

Article

God's Will as the Foundation of Morality: A Medieval Historical Perspective

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Abstract: Theological voluntarism places the foundation of morality in the will of God. The formulation of such a thesis warrants further refinement. Different formulations of theological voluntarism were put forward in medieval philosophical theology involving the relation of God's will to the divine intellect (reason) in determining ethical status. The fourteenth century Franciscan Andrew of Neufchateau maintained a purely voluntaristic theory in which it is God's will alone (and not the divine intellect) that determines ethical status. Subsequently Pierre d'Ailly worked with a divine will which is identical with the divine intellect in a strong sense while still maintaining that it is properly assigned to the divine will to be an obligatory law. Later, Jean Gerson, a student of Pierre d'Ailly, spoke explicitly of God's will and reason together as involved in God's activity in the ethical realm. In this paper, we set out these three different formulations of theological voluntarism, tracing the evolution of medieval formulations of theological voluntarism. Although the paper is historical in nature, we conclude with some reflections on how contemporary philosophers and theologians interested in theological voluntarism might profit from study of this historical literature.

Keywords: divine command ethics; theological voluntarism; medieval voluntarism; medieval ethics



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1. Introduction

An ethics of divine commands maintains that ethical status is dependent on the commands of God. But to say that ethical status is determined by divine commands is a thesis standing in need of further specification, for we have not yet been told what it is in the divine nature that is responsible for making those determinations. An ethics of divine commands has often been cast as theological voluntarism, in which divine commands are regarded as expressions of some aspect of God's will (Quinn 2006). As Robert Adams has observed, "the two concepts [of "divine command" and "God's will"] often seem interchangeable in theistic ethics, and believers may think of their ethical reflection as an attempt to 'discern the will of God'" (Adams 1999, p. 258).

In the contemporary literature, there have been attempts to further refine the description of the role of God's will in determining ethical status (Murphy 1998; Quinn 1999). For example, a distinction has traditionally been made between the *antecedent* and *consequent* wills of God, that is, between "God's preference regarding a particular issue considered rather narrowly in itself, other things being equal" and "God's preference regarding the matter, all things considered" (Quinn 1999, p. 55). Working within this framework, Quinn has proposed that a sufficiently rich and nuanced conception of God's antecedent will "will allow us to identify the ground of [moral] obligation with some of its activities" (Quinn 1999, p. 55). Or again, Mark Murphy has explored whether theological voluntarism should be formulated in terms of *God willing that the agent be morally obligated to perform a particular action* or in terms of *God willing that the agent perform that action* (Murphy 1998, 2019). Recently some philosophers have explored whether the act of the divine will requisite to determining ethical status is to be understood as some mental act such as choosing, intending, preferring, or wishing (Murphy 2019). Beyond such discussions, Murphy makes an important methodological point: as well as answering objections against

the ethical theory in question and providing good positive reasons in support of it, the task of determining the specific formulation of it merits attention (Murphy 1998).

Study of the historical literature reveals that different formulations of theological voluntarism were put forward in medieval philosophical theology, specifically, involving the relation of God's will to the divine intellect (reason) in determining ethical status. The fourteenth century Franciscan Andrew of Neufchateau maintained a purely voluntaristic theory in which it is God's will alone (and not the divine intellect) that determines ethical status. Subsequently Pierre d'Ailly worked with a divine will which is identical with the divine intellect in a strong sense while still maintaining that it is properly assigned to the divine will to be an obligatory law. Later, Jean Gerson, a student of Pierre d'Ailly, spoke explicitly of God's will and reason together as involved in God's activity in the ethical realm.

This paper will set out the formulations of theological voluntarism developed by Andrew of Neufchateau, Pierre d'Ailly, and Jean Gerson, tracing the evolution of the formulation of theological voluntarism that occurred in the medieval literature. Although the orientation of this paper is historical rather than argumentative, we will, in the final section of the paper, offer some reflections on how contemporary philosophers and theologians interested in theological voluntarism might profit from study of this historical literature.

