

## Logical Necessity and Divine Love in Duns Scotus's Ethical Thought

Thomas M. Ward

Author's Note: This is an unpublished paper and, after years of bad luck trying to get it accepted at various journals, will remain unpublished for the foreseeable future. Despite all the rejections, and sometimes even referee reports, I continue to believe the paper is correct. Feel free to get in touch if you know of a better home for it.

### Abstract

This paper is about John Duns Scotus's understanding of necessary moral truths. Scotus is famous for thinking that God's will is free to change or dispense from many moral truths. But God's freedom does not range over *necessary* moral truths. Instead, these are logically necessary in Scotus's sense of logical modality. When Scotus makes radical-sounding claims such as that God can do anything logically possible, he has in mind a much narrower class of actions than such claims seem to suggest.

### Keywords

Duns Scotus, modality, voluntarism, divine command theory, ethics, goodness, God

### Restricting the range of divine power

Scotus is so widely believed to be *some sort* of voluntarist and divine command theorist that it is difficult to present a reading of Scotus's ethical thought without situating it in relation to the logical space of voluntarism and divine command theory.<sup>1</sup> This situating task is harder than it

---

<sup>1</sup> Schneewind and Irwin are perhaps the most prominent voices who call Scotus a voluntarist. J.B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998),

might seem, however, both because Scotus's views as I understand them do not comfortably bear these labels, and because the concepts of voluntarism and divine command ethics are complex and contested, lacking consensus definitions which would, if we had them, provide criteria for picking out the right views.<sup>2</sup> I could craft my own definitions of 'voluntarism' or 'divine command ethics' which are tailor-made to allow me to apply them to or withhold them from Scotus, but that would not be philosophically interesting. Instead, my project here is to read Scotus without the hermeneutic crutch of anachronistic labels like 'voluntarism' and 'divine command theory.'

I do not think scholars have thought hard enough about Scotus's position that there are necessary moral truths over which God has no control. Just about everyone who writes on Scotus's ethics has noted this position, but none has paid sufficient philosophical attention to it. It turns out that necessary moral truths are *logically necessary* (in Scotus's sense of logical modalities), and

---

21-5; Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics: Volume 1: From Socrates to the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 653-700.

<sup>2</sup> To get a sense of the messy conflict, compare definitions of 'divine command ethics' and 'voluntarism' in, for example, Philip Quinn, "The Recent Revival of Divine Command Ethics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50.Suppl. (1990): 345-365; Mark Murphy, *God and Moral Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 100; Mark Murphy, "Theological Voluntarism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/voluntarism-theological/>>; Thomas Williams, "The Unmitigated Scotus," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 80.2 (1998): 162-181 (162); C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 35; Bonnie Kent, *Virtues of the Will: The Transformation of Ethics in the Late Thirteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 95; and Tully Borland and T. Allan Hillman, "Scotus and God's Arbitrary Will: A Reassessment," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 91.3 (2017), 399-429 (399). Scotus is or isn't a voluntarist or divine command theorist depending on which definitions you pick. It's also worth remembering that "voluntarism," unlike "nominalism," is not a term of medieval invention.

the fact that they are logically necessary significantly alters how we should understand radical-sounding claims in Scotus to the effect that God can do whatever is logically possible.<sup>3</sup> Demonstrably, what Scotus means is that God can do whatever it is logically possible *for God to do*, and this class is rather smaller than the class of the logically possible *simpliciter*.<sup>4</sup>

Scotus thinks that some moral truths are necessary and some are contingent. The contingent are those over which God has some control, and the necessary are those over which God has no control. His personal favorite necessary moral truth is that God must be loved above all things, so I will start with this.

