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# 3 Thomas Aquinas through the 1350s Eric W. Hagedorn

The late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries are often depicted as the high point of medieval philosophy. This is the time of the flourishing of the great medieval universities, during which the rediscovery of Aristotle in the Latin West created both great concern and innovation as Christian theologians tried to integrate existing doctrine with Aristotelianism. The two premier ethical theorists of the period were Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) and John Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308), and the contrast between their views is in many ways emblematic of the eras in which they operated.

Thinkers in the late thirteenth century were writing in the immediate aftermath of the translation and adoption of Aristotle and his Arabic interpreters. Their ethical theories tend to focus on the character of the moral agent and to embody many of the emphases associated with ancient Greek ethical thought, such as taking the agent’s own flourishing to be the motivation for moral behavior and identifying the possession of virtuous character traits as a necessary requirement for such flourishing. Much of the ethical theory of the early fourteenth century, however, constitutes a reaction against the strong naturalistic trends of that previous generation. (This reactionary development was encouraged by, if not entirely prompted by, official pronouncements by ecclesiastical officials.) These fourteenth-century theories increasingly identify the divine will as the foundation of moral obligation and also place less prominence on the possession of virtuous character traits by the moral agent. As with many of the philosophical transitions of this period, John Duns Scotus is one of the principal agents of this change.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Though Aquinas’s thought did not dominate Scholastic discussions in the way that it typically dominates contemporary discussions of medieval philosophy, I do begin by offering a summary of the main lines of Aquinas’s ethical system, principally focusing on his account of (i) what determines an agent’s moral obligations and (ii) what enables an agent to act morally. I then survey a few of the main debates that take place in ethical theory after Aquinas’s death, highlighting a pair of ecclesiastical pronouncements that were particularly impactful.

## 1 Thomas Aquinas

In contrast to most medieval philosophers, whose thoughts on ethics are typically scattered piecemeal throughout their corpora, Aquinas wrote both systematically and voluminously on ethical topics. Aquinas’s ethical writings include his collections of disputed questions, covering such topics as sin, charity, hope, fraternal correction, virtue in general, and the cardinal virtues in particular; a long commentary on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* along with an incomplete commentary on the *Politics*; and, not least of all, the second part of the *Summa Theologiae*, comprising 303 questions concerning the nature of happiness, action theory, the relationship between law and grace, an extensive taxonomy of the various species of virtue and vice, and more.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Aquinas’s ethical theory is simultaneously syncretic and original. It integrates aspects from ethical traditions that are typically seen as rivals; Aquinas’s theory combines the deontology of Stoicism and the Hebrew Bible with the virtue ethic of the Aristotelian tradition, and then adds a minor consequentialist component atop of that. Aquinas presents a naturalistic ethical theory whose content is derived from an essentialist conception of human nature, yet that same theory also depends in important ways on God’s voluntary creative act. He promotes the Aristotelian life of virtuous activity as an ethical ideal, while also arguing for the necessity of divine grace in order to achieve true and complete happiness.Needless to say, it is impossible to convey here the full complexities of Aquinas’s views, let alone weigh in on the numerous scholarly controversies surrounding them; in what follows, I provide merely a brief overview of the main lines.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Two central components of Aquinas’s ethics are his account of natural law and his theory of virtue. The former is primarily aimed at explaining what the moral obligations of human agents are, while the latter is primarily aimed at explaining how human agents can act so as to meet those obligations.

Aquinas is perhaps best known as a natural law theorist; indeed, he is often considered to be the paradigmatic natural law theorist (e.g. Murphy 2011). On his view, actions are right insofar as they contribute to the good of the agent; and given that the good for a given being just is what is rationally desirable by that being (a thesis taken from the opening line of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*), Aquinas explicitly infers that what is rationally desirable for a being is what is morally licit for that being: “Reason naturally apprehends as good (and, hence, as things that ought to be worked for) all those things that a human being has a natural inclination towards; and the contraries of those things reason apprehends as bad, as things that ought to be avoided” (*ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 3).

Aquinas goes on to assert that humans possess natural inclinations for self-preservation, for the continuation of the species, for knowledge of God, and for living in society. (Whether this is meant to be a *complete* list of human natural inclinations is unclear.) These inclinations make certain *action-types* morally good for humans, such as those action-types by which human life tends to be preserved, by which children are born and raised, by which peace is promoted within a community, etc.