2. Andrew of Neufchateau

In his treatise *De Veritate*, q. 23, a. 6, Thomas Aquinas considers the question whether justice as found among created things depends simply upon the divine will (Aquinas 1952). In setting out his own position on this issue, Aquinas maintains that "the will does not have the character of a first rule"; rather, the will is "a rule which has a rule" for the reason that "it is directed by reason and the intellect" (Aquinas 1952, p. 647). Additionally, according to Aquinas, the direction of the will by reason and the intellect holds true "not only in us but also in God" (Aquinas 1952, p. 647). Hence "the first thing upon which the essential character of all justice depends is the wisdom of the divine intellect" (Aquinas 1952, p. 647). On the other hand, "to say that justice depends simply upon the will is to say that the divine will does not proceed according to the order of wisdom" (Aquinas 1952, p. 647). To say this, Aquinas asserts, "is blasphemous" (Aquinas 1952, p. 647).

Aquinas's intellectualist position contrasts with a medieval ethical voluntarism described by the Renaissance scholastic Francisco Suárez in *De Legibus ac Deo Legislatore* II. 6 (Suárez 2013). Following Gregory of Rimini's distinction between an *indicative* and an *imperative* precept, prohibition, or law in *Super Primum et Secundum Sententiarum* II, d. 34–37, q. 1, a. 2, corr. 2 (Gregory of Rimini 1980), Suárez defines a notion of *perceptive* law which requires an *act of will* on the part of a superior issuing the command (Suárez 2013). It is within the context of addressing the issue whether natural law is *perceptive* law that Suárez describes the position of theological voluntarism:

The second opinion . . . is that the natural law consists entirely in a divine command or prohibition proceeding from the will of God as the Author and Ruler of nature . . . These authorities also add that the whole basis of good and evil in matters pertaining to the law of nature is in God's will, and not in a judgment of reason, even on the part of God Himself, nor in the very things which are prescribed or forbidden by that law". (Suárez 2013, pp. 209–10)

The position described by Suárez is an explicit thesis of the fourteenth century Franciscan Andrew of Neufchateau. In *Primum Scriptum Sententiarum* d. 48, q. 1, a. 1, De Secundo, concl. 1 and d. 48, q. 1, a. 2, concl. 2 Andrew argues that all varieties of goodness are good because the divine will so freely wills and decrees. (Andrew of Neufchateau 1997, pp. 9, 27). Subsequently, in d. 48, q. 1, a. 2, concl. 3, Andrew proposes:

THIRD CONCLUSION: For no activity of a rational creature which is simply good and just is it the case that the divine will wills and decrees it to be good and just because it is good and just in itself by nature. In other words, because first it

is antecedently dictated and judged to be good and just by the divine intellect, so that it is not the divine will as will but the dictate of the divine intellect which is the first reason and rule or measure of his activity which is simply good and just. (Andrew of Neufchateau 1997, p. 35)

Why Andrew would put forward such thesis is understandable within the broader context of the intellectual history of the period.

In *Virtues of the Will: The Transformation of Ethics in the Late Thirteenth Century*, Bonnie Kent sets out characteristics of the voluntarism regarding the human person which emerged in the latter years of the thirteenth century. According to Kent, “perhaps the most familiar is that the will is nobler than or superior to the intellect” (Kent 1995, pp. 95–96). Kent points out as “other earmarks of voluntarism . . . the claims that beatitude or happiness consists more in an activity of will than in an activity of intellect, that man’s freedom derives more from his will than his rationality, that the will is free to act against the intellect’s judgment, and that the will, not the intellect, commands the body and the other powers of the soul” (Kent 1995, p. 96). Kent suggests that “these doctrines can . . . be taken as points of division between Franciscan thought and Thomism, or more generally, between voluntarism and intellectualism” (Kent 1995, p. 96).