That God must be loved is a practical necessity which constrains even God's willing and acting. Scotus expresses this practical necessity in the maxim: *Deus est diligendus*, God must be loved. It is "a practical truth preceding any act of the divine will," and the divine intellect apprehends the truth of the maxim and the divine will *non potest discordare* with the intellect—

---

<sup>3</sup> Duns Scotus, *Ord.* IV.46.1.25 (V 14.204), and I.44.un.7 (V 6.366). All citations from Scotus's *Ordinatio* come from John Duns Scotus, *Opera omnia*, 18 vols. Edited by The Scotistic Commission, (Vatican City: Typis Vaticanis, 1950–). I will use "Ord." for "*Ordinatio*" and "(V X.y)" for "(Vatican edition, volume X, page y)". The convention for citing the *Ordinatio*, which I adopt, lists Book, Distinction, Part (if any), Question, Paragraph(s).

<sup>4</sup> Allan B. Wolter offered a different but somewhat related strategy for restricting the range of what is possible for God to command. Wolter argued that the affection for justice is a pure perfection and therefore God has it, by nature and necessarily. But if God has an affection for justice, then he cannot command anything unjust, since this would be inconsistent with his nature. See Wolter, *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press), 14. The problem with Wolter's strategy is that Scotus never says that God has an *affection* for justice, and where Scotus argues that justice is a divine attribute, he explicitly denies that God's justice demands that he give to creatures what their natures require. Thomas Williams has, to my mind, refuted Wolter's claim that God has an affection for justice. See Williams, "A Most Methodical Lover? On Scotus's Arbitrary Creator," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38.2 (2000): 169-202.

cannot be at odds with the intellect, cannot wish things were otherwise—regarding the truth of the maxim.<sup>5</sup> But Scotus also says, “God can do, and so will, whatever does not include a contradiction,”<sup>6</sup> and says elsewhere, “God can do anything that does not include a contradiction.”<sup>7</sup> From these we can infer that Scotus thinks that God’s doing or willing anything in any way contrary to *Deus est diligendus* “includes a contradiction” and is therefore impossible. Thus, *that God must be loved* is both practically necessary and necessary in a much stronger sense.

Since Scotus thinks that God can do anything which is not contradictory and thinks God can’t make it false that God must be loved, the sort of stronger-than-practical necessity attaching to the maxim that God must be loved is *logical necessity*. Scotus does not explicitly discuss logical necessity. But, famously, he does discuss logical possibility, and we can define a Scotistic notion of logical necessity from his notion of logical possibility.

### **Logical modalities as Scotus understands them**

Logical *possibility*, Scotus tells us, is “a certain way in which terms can be combined by the mind because of the relationship of the terms in a proposition, namely that they are not opposed to one another.”<sup>8</sup> This lack of opposition, or *non-repugnance*, is something like coherence. But it is

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ord.* IV.46.1.14&43 (V 14.201&208).

<sup>6</sup> *Ord.* IV.46.1.25 (V 14.204).

<sup>7</sup> *Ord.* I.44.un.7 (V 6.366). “un.” abbreviates “unica” and is the standard convention for referring to a *Sentences* commentary question which is the only question in its distinction.

<sup>8</sup> Scotus, *Quaestiones super libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis* IX.1-2.18, in John Duns Scotus, *Opera Philosophica*, 5 vols. Edited by The Franciscan Institute (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1991–2006), 4:514; trans. Allan B. Wolter in John Duns Scotus, *A Treatise on Potency and Act* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2000), p.78-9; See also Scotus, *Ord.* II.7.un.50 (V 8.99).

not what we nowadays might call a purely formal coherence. Consider that, as far as logic goes, most modern people would be fine saying there's nothing logically impossible about a soccer ball reading a sonnet, and this is because there is nothing about the syntax or grammar of the sentence, "A soccer ball reads a sonnet," which reveals the impossibility of a soccer ball reading a sonnet. Instead, this impossibility is due to the meanings of the terms in the sentence. As far as grammar and syntax go, "a soccer ball reads a sonnet" is modally on par with "a soccer ball rolls on the ground." To see why the former is impossible but the latter possible, we have to attend to the meanings of the terms. Scotus uses the concepts of repugnance and non-repugnance (between terms) to distinguish the impossibility of the former from the possibility of the latter. Scotus's own examples of repugnant combinations of terms are "white and black" and "non-rational and human."<sup>9</sup> It is arguable that non-rational and human are repugnant due to formal features, since human is defined as rational animal, and "a non-rational thing is a rational animal" wears its logical impossibility on its sleeve. But strictly speaking this cannot be what explains the repugnance of non-rational and animal amounts to, because the relevant term is "human," not the terms of its definition, "rational animal."

