration, development, and respect unparalleled in modern times.

In this paper, I trace the emergence of metaphysical freedom. Although medieval thinkers wanted to attribute personal choice to human beings, they faced many challenges to this idea. Personal choice implies control over one's own fate. The prospect of such control forced such eminent authors as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and John Duns Scotus to settle for restricted accounts of metaphysical freedom. Learning from their failures, William of Ockham succeeded in developing and preserving an unrestricted account. What does it mean to have control over one's own fate? The test question for medieval thinkers became: Do we have the power to say 'no' to God? Ockham was willing to make radical accommodations in his theology, science, and ethics in order to maintain this dignity for human beings.

Augustine (354–430)

Augustine was the first medieval philosopher to attempt a systematic treatment of the issue of metaphysical freedom. He introduces the notion of free will for the first time in the history of Western philosophy.[1] Plato had devoted some attention to the powers of the mind[2] and Aristotle had discussed choice,[3] but neither had hit upon the notion of a mental power that would give one control over one's own fate.

Augustine set out to insert the God of the Old Testament into a philosophical system, and this is what precipitated his discovery of the will. The Hebrews had long conceived of their God as a being with free will, and they had long conceived of human beings as made in God's image. It remained only for someone to make the inference and hammer out the details. Augustine took up the task.

In an early work called *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine asserts that human beings have wills, that the will is a mental power, and that nothing causes the will to will what it wills.[4] Moreover, he takes these things to be empirically obvious. One of his central goals in this work is to prove that human beings are responsible for their sins. The will plays a crucial role in his argument: human beings are responsible because sin is a personal choice that originates in the will.

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[1] See Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982).

[2] See Plato's *Phaedrus* 246a–257b, where he compares the soul to a chariot. The black horse represents the spirited part of the soul, the white horse represents the honourable part, and the charioteer represents the part that controls and guides the other parts. The charioteer is a vague analogue for the will.

[3] See, for example, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 1111a22, where he defines the voluntary as that of which the moving principle is in the agent himself, he being aware of the particular circumstances of the action. Despite his extended discussion of voluntary action, Aristotle has no word for will. He has only προαῖρεσις, meaning choice, and βούλησις, meaning decision.

[4] Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993) 69, 104.

Augustine finds support for this view in Neoplatonism. Neoplatonists subscribed to a hierarchical conception of the universe according to which human beings are superior to animals, animals are superior to plants, and plants are superior to rocks. They defined the relationship between the levels in this hierarchy in terms of a causal principle: one thing, *x*, has causal power over another thing, *y*, if and only if *x* is superior to *y*. Thus, human beings have power over trees, but trees have no power over us. Neoplatonists thought of superior beings as *having more existence* than their inferiors have, and, hence, having more power. This is convenient for Augustine. Only something that is superior to human beings could have causal power over our wills. Only angels and God are superior to human beings. Because the superiority of angels and God includes goodness, however, they could never cause a human will to sin. Therefore, the human will must cause itself to sin.[5]

Despite his early enthusiasm for metaphysical freedom, Augustine soon began to have second thoughts. It is not hard to see how a careful reader of *On Free Choice of the Will* might infer that, since the will freely causes itself to sin, it must be able to cause itself to avoid sin, or to do something good. Pelagius, an Irish monk living in Rome, was just such a reader. He began promoting the idea that, since human beings have free will, they can save themselves from eternal damnation. This idea runs directly contrary to the traditional Catholic interpretation of the New Testament, however, according to which only divine grace, as manifest through Jesus Christ, can save human beings from eternal damnation. Church officials were soon forced to condemn Pelagianism. Augustine was horrified that his philosophical initiative had contributed to this fiasco.[6]

Augustine began to qualify his conception of freedom.[7] He finds empirical evidence to suggest that the experience of free will is an illusion. He finds biblical evidence to suggest that God punished the entire human race for Adam's first sin by decapacitating our wills.[8] The result, which he insists upon in order to avoid contributing to Pelagianism, is that God directly causes the human will anytime it wills something necessary for salvation, including avoiding sin as well as doing good things. This is Augustine's interpretation of divine grace: God is responsible for everything human beings do right.