This division is vividly illustrated in John Quidort’s discussion of the question whether the will can will and choose against reason’s dictate in his commentary on the *Sentences* (Kent 1995). The first opinion reported is

That the will can choose nothing against the judgment of reason, so that when reason proposes two actions and judges that one of them ought to be chosen, it is impossible for the will not to choose that and to will the opposite; and that the will can do nothing against the judgment of reason, because otherwise it would not be a rational appetite. For this reason people say that the will is not free in desiring except because reason is free in judging. (Kent 1995, p. 106)

The second opinion which Quidort reports is

That however great and firm be the judgment of reason that this thing should be chosen, nevertheless the will can, with its own freedom, choose the opposite, so that the will’s freedom comes not from the free judgment of reason but from and on account of [the will] itself. (Kent 1995, p. 106)

As Kent comments, the first opinion is basically that of Thomas Aquinas, while the second represents the voluntarist school of thought (Kent 1995, p. 106).

An important piece of the theological and philosophical climate of this period that favored the voluntarist viewpoint is the Condemnations of 1277 at Paris. One group of condemned propositions appears “to detract from human freedom by regarding the will as a passive power which must be actualized by something else” (Wippel 1977, p. 192). In this group are propositions concerning the relationship between will and intellect. For the present purposes, noteworthy is the condemnation of the proposition that “the will of a human being is necessitated by its knowledge just as is the appetite of a brute” (Wippel 1995, p. 256). Also condemned is the proposition that “will necessarily pursues that which is firmly believed by reason; and that it cannot withhold consent (lit. abstain) from that which reason dictates”, such being “the nature of the will” (Wippel 1995, pp. 256–57).

Marilyn McCord Adams describes similar voluntarist strains of thought in William of Ockham and Duns Scotus:

True to his Aristotelian inspiration, Ockham consistently presents will as rational appetite . . . Nevertheless, Ockham denies that any deliverance of reason *determines* the will’s action (inaction), for the principal systematic reason that then the will’s action (inaction) would not be within the agent’s power and so would not be imputable. Scotus had already challenged Giles of Rome and Godfrey of Fontaines precisely on this ground—the determination of the will by the intellect would turn the former into a passive rather than an active power; for Scotus,

no matter what reason dictates, the will retains power to act or not. This is not enough control for Ockham, who insists that *experience* shows that “no matter how much reason dictates something, the will still has power to will or not to will or to nill it”. Moreover, systematic considerations require it: the power of inaction contrary to reason opens the possibility of sins of omission, but created will power must extend further to sins of commission. In the same vein, Ockham finds it counterintuitive to explain sins of incontinence and malice in terms of ignorance; rather they are instances of action against full knowledge. (Adams 1999, pp. 254–55)

Adams’ commentary lays out motivations for holding the position that reason does not determine the will. First, if this were the case, “then the will’s action (inaction) would not be within the agent’s power and so would not be imputable” (Adams 1999, pp. 254–55). Kent reports the same line of argument for the voluntarist movement: “Moral responsibility was thought to require freedom of will, and freedom was thought to be incompatible with necessity, including the necessitation of the will by rational judgment” so that “if we are to be held responsible for our actions, we must be able to act against what our own deliberation or judgment tells us to do” (Kent 1995, p. 113). Moreover, it is claimed that the ability of the will to act against reason is required to make sense of the phenomenon of sin. As Kent points out, “voluntarists worried that if the will were determined to choose in accordance with reason’s judgment of what is good, all wrongdoing would stem principally from ignorance or mistake, so that the appropriate response would be not punishment or blame but education” (Kent 1995, p. 115). However, as Gonsalvus of Spain argued, no ignorance preceded the sins of Adam and Eve and of Satan; rather, they sinned against conscience and such sins are possible only if the will can act against what reason dictates should be done (Kent 1995, p. 143). Indeed, “Gonsalvus suggests that experience establishes the same point” (Kent 1995, p. 143). For, “when people act against conscience, they feel remorse; but we would never have grounds for remorse if we always did what we believed at the time to be good *simpliciter*” (Kent 1995, p. 143).