However, Aquinas’s ethical theory does not end there, with a listing of morally licit action-types. For Aquinas, the proper subjects of moral appraisal are *particular* human acts (and only those actions which result from an act of will, as opposed to those resulting from reflex, instinct, or the like) (*ST* I–II, q. 1, a. 1). For Aquinas, every particular human act is either morally good or morally bad; that is, there are no morally indifferent act-tokens. The moral status of any particular act is determined by four factors; in Aquinas’s parlance they are (1) the *object* of the act, (2) the *circumstances* of the act, (3) the *end* of the act, and (4) the *foreseeable consequences* of the act.[[4]](#endnote-4) If even one of these factors is bad, then that particular action is morally bad; for a particular action to be morally good, each of these four factors must be good or at least indifferent.[[5]](#endnote-5)

With respect to the first of those four factors, it is not wholly clear what precisely Aquinas takes to be the object of a given act. He speaks of the object as “whatever thing is willed,” i.e., that thing which is sought by the will as a result of the agent’s reason considering it to be good, but it is not obvious how the agent’s reason determinately fixes a precise characterization of what is willed. (To extend an example of Thomas Williams (2014), what makes it the case that the object of a taking is *that-$100-bill-that belongs-to-someone else* rather than being the simpler *that-$100-bill* orthe more complex *that-$100-bill-that-belongs-to-someone-else-who-owes-me-an-unpaid-debt*?) What is clear is that Aquinas takes the object of an act to be what determines the species of that act; for instance, he explicitly states that what makes a given act an act of theft is that the object of the act is *secretly appropriating the property of another*, and since this is a bad object, the action-type which this object specifies must be bad (*ST* I–II, q. 18, a. 5, ad 2; II–II, q. 66, a. 4).

As noted above, every species of act has a moral status determined by its relation to the good of the agent; unlike particular actions, though, some species of acts may be morally indifferent, rather than being morally good or morally bad. What determines the moral status of a given species of act is its connection to the good of human beings: a given act-species is morally good just in case it necessarily is directed at the ultimate end for human beings, namely, happiness. Conversely, a species of actions is morally bad when that act-type necessarily is directed away from human happiness. An act-species is morally indifferent, then, if it neither necessarily leads to happiness nor necessarily leads away from happiness.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Even though some species of acts may be morally indifferent, Aquinas insists that any particular act will be either morally good or morally bad, as determined by the circumstances in which that particular act is performed together with its intended end and its foreseeable consequences. An act of a good or indifferent species may be morally bad because it is performed at the wrong time; for example, loudly clapping my hands is, in general, a morally indifferent type of action, but doing so at a moment calling for solemnity would nevertheless be morally wrong.

But though circumstances, end, and foreseeable consequences might make it wrong to perform a good or neutral action-type, Aquinas claims that these other factors can never make it right to perform an act of a morally bad species. Acts which are contrary to reason (i.e., those acts that are not naturally desirable due to their necessarily leading away from beatitude) are never licit, regardless of the circumstance, motive, or foreseeable consequences. Among such acts are theft, lying, and the taking of innocent life. (What it is for an action to belong to one of these species, though, is often a matter of subtle distinction: for example, according to Aquinas, it is not theft for the starving impoverished man to take what is required for his self-preservation, nor did Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac constitute an intention to take innocent life.[[7]](#endnote-7))

Aquinas’s ethical thought is not completed with his analysis of what determines the moral status of particular actions; at least in terms of page count, it has barely begun. His attention then turns to what is required for an agent to actually perform those morally good acts that will lead to the attainment of the human good. According to Aquinas, what is required for a human to actually perform morally good acts and thus attain happiness is that all the cognitive and appetitive faculties that contribute to action be perfected by the virtues, i.e., by those dispositions that make the agent more apt to perform such acts. Thus, the agent’s sensitive appetites, intellect, and will all need to be disposed to perform such acts consistently, easily, and pleasurably.[[8]](#endnote-8) Further, Aquinas actually posits two wholly distinct sets of virtues, each with a different purpose: one set of naturally acquired virtues directing the agent to the human good that is attainable in the present life (what Aquinas calls “imperfect happiness”), and a second set of supernaturally infused virtues directing the agent toward heavenly beatitude (“perfect happiness”).[[9]](#endnote-9) The taxonomy and analysis of these virtues and their respective vices constitutes 140 questions of the *Summa Theologiae*, roughly a quarter of the entire work.

