WILLIAM OF OCKHAM

Questions on Virtue, Goodness, and the Will

William of Ockham (d. 1347) was among the most influential and the most notorious thinkers of the late Middle Ages. In the twenty-seven questions translated in this volume, most never before published in English, he considers a host of theological and philosophical issues, including the nature of virtue and vice, the relationship between the intellect and the will, the scope of human freedom, the possibility of God’s creating a better world, the role of love and hatred in practical reasoning, whether God could command someone to do wrong, and more. In answering these questions, Ockham critically engages with the ethical thought of such predecessors as Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and John Duns Scotus. Students and scholars of both philosophy and historical theology will appreciate the accessible translations and ample explanatory notes on the text.

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WILLIAM OF OCKHAM

Questions on Virtue, Goodness, and the Will

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Since love, hate, pride, anger, envy and other passions of the soul hamper and even pervert human judgment in the search for the truth … everyone who pays attention to what was said rather than to who the author of a view is will see what is written with clearer eyes and will more sincerely press on with tracking down the truth.

William of Ockham, *Dialogus* Part 1, Prologue
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Acknowledgments

No book comes to be without a host of partial and concurring causes. Among the cooperating causes of this volume, let me first offer my thanks to a host of medievalists and historians of philosophy who helped me craft this project, encouraged me in it, and offered their advice along the way, including (but not limited to) Jeff Brower, Susan Brower-Toland, Peter Hartman, Robert Pasnau, Jenny Pelletier, Magali Roques, Sonja Schierbaum, Daniel Simpson, Zita Toth, and Scott Williams.

Thanks also to audiences at the St. Louis University Annual Symposium on Medieval and Renaissance Studies in June 2019, the Hamburg Conference on Moral Philosophy in the Fourteenth Century in September 2019, and the Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in February 2020, who helped me think through the doctrines and ideas that Ockham expresses in the texts in this volume.

My heartfelt thanks go to my closest colleagues, the philosophers of St. Norbert College, who read drafts of the introductory material and offered helpful critical feedback: Benjamin Chan, David Duquette, Jaime Edwards, John Holder, Paul Johnson, Sydney Keough, and Joel Mann. I am gratified to be able to work at an institution alongside such talented philosophers whom I can also count as such dearly loved friends.

I am most enormously indebted to Thomas Williams, who assiduously reviewed the manuscript and offered countless corrections to the translation, as well as a host of stylistic suggestions. Without his efforts, this volume would have been in a far worse state; a great many of the virtues it now possesses should be credited to him instead of me. The errors that remain, of course, are entirely imputable to me and in no way to him.

Thanks to my editor at Cambridge University Press, Hilary Gaskin, who saw the value in my initial proposal and worked with me to craft a volume that is far superior to what I had initially envisioned.

Thanks to St. Norbert College for providing me sabbatical research leave for the Fall 2019 semester, during which I was able to largely finalize the manuscript.
Acknowledgments

Thanks to my dissertation director Richard Cross, who encouraged my interest in Ockham while I was a graduate student and who helped form me into a scholar.

Thanks to Alfred Freddoso, whom I have looked up to as the very model of a philosophical translator since I was an undergraduate student, and who, in May 2012, generously gifted me his own copies of Ockham’s works.

Thanks to my parents, who unfailingly encouraged me in my intellectual pursuits, even when they did not always understand my interest in them.

Lastly, I am most grateful for my wife and my daughters, without whose love, support, and longsuffering this book could not have come about in the time and place that it did. I dedicate this volume to them.
Abbreviations

Aristotle:

NE  Nicomachean Ethics

Thomas Aquinas:

ST  Summa theologiae
QDA  Quaestiones disputatae de anima
QDV  Quaestione disputata de virtutibus

John Duns Scotus:

Ord.  Ordinatio
Rep.  Reportatio
Quod.  Quaestiones quodlibetales

William of Ockham:

Ord.  Ordinatio
Rep.  Reportatio
Var. Ques.  Quaestiones variae
Quod.  Quodlibeta septem
SL  Summa logicae
OTb  Opera theologica
OPb  Opera philosophica
Note on the Texts and Translation

On the Texts

As the culmination of his graduate studies at Oxford, William of Ockham was required to spend two years lecturing and commenting upon the Sentences of Peter Lombard, a twelfth-century theological compendium of Catholic doctrine organized into four books (on God, Creation, the Incarnation, and the Sacraments, respectively). By Ockham’s day, it was no longer typical practice to comment on the Sentences line by line; rather, the custom was to use the text of the Sentences as an occasion to discuss whichever philosophical and theological questions related to the text the degree candidate found most interesting, and so, especially in his commentary on Books II–IV, Ockham pays little attention to the actual text of Lombard other than as a source of themes to discuss. Given standard practice, Ockham probably spent one academic year lecturing on Books I and II and lectured on Books III and IV the following year; one likely guess is that these lectures took place during the years 1317–19.