In sum, the Franciscan Andrew of Neufchateau formulated his ethical theory within the framework of an intellectual culture that attached great importance to the faculty of will. For our purpose, of particular interest is the contention that the human will is free to act against the intellect’s judgment or, in other words, that the human intellect does not determine the actions of the human will—a position not put forward without supporting reasons. One can see Andrew of Neufchateau extrapolating this view of human action into the realm of divine action in his formulation of a divine voluntarist ethical theory.

In fact, in *Primum Scriptum Sententiarum* d. 48, q. 1, a. 2, concl. 3, Andrew supports his particular formulation of theological voluntarism by posing it as an instance of a broader voluntarist thesis about the nature of divine action in general, namely, that “for no outward activity of God is it the case that the divine will wills and decrees it because first it is antecedently dictated and judged by the divine intellect as it were from reason antecedently moving and stating why it must be done so . . . ” (Andrew of Neufchateau 1997, p. 39). Andrew’s supporting arguments for this voluntarist position on divine action in general fall into two categories.

The first set focuses on unacceptable consequences of rejecting the voluntarist position. Andrew argues that “the divine will would <otherwise> be necessitated to act outwardly or it would be inconsistent with and deviate from reason antecedently dictating” (Andrew of Neufchateau 1997, p. 39). This is actually a shortened version of an argument found in Thomas Bradwardine’s *De Causa Dei* I, 21 in arguments given for a negative answer to the question whether reason moves and directs the divine will:

If reason moves the divine will, that reason is not caused in God by any creature . . . but it is intrinsic and essential to him; therefore it is necessary. And therefore the will of God necessarily agrees with it; for otherwise there could be an opposition of will and reason in God . . . And so it would be the case that

God necessarily acts with respect to things outside himself, whatever he does. (Bradwardine 1964, p. 230)

A second argument, likewise a variant of one found in Bradwardine's *De Causa Dei* I, 21 (Bradwardine 1964), contends that "God could not work otherwise or make better things" (Andrew of Neufchateau 1997, p. 39). The reason for this consequence is again connected with necessitation versus freedom of the divine will: "For if reason so dictates, the will necessarily will do it; and if reason does not so dictate, the will cannot do it. The dictating, however, will not be free since it is understood prior to every dictate of the free divine will". (Andrew of Neufchateau 1997, p. 39) Thus, a thread running through both lines of argument is opposition to the divine will being *necessitated* in its activity, specifically, necessitated by reason.

The second category of arguments calls our attention to cases in which reason does not decide an issue but the decision falls to will. Andrew makes reference to the biblical text *Romans* 9: 20–21 regarding the potter of clay having the right to make out of the same lump of clay one vessel for noble use and another for ordinary use (Andrew of Neufchateau 1997). Bradwardine's commentary on this text in *De Causa Dei* I, 21 sheds light on its relevance as illustrating "the indifference of reason for different deeds" (Bradwardine 1964, p. 231). This concept is a theme continued in the argument that follows: "Fourth, in the case of two things, *a* and *b*, which are producible and equally possible, there is no reason why this one is produced and not that one except primarily because it pleases the divine will" (Andrew of Neufchateau 1997, p. 39).

This theme is further continued in a line of argument Andrew offers in support of his ethical thesis specifically. Again borrowing from Bradwardine, Andrew puts forward an analogical line of argument pointing out cases in human experience in which reason does not and cannot decide an issue, yet human beings perform just actions from a sheer choice of will. Suppose, for example, that someone has been given the power to pardon one, and only one, of two persons placed under a death sentence, and that no relevant differences can be found between them. In such a case, there is no better reason for pardoning the one than for pardoning the other. Nevertheless, the pardoner justly frees the one whom he chooses to pardon, although reason did not antecedently move his will to make this choice. The same kind of situation occurs when someone is in a position to bestow a gift on only one of two or more persons who are equally worthy of receiving it. (Andrew of Neufchateau 1997; Bradwardine 1964) Thus, since we allow that justness can stem from the human will unmoved by reason, then surely the same can hold true of the divine will in determining what is good and just.