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[5] *On Free Choice* 17.

[6] For a survey of the shift in Augustine's thought, see John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994) chapters 4 and 5.

[7] Augustine was struck by the fact that human beings are creatures of habit. If we are so free then why do we behave in such consistent patterns? For example, Augustine asked himself why he had so much trouble giving up sex once he decided he wanted to be celibate. See his *Soliloquies* in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, trans. John H.S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: Westminster P, 1953) 39.

Late in his life, Augustine wrote an overview of his lifework called *Retractations*. In it, he denies that he has abandoned free will. He maintains that the decapacitated human will is still able to sin all by itself. Furthermore, he maintains that grace is not coercive. He claims grace is compatible with human freedom because it works from the inside and does for human beings what we wish, or at least *should* wish, that we could do for ourselves. Augustine concludes that this measure of freedom is enough; it is all the freedom we should ever want or need.[9]

In the end, Augustine preserves the will while at the same time casting God as the single antecedent condition that determines what it wills. Can Augustine maintain that human beings are in control of their own fate under these conditions? The test question is whether it is possible for us, of our own free choice, to refuse divine grace. Augustine clearly indicates in several places that we cannot.[10]

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[8] This is the doctrine of original sin. Augustine develops this doctrine through his interpretation of Paul, in particular, Paul's explanation of the Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau. See Augustine's letter, *To Simplician*, in *Earlier Writings* 376–406.

[9] See his *Retractations*, trans. Mary Inez Bogan, R.S.M. (Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 1968) 32–40.

[10] Augustine asserts that God's act is an "efficacious power" upon human wills. See *Grace and Free Will*, trans. Robert Russell, O.S.A. (Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 1967) 287. He asserts that God can "bend them wherever and whenever He pleases" (297) and that "God works in men's hearts to incline their wills to whatsoever way He wills," either toward good or toward evil (303). Augustine also compares human nature to an injured man and God to a physician. He writes, "But now we are concerned with the man whom the thieves left half dead on the road, who, being torn and pierced with serious wounds is not capable of ascending to the heights of justice." See *Nature and Grace* in *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings: On Nature and Grace et al.*, trans. John Mourant and William Collinge (Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 1992) 60.

Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274)

Although medieval philosophers celebrated Augustine's pioneering work on metaphysical freedom, they were also well aware that it was full of compromises. The Neoplatonic framework that dominated the early Middle Ages did not produce many viable alternatives.[11] It was not until the new wave of Aristotelianism in the thirteenth century that a new approach to metaphysical freedom emerged.

Thomas Aquinas's great accomplishment was to show how the science of Aristotle could be combined with the Catholic faith to form a single comprehensive worldview. Aquinas did not reject the doctrine of divine grace that pushed Augustine toward determinism. Instead, he supplemented it with a strong Aristotelian account of human nature. In so doing, his aim was to temper the thesis that God is directly responsible for everything human beings do right.

Aristotle's science is founded on his doctrine of the four causes.[12] According to Aristotle, scientific inquiry is complete only when everything is explained, and an explanation is complete only when four causes are identified. These 'causes' are the four aspects of each object's existence, which Aristotle called the material, the formal, the efficient, and the final. Consider the case of a house. Its material cause is the matter out of which it is made, for example, wood. Its formal cause is how the matter is arranged—enclosing space. The efficient cause of the house is what brought it into existence, namely, the builder. Its final cause is the reason for which it exists, to provide shelter. Aristotle attempts to apply this explanatory model to natural objects. This proves a formidable task for him, and his final view is complicated, especially with respect to the human being. It is clear, however, that for Aristotle, the final cause of every natural object is to achieve the excellence proper to its kind and that the proper excellence of humankind is happiness.