A student would have been tasked with keeping a transcript of these lectures; for Books II–IV of Ockham’s commentary, this unedited student transcript (known as a reportatio) was the only text ever produced. For Book I, however, Ockham personally corrected, emended, and expanded upon the student transcript to produce a more polished version of the text (an ordinatio); the completed Ordinatio on Book I is significantly longer than the Reportatio on Books II, III, and IV combined. Ockham seems to have completed at least an initial version of the Ordinatio of Book I before he finished the last of his lectures on the Sentences; in the final question of Reportatio IV he directs his students to consult “Ockham’s Ordinatio” by that name. Ockham also made a significant number of later emendations to the text of the Ordinatio, though it is unknown exactly when these revisions occurred.

Most of the texts translated in this volume come from the Ordinatio and the Reportatio. Those that do not come from two other collections of theological and philosophical questions, the Quaestiones variae and the Quodlibeta septem. The Quodlibeta septem is a unified work, comprising seven sets of short questions that may be the result of...
Note on the Texts and Translation

classroom exercises during Ockham’s years of teaching in London (perhaps revised and completed while at Avignon); at the least, their content indicates that they are among the very latest of Ockham’s academic writings. A complete translation of the Quodlibeta already exists in English, but I have included translations of two short questions for reasons discussed below.

Unlike the Quodlibeta, the Quaestiones variae is not a single unified whole, but a grab bag of short essays, longer disputed questions, and marginal notes collected under that title in the mid-twentieth century by the editors of the critical edition of Ockham’s academic writings. It is unclear when or for what purpose any of these texts was produced; many of them are clearly later than the Sentences commentary, though at least one question appears to be the original student transcript of part of the lectures on Book I. I have included five texts from this collection in this volume.

One of those texts – Var. Ques., q. 4, on the nature of final causality – provides little to no internal evidence as to its time of composition or purpose. Though much of the question contains material relevant to the topics of this volume, it is exceedingly long, nearly twice as long as any other chapter in this book, and includes long digressions on the metaphysics of causation that are at best tangential to my purposes here. Given this, I have only included a few excerpts from it, largely confined to matters of moral psychology concerning how ends that are loved function differently in the causal process leading to action than do ends that are hated.

The other four texts from Quaestiones variae from which I have taken material are worthy of special note by one interested in Ockham’s ethics. There is significant internal evidence that what the edition calls articles 9–10 of question 6 were composed together along with questions 7 and 8 in the same manuscript: q. 8 includes explicit references to q. 7 and to q. 6, a. 9; and q. 7 includes such references to q. 6, a. 10, with each of these references stating that the discussion in question can be found on “an earlier page [quaternus].” Given both the connection and the content of these texts – on the nature of the passions, the role of self-control and temperance with respect to those

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2 Var. Ques., q. 1 seems to be an early version of Ord. 1, d. 17, qq. 1–2. But other questions, e.g., qq. 7–8, direct the reader back to the completed Ordinatio and the latter books of the Reportatio.
3 Namely, Var. Ques., q. 6, a. q: “On pleasure, pain, and distress,” Var. Ques., q. 6, a. 10: “On virtues and vices,” Var. Ques., q. 7: “Whether the virtues are connected,” and Var. Ques., q. 8: “Whether the will could have a virtuous act concerning an object about which there is error in the intellect.”
Note on the Texts and Translation

passions, the connections of the virtues to each other and to prudence, and whether virtuous action is possible when reason is mistaken – I think it a distinct possibility that these four questions were an attempt at composing a commentary on *Nicomachean Ethics* VI–VII; but when they were written and whether they were intended to be part of some larger project is entirely unclear.