When Andrew considers objections to his formulation of theological voluntarism in d. 48. q. 1, a. 2, concl. 3, the very first objection presented is the intellectualist position on divine action in general, viz., that "God may do nothing unless from reason antecedently dictating and judging and as it were stating why it is that he so acts" (Andrew of Neufchateau 1997, p. 39). It is noteworthy that subsequent objections, for the most part, do not deal with ethical considerations specifically but focus generically on God acting from reason (Andrew of Neufchateau 1997, pp. 39–45). This clearly indicates how Andrew of Neufchateau's ethics is embedded in the medieval debate about voluntarism versus intellectualism. Concomitantly, the plausibility of Andrew's particular formulation of the theological voluntarism is related to the plausibility (or implausibility) of the philosophical position of voluntarism.

3. Pierre d'Ailly

Andrew of Neufchateau commented on the *Sentences* at the University of Paris c. 1358–59 (Idziak 1997). Pierre d'Ailly engaged in the same exercise at the University of Paris in 1377 (Oakley 1964). In *Principium in Primum Sententiarum* d'Ailly offers an argument in support of God as the foundation of morality which has as its conclusion that the divine will is the first law or rule in the class of obligatory laws (d'Ailly 2013). In *Principium in Secundum Sententiarum* d'Ailly reports that a certain Brother Jacob [of Chiva] took issue

with the conclusion of this argument precisely in the respect of representing a *voluntarist* position. This objector claims that “the divine will ought not properly to be called a law or rule” (d’Ailly 2013) and brings forward Augustine’s descriptions of the first and eternal law to demonstrate that such law belongs to the divine intellect (d’Ailly 2013).

When confronting this objection to a divine voluntarist ethics, d’Ailly’s response is very different from that of Andrew of Neufchateau. While Andrew is insistent that it is the divine will and not the divine intellect which makes the laws of ethics, d’Ailly invokes the identity of will and intellect in God:

... I will advance four propositions against this Reverend Father.

The first proposition is that the divine will and the divine intellect or reason are, just as much formally as really, the same in every way, nor is there a distinction between them in any way ...

The second proposition is that whatever is suitable by its nature to the divine will is suitable to the divine intellect ...

The third proposition is that if the divine intellect is an obligatory law or rule, so also is the divine will, and vice versa ...

The fourth proposition, not precluded by the previous claims, is this: According to the mode of speaking of saints and teachers, it is more properly assigned to the divine will than to the divine intellect to be an obligatory law. Thus this is true per se, *The divine will is an obligatory law*, and not this, *The divine intellect is an obligatory law*. And this is the reason why: Just as the mode of speaking of teachers is that the divine will, and not the [divine] intellect, is the effective cause of things on account of the fact that whatever the will wills exists or is done, and not whatever the intellect understands, so it is in what is to be proven, viz., whatever the will wills to be obligatory, is obligatory, while this is not so with respect to the intellect. So this inference holds good, *The divine will wills that Socrates be obligated to do A, therefore Socrates is obligated to do A*; nevertheless this one does not hold good, *the divine intellect understands Socrates to be obligated to do A, therefore Socrates is obligated to do A*. And therefore this true per se, *The divine will is an obligatory law*, and not this, *The divine intellect is an obligatory law*, although either one is true ... (d’Ailly 2013, pp. 56, 58–59)

D’Ailly’s response can be understood as having two parts. The first is comprised by propositions one, two, and three, and the second part, by proposition four.