Scotus contrasts logical possibility with what he calls 'real' possibility in the following way: real possibility refers to actual active and passive powers to bring about and to be brought about, whereas logical possibility refers to some relationship between terms. Anything really possible is

---

<sup>9</sup> *Reportatio* IA.43.1.23, in John Duns Scotus, *The Examined Report of the Paris Lecture: Reportatio I-A*, 2 vols. (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2004–8), vol.2, 527. The convention for citing the *Reportatio* is the same as the convention for citing the *Ordinatio*: Book, Distinction, Part (if any), Question, Paragraph(s). There are several versions of the "Reports" on Scotus's late lectures, so the "A" which follows the book number in this citation distinguishes one of these Reports from several others.

logically possible. That a soccer ball rolls on the ground is logically possible just in case there is no “opposition” or repugnance between the terms of the proposition, and it is really possible just in case there is some power which can bring it about that a soccer ball rolls on the ground. To illustrate as clearly as he can that logical possibilities obtain independent of powers to realize them, Scotus says that the proposition “The world will exist” is logically possible before there is a world, even if we assume there exists no active power [i.e., God] to bring the world about.<sup>10</sup>

The logically *impossible*, then, could be defined in Scotus’s terms as a certain way in which terms *cannot* be combined by the mind because of the relationship of the terms in a proposition, namely that they *are* opposed or repugnant to one another. Whatever the reason for such opposition, it is not to be found in reference to any causal power, even God. God does not bring it about that the logically impossible, possible and necessary have the modal statuses they have.<sup>11</sup> Instead, the logical impossibility of logical impossibilities is to be explained with reference to the meanings of the terms involved. “A soccer ball reads a sonnet” is logically impossible, for example, just due to the meanings of ‘soccer ball’ and ‘sonnet’.

A proposition is logically *necessary*, on Scotus’s understanding of logical modality, just in case its contrary (or subcontrary) and contradictory are logically impossible. “All soccer balls are balls” is logically necessary in this sense because its contrary, “No soccer balls are balls,” and contradictory, “Some soccer ball is not a ball,” are logically impossible.

---

<sup>10</sup> *Reportatio* IA.43.1.23 (Wolter and Bychkov 2, 527).

<sup>11</sup> Peter King, “Duns Scotus on Possibilities, Powers, and the Possible,” in *Potentialität und Possibilität: Modalaussagen in Der Geschichte Der Metaphysik*, ed. T. Buchheim, K. Lorenz, and C.H. Kneepkens (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2001), 175-99; Fabrizio Mondadori, “The Independence of the Possible According to Scotus,” in *Duns Scot à Paris: 1302-2002*, ed. Olivier Boulnois, Elizabeth Karger, Jean-Luc Solère, and Gérard Sondag (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 313-74.

Here is not the place to determine whether Scotus's logical modalities may be identified with any modern modal notions. Probably they map onto Plantinga's broadly logical modalities, Kripke's metaphysical modalities, and Leftow's absolute modalities, but it's not important to settle this.<sup>12</sup> For my purposes, the most salient feature of Scotus's logical modalities is that *they obtain independent of any divine acting, willing or thinking*. "God must be loved" is necessary in this strongest of senses. In other words, *it is logically necessary that it is practically necessary to love God*. That may sound strange. But Scotus recognizes a variety of practical necessities which are contingent, for example, most of the Ten Commandments, which are contingent in the precise sense that God is free to modify them. Exactly how to understand Scotus on contingent moral truths is difficult and important but need not concern us here except to say that contingent moral truths would be practical necessities which are not logically necessary. By contrast, if there are practical necessities over which God has no control, which are what they are independent of what God thinks or wills about them, they are logically necessary practical necessities, in Scotus's sense of logically necessary.

