

The Incoherence of Ockham's Ethics

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The project here is to offer a view of Ockham on omnipotence, and apply this to Ockham's famous sayings about God's power to cause or command creaturely hatred of God.¹ The account offered explains why God can command creatures to hate God, and can cause creatures to hate God, but cannot hate himself. But the account cannot explain why Ockham thinks God, through a command, can make it *right* to hate God. Of course it is right to obey divine commands, but why? What grounds our obligation to obey them? The most plausible candidates are God's goodness, and God's power. The textual evidence in Ockham points toward both, and I judge the preponderance of the evidence to lean in favor of grounding our obligations to obey God on God's goodness. But whichever of the two we pick, we end up with an incoherent view. Given some things Ockham says, it should not be possible for Ockham's God to make it right to hate God, yet Ockham also says that this is possible. I see no way to rescue Ockham's ethics from incoherence.

Omnipotence

I'll start with omnipotence. As a quick gloss on divine omnipotence, Ockham sometimes says

1. God can bring about whatever does not include a contradiction.²

Ockham also holds that

2. Creatures can hate God.³

Given 1 and 2, it's no surprise that Ockham holds

¹ I am grateful for good feedback I received from the participants in the 2018 Moody Workshop in Medieval Philosophy at UCLA.

² Guillelmus de Ockham, *Quodlibet* VI, q.6 (Opera Theologica IX, ed. J.C. Wey, St. Bonaventure, NY, 1980, 604.13-16): "Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem." Quem sic intelligo quod quodlibet est divinae potentiae attribuendum quod non includit manifestam contradictionem."

³ Guillelmus de Ockham, *Reportatio* IV, q.16 (Opera Theologica VII, ed. R. Wood and G. Gál, St. Bonaventure, NY, 1984, 352.5-7): "Praeterea, omnis voluntas potest se conformare praecepto divino. Sed Deus potest praecipere quod voluntas creata odiat eum, igitur voluntas creata potest hoc facere."

3. God can bring about a creaturely act of hatred toward God.⁴

The thing that doesn't include a contradiction and which God can therefore bring about is a creaturely act of hating God. But from 2 it follows that

4. Hating God does not include a contradiction,

since a creature couldn't hate God unless hating God does not include a contradiction. But Ockham thinks that God necessarily loves himself,⁵ and necessarily wills himself as his final end,⁶ and therefore

5. God can't hate God.

From 4 and 5 it follows that there is something which does not include a contradiction which God cannot bring about, and therefore,

6. (not-1) It is not the case that God can bring about whatever does not include a contradiction.

Fortunately, Ockham has more careful ways of characterizing divine omnipotence, which don't saddle him with contradictory saying about what God can do.

⁴ Guillelmus de Ockham, *Reportatio* II, q.15 (Opera Theologica V, ed. G. Gál and R. Wood, St. Bonaventure, NY, 1981, 342.8-15): "Et quod Deus possit causare actum odiendi Deum quantum ad omne absolutum in actu in voluntate creata probatur, quia Deus potest omne absolutum causare sine omni alio quod non est idem cum illo absoluto. Sed actus odiendi Deum quantum ad omne absolutum in eo non est idem cum deformitate et malitiain actu, igitur Deus potest causare quidquid absolutum est in actu odiendi Deum vel nolendi, non causando aliquam deformitatem vel malitiam in actu, igitur etc."

⁵ Guillelmus de Ockham, *Ordinatio* I, d.10, q.2 (Opera Theologica III, ed. G.I. Etzkorn, St. Bonaventure, NY, 1977, 340.24-341.5): "Et ideo dicendo quod significatum libertatis est omne quod producitur quocumque modo mediante voluntatesive necessario sive contingenter—concedendum est quod Spiritus Sanctus producitur libere. Eodem modo si 'liberum' sit idem omnino quod 'voluntarium', tunc si voluntas creata aliquid faceret necessario, adhuc esset concedendum quod faceret libere, quia voluntarie et tamen necessario."

Si autem intelligatur quod 'liberum' sit idem quod 'contingens' vel 'indifferens', sicut mihi videtur esse de intentione auctorum, sic dico quod si voluntas aliquid velit necessario, non vult illud libere. Et ideo sic Spiritus Sanctus non producitur libere, sicut nec contingenter. Et isto modo libertas non stat cum necessitate respectu eiusdem; sed quidquid necessario producitur, non libere producitur. Nec video quin libertas, quae non excludit necessitatem, ita possit competere intellectui respectu saltem alicuius actus intelligendi sicut voluntati respectu actus necessario eliciti. Et ideo non video quod Deus magis libere diligit essentiam suam quam intelligit essentiam suam, nisi aliter imponendo vocabula ad significandum."