In producing this volume, my aim has been to present as much of the broadly ethical material as possible from Ockham’s academic works. (I have not included any selections from the political writings from the second half of Ockham’s life; but many of these texts are already available in English.) The most notable absence is the longest part of this hypothesized commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, namely the lengthy question on the connection of the virtues (*Var. Ques.*, q. 7); that text would be twice as long as the next longest chapter in this volume, and besides, a complete English translation of it is already in print, so I would direct the reader to look there. The ethical questions in *Quodlibeta septem* largely tend to be either echoes or elucidations of what Ockham says in the questions translated here, and are already available in English elsewhere, but I have included translations of two short questions that have been widely discussed in the secondary literature and that may differ in subtle points of doctrine from the views Ockham expresses in his *Sentences* commentary: namely, *Quod.* III, q. 14, on whether any acts are necessarily virtuous, and *Quod.* II, q. 14, on the possibility of moral knowledge. I have also included one very short excerpt from *Var. Ques.*, q. 7 that closely parallels *Quod.* III, q. 14 but that seems to have been largely overlooked in the secondary literature. The resulting volume is not an exhaustive collection of Ockham’s ethical writings by any means, but it is, I think, as close to complete as could be produced, especially if it is supplemented with the existing translation of *Var. Ques.*, q. 7.

In organizing this material, I have decided to compile it thematically and in such a way that Ockham’s doctrines are presented largely in a logical order, rather than following the original order of presentation according to the arrangement of Lombard’s *Sentences*. First, I include a number of questions on the nature of the created will and its internal states and abilities, followed by questions about the divine will, then questions about the morality of individual acts and virtuous habits, and I close with a series of questions about charity and grace.

4 See William of Ockham 1997.
ON THE TRANSLATION

I have sought to create a translation that is both faithful to the original while being comprehensible by those who are not already experts in medieval philosophy, but the latter goal has generally taken precedence over the former. For example, Ockham’s writings have a rather terse style and tend to use multiple pronouns within every sentence, trusting syntactic markers such as grammatical gender and case endings to make the referents of those pronouns clear; throughout I have silently replaced pronouns with their referents in order to prevent potential confusion by the reader over what ‘it,’ ‘this,’ ‘that,’ ‘them,’ and ‘the others’ might possibly refer to in any given paragraph; similarly, I have variously translated dicere (literally, “says”) as “objects,” “answers,” or “responds” to help make clear the dialectical context. In some cases I have supplied an expression that does not appear in the surrounding text in order to provide greater clarity; such insertions are placed in square brackets.

Furthermore, I have typically translated technical terms with what I believe to be their most fitting English equivalents, rather than using renderings that are widely used within medieval scholarship but that might mislead readers not familiar with that literature. For a few representative examples, because “corruption” means something very different in contemporary English (especially in ethical contexts!), corruptio as the contrast of generatio has been translated throughout as “destruction.” Similarly, invincibilis has been rendered as “indefeasible,” doctor as “professor,” scientia as “knowledge,” ars as “technical skill,” tristitia as “distress,” viator as “someone in the present life,” and beatus as “beatified” (to make maximally explicit the connection with the beatific vision and beatific enjoyment). Intensus and remissus have been translated as “more intense” and “less intense” when applied to acts and “strong” or “weak” when applied to habits. The only verb Ockham uses for sexual intercourse is fornicare, but he does not always use it as deserving of censure; I translate it as “fornicate” only where it is explicitly contrasted with marital chastity, opting for more neutral expressions like “have sex” elsewhere. The word Ockham most frequently uses to express obligation is tenere, which I have always translated as “obligate”; I have usually translated the less frequently used obligare the same way, though I have used “bound” when tenere and obligare are used side-by-side. Following the example of Thomas Williams, nolle/nolitio is always “will-against” or the like (with the hyphen); in addition, I often render velle/volitio as “will-for” in cases where nolitio and volitio are explicitly contrasted. I have occasionally supplied the Latin in square brackets when I think it will be useful.
Note on the Texts and Translation

Except in the very rare cases when Ockham emphasizes the gender of a human being in a given example or claim, I have used gender-neutral language throughout. I have assiduously avoided using the word “person” in my translations, as the word persona in late medieval contexts is generally reserved only for members of the Trinity; I tend to use “the individual” instead.

One peculiar translation choice requires further explanation. Love is among the most important concepts in Ockham’s ethics, and it shows up literally hundreds of times in this volume, occurring in nearly every single question. But Ockham has two different sets of Latin terms for love: *amor/.amare* on the one hand and *dilectio/diligere* on the other. In most contexts, the difference between these terms seems to be minimal or nonexistent; in many passages, Ockham seems to use them as synonyms, moving from one to the other seamlessly, perhaps following the example of Augustine, who explicitly argued in *City of God* XIV.7 that *amor* and *dilectio* are synonymous.