## 2 The Condemnation of 1277

Thomas Aquinas died on March 7, 1274; precisely three years later occurred one of the more monumental events in the history of medieval philosophy. On March 7, 1277, the Bishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier, delivered a searing condemnation of the teaching that was being given by the undergraduate and graduate faculties at the University of Paris. The Condemnation of 1277 named 219 different doctrines and threatened excommunication to anyone who “taught …, dared in any way to defend or uphold … or even to listen to” any of the condemned teachings (Mandonnet 1911). Previous ecclesiastical authorities had unsuccessfully tried to slow down or stamp out the spread of certain Aristotelian doctrines throughout the thirteenth century; councils, bishops, and popes had either forbidden or at least strongly cautioned against public readings or teachings of Aristotle’s work. For the most part, these earlier prohibitions seem to have been quietly ignored or even openly flouted; where those previous efforts failed, however, the Condemnation of 1277 appears to have had much greater success. For decades afterwards, pointing out that “such-and-such is an article condemned at Paris” was a tactic frequently used to end or forestall debate.[[10]](#endnote-10)

A number of the condemned articles dictate specific positions on ethical issues; among those positions declared false were that happiness is to be found in philosophical contemplation, that the natural virtues are sufficient for acquiring eternal happiness, that all sin results from bodily passions, that killing non-human animals is always wrong, and that material possessions are required to perform morally good actions.[[11]](#endnote-11) Tempier’s decree directs particular attention to condemning the doctrines of Greek and Arabic necessitarianism. By rejecting those doctrines, the Condemnation affirms instead that God does not create by necessity, that the created world is not eternal, and that God is able to bring about the effects of any given created cause without first bringing about that cause.[[12]](#endnote-12) The sustained attack on necessitarian doctrines includes a number of articles on action theory, ruling out any account which attributes any kind of necessitation to human action, whether that necessitation be the result of a desire, a desirable object, or reason itself.[[13]](#endnote-13) A number of further articles without specifically ethical content nevertheless had significant implications for ethics: e.g., if God is able to bring about the effects of any created cause without the cause itself, it seems that God could miraculously give someone a virtuous character without needing any virtuous action to produce that character.

Contrary to some histories of medieval philosophy, the Condemnation of 1277 was not a revolutionary document; it did not overturn some broad consensus or great medieval synthesis of the late thirteenth century (for there wasn’t any such consensus among Scholastic thinkers prior to the Condemnation). Nor—contrary to some rival histories—did the Condemnation bring an end to all philosophical debate by ecclesiastical fiat. But the Condemnation did result in philosophical and theological discussions in subsequent generations having a strikingly different tenor to the debates that preceded it. Following the Condemnation, greater attention would be given to the scope of divine power, and fewer necessary connections would be postulated within the created realm. In the realm of ethics, the Condemnation prompted theologians to rethink the modal status of moral truths and the nature of moral virtue.

# 3 Ethical Debates after the Condemnation

### 3.1 On the Modal Status of Moral Truths

Although thinkers of this period largely agreed on what the actual moral truths were, there was no such agreement concerning the modal status of these truths. Whether the moral truths laid out in Catholic doctrine were necessary orcontingent was a matter of dispute.

As explained above, on Aquinas’s view what is good for an agent is what determines which actions are right for that agent. Now Aquinas thinks that what is good for an agent is an objective feature of human nature that is the same in all human beings. Whatever leads to flourishing and happiness for human beings is good for human beings, and whatever leads away from flourishing and happiness for human beings is bad for human beings.

Furthermore, every rational creature has a natural inclination toward what is good for that creature; as such, every human being has a natural inclination toward what is good for that human being. On Aquinas’s view, it’s possible to determine by reason alone what is morally right: anything that all human beings have a natural inclination toward is good for a human being, and any kind of action which leads toward those good things is morally right. Conversely, anything that all human beings have a natural aversion toward is bad for human beings, and thus any kind of action which leads toward those bad things is morally wrong.

Since the natural inclinations of human beings are determined by human nature, and since the properties of a nature are necessary features of it, God ultimately does not have control over what is morally right for human beings. As such, if God chooses to create human beings, they will have precisely the moral obligations they in fact have. God couldn’t create different moral obligations for humans; not even God could make it morally obligatory to murder, or commit adultery, or dishonor one’s parents. Aquinas does affirm, however, that it is within God’s power to arrange situations to make an action that could have been morally wrong into a morally permissible action; for instance, when discussing the Israelites’ despoiling of the Egyptians, Aquinas claims that this was not an instance of theft since God had declared the Egyptians’ property to be due to the Israelites. Similarly, God might make some particular action not be an instance of murder or adultery (by, say, justly ordering death in the former case or divinely annulling the marriage in the latter) (*ST* I, q. 100, a. 8, ad 3).