### **God must be loved**

I take the previous sections to have established that the maxim, *God must be loved*, is on Scotus's view a logically necessary practical necessity. In this section I want to try to say why Scotus thought this.

In *Ord.* III.27.un.14, Scotus explains that,

---

<sup>12</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 2; Saul Kripke, "Naming and Necessity," in *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1972), 253-355; Brian Leftow, *God and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 34-8.

[L]oving God above all else is an act that conforms to natural right reason, which dictates that what is best should be loved the most, and consequently the act is right in and of itself. Indeed, its rightness is self-evident, as the rightness of a first principle in the domain of possible actions. For something should be loved the most, and that is nothing other than the highest Good, just as nothing other than the highest Truth should be most firmly held as true by the intellect.<sup>13</sup>

Something should be loved the most. What sort of thing? The best. God is the best. So he should be loved the most. The key terms in the passage are ‘God’, ‘good’, and ‘love’. Scotus thinks that by grasping the meanings of these terms we just see that God must be loved above all. The mysterious normative connection between love and the good, such that the highest good by nature deserves our highest love, is supposed to be what it is independent of any divine willing or thinking about it. God has no choice at all about his status as that highest good which all lovers must love above all. Noteworthy here is that the relevant terms characterize the divine nature apart from any consideration of divine willing. He does not will there to be goodness or love; he is these by nature.

### **Logically possible for whom?**

So Scotus thinks that the truth of the proposition that God must be loved is due to the meanings of its terms and not to divine fiat. Granting this, there is still a puzzle about how this fact is supposed to constrain God’s willing, which is, after all, supposed to extend to whatever is logically possible. Notice that it is logically possible to hate or otherwise fail to love God. Scotus

---

<sup>13</sup> *Ord.* III.27.un.14 (V 10.52); trans. Thomas Williams in *John Duns Scotus: Selected Writings on* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 162.



agrees, since he thinks that angels and humans can hate God.<sup>14</sup> But God can do anything which does not include a contradiction. So he should be able to hate himself. But he can't. Why not? Moreover, a command to hate or otherwise fail to love God, is, *prima facie*, logically possible—think of an evil tyrant decreeing, “Don't love God.” From this, together with a premise asserting that a divine command establishes an obligation on those he commands, it follows that God should be able to make it forbidden to love God. But God can't do this, according to Scotus. Why not? To see why not, in both cases, it is crucial to heavily qualify what Scotus means when he says that God can do anything that does not include a contradiction.

If we're wondering whether it is logically possible that some agent, *x*, perform some action, *A*, we might check whether *A*'s terms are non-repugnant. Thus, “*x* kicks a soccer ball” turns out fine because kicking and soccer balls are non-repugnant, while “*x* kicks music” is not fine because music isn't the sort of thing that can be kicked. But notice that in making the judgments that “*x A*'s” is possible where *A* = *kicks a soccer ball* and impossible where *A* = *kicks music*, we're assuming “normal” values for *x*, such as human beings. But really we need to consider the whole proposition. Kicking a soccer ball, as such, is a possible action (unlike kicking music), but a paramecium cannot kick a soccer ball, and neither can a fountain pen. Kicking a soccer ball is a possible action *for human beings* and other relevantly similar things. So elephants can probably be soccer ball kickers, and probably some robots, but not napkins or clouds. In general, to judge whether “*x A*'s” is logically possible, we need to consider the *A*-ing in relation to the *x*. We assess the logical possibility of the whole proposition by making a judgment about repugnance or non-repugnance of all relevant terms in the proposition, in light of the ordering of the terms in a proposition, including the subject term.

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ord.* II.6.2.78 (V 8.65); *Ord.* II.43.un (V 8.483-7); trans. Williams, 122, 151-2.