⁶ Guillelmus de Ockham, *Ordinatio* I, d.1, q.6 (Opera Theologica I, ed. G. Gál, St. Bonaventure, NY, 1967, 491.3-9): "[...] quia voluntas divina necessario est principium spirandi Spiritum Sanctum, secundum istos, et ipsa eadem est principium creandi creaturas contingenter. — Ita dicerent illide alia opinione quod eadem voluntas est principium naturale et necessarium volendi finem ultimum, et eadem est principium contingens et liberum volendi ea quae sunt ad finem." For Ockham, human beings are freer than God in this respect, since we can choose our own final end but God cannot. See Sonja Schierbaum, "Intellections and Volitions: Ockham's Voluntarism Reconsidered," in *The Language of Thought in Late Medieval Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Claude Panaccio*, ed. Jenny Pelletier and Magali Roques (Historical-Analytical Studies on Nature, Mind, and Action) 5 (Cham, Switzerland, 2017), 125-136.

For example, elsewhere Ockham observes that omnipotence is *not* the power to bring about anything which does not include a contradiction, since God cannot bring about God.⁷ Let's take as the lesson of these texts Ockham's awareness that power to do whatever does not include a contradiction doesn't really work as a characterization of omnipotence. We need various qualifications.

Here's a qualification. Characterizing God's absolute power (which I assume to be equivalent to divine omnipotence), Ockham says that God's absolute power is the power to bring about anything the making of which does not include a contradiction (*posse facere omne illud quod non includit contradictionem fieri*).⁸ This gives us a nice qualification of omnipotence, and explains why God cannot make God. God is not the kind of thing that can be made. But this gives us no explanation of why God can't hate God. After all, an act of hatred seems like the sort of thing which can be made.

Another text takes us the rest of the way to explaining why omnipotence does not equip God to hate himself. In this text, Ockham is arguing that God could produce an intuitive cognition of a non-existent object.⁹ Here are the premises of the argument:

1. God can bring about whatever does not include a contradiction.

7. But there is no contradiction in *God's making* that thing [i.e., an intuitive cognition of a non-existent object].¹⁰

Therefore God can make an intuitive cognition of a nonexistent object. I take 7 to be clarifying how Ockham understands omnipotence. When we assess whether God can ϕ we have to consider the logical relations of the terms of the whole proposition, *God ϕ 's*, not just the terms of ϕ . The non-contradictory things within the scope of divine power always include *God* as one of the terms. Even if ϕ includes no contradiction, if *God ϕ 's* includes a contradiction then God cannot ϕ . So omnipotence is not merely the power to bring about whatever does not include a contradiction, as 1 suggests, but the power to bring about what God can bring about!¹¹

⁷ Guillelmus de Ockham, *Ordinatio* I, d.20, q.1 (Opera Theologica IV, ed. G. Etzkorn and F.E. Kelley, St. Bonaventure, NY, 2000, 36.7).

⁸ Ockham, *Quodlibet* VI, q.1 (ed. Wey, 586.25-26).

⁹ Ockham, *Quodlibet* VI, q.6 (ed. Wey, 604-607).

¹⁰ Ockham, *Quodlibet* VI, q.6 (ed. Wey, 604.11-17): "In ista quaestione pono duas conclusiones: prima est quod cognitio intuitiva potest esse per potentiam divinam de obiecto non existente. Quod probo primo per articulum fidei: 'Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem.' Quem sic intelligo quod quodlibet est divinae potentiae attribuendum quod non includit manifestam contradictionem; sed *istud fieri a Deo* non includit contradictionem; igitur etc." (Italics mine.)

¹¹ This is more or less Marilyn Adams's final analysis of Ockham on omnipotence in her far more detailed treatment of this topic in *William Ockham*, vol.2 (Notre Dame, 1987), 1152-1168. On omnipotence, see also Jenny Pelletier, "William Ockham on Divine Ideas, Universals, and God's Power, in *Universals in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Fabrizio Amerini and Laurent Cesalli (Pisa, 2017), 187-224.