Aquinas finds this a useful framework in which to develop his account of the will. Aristotle established that human beings by nature strive for happiness. Aquinas designates the will as the faculty of the human soul whose purpose it is to carry out this function. He designates the intellect as the faculty of the human soul whose purpose it is to inform the will which actions are likely to lead to happiness. When the intellect judges that action x is the best way to achieve the end, the will immediately wills the execution of action x.[13]

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[11] One noteworthy exception is the theory Anselm of Canterbury presents in his treatise, *De Casu Diaboli*. The central insight in this theory was advanced and expanded by John Duns Scotus, discussed below.

[12] See Aristotle's *Physics* bk. II ch. 3 and *Metaphysics* bk. XII ch. 5.

On Aquinas's view, human beings are free in virtue of the intellect rather than the will. The will is not free to will against the judgement of the intellect. Since the function of the will is to will whatever is likely to bring happiness, and since it has no idea what is likely to bring happiness apart from the judgement of the intellect, it is completely determined by the intellect.[14] On the other hand, Aquinas maintains that the judgement of the intellect is not determined. In actual choice situations, human beings face a great quantity of information, conflicting evidence, and emotional pressures that create the opportunity for personal choice.[15]

Can human beings reject divine grace? Aquinas answers that they can, in virtue of the intellect.[16] If, through emotional confusion or inaccurate reasoning, the intellect concludes that divine grace will not lead to happiness, then the will immediately rejects it. Aquinas maintains his claim to have secured metaphysical freedom on the grounds that, although the will cannot will otherwise unless the intellect judges otherwise, the intellect can judge otherwise.[17]

In virtue of what, however, can the intellect judge otherwise? Why is it not the case on his view that one's beliefs about happiness determine one's judgement? Aquinas holds that the intellect comes to acquire such beliefs through reasoning. If happiness consists in a single thing and if it is transparently obvious what that thing is, then reasoning about happiness should determine the intellect's judgement.

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[13] See Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* bk. II chs. 47 and 48. See also Aquinas's *De Veritate* qu. 24 art. 5.

[14] The will can will the intellect to do things, but only if the intellect first deems it best for the will to do so. See Aquinas's *De Veritate* qu. 22 art. 12.

[15] See Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* 1a qu. 83 art. 1.

[16] See Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* bk. III pt. I ch. 73 and pt. II ch. 159.

[17] See Norman Kretzmann, "Philosophy of Mind," *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 128–59. See also Eleonore Stump, "The Mechanics of Cognition: Ockham on Mediating Species," *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, ed. Paul Spade (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 168–203; as well as Eleonore Stump, "Aquinas's Account of Freedom: Intellect and Will," *The Monist* 80.4 (1997): 576–97.

Aquinas avoids this deterministic result by maintaining that perfect happiness does not exist in this life.[18] Because perfect happiness is nowhere to be found in nature, natural reasoning about it will always be incomplete. Imperfect happiness can be found in this life; yet, it does not consist in a single thing, nor are the things it does consist in transparently obvious.[19] Therefore, due to ignorance and ties among equally imperfect alternatives, the intellect is underdetermined. Aquinas readily admits, however, that the intellect will be entirely determined in the next life.[20] In the next life, perfect happiness will consist in a single thing that will be transparently obvious, namely, the beatific vision of God.[21] According to Aquinas, no one can resist God in heaven, and if someone were to experience the beatific vision before heaven, no one would be able to resist it then either.

John Duns Scotus (1265–1308)

Aquinas's view implies that the reality of human freedom is a direct result of imperfection. In a perfect world, a human being would not be free to choose between two options in such a way that, no matter which she chooses, she could have chosen the other option instead. Some of Aquinas's successors were happy to embrace this result; others, who thought of the ability to do otherwise as a noble thing, were not.

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[18] See *Summa Contra Gentiles* bk. III pt. I ch. 48.

[19] See *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae qu. 1 art. 6–7.