I think we need to say the same thing about propositions asserting some divine action. “God creates” is logically possible because creating is within the scope of divine power and *not just* because creating as such is a possible action, as is obvious when we consider that “A soccer ball creates” is logically impossible due to the repugnance of the subject term with the verb. (If we are being strict about syllogistic form, we could change the sentences to “God is creator” and “Soccer ball is creator.”) Now Scotus thinks that “God loves himself” is logically necessary and therefore thinks that propositions like “God fails to love God” and “God hates God” are logically impossible. As we’ve seen, however, failing to love God or hating God are possible actions for humans and angels. So the logical impossibility of “God hates God” is not due to the meaning of the terms expressing the action, but rather to the meaning of both the action terms and the subject term. These reflections yield what might otherwise seem a counterintuitive result, namely that there are things possible for us to do which are logically impossible for God to do (e.g., failing to love God, hating God). In the language of Scotus’s definitions of logical modalities, we can say that the “terms” *God* and *failing to love God* are opposed to each other. God’s power means, not that God can do whatever is logically possible but rather that God can do whatever it is logically possible *for God* to do, namely, all those things that are logically compatible with divine attributes such as goodness and omniscience.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> For similar points, see Wes Morriston, “Omnipotence and Necessary Moral Perfection: Are They Compatible?” *Religious Studies* 37.2 (2001): 143-60; Graham Oppy, “Omnipotence,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 71.1 (2005): 58-84.

Now the strongest single piece of evidence for an extreme or “unmitigated” interpretation of Scotus is the radical-sounding claim that God can do whatever is logically possible.<sup>16</sup> But if my reflections are correct and what is logically possible *for God* to do is a smaller class than the logically possible to do as such, then the radical-sounding claim loses a great deal of its evidential value for the extreme reading. Speculations about what practical propositions God can make true cannot just focus on the logical consistency of the content of the proposition but also on the consistency of the content of the proposition with a *divine* action of making it true. Only by including the divine nature in our reflections about what it is logically possible for God to do can we make sense of Scotus’s assertion that God cannot will or act in any way contrary to the maxim that God must be loved.

### **Why can’t God hate God?**

We are now in a position to answer our questions from the beginning of the previous section: *Why can’t God hate God?* and *Why can’t God make it obligatory or permissible for us to hate him?* I will answer each of these in turn. First, God cannot fail to love God. Failing to love God is logically possible, but it is not logically possible that God fail to love God. As Scotus argues, God by nature has intellect and will and is therefore capable of happiness. Moreover, God has no potentiality—no unrealized perfections—so he is actually happy. Only by loving and knowing God can a person be happy. So God loves God.<sup>17</sup> The argument reaches its conclusion through premises

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ord.* IV.46.1.25 (V 14.204); *Ord.* I.44.un.7 (V 6.366). Williams, “A Most Methodical Lover? On Scotus’s Arbitrary Creator,” 171. The term “unmitigated” in this context comes from Williams, “The Unmitigated Scotus.”

<sup>17</sup> *Ord.* III.32.un.7 (V 10.130); trans. Williams, 187.

about the divine nature, not divine freedom. God has no choice about whether to love himself. He just does, by nature.

### **Why can't God make it right for us to hate him?**

Second, God cannot permit or obligate anyone else to fail to love God. To explain this, I need to make a clarification. By “failing to love God” I mean “never loving God.” Scotus does think that it is morally permissible not to be always actively loving God (e.g., by praying to him adoringly or contemplating him piously), so there’s a sense in which Scotus is happy to say that failing to love God is permissible.<sup>18</sup> So the claim we’re really dealing with here is that God cannot permit or obligate anyone else never to love God. Scotus says explicitly that God cannot dispense anyone from his obligation to love God, from which it follows that God cannot obligate anyone never to love God. But Scotus does not argue for the claim that God cannot so dispense.<sup>19</sup> On his behalf we might reason that, were God to issue a command such as “never love me,” either (i) the command would generate a moral obligation not to love God or (ii) it would not. (i) Were it to generate a moral obligation, then an agent would have inconsistent moral obligations, an obligation never to love God stemming from the divine command, and an obligation to love God stemming from the logically necessary maxim that God must be loved. To fulfill one obligation would be to violate the other. There does not seem to be anything logically impossible about being under inconsistent moral obligations. But, plausibly, it is bad of one person, x, to cause another person, y, to be under inconsistent moral obligations if x can act well and not cause y to be under inconsistent moral obligations. But God is not bad, and God can act well without placing anyone

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ord.* III.37.un.21-3 (V 10.281-2); trans. Williams, 253.