This looks trivial. I don't think it is, but let me speak first to the advantages of this analysis of omnipotence. It explains how it is that God could cause someone to sin, to hate God, to die, to sleep, etc., but could not himself sin, hate God, sleep, etc. It's not enough, for God to do them, that hating God or sleeping do not include a contradiction and are producible. For God to do them, it must be that, additionally, *God's sleeping* or *God's hating God* do not include a contradiction and are producible. But God's necessary incorporeality and God's necessary self-love introduce a contradiction into God's sleeping and God's hating God, respectively. And this is why God's sleeping and God's hating God do not fall within the scope of God's power. On this account, it remains true that God can do whatever does not include a contradiction; the qualification is that God is always one of the terms to be considered in an assessment of whether God's doing something or other includes a contradiction.

So much for the advantages. Is this account of omnipotence trivial? The account is that God can do whatever God can do. If we tried to generalize so as to attribute to God the property of omnipotence, characterized, for any x that might turn out to have it, as the property of being able to do whatever x can do, then the account of omnipotence is indeed trivial, since anything that has all of the power it has (and no more!) can do anything it can do! We all turn out to be omnipotent!

I think this is the wrong way to think of Ockham's account. On the account given, omnipotence is not the power to do whatever x can do, for any x that has it, but the power to do whatever *God* can do, and yes, God has this. So you and I don't have omnipotence. God does, and we could then inquire whether anything else has the power to do whatever God can do.

Why God Can't Hate God

What the account tells us is that we cannot get a good grip on God's power by considering it in isolation from all the other things we have to say about the divine nature. The whole of God, so to speak, conditions divine power. For example, God's incorporeality explains why God can't bring it about that God walks, and God's necessary existence explains why God can't make or kill God. In general, we can only get insight into what sort of power omnipotence confers by viewing omnipotence through God-colored lenses. I think it is supposed to turn out that for anything to have omnipotence, it must have all the other divine attributes. This raises the difficult issue of the way in which God's goodness hangs together with God's power.

God's goodness does seem to explain why God can't hate God. God is so good, he can't help but love himself and will himself as the ultimate end.¹² But hating God, a logically possible action, only falls out of the scope of God's power when we consider that God's bringing about his

¹² Ockham, *Ordinatio* I, d.10, q.2 (ed. Etzkorn, 340.24-341.5); Ockham, *Ordinatio* I, d.1, q.6 (ed. Gál, 490.21-491.9).

own hatred of himself “includes the contradiction” of the highest good failing to respond appropriately to its own goodness.¹³

Why God Can Command Us to Hate God

Given this account of divine nature-conditioned omnipotence, you might have expected Ockham to have conceded various ways in which God’s goodness conditions what he can do or will for creatures. Famously, however, Ockham concedes no such conditions.

Most famously, Ockham thinks

8. God can command creatures not to love God.¹⁴

and

9. God can command creatures to hate God.¹⁵

Slightly less famously, but more troublingly, Ockham also thinks

10. God can make hating God a right action (*actus rectus*).¹⁶

And his support for 10 seems to be based on a plausible assumption that God’s commanding an action makes that action right.

8 and 9 are a little tricky to square with other of Ockham’s metaethical commitments, but I think they can be squared. 10 however poses a problem for Ockham of which I can’t see the way

¹³ For Ockham on God’s goodness and transcendental goodness, see Jenny Pelletier, “Is There a Metaphysical Approach to the Transcendentals in Ockham? The Case of the Good,” in *The Language of Thought in Late Medieval Philosophy*, 111-124.

¹⁴ Ockham, *Quodlibet* III, q.14 (ed. Wey, 256.83-257.94): “Si dicis quod Deus potest praecipere quod pro aliquo tempore non diligatur ipse, quia potest praecipere quod intellectus sit sic intentus circa studium et voluntas similiter, ut nihil possit pro illo tempore de Deo cogitare. Tunc volo quod voluntas tunc eliciat actum diligendi Deum; et tunc aut ille actus est virtuosus, et hoc non potest dici, quia elicitur contra praeceptum divinum; aut non est virtuosus, et habetur propositum, quod actus diligendi Deum super omnia non est virtuosus:

Respondeo: si Deus posset hoc praecipere, sicut videtur quod potest sine contradictione, dico tunc quod voluntas non potest pro tunc talem actum elicere; quia ex hoc ipso quod talem actum eliceret, Deum diligeret super omnia, et per consequens impleret praeceptum divinum, quia hoc est diligere Deum super omnia: diligere quidquid Deus vult diligere; et ex hoc ipso quod sic diligeret, non faceret praeceptum divinum per casum; et per consequens sic diligendo, Deum diligeret et non diligeret, faceret praeceptum Dei et non faceret. Posset tamen Deum diligere simplici amore et naturali, qui non est dilectio Dei super omnia, sicut posito quod aliquis non credat Deum esse, non potest eum diligere, quia nihil potest diligere nisi quod est vel potest esse.”