It should be noted that although Aquinas never explicitly says so, one may think that it’s consistent with his theory that God could have created an entirely different set of moral obligations by creating some other kind of rational creatures, beings that possessed a rational nature with markedly different natural inclinations than ours. (Of course Aquinas does believe there are other rational beings with somewhat different obligations than ours; but what he considers to be sinful for angels turns out to be quite similar to what he says is sinful for human beings: *ST* I, q. 63.) Whether or not this is a possibility for Aquinas depends both upon (i) whether he thinks there could have been some other species of rational creatures, distinct from the rational creatures that there are in actuality, and (ii) whether the natural inclinations of human beings result from something unique to human rationality or just from rationality in general. Fully answering this question would require careful consideration both of the details of Aquinas’s account of natural law and also his account of truths about merely possible creatures, neither of which can be done here;[[14]](#endnote-14) but the fact that Aquinas seems to treat the natural inclinations of human beings as continuous with the inclinations of plants and non-human animals makes me doubt that Aquinas would consider it possible that there could be rational beings with obligations that significantly differed from ours.

John Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308) responds to this question of the contingency of moral obligation quite differently than Aquinas does. While Aquinas affirms that a creature’s essence necessarily dictates what is morally obligatory and morally forbidden for that creature, Scotus presents a much weaker position, according to which (at least some of) the moral obligations for a creature might have differed, had God willed differently. Prior to God’s creative act, Scotus claims, there are no truths regarding what ought to be done or ought to be created, and hence the divine intellect has no practical knowledge prior to creation. In other words, there are no truths of the form “S ought to φ”, because the truth of such “practical principles” is dependent upon the decision of the divine will (*Lectura* I, d. 39, qq. 1–5).

…given how God’s cognition is related to the act of his will, the divine intellect does not have beforehand any cognition dictating that anything should be done, or any cognition of a principle, or any quidditative cognition of a term that includes a practical principle…[[15]](#endnote-15)

That is, on Scotus’s view, the truths of morality are contingent and thus notavailable to the divine intellect prior to the divine will selecting them. The reason Scotus gives for holding this view is that the alternative would be an inappropriate limitation of God’s freedom:

…if, before any act of the divine will, the divine intellect could have some such [practical] cognition, it would have it purely naturally and necessarily, because all cognition in the divine intellect that precedes an act of will is purely natural and is had through the divine essence as a purely natural ground of understanding; therefore, the divine intellect would know of necessity that such-and-such is to be done, and then God’s will, to which his intellect would present such cognition, could not fail to will it; for if it could, it would be able not to be correct, being able to deviate from correct practical reason and thus not to be correct. Therefore, the divine will would will every act of necessity, because the same reasoning applies to any given act.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Thus, for Scotus, ethical truths are not necessary. God, according to his “absolute power,” might have decreed a different moral law than the one which was actually decreed (although once a given set of ethical truths is actually decreed, God acts according to that law, by God’s “ordered power”).[[17]](#endnote-17)

The lone exception to God’s freedom here is with respect to whether God ought to be loved; Scotus affirms that this principle is in fact necessarily true; the divine intellect recognizes its truth prior to any decision of the divine will, and the divine will is obligated to will it. Scotus reaffirms this doctrine when speaking explicitly of the connection between the natural law and the Ten Commandments: he claims that the first two commandments (which forbid irreverence toward God and worship of other deities) are necessarily true and “belong to the natural law in the strict sense,” while the remaining commandments are not necessarily true.[[18]](#endnote-18) Since the remaining commandments are not necessary, God can (and, according to Scotus, has) granted dispensations from the commandments to not steal or not murder; the obvious implication is that God could also have never instituted those commandments in the first place.[[19]](#endnote-19) Indeed, Scotus explicitly states that though it is not permissible to kill an innocent man, it would be permissible if God were to revoke the commandment against murder, and would even be obligatory were God to expressly command the killing. Similar considerations hold for the prohibition of lying: if God were to revoke the commandment against lying, it would be morally licit to intentionally deceive others (*Ordinatio* III, d. 38, q. un., n. 17).

There is intense debate in the secondary literature regarding how strongly we should read Scotus’s claims. He clearly affirms that all practical truths other than ‘that God ought to be loved’ are contingent upon the divine will. Some scholars infer from this that Scotus believes the content of the moral law is fixed only by God’s free and undetermined choice[[20]](#endnote-20); others point to his designation of the will as a *rational* power and his contention that the commandments concerning love of neighbor are “highly consonant” both with the natural law and with right reason as evidence that Scotus believes the scope of possible moral truths is far narrower than I suggest above (e.g. Ingham 2001). But it is difficult on the face of it to fully reconcile this latter, more modest interpretation of Scotus with his affirmation that lying and murder would be licit were God to command them.

The contingency of the moral law for Scotus also entails that there is no necessary connection between human action and human happiness; had God decreed a different moral law, even Judas’s actual actions might not have entailed his damnation.[[21]](#endnote-21) Relatedly, Scotus also affirms that the virtues are as a matter of fact useful for beatification, though not necessary for it, as Aquinas had held. Similar considerations hold for the case of human freedom; our own freedom of action would be endangered if the dictates of our intellect or our dispositions to action determined our acts; therefore, possession of the virtues is not necessary for performing morally right actions.