But just frequently enough Ockham will use these terms for love in a way that seems to mark some subtle distinction between them. E.g., throughout Rep. IV, q. 16 he uses *dilectio* (but not *amor*) as a synonym for beatific enjoyment and one text could be read as suggesting that *dilectio* is a species of *amor*, identifying *dilectio* with friendship-love but not desire-love. Similarly, in Quod. III, q. 14, he says that an individual who has been commanded to not love God cannot possibly have *dilectio* for God, though such an individual might still have *amor* for God, since the former but not the latter entails obeying all divine commands. I am not at all certain that there is a consistent and carefully thought out distinction in Ockham’s usage of these two terms across all the texts in this volume, and it would make some inferences difficult to follow if they were translated with different English terms. Thus, I have uniformly translated both sets of Latin terms with some form of “love”; nonetheless, since Ockham does distinguish between

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5 Ockham famously claims in his *Summa logicae* that grammatical gender is a purely contingent feature of spoken and written language and that thoughts do not have anything corresponding to grammatical gender, so I take gender-neutral translation to be a somewhat fitting extension of his thought.

6 “The rational appetite, though, has two kinds of acts of love [*amoris*] with respect to an absent object: one act by which it loves [*diliget*] this sort of object in itself and because of itself (which is friendship-love [*amor amicitiae]*) and a second act by which it craves and desires this sort of object insofar as it is good for itself or for someone else.” (Rep. IV, q. 16, n. 72, translated in chapter 8 of this volume.)

7 “Consequently, by loving [*diligendo*] God in this way, the will would both love and not love [*diligeret et non diligeret*] God; it would perform God’s command and not perform it. However, it could love [*diligere*] God with a simple and natural love [*amore*], which is not the love [*dilectio*] of God above all things.” (Quod. III, q. 14, n. 12, translated in chapter 21 of this volume.)
them in at least some passages, I have marked every occurrence of each in case it aids some observant reader in noticing a more systematic difference between them. Thus *amor* and all related terms are always translated with a subscripted \( A \) while *dilectio* and its forms are translated with a subscripted \( D \) (e.g., *amare* is “loving\( A \),” *diligibilis* is “loveable\( D \),” and so on). Note that I have not subscripted the occurrences of these terms when they appear in quotes from other authors such as Augustine or Peter Auriol.

Lastly, I have added several forms of apparatus alongside the translations to aid the reader. For one, I have enumerated my translations according to the (unnumbered) paragraphs in the critical edition (e.g., *Rep*. III, q. 11, n. 17 refers to the seventeenth paragraph of the text in the critical edition); I have used these to provide extensive cross-references in the footnotes within and across chapters. A paragraph number appearing in bold square brackets (e.g., [9]) always refers to another paragraph within the same chapter. I have also supplied an analytical table of contents for several of the longer and more dialectically complicated chapters to make more apparent the structure of objections, replies, and rejoinders. The italicized section headings within chapters are additions to the original text; some of these I have taken directly from the edition, but I have altered many of the edition’s headings, silently adding some and deleting others when I believed it appropriate.
Introduction

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

As best we can conjecture, William of Ockham was born in the late 1280s in Ockham, a small village near London.1 He joined – or was given to – the Franciscan order, probably as a teenager, and was eventually sent to Oxford to pursue a graduate degree in theology. During his studies at Oxford he criticized the views of many of the most prominent theologians and philosophers of the late Middle Ages, including Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), Henry of Ghent (d. 1293), Henry of Harclay (d. 1317), Peter Auriol (d. 1322), Durand of St. Pourçain (d. 1334), and more; but the majority of his focus was directed at the writings of his Franciscan predecessor John Duns Scotus (d. 1308). Ockham finished his graduate lectures in theology around 1320, but due in part to a backlog of degree candidates, he didn’t receive a degree; at the time, to receive a master degree one actually had to become a master (what we would now call a professor). So, as there were no open positions, Ockham was forced to wait to complete his graduate studies until he could take a position in the Oxford theology department, but that day would never come. This is a likely source of Ockham’s late medieval nickname, “the Venerable Inceptor” – translated somewhat loosely it could mean something akin to “the old graduate student,” though historians have sometimes treated it as something closer to “the respected beginner [of a philosophical movement].”