¹⁵ Ockham, *Reportatio* IV, q.16 (ed. Wood and Gál, 352.5-7): “Praeterea, omnis voluntas potest se conformare praecepto divino. Sed Deus potest praecipere quod voluntas creata odiat eum, igitur voluntas creata potest hoc facere.”

¹⁶ Ockham, *Reportatio* IV, q.16 (ed. Wood and Gál, 352.8-10): “Praeterea, omne quod potest esse actus rectus in via, et in patria. Sed odire Deum potest esse actus rectus in via, puta si praecipitur a Deo, igitur in patria.”

out. Here I'll show how there's no real problem with 8 and 9 before saying more about why I can't make sense of 10.

In the text in which Ockham asserts 8, Ockham goes on to say that it is impossible *to do something or other* in response to a divine command not to love God. Usually the *something or other* is glossed as *obey*—it's impossible to obey a divine command to hate God. I don't like to use this word, however, because Ockham doesn't talk about obedience or *oboedire* here. Instead, he talks about eliciting (*elicere*) the act God has commanded, and doing or bringing about (*facere*) a divine command.

The case in which Ockham asserts 8 is this: God commands that for some time you not love him, because he wants you to be so intent on your studies that you can't, while so intent, think about God. Then suppose that, loving God above all, you seek to obey the command. According to Ockham, loving God above all just is loving whatever God wants us to love. You're stuck! Your love for God above all entails that you do what he tells you. But as long as your love for God inspires you to do what he tells you, you can't do what he tells you. So the command can't be fulfilled.

Actually, what Ockham really argues is that the command can't be fulfilled by *someone who loves God above all*. The paradox here is that the person most disposed to follow divine commands is the person unable to do so in this case, but there is nothing contradictory about this paradox. Someone who has a lower-level love for God, or no love for God at all, or even no belief in God, could perform the action commanded, and Ockham thinks this is sufficient for a successful response to the command. Whether simply not loving God because focused on something else instead is sufficient for correct application of our contemporary concept of obedience is not relevant here.

So only one sort of very special divine rule follower is in the frustrating position of being unable to fulfill this possible divine command not to love God. Noting this helps us make sense of something Ockham says in connection with 9.

In the text in which Ockham says 9, he argues this way: every will is able to conform itself (*potest se conformare*) to a divine command. But God can command that a created will hate him. Therefore a created will is able to hate God.

Superficially, it looks like Ockham says in the context of 8 that a divine command not to love God can't be obeyed, while he holds in the context of 9 that a divine command to hate God can be obeyed. And, superficially, these seem inconsistent. What's so special about hating God that makes it, but not not loving God, apt to be the object of an obeyable divine command? Well, nothing, actually. In the context of 8, Ockham only says that a divine command not to love God

cannot be obeyed by someone who loves God above all. In the context of 9, Ockham's only condition for "obedience" to a divine command to hate God is "conformity," and we're free to read this in a way that leaves it impossible for some, say, those who love God above all, to conform to a command to hate God, and possible for the rest so to conform.

So whatever is supposed to be scandalous about Ockham's possible divine commands to hate and not to love God, it is not that the actions that would count as successful responses to the commands cannot be done. All you need to do to do what has been commanded is hate God or not love God (as the case may be). That so doing rules out loving God above all is not that interesting.

How Can God Make Hating God Right?

Still, these commands do raise another problem. How could God, who is so good, command actions which by nature are wrong? Ockham himself thinks that, by nature,

11. God alone should be loved the most, because God is the highest good.¹⁷

Following the possible precepts of 8 and 9 rule out loving God above all. It doesn't make much sense that God, the highest good, would command creatures to do something wrong. Doesn't make much sense, but not yet logically impossible. In general, commanding that *p* doesn't make *p* true (practically true, we might say). So while it might be true just by the natures of things that God should be loved, God's commands to hate God or not love God do not, *just insofar as they are commands*, make it true that it is not the case that God should be loved. So no contradiction here.