William of Ockham (c. 1285–1347) follows Scotus in believing that the content of the moral law is contingent upon God’s command. Ockham seems to reason as follows: God is able to do anything that does not involve an obvious contradiction; in general, there is no obvious contradiction in God commanding “S ought not φ” rather than “S ought to φ”; therefore, God is able to command “S ought not φ”. In particular, Ockham claims, God could make it the case that acts of hatred, theft, and adultery had no badness attached to them; indeed, God could make it the case that such actions were even meritorious for salvation.[[22]](#endnote-22) Ockham offers another argument for this point, arguing that any exterior action can be morally right or wrong depending on the intention of the agent performing it. (Indeed, Ockham argues, even the very same action can be right at one moment and wrong at the next, if the intention of the agent were to change from good to bad during the performance of the action.) The only possible exception here is similar to the exception that Scotus made; Ockham seems to affirm that the act of loving God above all other things is necessarily virtuous inasmuch as it is impossible for a created agent to form that intention without that intention being morally good.

But it seems that Ockham goes beyond Scotus on this point, raising the possibility that even the obligation to love God is under God’s power. Ockham suggests in an early text that God could command some creature to hateGod, and that in such a case the creature would be obligated to hate God. Whether the suggestion in this early text should be taken at face value, and whether Ockham continues to affirm this possibility in his later writings is a matter of significant scholarly controversy.[[23]](#endnote-23) But it does certainly appear on the face that Ockham considers this to be a possible divine command, which would imply that Ockham takes the entirety of the moral law to be contingent upon the divine will.

### 3.2 Debates on the Nature of Virtue

The concept of virtue was central to medieval ethical thought; but what, precisely, is a virtue? What ontological category does it belong to, and where and how are they instanced? The near consensus position, defended by Aquinas, Scotus, Henry of Ghent (c. 1217–1293), Ockham, John Buridan (c. 1300–1360), and others, is that a virtue is a habit (*habitus*), where a habit is a disposition which is (i) generated by the initialperformance of a certain kind of action, (ii) strengthened by the continual performance of that kind of action, and (iii) whose existence makes the futureperformance of that action easier for the agent. Authors who reject this standard account of virtue are rare, but there are at least a few dissenters: Henry of Harclay (c. 1270–1317), for instance, argues that moral virtue is not a habit but rather a harmony among the rational and sensitive powers of the soul.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Setting Harclay’s view aside, though, amidst the widespread agreement that virtues are dispositions for performing moral action, there still remained much debate over (i) the precise enumeration of the virtues, (ii) how an agent comes to possess them, (iii) their locationin the agent, and (iv) whether an agent who possesses one of the virtues necessarily possesses them all.

The standard taxonomy included four cardinal virtues (courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom) and three theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity). Adding to this list, Aquinas held that each of the four cardinal virtues has both a naturally acquired and a supernaturally infused form; thus a complete taxonomy of the virtues would have to include, for instance, both acquired temperance and infused temperance. An agent acquires the former disposition through the performance of temperate actions, while the latter virtue only comes about by God directly infusing it into the agent. (The theological virtues, on the other hand, only come about by being infused by God, and thus do not have acquired forms.) The acquired virtues aim the agent at her natural end of temporal happiness; the infused virtues, on the other hand, aim the agent at her supernatural end of eternal beatitude.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Aquinas’s position on this issue was attacked as superfluous from two sides, as most agreed that it was unnecessary to posit bothacquired and infused cardinal virtues. Some, such as Gregory of Rimini (c. 1300–1358), rejected the existence of any natural, non-infused virtues by arguing that no natural trait can bring about morally correct action without divine grace. Scotus and others contrarily held that there is no need for positing infused cardinal virtues over and above the naturally acquired cardinal virtues by arguing that the theological virtues are sufficient to direct the agent to her supernatural end.[[26]](#endnote-26) Ockham follows Scotus in rejecting infused cardinal virtues, though he does apply the distinction between acquired and infused virtue to the theological virtues. Ockham thus postulates the existence of acquired faith, hope, and charity in addition to infused faith, hope, and charity. On his account, the acquired theological virtues are habits which come about as a result of the actions prompted by the associated infused virtues; for example, acquired charity is a naturally occurring volitional habit which results from repeated acts of loving God. Ockham argues for this distinction by claiming that an agent’s naturally acquired habit of hating God might continue to exist for some time after receiving infused charity, but that she cannot continue to habitually hate God once she has developed the acquired habit of loving God.[[27]](#endnote-27)