While waiting for a chair of theology to open at Oxford, Ockham lived and taught at the Franciscan chapter house in London. He stayed there for roughly four years, teaching mostly on Aristotelian logic and science. The Franciscan house in London seems to have been a heated and contentious intellectual environment, and Ockham’s views became a regular matter of classroom debate by the other teachers there. Among his fraters at London he met his fiercest intellectual opponent, Walter Chatton, as well as his closest disciple, Adam Wodeham.2

1 This biography is based upon the information in Spade and Panaccio 2019, Keele 2010, Courtenay 1999, and Kynsh 1986.
2 Wodeham seems to have served simultaneously as Ockham’s scribe and as the designated student recorder for some of Chatton’s theology lectures; there is manuscript
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In 1324, Ockham was summoned to the papal court in Avignon, France. He was there to face formal accusations that he had taught a number of heretical doctrines in his Oxford theology lectures, including holding views that entailed the Pelagian heresy. Ockham spent the next four years at Avignon, where he was not free to leave but seems to have had a great deal of free time on his hands. At times he was required to meet with a committee that had been charged with assessing the orthodoxy of his theological works, but much of his time seems to have been spent revising and polishing the notes from his theology lectures at Oxford and his philosophy lectures at London.

In 1328, while still under quasi-house arrest at Avignon, Ockham was asked by the Minister General of the Franciscan order, Michael Cesena, to review a number of papal decrees that argued against the Franciscans' understanding of poverty and property ownership. Ockham quickly became convinced that the current pope, John XXII, had contradicted previous papal guarantees to the Franciscans and was also promulgating erroneous views about the poverty of Jesus Christ and his apostles. As Ockham himself describes it,

At the command of a superior I read and diligently studied three of [Pope John XXII's] constitutions – or, rather, heretical destitutions. In these I found a great many things that were heretical, erroneous, silly, ridiculous, fantastic, insane, and defamatory, contrary, and likewise plainly adverse to orthodox faith, good morals, natural reason, certain experience, and fraternal charity … Because of [these] errors and heresies and countless others, I withdraw from the obedience of the pseudo-pope and of all who support him to the prejudice of the orthodox faith.

Evidence that Wodeham took his notes of Chatton's lectures (which were very critical of Ockham's views) to Ockham, who on at least one occasion personally wrote replies to Chatton's arguments in the margins. Around the same time, Wodeham wrote a laudatory preface to Ockham's massive logic textbook, the *Summa logicae*. Wodeham's own theological writings do not slavishly follow Ockham's thought, though they do show obvious respect and admiration for his work.

Kynsh 1986 cites documentary evidence that complicates this traditional dating, arguing that the papal investigation into his writings only began in 1327. He speculates that Ockham may have initially travelled to Avignon in 1324 to instead teach at the Franciscan convent there.

Pelagianism includes the denial of original sin and the thesis that human beings can merit salvation by their own natural powers; Pelagius's views were declared heretical by a series of ecumenical councils in the early fifth century. It is unclear who brought the accusation against Ockham, though the most common suggestions are either Walter Chatton or else John Lutterell, the Chancellor at Oxford. Ockham argues that his view is actually "maximally distant" from Pelagianism in *Ord.*, d. 17, q. 1, nn. 42–44, translated in chapter 24 of this volume.


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Soon after, on May 26, 1328, Ockham, Cesena, and a number of other Franciscans stole the official seal of the Franciscan order and fled into exile. They were excommunicated from the Catholic Church a few weeks later. The renegade Franciscans traveled to Munich, where they sought refuge with the Holy Roman Emperor, Louis IV, who was himself at odds with the Pope over whether the Emperor's election was valid without papal confirmation.

A late medieval chronicle claims that Ockham told Emperor Louis IV, “If you defend me with your sword, I will defend you with my pen!” This is almost certainly fiction, but Ockham indeed does seem to have permanently set aside his work on science, logic, and theology, and instead spent the remaining twenty years of his life writing political philosophy and screeds against the papacy. These works contain some of the first philosophical arguments justifying a separation of religious authority and civil authority in the history of Western philosophy, as well as an inchoate theory of individual rights, and some primitive attempts to map out a possible system of checks and balances between princes and popes. He remained in Munich, exiled and excommunicated, until his death in April 1347.

In what remains of this introduction, I will not try to weigh in on any significant interpretative issues about Ockham’s ethics; I will largely leave it to the readers of this volume to discover Ockham’s doctrines on these matters for themselves. Here though, I do wish to say a bit about the overall picture of Ockham’s thought and his place with respect to his predecessors, and to relate some matters of current scholarly controversy about Ockham’s ethical theory, and I will close by explaining for the reader a key linguistic tool that Ockham makes use of throughout the texts in this volume.