Nevertheless, there's a problem. According to 10, were God to issue such commands, the actions they enjoin would be *right*. So while we might not be able to reason from '*p* is commanded' that '*p* is true', it looks like we can reason from '*p* is commanded *by God*' that '*p* is true'. So in the case of these possible divine commands, we have one source of rightness, the nature of things, which tells us God should be loved the most, and another source of rightness, divine commands, telling us God shouldn't. But then it follows that these divine commands *would* include a contradiction, and therefore it shouldn't fall within the scope of divine power to command them. Or, at least, it shouldn't fall within the scope of divine power to command them in such a way that what they enjoin is made to be right. So we have a mess: on the one hand, Ockham asserts God can't bring about contradictions, and on the other hand, God can make right, by a divine command, an action (hating God) which, given divine goodness, is wrong by nature.

Merely Commanded to Love God?

¹⁷ Ockham, *Ordinatio* I, d.1, q.4 (ed. Gál, 447.5-6): "Ad secundum dico quod solus Deus est summe diligendus, quia est summum bonum."

One possible way out of this mess is to downplay Ockham's commitment to natural goodness and moral norms formulable as rational responses to natural goodness. Ockham indeed says at least once that

12. Creatures are obligated to love God due to a divine command to love God.¹⁸

The immediate context of 12 is a discussion of whether God could be the total cause of an act of hatred of God—whether he could *cause* an act of hatred of God, not command or make right such an action. In arguing that God could, Ockham says that, given a divine command to love God, not even God could be the total cause of a bad act of hating God. But, given an opposite divine command, neither could God be the total cause of a good act of loving God! The point is that a creaturely act of loving (or hating) God is only good (or bad) if the creature is a partial cause of the act. If God is the total cause of the act, the creature does not act well or badly. What Ockham is going for here is a strong assertion of divine power over creaturely acts without the consequence that God can sin.

Yet there is nothing in Ockham's texts that I know of which should lead us to conclude from 12 that what Ockham *really* thought is that the obligation to love God comes *only* from a divine command. It's consistent that God command that we love him—as the Bible reports he has—and that we'd still be obligated, by the natures of things, to love God even if he hadn't commanded this. And this must be what Ockham really thinks, since he says

13. Loving God above all is necessarily virtuous.¹⁹

And Ockham thinks this not because he thinks God has said so but for reasons having to do with divine goodness. A divine command not to love God or to hate God does not falsify 13. As Peter King pointed out, when Ockham goes on to say that God could command us not to love him, he

¹⁸ Ockham, *Reportatio* II, q. 15 (ed. Gál and Wood, 353.3-354.6): “Ad aliud dico quod aliquis actus ab una causa potest fieri bene, et si fieret ab alia, non posset fieri nisi male. Et tota ratio est quia una causa obligatur ad actum oppositum et alia non. Sic est in proposito: voluntas creata obligatur ex praecepto Dei ad diligendum Deum, et ideo stante illo praecepto non potest bene odire Deum nec causare actum odiendi, sed necessario male causat malitia moris. Et hoc quia obligatur ex praecepto Dei ad actum oppositum. Nec stante primo praecepto potest sibi Deus oppositum praecipere. Sed Deus ad nullum actum causandum obligatur, ideo quemlibet actum absolutum potest sine omni malo culpae causare et eius oppositum. Et ideo sicut potest causare totaliter actum diligendi sine bonitate vel malitia morali, quia bonitas moralis vel malitia connotant quod agens obligatur ad illum actum vel eius oppositum, ita potest causare totaliter actum odiendi Deum sine omni malitia morali propter eandem causam, quia Deus ad nullum actum causandum obligatur.

Ad aliud dico quod si odium Dei causatur a solo Deo, semper erit propter bonum finem, quia Deus ex odio creaturae in nullo damnificatur. Sed odire Deum propter indebitum finem est malum, et sic est actus creaturae et non a solo Deo. — Illud etiam quod assumit est falsum quod dilectio Dei sit semper bona [et] propter debitum finem, quia aliquando potest esse mala et propter indebitum finem, ut quando amo Deum amore concupiscentiae.”