[20] In his early work, Aquinas unqualifiedly asserts that someone who is experiencing God necessarily wills to experience God. See *Summa Contra Gentiles* bk. III pt. I chs. 59 and 62. See also *Summa Theologiae* 1a qu. 82 art. 2. In his later work, Aquinas qualifies this assertion by saying that someone who is experiencing God necessarily wills to experience God *if he wills anything*. He thereby suggests that the will can refrain from willing to experience God even if it cannot will something else instead. See *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae qu. 10 art. 2 and *De Malo* 6 *ad* 7. This represents a move toward Scotus's view that may well have been occasioned by criticism concerning the deterministic implications of the early view. It is not at all clear that this move is consistent with Aquinas's account of human nature.

[21] See *Summa Contra Gentiles* bk. III pt. I ch. 37.

According to John Duns Scotus, Aquinas's fundamental mistake lay in conceiving of the will as a merely natural power. Every natural power is by definition determined to one effect. Consider an acorn. It has the natural power to grow into an oak tree. Moreover, growing into an oak tree is the only thing it can do. If the conditions are right, it will produce this effect; if it fails to produce this effect, then the conditions must not have been right. Aquinas conceives of the will as a natural power when he states that it necessarily strives for happiness. If the intellect tells the will that God is the ultimate source of happiness, then the will necessarily strives for God; if the will does not strive for God, then this is because the intellect failed to present God accurately. Whether the intellect fails to present God accurately because the relevant information is not available in this life or because it made a mistake in reasoning, the effect is the same: the will was misled. Being misled is a malfunction equivalent to an acorn not receiving the right amount of sunlight and water. This shows that the will is just as necessitated as the acorn. Scotus rejects this account of human freedom. He argues that God has free will, and, yet, is never misled.[22] Therefore, there must be some other way to explain the ability to choose.

Scotus defines the will as a "potency for opposites," capable of executing one or the other of two alternatives with no change in its nature.[23] The will does not need a command from the intellect to make a choice. In fact, Scotus turns Aquinas's view of the relationship between intellect and will upside down. On Scotus's view, the intellect is the passive power, whose function is to receive and process information, while the will is the active power that decides how to respond to the information.[24] This enables Scotus to conceive of the human will as a mirror image of the divine will.

Scotus is not confident, however, that he can elaborate a plausible ethical theory without incorporating some natural power into the will. A natural power is a thing's inclination toward the perfection proper to its kind. To say that a human being has no natural power would be tantamount to saying that there is no perfection for humankind. Without a perfection for humankind, there would be no basis for judging the difference between a good and a bad human being. An oak tree is either a good or a bad oak tree depending on how well it fulfils the oak tree perfection toward which it is naturally inclined. The problem is that human beings must be naturally inclined toward human perfection in some way.[25]

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[22] See Scotus, *Oxford Commentary* bk II d. 25, *Free Will*, trans. Sydney Morgenbesser and James Walsh (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962) 35–39.

[23] Scotus, *Questions on the Metaphysics* IX q. 15 art. 1, in *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, trans. Allan B. Wolter and ed. William A. Frank (Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 1997) 137.

[24] This implies, *pace* Aquinas, that the will can command the intellect without itself being commanded by anything. See Scotus, *Oxford Commentary* bk II d. 42 q. 1–4.

Scotus turns to Anselm of Canterbury for a solution. Anselm conceives of the will in terms of a twofold inclination, "natural" and "free." By the will's natural inclination, human beings strive for their own self-interest. By the will's free inclination, we can refrain from striving for our own self-interest, in effect regulating our own natural inclination. Following Anselm, Scotus calls the natural inclination the "affection for advantage" and calls the free inclination the "affection for justice." These two affections work together for moral or immoral action. Through his free inclination, a martyr can refrain from striving for his own self-interest in order to sacrifice his life for a good cause.[26] Conversely, a criminal strives for his own self-interest in an unregulated way. Misuse of the free inclination, according to both Anselm and Scotus, explains the origin of human sin.