<sup>19</sup> *Ord.* III.37.un.20 (V 10.280-1); trans. Williams, 252.

under inconsistent moral obligations, so God *could not possibly* will to obligate someone never to love him. (ii) Alternatively, if the command never to love God were to fail to generate a moral obligation, then God would be frustrated in his legislative intentions. But God cannot be frustrated; he gets what he wants. So he *could not possibly* issue a command which could not generate a moral obligation. Either way, then—whether or not a divine command never to love God succeeds in obligating someone never to love God—we can see that it is not possible *for God* to issue such a command. And we can run through very similar arguments against the possibility of God’s issuing an edict *permitting* never loving God, such as “you are permitted never to love me.” The fact we appeal to in concluding that God could not do either is the divine nature, in particular God’s lacking the properties of being bad and being liable to frustration. God has no choice but to concur with the logically necessary practical necessity that God must be loved. He just does, by nature. There may be more rigorous ways to argue for the conclusion that God cannot permit or obligate anyone never to love God, but the programmatic lesson here is simply that any more ambitious attempt to make sense of God’s inability to do this must appeal to features of divine nature.

### **From love to obedience**

By the way, the logically necessary practical requirement to love God seems to me to entail a practical requirement to obey divine commands. John Hare has hit upon the same thought. Loving God, he says, interpreting Scotus, is “to repeat in our wills [...] God’s will for our willing. But willing what God wills for our willing is obedience. So it is necessarily true not just that God is to be loved, but that God is to be obeyed.”<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> John Hare, *God’s Command* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 18.

One of the conceptual problems with divine command theories is that they cannot show that we have a moral obligation to obey divine commands. A divine command theory is usually taken to assert that, for any action, an action's having the property of being morally required is due to some divine command. But obeying a divine command is a kind of action. Either God has commanded it or has not. If not then there is no moral requirement to obey God's commandments. If God has, then obeying a divine command is morally required because God has commanded it, which appears to generate an infinite regress or vicious circle of explanation.<sup>21</sup> What we need, then, is some other explanation of our duty to obey divine commands. If it is logically necessary that we ought to love God, and if loving God entails obeying divine commands, then we get just such an explanation, and a very nice one, too. Whether or not such a view would count as a divine command theory is for others to decide.

### **Moderating readers rejoice!**

I have reflected with Scotus on the sort of moral truths which do not depend on God's will for their obtaining. I showed that Scotus recognizes a natural normative link between love and the good which he thinks entitles him to assert that we have a moral obligation to love God above all things, a moral obligation which does not depend on God's will. Since God can do anything logically possible, but cannot fail to love himself or make it the case that we are not obligated to love him, it is logically necessary that God must be loved. But in order to make plausible the idea that this practical necessity is *logically necessary*, we must, I argued, understand Scotus's claim

---

<sup>21</sup> Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 90; Ralph Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 18-9; Mark Schroeder, "Cudworth and Normative Explanations," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 1.3 (2005): 1-27 (2-3).

that God can do anything logically possible as asserting that God can do anything logically possible *for God* to do, that is, anything consistent with God's being what God is. But divine nature is supremely good, wise, etc., and these facts ought to keep us sober-minded about Scotus's views of the real range of God's powers with respect to what practical propositions he can and cannot make true.

Before closing, I want to consider briefly Thomas Williams' interpretation of a text on God's justice which, if correct, would be in tension with the moderating reading I've advanced here. In the question on whether there is justice in God, Scotus recognizes a sense of justice which arises from the natures of creatures. What is just for them is to lack nothing which they need for their flourishing.<sup>22</sup> But Scotus is very clear that God's justice "does not determine the divine will to what is just [for creatures]."<sup>23</sup> Williams has argued very rigorously that Scotus's question on justice in God firmly establishes that God is just no matter what God wills for creatures—he is just even if he does not will for creatures that they have what creaturely justice demands they have.<sup>24</sup> Now, I have argued that God's nature entails significant restrictions on what is logically possible for God to will, which appears to be at odds with Williams' reading of Scotus's text on divine justice. So is the text on God's justice a problem text? I don't think so.