¹⁹ Ockham, *Quodlibet* III, q. 14 (ed. Wey, 255.60-62): “Tertio dico quod ille actus necessario virtuosus modo praedicto est actus voluntatis, quia actus quo diligitur Deus super omnia et propter se, est huiusmodi[.]”

does not say that God's command can make it not right to love God above all; instead, God's command makes it impossible to elicit an act of loving God above all. As King puts it,

The logical puzzle [about God's command to do what is impossible to do] has to do with the conditions of eliciting the act and not with the content of the act itself, which is not affected by its circumstances.²⁰

So while there is a text in which Ockham says we're obligated to love God because he has commanded us to love him, we should not conclude that only a divine command keeps in force the obligation to love God above all. The divine nature does this. But then it is mysterious how a divine command to the contrary can make the action commanded *right*, as 10 asserts it can.

Distinguishing the Good from the Right?

A second possible way out of this mess is to attribute to Ockham a sharp division between the good and the right.²¹ Perhaps certain acts are by nature virtuous, or rational, or good, but such acts do not for these reasons achieve the moral force of the right or the morally obligatory—to get rightness on top of goodness, we need the imposition of divine commands onto the created order. So distinguishing the good from the right, we could say that it is good by nature to love God, but it is *right* to love God—in the oomphy, moral sense of right—just because God commands us to love God.

Here's how the distinction between the good and the right would fix the mess. An act's being "necessarily virtuous" on this view does not make that action right. Only a divine command makes that action right. So if God makes hating God right, as 10 avers he could, no contradiction ensues, since there are no facts about creation or the divine nature which make hating God wrong independent of a divine command. Similarly, the sense of "ought" or "should" at play when we

²⁰ Peter King, "Ockham's Ethical Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, ed. Paul Vincent Spade (Cambridge, 1999), 227-244 (232). Holopainen argues at some length the necessarily virtuous act of loving God above all is only conditionally necessarily virtuous: it is necessarily virtuous provided God continues to command it. Holopainen bases this view on Ockham, *Quodlibet* III, q.14 (ed. Wey, 255.44), in which Ockham says that an act can be necessarily virtuous in the sense that it cannot be vicious *stante praecepto divino*. The idea is that the necessarily virtuous act of loving God above all is itself dependent for its morally binding force on a divine command. The problem with this interpretation is that it would make every moral obligation necessarily virtuous, and there would be no special reason for singling out the love of God above all as an unusual or extra important moral obligation. Holopainen defends this interpretation in part by considering the ensuing discussion of God's ability to command that he not be loved. But as King notes, the discussion here does not call into question the status of the act of loving God above all, but instead the conditions under which it can be successfully performed. However, it is part of my thesis that Ockham is actually inconsistent in his claims about the source of our moral obligations, so *Quodlibet* III, q.14 may well have two tales to tell. See Taina M. Holopainen, *William Ockham's Theory of the Foundation of Ethics* (Publications of Luther-Agricola Society) B20 (Helsinki, 1991), 139-145.

²¹ For some reasons to think that Ockham does admit some sort of distinction between the good (or rational) and the right, see Sonja Schierbaum, "Intellections and Volitions: Ockham's Voluntarism Reconsidered," 125-136, especially 135-136. I hasten to add, however, that the view I explore below is not the view Schierbaum claims to find in Ockham.

translate the text given in 11, “Deus est summe diligendus, quia est summum bonum,” as “God ought to/should be loved the most...” is not a sense of “ought” or “should” which has to do with what is right. We could say instead that one acts foolishly or against the good for oneself if one fails to love God above all. But God’s being the highest good just isn’t enough to make it right—morally obligatory—to love God above all. For that, we need a command. Thus, so long as God revokes the command to love God before issuing the command to hate God, God’s making it right to hate God is not contradictory.