Ockham’s Place in the History of Thought

William of Ockham is widely considered to be among the greatest of the Christian philosophers of the late Middle Ages, his thought at the very least foreshadowed, and to some degree actually shaped, much of the course of European thought for several centuries after his death. In Ockham’s writing we see the first stages of the transition from ancient and medieval ways of thinking to more characteristically modern ones such as a greater emphasis on individual rights, the primacy of experience, explanatory modesty, and human freedom. His most

7 Earlier sources would sometimes speculate that Ockham may have been killed by the bubonic plague which marched across Europe in 1348, but we now know that he died before it arrived. See Gál 1982.

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characteristic philosophical views are his nominalist metaphysics, vol-
untarist ethics, and liberal political theory.

Among philosophers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries,
Ockham is best known for being the progenitor of a particular variety
of ontological reductionism. Though not the first thinker in the his-
tory of philosophy to be a nominalist in the contemporary sense of
denying any kind of universal entities (that honor likely goes to the
twelfth-century thinker Peter Abelard and his immediate predecessor
Roscelin of Compiègne), Ockham is probably the historical figure
most readily associated with that doctrine. He shrunk the standard
medieval Aristotelian ontology considerably through the use of his
eponymous Razor along with an array of other metaphysical princi-
pies: he argued against the existence of any kind of universals and he
also pruned away many of the branches of the Aristotelian categorical
tree by arguing that there is no philosophical need to posit any entities
at all within the categories of Quantity, Relation, Time, Place, Action,
etc. Ockham’s world is one that contains only individual substances
and individual qualities inhering in those substances; in this way, he
prefigures and sets the stage for early modern substance/mode ontolo-
gies as found in authors such as Descartes and Locke. (The reader
will see some faint traces of this ontological program in this volume,
e.g., in texts where Ockham argues against more ontologically expan-
sive theories that suppose moral goodness and original sin must be
some sort of property or relation inhering in morally good acts and in
unbaptized humans, respectively.)

The content and influence of Ockham’s ethical views are less well
known today than are his ontological doctrines, but they were no less
impactful in the history of thought. Ockham, along with his prede-
cessor John Duns Scotus, helped initiate a momentous shift in the
history of ethics. In the century immediately prior to their work,
many of the dominant ethical theories were eudaimonist; according
to such views, what is right for an agent is importantly grounded in
what is good for that agent. Further, many of these views were also in
some sense naturalist; they taught that what is good for an agent is a
matter of natural fact, at least to some degree discernible through
unaided human reason alone. Thus, according to a thirteenth-cen-
tury thinker like Thomas Aquinas, one can discover most, if not all,
ethical truths simply through the natural study of human nature and
the human good. Furthermore, Aquinas and many of his contempo-
raries held that one’s conception of the good in some way necessitates
the activity of one’s will: the very idea of choosing contrary to one’s
considered judgment was seen as paradoxical at best, outright impos-
sible at worst.
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Scotus begins to sever this theoretical link between the right and the good, arguing that it is at least possible for God to bring about a world in which an agent’s ethical duties conflict with that agent’s own flourishing, and that it is at least possible that one’s ethical duties might not be deducible from the facts of human nature. He also laid out an elaborate doctrine of the will’s two inclinations (an idea previously suggested by Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century); for Scotus, the will is always simultaneously tugged toward one’s moral duty and toward one’s own self-interest, and the will’s freedom lies in its ability to indeterministically select which of these inclinations to follow.

Ockham extends Scotus’s ideas, arguing that the concept of right action is entirely based on relations of duty and obligation, that such obligation holds irrespective of the agent’s flourishing, and that the will is empowered to select absolutely anything the intellect can represent. An agent willing what is straightforwardly morally bad while conceiving that very thing as bad is not treated as a paradoxical situation by Ockham; if anything, he seems to take it to be a not uncommon occurrence of human experience, one we should be able to recognize in our own lives. He is firmly committed to the view that an agent is only morally praiseworthy or blameworthy when their actions are both deliberate and unnecessitated; someone acting from drunken rage or from outside compulsion cannot be held morally responsible for those acts, and is in fact blameless in the sight of God (although, of course, the drunk individual might be responsible for deliberately and freely getting drunk). Further, he holds that God has no moral obligations – this seems to be a conclusion he reaches from the premise that the only possible source of moral obligation is the command of a superior authority, together with the belief there is no authority to whom God owes deference – and therefore there is nothing that God could ever do that could count as being morally wrong or unjust in any sense. Rather, God’s activity is, in an important sense, simply not subject to moral appraisal. Views such as these would serve to form a basis for the moral and theological reflections of later thinkers such as the early Protestant reformers.