D’Ailly begins by pointing out that God is a different kind of being from human beings. While humans are a composite of various parts and faculties, the being of God is a unity. Moreover, this unity obtains in a strong sense. There is no *real* distinction between the divine will and the divine intellect, nor are they even *formally* distinct. In other words, the divine will and the divine intellect are not in actuality separate entities, nor are they in principle separable, even by the divine power itself. Further, the unity of intellect and will in God is such that they do not even possess different definitions; hence, it is not the case that the divine will is conceivable differently from and without the divine intellect, or vice versa. (Grajewski 1944)

The objector takes issue with attributing the status of a law or rule to the divine faculty of will. But given the peculiar identity of will and intellect in God, if it turns out that the divine will is an obligatory law, then so is the divine intellect; and if, on the other hand, the divine intellect is to be designated as an obligatory law, then the divine will is also an obligatory law. In fact, given the ontological and definitional identity of the divine will and intellect, there is a sense in which insisting on designating the divine intellect (rather than the divine will) as the first obligatory law, or vice versa, is simply misguided.

D’Ailly refines and complicates this position in the fourth proposition. The meaning of this proposition, and of d’Ailly’s accompanying comments, can be elucidated through a subsequent discussion in *Quaestiones super libros sententiarum* I, q. 6, a. 2 (d’Ailly 1968).

Against his claim of the formal identity of intellect and will in God, d'Ailly records the following objection: the divine intellect and the divine will are not formally the same because of the fact that some things are suitable *per se* to the divine intellect which are not suitable *per se* to the divine will, and vice versa. For example, God understands through his intellect and not through his will, and God wills through his will and not through his intellect. Or again, God is the efficient cause of things through his will, not through his intellect. And when it comes to the issue of sin, God knows sins but does not will them (d'Ailly 1968).

D'Ailly replies to this point of objection by distinguishing two senses in which it may be claimed that something is suitable *per se* to the divine intellect but not to the divine will, or vice versa. First, this contention may be interpreted as the claim that something is in some way suitable to the *thing (res)* which is the divine intellect which is not suitable to the *thing* which is the divine will. This ontological interpretation contrasts with a linguistic interpretation: some proposition in which some predicate is applied to the *term (terminus)* 'divine intellect' is true *per se* while the proposition in which the same predicate is applied to the *term* 'divine will' is not true *per se*. (d'Ailly 1968).

Working on the ontological level, d'Ailly denies that it is ever the case that something is suitable *per se* to the divine intellect but not to the divine will, or vice versa. Thus, on this level, it must be conceded that God understands through his will, and that he wills through his intellect, and that he is the efficient cause of things through his intellect, etc. (d'Ailly 1968).

Operating on the linguistic level, however, the situation is different. If it were the case that the terms *intellect*, *will*, *to understand*, *to will*, etc., had as their exact meaning that thing (res) which God is, then such propositions as *God knows evils* and *God wills evils* would be equally true. However, the terms in question are also connotative. To continue with the same example, the proposition *God wills sins* means, *according to our ordinary way of speaking*, that God does something wrongly or as he ought not. In other words, the proposition in question *connotes* that the thing which God is does something wrongly or as he ought not, a kind of behavior which can only belong to a creature. On the other hand, the proposition *God knows evils or sins* does not have this connotation. For this reason, the second proposition has been allowed but the first denied (d'Ailly 1968).

Against this background, d'Ailly's fourth proposition and his accompanying comments may be understood in the following way. From an ontological point of view, it is just as true that the divine intellect is an obligatory law as that the divine will is an obligatory law. From a linguistic point of view, however, it is more properly assigned to the divine will than to the divine intellect to be an obligatory law. The proposition *The divine will is an obligatory law* is true *per se*, while the proposition *The divine intellect is an obligatory law* is not. This difference obtains because of the connotative aspect of the terms in question. To say *God wills x to be obligatory* connotes that x is in fact obligatory, for any x whatever. On the other hand, not everything which God may be said to know falls into the category of the ethically obligatory. Hence to say *God knows x* does not connote the obligatoriness of x.

D'Ailly's ethics may be characterized as *voluntarist* in that he wishes to speak of the divine will, and not the divine intellect, as the first obligatory law. For the sake of distinguishing the varieties of theological voluntarism developed by medieval philosophical theologians, it is important to note that d'Ailly's voluntarism is of a different sort than that articulated by Andrew of Neufchateau. While Andrew insists on the priority of the divine will over the divine intellect in the ethical realm, d'Ailly's ethics works with a divine will which is identical with the divine intellect in a strong sense. D'Ailly's designation of the divine will rather than the divine intellect as the first obligatory law is not ontologically grounded but is a choice dictated by linguistic considerations.