Ultimately, however, this is not a successful line of interpretation. The issue is this. If we read 11 the way I think 11 should be read—as asserting a naturally arising moral obligation to love God above all which arises naturally precisely because of what God is, namely the highest good, then we get a very nice explanation of the grounds for obeying divine commands. Plausibly, doing what God commands (or attempting to do!) is *entailed* by loving God above all. So if the moral obligation to love God above all obtains simply given what God is, then, plausibly, all God’s commands and prohibitions establish moral obligations. But now suppose, in the spirit of the distinction between the good and the right, that we do not read 11 as asserting a naturally arising moral obligation to love God. Then we lose the plausible grounding of moral obligations to obey divine commands in a moral obligation to love God. Why, then, would we be morally obligated to obey divine commands? The view proposed says we get moral obligation from divine commands. So maybe we’re morally obligated to obey divine commands just in case we’ve been commanded by God to obey God’s commands. It’s not clear that there’s anything incoherent about this. And it’s not vacuous. A divine command to obey a divine command to obey a divine command is certainly a different command, with different content, from a divine command to obey a divine command. And God could play the game of commanding to obey commands all day, *ad infinitum*, if the stiff-necked among us put him to the test. And in any case, God has a put-his-foot-down, parental sort of power just to stop the game with a threatening “...because I said so!” God can be comprehensively violent to us, in a way no earthly sovereign or strongman can be. So maybe for Ockham it turns out that what it is to be under a moral obligation instead of some other sort of obligation just is to have been commanded by someone with this sort of power. Maybe the moral obligation to obey divine commands is not after all grounded in infinitely iterative divine commands, but simply in divine power, or something close to divine power, like the threat of divine violence.

Unattractive as this view may be, so far it is coherent. Might it then be preferable as an interpretation of what Ockham is up to? I think not, because I think the view does not in the end save Ockham from incoherence. Consider again the text in which Ockham says that loving God above all is necessarily virtuous.²² He goes on to explain why this act is necessarily virtuous: first: everyone is obligated at some time and place to love God above all, and therefore that act cannot

²² Ockham, *Quodlibet* III, q.14 (ed. Wey, 255-256).

be vicious; second: because loving God above all is the first of all good acts.²³ Now it might seem here that Ockham is admitting a division between the good and the right. It is *both* obligatory *and* good to love God above all. And as far as this goes, we could read this division as consistent with the view that only divine commands make moral obligations, including even the obligation to love God above all. But then we'd have a problem. As we've seen, Ockham thinks a divine command could make it obligatory to hate or not love God. But whatever the source of the obligation, asserted here in *Quodlibet* III, q.14, to love God above all, it cannot be a divine command. This is because Ockham here *infers* that loving God above all cannot be vicious, *from* its being the case that everyone is obligated to love God above all. But this would be a *bad inference* if this obligation held only by a divine command, since God *need not* issue a command to love God, and *could* issue a command to hate or not love God. So the most natural way to read this passage in *Quodlibet* III, q.14 involves taking this obligation to love God above all as arising just due to the natures of things. This keeps the inference a good one.

A Disappointing Choice

We have an interpretive choice. For Ockham, is our moral obligation to obey divine commands grounded in a naturally arising moral obligation to love God as the highest good, or is it grounded in God's coercive power? In short, is our moral obligation to obey divine commands grounded in goodness or power? If we go with goodness, we saddle Ockham with a genuine contradiction at the heart of his ethics: Ockham asserts that God cannot bring about contradictories, but Ockham implies that God can bring about that it is and is not right to hate God. If we go with power we make this disciple of St. Francis a promoter of an ethics fit only for orcs, and guilty of an invalid inference from *everyone's being obligated to love God above all* to *its being impossible for an act of loving God above all to be vicious*. The texts as I read them tilt toward goodness, but I doubt there can be a demonstration either way.²⁴ A hermeneutic of charity usually bids us preserve the coherence of an author's views, but I'm afraid in this case not even charity can rescue Ockham from incoherence. But charity might also bid us to preserve an author's humanity, and for this reason I think it's better for us to associate Ockham with the view that the moral obligation to love God above all is grounded in divine goodness, not divine power.

²³ Ockham, *Quodlibet* III, q.14 (ed. Wey, 255.60-256.67): "Tertio dico quod ille actus necessario virtuosus modo praedicto est actus voluntatis, quia actus quo diligitur Deus super omnia et propter se, est huiusmodi; nam iste actus sic est virtuosus quod non potest esse vitiosus, nec potest iste actus causari a voluntate creata nisi sit virtuosus; tum quia quilibet pro loco et tempore obligatur ad diligendum Deum super omnia, et per consequens iste actus non potest esse vitiosus; tum quia iste actus est primus omnium actuum bonorum."

²⁴ Recent scholarship on Ockham's ethics has also tilted toward goodness. See Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Structure of Ockham's Moral Theory," *Franciscan Studies* 46 (1986), 1-35; Marilyn McCord Adams, "Ockham on Will, Nature, and Morality, in *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, 245-272; Peter King, "Ockham's Ethical Theory"; A.S. McGrade, "Natural Law and Moral Omnipotence," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, 273-301.

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