The result of this solution is to set the will apart from other natural powers. Whereas all merely natural powers are necessary, the will is contingent.[27] This means that it can strive for its perfection or not, according to its own determination. By conceiving of the will as contingent in this way, Scotus is able to assert, against Aquinas, that knowledge of God does not necessarily imply striving for God. Striving for God as an ultimate end implies loving him. Likewise, loving God implies willing as he wills. Since God always wills in accordance with justice, someone who failed to regulate her self-interest in accordance with justice, while knowing that this is what she needed to do in order to love God, would be failing to love God.

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[25] See Scotus, *Ordinatio* IV suppl. dist 49 qq. 9–10.

[26] See Scotus, *Ordinatio* IV suppl. dist 49 q. 9 art. 1. See also Anselm of Canterbury's *De Casu Diaboli*. Scotus acknowledges his debt to Anselm. See, for example, *Ordinatio* II d. 6 q. 2.

[27] Although Aquinas and others had attempted to develop the notion of contingent causality, Scotus is arguably the first to succeed. See Michael Sylwanowicz, *Contingent Causality and the Foundations of Duns Scotus' Metaphysics* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) 67.

Scotus cautions, however, that failing to will something (not willing it) is different from willing *against* something (nilling it). To nill God would be equivalent to willing the opposite of heaven, namely, hell. Scotus argues, however, that it would be impossible for human beings to will hell.[28] A human being willing hell would be equivalent to an acorn growing into a pine tree. We can fail to attain our perfection but we cannot become something else altogether. Once one posits a natural inclination within a thing one places limits on what it can do.

According to Scotus, the human will can either cooperate with God or fail to cooperate, without being misled by the intellect. The human will cannot, however, reject God in the sense of willing against him. We can say 'yes' to God, or we can say nothing, but we cannot say 'no.'

Ockham (1285–1347)

William of Ockham was deeply troubled by his predecessors' compromises. He read the history of metaphysical freedom as a history of failures. Each philosopher started out with the intention of crediting human beings with free will, but each one bowed under the weight of his own theory. For Augustine, theology, particularly the doctrine of divine grace, was an insurmountable obstacle to freedom. For Aquinas, the obstacle was science and Aristotle's doctrine of the four causes. For Scotus, it was ethics and Anselm's doctrine of the twofold affection. Other medieval philosophers made these and other compromises in attempting to rise to the challenge of metaphysical freedom.[29] They were unwilling to develop theories that would allow human beings the power to say 'no' to God.

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[28] See Scotus's *Ordinatio* IV suppl. dist 49 q. 9 art. 2.

[29] The one notable exception is Peter John Olivi (1247–1298), who aggressively defends unrestricted metaphysical freedom. See his *Quaestiones in secundum librum Sententiarum*, vol. II, ed. B. Jansen (Quaracchi, 1921–26) q. 57. Unfortunately, Olivi's work was condemned and burned. See David Burr, "The Persecution of Peter Olivi," *Transactions of the American Philosphical Society* 66 (1976): 1–98. Although the official censure of Olivi's work made his successors reluctant to quote him, they were clearly influenced by his ideas.

Ockham, in contrast, openly asserts that human beings have the power to say 'no' to God. He writes,

> This is proven because free power is receptive of two contrary acts. It is able to will any one thing for the same reason that it is able to will any other thing. The will, however, as a free power, is receptive to nill and to will with respect to any object whatsoever. Therefore, if it is able to will with respect to God, for the same reason, it is able to nill with respect to God.[30]

Despite his insistence, Ockham admits that the only proof he has for his claim is his own experience. He writes,

> The thesis in question cannot be proven by any argument, since every argument meant to prove it will assume something that is just as unknown as, or more unknown than, the conclusion. Nonetheless, the thesis can be known evidently through experience, since a human being experiences that, no matter how much reason dictates a given thing, the will is still able to will that thing or not to will it or to nill it.[31]

Ockham's goal was to defend freedom without compromising anything. This was an enormous undertaking, and his efforts proved an extraordinary accomplishment. Ockham's commitment to free will leads him to overhaul theology, science, and ethics. Nevertheless, Ockham considered himself a representative of the same Catholic worldview as his predecessors. It was therefore incumbent upon him to show where they went wrong.