4. Jean Gerson

Jean Gerson was a student of Pierre d'Ailly and, like him, a chancellor at the University of Paris (Connolly 1928). In Gerson's writings can be found passages indicating that he regards God as the foundation of morality.

On some occasions, Gerson speaks of the divine will alone in an ethical context. In *Regulae Morales* 2, he states that "all obligation is finally reduced to the dictate of divine free choice so willing to obligate a creature . . ." (Gerson 1973a, p. 95). Or again, in *Definitiones Terminorum Theologiae Moralis*, he says that "the first law is the good pleasure or the supreme will of the Lord God prescribing to the things established by it their ends and the movements and operations towards them" (Gerson 1973b, p. 134). Or yet again, in *De Vita Spirituali Anima*, lectio II, corollarium 5, he states that preceptive natural law gives "notice of the divine will willing a rational human creature to be bound or obliged to the performance or avoidance of something for the attainment of his natural end . . ." (Gerson 1962, p. 135).

On the other hand, we also find the following affirmation in Gerson's treatise *De Vita Spirituali Animae*, lectio I, corollarium. 10:

It is probable that no act of a creature is, of itself and intrinsically, good with moral or meritorious goodness or similarly evil except with respect to the divine reason and will. For clearly the divine will and reason deem a human being worthy for one kind of act and render him unworthy for another . . . And from this point we are consequently easily able to see how nothing is evil except because it is prohibited by God and how nothing good except because it is accepted by God . . . (Gerson 1962, pp. 123–24)

It is clear that Gerson here presents God as determining ethical status. For our purposes, what is noteworthy about this text is that both the divine will and the divine reason are named in God's establishment of ethical status. In a later passage in lectio III of the same treatise, Gerson comments that "it is established that in moral practices right reason is not prior to the will, so that it is not the case that God wills to give his laws to a rational creature because first his right reason judged that this ought to be done, but rather the contrary" (Gerson 1962, p. 141). Gerson then goes on to state that "therefore it seems to be a more orthodox and unencumbered position if we say that neither one is prior to the other in God" (Gerson 1962, p. 141). He supports this position by an analogy: "Just as, in a similar situation, it is not the case that God judges that Socrates will walk because it is so in external reality, nor properly the contrary, but rather, they are correlative and accompany each other in a certain measure by inference" (Gerson 1962, p. 141).

Moreover, Gerson presents in lectio II of this treatise a definition of "divine law" and a subsequent exegesis of it, which makes very explicit that both God's right reason and God's will are involved in God's obligatory power:

Preceptive divine law is a true sign revealed to a rational creature which gives notification of divine right reason willing that creature to be held or bound to doing or not doing something for the sake of him being deemed worthy to attain eternal life and to avoid damnation. There follows in the description, 'which gives notification of divine right reason willing that creature to be held or bound to doing or not doing something' because a question is raised by certain persons, *What is the obligatory principle in God, right reason or will?* Here both are affirmed because neither right reason without the will, nor the contrary, constitutes the totality of obligation in God. (Gerson 1962)

Thus, Gerson took a step beyond d'Ailly. While d'Ailly works with a divine will which is identical with the divine intellect in a strong sense, he still maintains that it is more properly assigned to the divine will than to the divine intellect to be an obligatory law. Gerson speaks explicitly of God's will and reason together as involved in God's activity in the ethical realm.

5. Concluding Reflections

John Haldane authored a paper entitled “Voluntarism and realism in medieval ethics” which focuses on the relationship between God and ethics as presented in the Euthyphro dilemma. He cites Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham as the main contributors to the voluntarism/realism dispute in the medieval period, with emphasis on Ockham for the voluntarist position (Haldane 1989). *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Ethics*, published in 2019, includes some consideration of the extent to which the moral law was thought to depend on God’s will or intellect (Williams 2019). From the Christian tradition, it is again Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham who are discussed (Hagedorn 2019). Such sources suffer from a knowledge gap in ignoring the subsequent discussions of Andrew of Neufchateau, Pierre d’Ailly, and Jean Gerson. Thus, this paper serves to point out a lacuna in contemporary understanding of the medieval literature and makes a contribution to medieval scholarship and the history of ethics.