8 See, e.g., Var. Ques., q. 8, nn. 50–51, translated in chapter 17 of this volume.
9 See, e.g., Var. Ques., q. 8, nn. 50–51, translated in chapter 17 of this volume.
10 See, e.g., Var. Ques., q. 8, n. 43; Rep. II, q. 15, n. 39; and Rep. IV, qqs. 10–11, n. 20; translated in chapters 17, 18, and 19 of this volume, respectively.
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Recent Scholarship

For the last several decades, the most discussed question about Ockham’s ethics is the extent to which he held a divine command theory of ethics, believing that both the content and the force of moral norms depend upon the arbitrary choice of the divine will. Interpreters throughout the early part of the twentieth century took it to be somewhat obvious that he did; Ockham’s insistence that adultery, theft, murder, and hatred would be obligatory if God commanded them and his seeming suggestion that God could even command that some human ought to hate God convinced these interpreters that Ockham took morality to be entirely contingent upon God’s decrees. Frederick Copleston, for one, recognized that the matter was somewhat complicated by Ockham’s regular appeals to the role of right reason in the moral order, but still hewed to the common view by arguing that on Ockham’s view “authoritarianism has the last word … the ultimate and sufficient reason why we ought to follow right reason or conscience is that God wills that we should do so.”

In the late twentieth century, Marilyn Adams and Peter King both rejected this standard interpretation, though for different reasons. Adams emphasized Ockham’s discussions of right reason, noting that just because moral norms are constituted by divine commands that does not prevent the norms also being constituted by right reason; on Adams’s view, morality for Ockham rests on two distinct foundations, one grounded in divine commands and the other grounded in conscience and right reason, and those two foundations each independently ground the content and force of moral norms.

Peter King similarly takes Ockham to hold that knowledge of moral norms is achievable through reason alone; King also maintains that love for God is the central organizing principle of Ockham’s ethics, emphasizing passages in which Ockham suggests that loving God is an intrinsically virtuous act, one that is necessarily morally right whenever it is instanced. Thus, according to King, though much of the content of morality is fixed by divine command, the obligation to love God is a natural obligation, and it is this natural obligation to love God that grounds all other moral obligations. Thus Ockham is at

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12 See, e.g., Rep. II, q. 15, n. 38, translated in chapter 18 of this volume.
14 Copleston 1953: 121. A survey of others who interpreted Ockham as a divine command theorist can be found in the opening pages of Osborne 2005.
15 See, e.g., Var. Ques., q. 6, a. 10, nn. 19–22; and q. 8, nn. 10–32, translated in chapters 16 and 17 of this volume, respectively.
17 See King 1999. The passages he most relies on are Quod. II, q. 14 and Quod. III, q. 14, translated in chapters 21 and 22 of this volume, respectively.
best a mitigated divine command theorist, with the central core of morality not depending on divine commands after all.

The interpretations of Adams and King have been challenged in the years since; Taina Holopainen, Armand Maurer, and Thomas Osborne have all argued that the older divine-command theory interpretation is much closer to the truth, and Thomas Williams and Eric Hagedorn have both drawn attention to the emphasis Ockham places on the contingency of all moral norms. 18 Thomas Ward has recently argued that Ockham’s ethical theory turns out to be deeply incoherent on the assumption that something like King’s interpretation is the right one; Ward takes this to be a reason to dismiss Ockham’s thought altogether, though, rather than as a reason to question King’s interpretation. 19

The debate over whether Ockham is a divine command theorist has so dominated the scholarly conversation that for several decades there was little detailed discussion of his other ethical views, but this has happily begun to change in the twenty-first century. Thomas Williams has recently drawn attention to how, despite all the language of virtue in Ockham’s works, his moral theory seems entirely focused on the rightness or wrongness of action, almost entirely setting aside the traditional Aristotelian focus on character traits; this singular focus on the morality of actions, rather than of dispositions of character, Williams claims, makes Ockham “the earliest important representative” of “the approach that is commonly said to be characteristic of modern moral philosophy.” 20

In other recent scholarship, Thomas Osborne has given a careful assessment of Ockham’s account of practical reason. 21 Sonja Schierbaum has argued that Ockham’s account of the indeterminacy of volitions does not preclude the possibility of those volitions still being rational in at least one important sense, Eileen Sweeney has detailed Ockham’s understandings of sin and vice, and Terence Irwin has given careful analyses of the arguments Ockham provides for his libertarian account of free will and against eudaimonist ethical theories like Aquinas’s. 22 Dominik Perler, Vesa Hirvonin, and Peter King have all drawn attention to Ockham’s psychology of the emotions (what Ockham himself calls passions), noting that Ockham (along with Scotus) reconceives of the passions as being in some way active and