The Scholastics’ commitment to compositional metaphysics inevitably raised the question of where to locate virtues within the human soul. This question of where virtues are located within the agent may initially appear to be an obscure aspect of Scholastic ontology with little practical import, but in actuality this question is inextricably linked to the theory of action. As the virtues are dispositions to perform moral action, the question of the location of the virtues is ultimately the question of which faculties of the soul are involved in the production of morally good acts. Aquinas claimed that each of the cardinal virtues belongs to a distinct faculty of the soul: courage and temperance inform the two sensitive appetites (the irascible and the sensual, respectively), prudence informs the intellect, and justice informs the will. Aquinas argues that this must be so because, in order for a human being to be appropriately aimed toward their final good, every faculty of the human soul that contributes to the formation of human actions must be appropriately habituated. That is, in order to perform those good acts that lead toward beatitude, Aquinas believes that one’s appetites must be appropriately held in checkby courage and temperance, one’s will must be attuned by justice, and one’s intellect must be formed by prudence. Additionally, Aquinas claims that the virtues are necessarily connected, with prudence the link among the acquired virtues and charity the link among the infused virtues: that is, anyone who possesses acquired prudence will possess all the other acquired cardinal virtues (and vice versa), while anyone who possesses infused charity will possess all the other infused virtues (and vice versa). [[28]](#endnote-28)

Scotus and others contended instead that all the moral virtues (courage, temperance, and justice) were located in the will. Scotus argues for this claim on the basis that the will retains the power to make morally good or morally bad choices regardless of the state of the intellect or the sensitive appetites. So any virtues which habituate an agent toward performing certain actions must be located in the will.[[29]](#endnote-29) Ockham largely adopts Scotus’s position, but amends it in a rather idiosyncratic fashion; he argues that repeatedly performing any kind of action will result in habits being formed *both* in the sensitive appetites *and* in the will. Each of these sets of habits disposes the agent to perform the relevant sort of action more easily, but only the habits in the will count as virtues since strictly speaking the only virtuous actions for Ockham are acts of the will.[[30]](#endnote-30)

With respect to the connection of the virtues, Scotus contends that the virtues are not necessarily connected; he takes there to be obvious counterexamples to Aquinas’s position. For example, an agent might be disposed to temperate acts by the virtue of temperance without possessing all the other cardinal virtues. Nor are the theological virtues connected with the cardinal virtues, for a new convert or a baptized infant may have infused charity without possessing any other virtue at all.[[31]](#endnote-31) Ockham attempts to occupy a sort of middle ground on this point. On Ockham’s view, each virtue comes in five degrees, varying according to the agent’s dedication to performing the act in the face of adverse circumstances and according to the agent’s purposes in performing the act. The lowest degrees of the moral virtues are in no way connected; Ockham agrees with Scotus that one can be just, temperate, or courageous to some degree without possessing any other virtues. But matters become more complex at the higher degrees, as one virtue might imply the existence of some other—at least in the actual created order.[[32]](#endnote-32) For example, the highest degrees of justice, which by definition involve acting justly only for the sake of right reason or only for the sake of the love of God, exclude every vicious habit; and the fourth degree of each moral virtue, which requires acting for the sake of the love of God, requires the presence of some degree of theological virtue.[[33]](#endnote-33)

### 3.3 Disputes over Franciscan Poverty

Within fifty years of the Condemnation of 1277, another ecclesiastical pronouncement would have significant ramifications for medieval ethical thought. The dawn of the fourteenth century saw an increasing number of discussions about the merit of economic asceticism, especially among the Franciscan Order, which made “apostolic poverty” a key component of its religious identity. The Franciscans held that Christ and his apostles owned absolutely nothing, not even the clothes on their backs and the food that they ate. Hoping to imitate the example of the apostles, early in the thirteenth century the Franciscans reached an agreement with the papacy, according to which neither individual Franciscans nor the Order as a whole had ownership of anything; chapter houses, books, clothes, food, etc., were officially possessed by the papacy, but the Franciscans were granted usage rights over all of these items. Some Franciscans felt that this arrangement did not go far enough; following the thought of Peter John Olivi (c. 1248–1298), these so-called “Spiritual” Franciscans held that the Order’s vows should go beyond merely giving up property rights to items and should instead commit members of the Order to a life of strict asceticism (in their terms, to *usus pauper*).