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[30] *Opera Theologica* 7: 350, in *Opera Theologica et Philosophica*, ed. Rega Wood and Gedeon Gál O.F.M. (St. Bonaventure: The Franciscan Institute, 1967–88). See also *Opera Theologica* 1: 503–6.

[31] *Quodlibetal Questions*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso and Francis E. Kelly (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991) 76.

Ockham against Augustine

Augustine introduced limitations on the freedom of the will in the interest of preserving the doctrine of divine grace. He concluded that God efficaciously causes human beings whenever they have genuinely good will.

Ockham rejects this view. He disagrees not only with Augustine's original formulation of the doctrine of divine grace but also with Aquinas's reformulation. Both make the mistake of supposing that human beings need supernatural help in order to love God. According to Ockham, in contrast, the will is able to love any object all by itself. He writes,

> Neither the meritorious act, nor even the act of love, exceeds the total natural faculty of the human being. For every act of love which we have in the common course in this life is of the same cause as an act of pure natural possibility, and such an act does not exceed the natural human faculty. True, that act's *being meritorious* is not in the natural power of human beings—whether they have love or not. This is because merit depends on the free acceptance by God. Whether the love is in the soul or not, after the act is elicited, still it is in the power of God to accept that act as meritorious or not. God would be able, through his absolute power, not to accept an act of love that is now meritorious. Then it would no longer be meritorious. Nevertheless, it would be the same act and the same love. For, otherwise, it would follow that some creature would be able to necessitate God to do something in the future, because the love would necessitate God at some time in the future to give the one having the love eternal life.[32]

Ockham's strategy is to make a distinction between what counts as love and what counts as merit. Human beings are capable of loving all by themselves.[33] They are not capable, however, of bringing it about that their love elicits God's love in return.

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[32] *Opera Theologica* 3: 472.

[33] According to Ockham, in this life, divine grace does not cause human love but rather joins with it. See *Opera Theologica* 6: 388–89 and 3: 473. A different rule

A careful analysis of the notion of divine grace shows that human beings cannot save themselves from damnation as Pelagius believed. Hence, theology need not place limitations on free will.

Ockham against Aquinas

Aristotle asserted that a complete explanation of any natural phenomenon requires identifying its final cause. Aquinas inferred that, since the final cause of humankind is happiness, the will must be constrained to will whatever the intellect presents to it as a source of happiness.

Ockham, on the other hand, was prepared to revise Aristotle significantly when it came to the doctrine of the four causes.[34] Ockham insists that it cannot be proved that every effect has a final cause.[35] He contends that, from a scientific point of view, natural phenomena, such as fire, do not have final causes at all. He writes, "Someone who is just following natural reason would claim that the question, 'Why?' is inappropriate in the case of natural actions. For he would maintain that it is no real question to ask something like, 'For what reason is fire generated?'"[36] Aquinas would say that fire is generated in order to heat. In Ockham's view, however, a true scientist would say that fire is generated and that fire heats, without positing the heat as the purpose of the generation. There is no scientific reason why fire behaves as it does. Natural phenomena necessarily behave as they do because of their natures.

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applies, however, in the next life. It was a tenet of faith that those who reach heaven will be eternally confirmed in this state. Ockham struggles to accommodate this tenet and considers many doubts concerning it. In the end, he allows that God could eternally confirm those who reach heaven by causing their love himself. He maintains that God can do this on the grounds that, if God can create whole human beings, he ought to be able to create parts of them, such as their loves. He insists, however, that this intervention, rather than freeing the will, would render the will unfree. See *Opera Theologica* 5: 338–50.