Let me say first that I agree with Williams' interpretation of Scotus on divine justice. I think he shows that Allan Wolter interpreted the text incorrectly when Wolter used it to argue that God's

---

<sup>22</sup> *Ord.* IV.46.1.35 (V 14.206-7); trans. Williams, 324.

<sup>23</sup> *Ord.* IV.46.1.36 (V 14.207); trans. Williams, 324.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, "A Most Methodical Lover? On Scotus's Arbitrary Creator," 169-202.

justice entails that God is bound to give creatures what their natures require.<sup>25</sup> But I do not think that this text can be used to settle questions about what moral laws God can or cannot establish. That God is not determined by the demands of creaturely justice to give to them what they are due is evident from the fact that so many creatures do not get what they need for their flourishing. But God's freedom to order the world in such a way that creatures in fact don't get what their natures demand does not tell us anything at all about what moral laws God can or cannot establish. It's simply invalid to move from "God has ordered the world in such a way that little babies have been left in the cold to die," to "God can make it obligatory for us to leave little babies in the cold to die." Much more revealing about Scotus's view of the nature of morality, in the question on God's justice, is that *Scotus thinks there is such a thing as creaturely justice*, a normative quality in the creaturely order which is what it is simply due to that order's being what it is.

All readers of Scotus's ethics acknowledge that he thought that there are some necessary moral truths. So even the most extreme readings of Scotus acknowledge some constraints on the moral truths over which God's freedom ranges. Moderating readers of Scotus try to make further constraints by appealing to divine attributes such as God's justice, wisdom, or goodness.<sup>27</sup> Surely

---

<sup>25</sup> Wolter, *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, 19. Wolter's mistake seems to recur in Borland and Hillman, "Scotus and God's Arbitrary Will," 414-15, in which the authors assert that for Scotus, God has a duty toward creatures once he creates them (but nevertheless freely fulfills this duty).

<sup>27</sup> Other moderating efforts, focused on different aspects of Scotus's ethics, include Irwin, *The Development of Ethics: Volume 1*, 693-5; Cross, *Duns Scotus*, 92; C.P. Ragland, "Scotus on the Decalogue: What Sort of Voluntarism," *Vivarium* 36.1 (1998): 67-81; Borland and Hillman, "Scotus and God's Arbitrary Will: A Reassessment," Mary Beth Ingham, "Duns Scotus, Morality, and Happiness," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 74.2 (2000): 173-195; Mary Beth Ingham, "Letting Scotus Speak for Himself," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 10 (2001): 173-216;



a *good* God just *couldn't* make it the case that we ought to, or may, do some bad thing which we just *know* is bad! Then the careful moderating reader must make an attempt to square this plausible intuition with those texts of Scotus's to which the unmitigating readers would appeal, the strongest of which assert God's power to do whatever is non-contradictory. I share this moderating bent. My contribution here has been to demonstrate that Scotus is deeply committed to God's good character placing enormous restrictions on what God is able to will. Scotus's claim that God can do whatever does not involve a contradiction, together with his claims that God must love God and that God cannot make it the case that it is obligatory or permissible never to love God, *entail* that there are some actions which are logically possible for some agents to do but not logically possible for God to do (e.g., hating God is possible for us but not for God). Thus, when Scotus says that God can do whatever does not include a contradiction, demonstrably this means that God can do whatever is logically possible *for God* to do—that is, whatever is logically compatible with the divine attributes. Moderating readers, rejoice; we have what we've hoped for!

Thomas M. Ward

*Department of Philosophy*

*Baylor University*

*Waco, Texas, USA*

---

Allan B. Wolter, "The Unshredded Scotus: A Response to Thomas Williams," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 77.3 (1998): 315-356.