Can contemporary philosophers and theologians who are interested in the position of theological voluntarism gain any insights from study of this neglected medieval literature?

A recurrent criticism of theological voluntarism is that grounding ethical status in the will of God makes morality arbitrary, capricious, and even irrational (Haldane 1989; Murphy 2019). Andrew of Neufchateau’s formulation of theological voluntarism, in which ethical status is determined by God’s will alone without an antecedent dictate and judgment of the divine intellect, seems particularly vulnerable to this line of criticism. It is noteworthy that both Pierre d’Ailly and Jean Gerson moved away from this formulation of theological voluntarism.

In the course of his work on Gabriel Biel, the medievalist Heiko Oberman has proposed that the medieval concept of divine simplicity can rescue the theological voluntarist from the objection of arbitrariness:

Still this does not answer the charge of those who claim that this legal structure of the set order is not an expression of God’s holiness and inner being but the result of an arbitrary and changeable decision of God’s unguided will . . .

. . . Against the Thomistic emphasis on the priority of God’s intellect, the priority of God’s will is not stressed as much as the simplicity of God’s being and the resulting unity of his intellect and essence. As the simplicity of God’s being also implies a unity of essence and will, God’s very essence guarantees the unbreakable relation and cooperation of intellect and will in God’s *opera ad extra*. Biel constantly tries to make clear that, whereas the will of God is the immediate cause of every act, these acts are certainly no arbitrary products of God’s will alone. On the contrary, God’s will operates according to God’s essential wisdom, though this may be hidden from man. (Oberman 1983, pp. 98–99)

There has been considerable debate about the doctrine of divine simplicity among contemporary philosophers of religion (Dolezal 2011). Some have questioned its plausibility (Dolezal 2011), but the doctrine has also had its defenders (Stump and Kretzmann 1985; Vallicella 1992; Brower 2008; Dolezal 2011). Indeed, Stump and Kretzmann have proposed that the divine simplicity can serve as a tool for understanding the relation between God and ethics and for resolving the Euthyphro dilemma (Stump and Kretzmann 1985).

Prescinding from particular formulations of the doctrine of divine simplicity and problems with them, one can ask a more global question of whether there is a theological insight which the doctrine of divine simplicity is trying to capture. Thomas Morris, for example, while rejecting the thesis of divine “property simplicity”, comments that “it is still possible that the doctrine is an attempt to express a true mystery concerning the real metaphysical unity of God” for “it is sensible to think there is a special kind of integrity to the being of God” (Morris 2002, pp. 117–18). Or again, Millard Erickson has observed that “as foreign as the concept of divine simplicity seems to modern persons, it was formulated to express an important truth about God: the unity of his nature, the harmony of his

attributes, and the fact that his actions involve the whole of what he is" (Erickson 1998, p. 232).

D'Ailly captures the sense of the metaphysical unity and integrity of God's being in maintaining that the divine will which we designate as the obligatory moral law is identical with the divine intellect. Similarly, in speaking of God's will and reason together as involved in God's activity in the ethical realm, Gerson reflects the belief that God's actions involve "the whole of what he is".

There may be reason for specifying God's "will" as the foundation of morality (rather than speaking generically of what God commands) (Quinn 1999). Nevertheless, the evolution of the formulation of theological voluntarism in the medieval literature may serve to caution us against slicing off God's will from the rest of God's being in formulating the theory. Such an approach does not do justice to the being of God. Any adequate formulation of theological voluntarism must address the relation of God's will to God's intellect (reason), and for that matter, to other attributes of God (Brown 1963), in determining ethical status.

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