[34] Ockham fancied himself an Aristotelian just as did Thomas Aquinas. Nevertheless, Ockham disagreed with Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle. Ockham's interpretations of Aristotle are idiosyncratic, often deviating both from standard medieval interpretations and from what Aristotle himself seems to say. In the prologue to his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*, Ockham admits that he is concerned with what Aristotle *should* have held. See *Opera Philosophica* 4: 3–4.

[35] Ockham, *Quodlibet* 4.1.

[36] *Quodlibet* 4.1.

Likewise, according to Ockham, human beings, as natural phenomena, do not have a final cause.[37] Therefore, there is no scientific reason to posit a purpose for the will. Aquinas asks the question, "For what reason do human beings will?" His answer is, "in order to attain happiness." He thereby commits himself to the position that when the intellect presents the ultimate source of happiness, namely, God, the will necessarily wills it. Ockham rejects this account on the grounds that the original question was misguided. Human beings will simply because it is in their nature to do so.

A complete explanation of human nature includes an account of the will, but it does not include an account of what the will is for. Hence, science need not place any limitations on the freedom of the will.

Ockham against Scotus

Scotus reasons as follows:

1. For anything that is legitimately judged, there is a perfection proper to its kind.
2. Anything with a perfection proper to its kind has a natural inclination toward that perfection.
3. The human will is legitimately judged.
4. Therefore, the human will has a natural inclination toward the perfection proper to its kind.

In Ockham's analysis, Scotus's mistake lay in premise one. It may be true that we speak of good oak trees just as surely as we speak of good human beings. But when we do so, we are employing two different senses of the term 'good.' The good in oak trees is morally neutral; the good in human beings is not. What makes the good in human beings *moral* is precisely the fact that it is not the product of a natural inclination.

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[37] Ockham maintains that only those who look at the world from the point of view of religious faith see a final cause for everything. Christians believe that God made the world for a special purpose and that everything in the world has a special role to play in God's plan. Ockham, as a Christian, accepts this view on faith. His view of divine providence, however, deprives God's plan of any explanatory power. According to Ockham, God's plan is simply to allow whatever would have happened on its own to happen. See his discussion of the question, "Is any creaturely power able to impede the divine will?" *Opera Theologica* 4: 670–85.

Ockham presents an extended critique of Scotus's naturalistic ethics that concludes with the following remark:

> Against the principal argument, I say that the will is not naturally inclined toward an ultimate end .... Moreover, when it is said that "each thing is inclined toward its proper perfection," this is to be denied if we take the word inclination in the strict sense. The only perfectible thing that is inclined toward its proper perfection is a natural power, and the will is not one of these.[38]

The will is not inclined toward anything. It is indifferent, meaning that it is poised equally between all the options.[39] Scotus conceded that the will is poised equally between willing one end and not willing at all. For Ockham, this is not enough. To be truly free, the will must be poised between willing one end, not willing it, and nilling it.

In Ockham's view, human beings freely incline themselves toward whatever ultimate end they choose. Christians believe that God is the only thing that is ultimately capable of satisfying the human will. As a Christian, Ockham agrees. He denies, however, that God necessarily satisfies any human will. Human beings create the conditions of their own satisfaction.[40] If they create conditions that do not involve God, then they will not find God satisfying. According to Ockham, human beings are able to experience the beatific vision itself without enjoyment.[41]

The fact that human beings choose what to strive for implies that they have no natural inclination and hence that there is no standard of excellence proper to their kind. However, this does not mean that there are no standards of excellence at all. Ockham maintains that God sets individual moral standards for individual human beings.[42] Therefore, ethics need not place any limitations on free will.

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[38] *Opera Theologica* 1: 507.

[39] For Ockham's use of the term "indifference" to characterize the will, see Ockham, *Quodlibet* 1.16. See also *Opera Theologica* 7: 360. For a discussion of the liberty of indifference in Ockham, see Marilyn McCord Adams, "Ockham on Will, Nature, and Morality" in *The Cambridge Companion*, ed. Spade 245–72.