19 See Ward forthcoming.
20 See Williams 2013.
21 See Osborne 2014.
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volitional, rather than being states that merely happen to a human being and which one’s rational soul ought to pacify.23

Readers of this volume should find ample material here with which to interact with this recent scholarship and also to locate previously unexplored aspects of Ockham’s thought. Those who want a sort of one-stop summary of Ockham’s whole system should first consult the long discussion of virtuous acts and habits found in chapters 14–15; most of the ideas discussed elsewhere at length can be found at least in an inchoate form in those two chapters, perhaps supplemented by the selections from Var. Ques. that are found in chapters 2, 16, and 17. Those who are most interested in Ockham’s claims about the will and its freedom should especially see chapters 1, 7–8, and 17; those wanting to explore his accounts of moral psychology and practical reason should see chapters 2–6 and 16–17; while those who want to investigate the ethics of divine commands should carefully examine chapters 11–13, 18–22, and 24–27.

Connotation

Perhaps the single most utilized implement in Ockham’s philosophical toolbox is his notion of connotative terms; since connotation theory is used a number of times in this volume without actually being explained in any of these texts, a short summary may be useful.24

Ockham regularly accuses his predecessors (justly or not) of trying to derive ontological structure from linguistic structure, believing that they assume, for example, that some entities in reality must be common to many because some terms generally apply to many, or that some entities in reality are relational items because there are true sentences containing relational predicates. The theory of connotation is intended to forestall and help clear up such metaphysical confusion.

On Ockham’s account, some linguistic terms and concepts are what he calls “absolute”; they signify only individual substances and/or individual qualities that do exist in reality, they are truly predicated of everything that they signify, and the semantic role of these terms just is this signification. (In contemporary terms, we might say their meaning is equivalent to their reference.) Most linguistic terms and concepts, however, are “connotative” and so have multiple semantic roles; they have what Ockham calls both a primary signification and a secondary signification, by which he means that such terms are truly predicated of one real entity (or entities) while conveying or bringing

24 Readers who want a fuller account should see Spade and Panaccio 2019, Keele 2010, or Panaccio 2004. Ockham’s clearest account of connotation is found in SL I.10.
to mind some other entity (or entities) as well, but without being truly predicated of the latter entity (or entities).

Examples may help. On Ockham’s view, absolute terms like ‘Thomas Aquinas,’ ‘Lucifer,’ ‘the redness of that ball,’ ‘dog,’ ‘human being,’ and ‘heat’ all play a similar semantic role. They differ in that the first three signify unique individuals (an individual human, an individual angel, and an individual quality entity) while the latter three signify all the members of a collection (all the individual dogs, humans, and heat qualities, respectively), but all these terms are similar insofar as they have the same kind of semantic role: each term is truly predicated of all the entities in question, and this, Ockham thinks, is the entirety of its meaning.

The paradigmatic case of a connotative term, on the other hand, is something like ‘parent.’ On Ockham’s view, the word ‘parent’ primarily signifies all the parents, but secondarily signifies (i.e., connotes) all the children of those parents; the semantic role of ‘parent’ is that it is truly predicable of all the parents by means of its implicit gesturing to the children, since ‘parent’ is not truly predicated of someone unless there’s a child around somewhere. What Ockham thinks he gains from this theory is he doesn’t need to appeal to a relational property of parenthood floating around in the external world to explain why it’s true that some people are parents and others aren’t; rather, it’s just a linguistic fact about the term ‘parent’ that it only applies when both the appropriate primary significate and secondary significate exist.

Similarly, albeit in a more complicated way, Ockham argues in the texts collected here that there is no distinct property of moral goodness that actions possess when they are good and lack when they are not good; rather, the term ‘morally good’ is just a connotative term that primarily signifies the good action while connoting (among other things) that the agent committing that act is under an obligation to perform that act. Likewise, he also claims in this volume that ‘intellect’ and ‘will’ are connotative terms with exactly the same primary significate: ‘intellect’ signifies a rational soul while connoting that soul’s thinking, while ‘will’ signifies the very same rational soul while connoting that soul’s desiring. Thus, on his view, the intellect and the will are entirely undifferentiated in reality; the division between intellect and will is, on his view, merely a difference in how we conceptualize and speak about the human mind and the various kinds of operations it can perform.