The years after Olivi’s death were marked by a wide-ranging series of philosophical arguments both within the Franciscan Order and without concerning the value of poverty, the nature of property rights, and more.[[34]](#endnote-34) Some Franciscan authors argued that personal property was a cause of discord and distraction, and that a life without any possessions was thus more perfect; critics such as the Dominican Hervaeus Natalis (c. 1260–1323) were quick to point out that a complete lack of possessions is incompatible with the mere continuation of life, let alone with life’s perfection.[[35]](#endnote-35) Unlike the other debates discussed above, however, these disputes were not merely the matter of commentaries on Aristotle and university disputations. Those Franciscans who did not follow Olivi (the “Conventuals”) as well as the Catholic hierarchy saw the more extreme members of the Spirituals as dangerous radicals; various splinter groups of Spiritual Franciscans were first excommunicated and then quashed violently by the Inquisition in the years 1317–1323. The dispute reached its culmination in 1323, when Pope John XXII abruptly ended the arrangement by which the Papacy had ownership of all the order’s goods, and also declared the belief in apostolic poverty to be heretical. The Franciscans appealed their case, but to no avail; on May 26, 1328, the Franciscan Minister-General Michael Cesena, together with William Ockham and a handful of other renegade Franciscans, fled the papal court at Avignon without permission; they sought and found shelter at the court of the excommunicated Holy Roman Emperor, Louis of Bavaria.

Louis’s court became a home to innovative political theory. There Marsilius of Padua (c. 1270–1342) had already begun to develop decidedly non-medieval views about the roles and authority appropriate to secular and clerical power in his *Defensor Pacis*. Marsilius claimed that the will of the people, rather than the will of their ruler, was the source and justification of the law’s authority, and argued for the superiority of the secular authority over the ecclesiastical. The exiled and excommunicated Ockham also turned his attention to questions of civil and ecclesiastical power, writing a number of political tracts in which he proposes a clear separation of secular and clerical authority, according to which the emperor and the pope would each have a distinct sphere of authority in which he was supreme. Ockham even raises the idea of a kind of primitive system of checks and balances between secular and ecclesiastical, suggesting that the church should have the power to depose a tyrannical emperor, and likewise the state should have power to depose a heretical Pope.[[36]](#endnote-36) Ockham’s evident desire that the Pope be deposed and replaced by one more amenable to the Franciscan cause never saw fulfillment; he remained in exile in Munich until his death in 1347 (Gál 1982).