[40] Ockham writes, "For any given thing, it is possible for one to believe that one will not be able to be satisfied with it." *Opera Theologica* 1: 503.

[41] See *Opera Theologica* 7: 351. For a discussion of Ockham's view of enjoyment, see A.S. McGrade, "Ockham on Enjoyment: Towards an Understanding of Fourteenth Century Philosophy and Psychology," *Review of Metaphysics* 34 (1980–81): 706–28.

Conclusion

Ockham maintains that unrestricted metaphysical freedom is a crucial prerequisite for human dignity. He writes,

> The will is poised equally over contrary effects in such a way that it is able to cause love or hatred of something. ... To deny every agent this equal or contrary power is to destroy every praise and blame, every council and deliberation, every freedom of the will. Indeed, without it, the will would not make a human being free any more than appetite does an ass.[43]

Ockham's use of an ass for the purpose of contrast in this last passage is significant. Today, supporters of unrestricted metaphysical freedom of the kind advocated by Ockham are known as metaphysical libertarians.[44] Libertarians have long used a thought experiment called "Buridan's Ass" to motivate their view. Ockham is probably alluding to this thought experiment.[45]

Imagine a hungry donkey placed at equal distances between two equally attractive piles of hay. The donkey has a strong desire for hay, but has no preference for one pile as opposed to the other. If there were some feature about one of the piles that gave the donkey reason to approach it rather than the other pile, then the donkey would spring into action. According to the thought experiment, however, there is no such feature: the two piles are perfectly equivalent. Therefore, the donkey has two conflicting desires: it wants to eat the pile on the left and it wants to eat the pile on the right; and these two desires are absolutely tied. The donkey can spring into action only if it can break the tie. It cannot break the tie, however, because there is no cause for preference. Therefore, the donkey cannot spring into action and dies of hunger.

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[42] Ockham assumes that the traditional divine commands, as set forth by the church, usually constitute a sufficient moral guide for most human beings. Conscience functions to individualize general precepts. Nevertheless, God can issue radically individualized commands. For example, God could command someone to hate him. See *Opera Theologica* 5: 342 and 352. The Bible provides some evidence that God has, on occasion, commanded murder, theft, and adultery.

[43] *Opera Philosophica* 4: 319–21.

[44] For a recent defence of libertarianism, see Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996).

[45] The origin and history of this thought experiment is a complicated matter. See Nicholas Rescher, "Choice without Preference," *Kant Studien* 51 (1959): 142–75.

This thought experiment calls attention to the difference between human beings and beasts. It suggests that a human being in a similar situation would not suffer the paralysis suffered by the donkey. The reason is that human beings are not slaves to their desires. On the contrary, we have a will whose function it is to create preferences for ourselves.

Ockham's ultimate concern is to establish that each human being controls his or her own fate. It may seem absurd to compare heaven and hell to two equally desirable piles of hay. And yet, if the will comes without a natural inclination, then heaven and hell are 'equally desirable' in the most basic sense: it is equally possible for human beings to prefer either of these ends—or something else altogether, for that matter.[46]

Ockham calls human beings "unmoved movers." In so doing, he establishes an even stronger parallel than his predecessors established between the human and the divine will. God chooses his own end when he decides whom to love. Human beings choose their own ends when they decide whom to love.[47] This sets us apart from the rest of the natural world. Natural objects and beasts move only if they are moved by something else. Buridan's ass starved because the two piles of hay were unable to move it in one direction or the other. Human beings, in contrast, do not need to be moved by something else. Our special dignity is our metaphysical freedom. We move ourselves, Ockham says, "when we begin to intend an end."[48]

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[46] For a discussion of Ockham's view that human beings choose their own ends, see Calvin Normore, "Picking and Choosing: Anselm and Ockham on Choice," *Vivarium* 36.1 (1998): 23–39.

[47] See *Opera Philosophica* 5: 598.

[48] See *Quodlibet* 4.1.