1. Though there are many studies of individual Scholastic philosophers, there are only a few book-length discussions in English covering ethical thought across this period; chief among these is Kent 1995. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. With the possible exception of the *Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, Aquinas’s major ethical works are believed to have all been written between 1268 and 1272, during his second regency at the University of Paris (Stump 2003, xvi–xx). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. There are any number of excellent introductions to Aquinas’s ethics; those largely unfamiliar with Aquinas’s thought may find especially useful DeYoung et al. 2009 as well as chapter 9 of Shields and Pasnau 2016. Fuller and more scholarly treatments of the individual pieces of his theory can be found in Pope 2002. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *ST* I–II, q. 15, a. 4, and I–II, q. 20, aa. 3–5. I have collapsed under the heading of “foreseeable consequences” two distinct sorts of consequences which Aquinas discusses: those consequences which are in fact foreseen and those consequences which follow from the nature of the action in most cases, in virtue of which said consequences should be foreseen, even if as a matter of fact they are not. See q. 20, a. 5, resp. & ad. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This fourfold analysis differs from the one Aquinas himself presents in *STh* I–II, q. 15, a. 4: there Aquinas mentions the object, the circumstances, and the end, but in place of the consequences he cites the *genus* as a contribution to the good of the act. However, as is made clear in articles 1 and 4 of question 18, the contribution of the “genus” is that the action is good just in virtue of being an existing entity; i.e., *every* particular action is good according to its genus, insofar as every particular action is an entity which has being. Only the three other criteria (object, circumstances, and end) could make the particular act morally bad. Furthermore, in q. 20, a. 5, Aquinas makes clear that those consequences of the action which are either foreseen or regularly follow upon the action also contribute to its moral status, albeit only by *increasing* the goodness or badness contributed by the object, circumstances, and end. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See DeYoung et al. 2009, 91, for discussion of this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Aquinas discusses the theft example at *ST* II–II, q. 66, a. 7; the case of Abraham and Isaac (along with other Biblical cases) is at *ST* I–II, q. 100, a. 8, ad 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Disputed Question on the Virtues in General*, a. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See *ST* I–II, q. 3, a. 8; I–II, q. 5, a. 5; *Disputed Question on the Virtues in General*, aa. 9–10. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Mahoney (2001) recites numerous examples from the thirteenth, fourteenth, and even fifteenth centuries of the condemnations being used to settle previously disputed doctrines. Already in 1295, the theologian Godfrey of Fontaines “deplore[d] the harm that had been done to the search for truth, since ‘men are now immovably held to one side of a topic and prevented from disputing properly debatable issues’” (Mahoney 2001, 909, citing Godfrey’s Quodlibet XII, q. 5) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Articles 2, 171, 167, 179, and 212, respectively. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Articles 20, 85, and 69, respectively. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See articles 151, 158, and 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. The literature on his theory of natural law is enormous; a reasonable starting place is J. Porter 2005. For his account of possibilia, see Wippel 1981, Ross 1990, and Frost 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *Ordinatio* I, d. 38, q. un, n. 5 (trans. Williams 2017, 83). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Ordinatio* I, d. 38, q. un, n. 6 (trans. Williams 2017, 83). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *Ordinatio* I, d. 44, q. un., nn. 8, 10: “Just as [God] can act otherwise, so also can he establish a different law; and if that law were established by God, it would be correct, because no law is correct except insofar as it is established by the divine will’s acceptance. . . . [therefore God] can act otherwise than as is ordinate according to a universal order—in other words as accords with laws of justice—because both things that are outside that order and things that are contrary to it can be done ordinately by God through his absolute power” (trans. Williams 2017, 96–97). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Ordinatio* III, d. 37, q. un., n. 20: “[T]his follows necessarily, ‘If God exists,’ he alone is to be loved as God.’ And it likewise follows that nothing else is to be worshipped as God and that no irreverence is to be done to him” (trans. Williams 2017, 252). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *Ordinatio* III, d. 37, q. un., especially nn. 36–39. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. “Some of the laws of morality, Scotus says, are in force only because God willed them to be in force. . . . The divine intellect, which necessarily understands all things, understands *L* as a possible (that is, a logically possible, non‐contradictory) law. It also understands the opposite of *L*, *not‐L*, as a possible law. If his will endorses *L*, *L* is in force; if his will endorses *not‐L*, *not‐L* is in force. *And there is nothing about either* L *or* not‐L *that moves God’s will to endorse one or the other*.” Williams 1998a, emphasis in the original. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Ordinatio* I, d. 44, q. un., n. 11: “God can foreknow that Judas is to be saved by his ordered power, though according to some other order [than the actual order], because [God] set things up in that way according to some order that was then possible; according to the actual order, of course, God cannot do so by his ordered power, but only by his absolute power.” [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. *Reportatio* II, q. 15 (*Opera theologica* [afterwards *OTh*] V, 352). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ockham discusses the possibility of God commanding a creature to hate God in *Reportatio* IV, q. 16 (*OTh* VII, 352). Those who think Ockham changes his mind about this point especially to *Quodlibeta septem* III.14 (*OTh* IX, 253–257), where Ockham seems to suggest that loving God is an act of the will which can never fail to be virtuous. But this latter text is rather compressed and can quite plausibly be read as merely saying that loving God is *actually* always virtuous, given God’s actual commands. For the scholarly debate over these passages, see especially King 1999, Adams 1999, Osborne 2005, and Williams 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. “moral virtue is a certain imperfect health of the interior person, a health which consists in a proportional and appropriate subjugation of the sensitive appetite to the intellective, insofar as that is possible in the present life.” Ordinary Questions, q. 23, n. 13. In Henry of Harclay 2008, 862. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. *Disputed Question on the Virtues in General*, aa. 9–10. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See Gregory of Rimini, *Lectura super primum et secundum Sententiarium*,Book II, dd. 26–28, q. 1, and Scotus, *Ordinatio* III, d. 36, q. 1, nn. 109–113. Gregory’s position is discussed in Kent 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See, e.g., *De Connexione Virtutem*, aa. 2, 4 (*OTh* VIII, 339; 391–392). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. *ST* I–II, q. 61, a. 2 and q. 65, aa. 1–5; also *Disputed Question on the Cardinal Virtues*, aa. 1–2. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. *Ordinatio* III, d. 33, q. 1, nn. 43–45. For commentary and discussion of other authors, see Kent 2010, 224–245. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. *Reportatio* III, q. 11 (*OTh* V, 358–366). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. *Ordinatio* III, d. 36, q. 1, nn. 32–33; 108–113. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. In general, Ockham’s beliefs about the power of divine omnipotence commit him to believing that God’s power is sufficient to separate any virtue from any other. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. *De Connexione Virtutum*, a. 3 (*OTh* VIII, 347–360). Discussion of Ockham’s position can be found in Wood 1997, 223–237. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. The history of the poverty dispute is traced in Burr 1989 and 2001. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. For these arguments and more, see Hervaeus Natalis 1999. Natalis discusses the arguments just mentioned on pp. 25–31. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. See especially Ockham’s *Dialogus*, Part 3.1, Book 1 and Part 3.2, Books 1–3. For discussion, see McGrade 2002 and Kilcullen 1999. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)