

## 9 Human nature

Nothing in medieval philosophy was more fiercely contested than the topic of human nature. Among the many questions discussed were the nature of the soul, the relationship between the soul and the mind, the workings of sense and intellect, the role of the passions, the limits to human freedom, and the extent of our dependence on divine grace and illumination. Yet these disputes, though wide-ranging, were fought in the context of general agreement on a number of basic issues. There was general agreement that human beings have a soul but are not merely souls – that they are composites of soul and body. There was also agreement that the human soul is immaterial and created by God; it does not come into existence naturally, as the souls of other animals do. Likewise, almost all agreed that the soul does not preexist the body,<sup>1</sup> that God brings it into existence once the fetus has sufficiently developed, and that, once created, the soul will exist forever – that it is incorruptible. The story of medieval thinking on human nature concerns how this general framework was developed in various and conflicting ways and how these various theses could be proved philosophically – if indeed they could be proved at all.

### MIND AND BODY AND SOUL

It is hard to imagine a more impressive start to medieval thinking about human nature than the writings of Augustine. “Refuse to go outside,” he advised. “Return to yourself. Truth dwells within” (*Of True Religion* 39.72). Remarks like these announced a major shift in philosophical thought. Rather than looking to the physical world

for fundamental truths, or to an abstract realm of Forms, Augustine proposed a first-person method. Look within.

The truth Augustine sought was not only truth about ourselves. By looking within, he thought, we could gain some understanding of the nature of God as this was professed in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The distinctness of memory, understanding, and will, combined with their mutual inclusion of one another, made the mind an image, albeit a distant one, of the three Persons that are God (*Trinity* X-XV). In striving toward this height, however, Augustine established fundamental conclusions about our own nature. What is a body? Something that occupies space in such a way that a part of it occupies less space than the whole (X 7.9).<sup>2</sup> What is the mind? Those fixated on the senses and images of the physical world suppose that the mind is some kind of body, or perhaps a harmonious state of the body. For our mind to suppose this is for it to confuse sensory images with its very self, to add something physical to what it knows itself to be. "Let it set aside what it *thinks* itself to be, and discern what it *knows*" (X 10.13). What the mind knows – what every mind knows – is that it is a thing that thinks:

Who would doubt that he lives, remembers, understands, wills, thinks, knows, and judges? For if he doubts, he lives; if he doubts, he remembers why he doubts; if he doubts, he understands that he doubts; if he doubts, he wants to be certain; if he doubts, he thinks; if he doubts, he knows that he does not know; if he doubts, he judges that he should not rashly consent. (X 10.14)<sup>3</sup>

In knowing all this about itself, the mind knows its very self. Whereas others suppose that willing and understanding are qualities inhering in some further substance, Augustine insists that the mind grasps its own nature with certainty: "a thing is not said to be known in any way when its substance is unknown" (X 10.16). Hence we know what the mind is, simply by looking within ourselves: our mind just is our own thinking, willing, and understanding. This inward-directed method dominated western thought for centuries. In 1077 Anselm began his famous proof for the existence of God with the injunction to "enter into the chamber of your mind; exclude everything but God and what helps you to search for him, and then search for him, with the door closed" (*Proslogion* 1). For Bonaventure in 1259 the

mind's journey to God begins with the external world and then leads us "to reenter ourselves – that is, into our mind, in which the divine image shines" (*Itinerarium mentis in Deum* 3.1). Despite Bonaventure's best efforts, however, philosophy changed course dramatically in the thirteenth century, as it absorbed new influences from Aristotle and Islamic thought. Although authors such as Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus labored mightily to meld Augustine and Aristotle, the two approaches to human nature could hardly have been more different. In place of Augustine's introspective method, which tended to leave the body behind in focusing on the *mind*, the Aristotelians made an essentially biological notion of *soul* the model for their understanding of our nature as well as that of other animals. Instead of treating thought as the essence of mind, they treated it as merely its activity, and took mind to be a faculty of the human soul. As for the soul itself, its nature was said to be unknown, or at least unavailable to introspection. As Thomas Aquinas put it, "The human intellect neither is its understanding, nor has its own essence as the first object of its understanding. Instead, something external, the nature of a material thing, is its first object" (*ST I*, q. 87, a. 3).

This is not to say that scholastic Aristotelians regarded the soul as a complete mystery. It was axiomatic for them that the soul is the *first principle of life* – that is, the most basic internal explanation for why plants and animals are alive (see Aristotle, *De anima* II 1). To be alive, on this account, just is to engage in the operations that characterize all or some living things: taking nourishment, growing, reproducing, moving, perceiving, desiring, and thinking. Hence the soul was conceived of as having assorted powers for producing these various functions and was divided into functional parts: five, according to Aristotle, or three in Avicenna's more standard account: vegetative (= nutritive), sensory, and rational. (Aristotle added appetitive and locomotive.<sup>4</sup>) The soul actualizes the body, which is to say that soul and body are related to one another as form to matter. Encouraged by Aristotle's remark that "It is not necessary to ask whether the soul and its body are one, just as we do not ask about wax and its shape" (*De anima* II 1, 412b6–7), scholastic authors supposed that this kind of hylomorphic (that is, matter-form) framework could solve the perennial problem of unifying soul and body. The diversity of plans for doing this suggests that the solution was not self-evident.

Scholastic accounts of the soul-body relationship fall into two broad classes. First, there were those that treated human beings as composites of matter and a series of forms, so that the initial unformed matter (prime matter or, more literally, "first matter") is shaped by a corporeal form, and this form-matter composite is at the same time shaped by a further form, all the way up to the ultimate form, the rational soul. Among early scholastic authors, it was standard to follow the eleventh-century Jewish philosopher Ibn Gabirol (Avicenna) in supposing that human beings are composed of many such essential or substantial forms: corporeal, nutritive, sensory, rational, and perhaps still more (*Fons vitae* IV 3). For later authors like Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus, a human being is composed of just two substantial forms: a corporeal form for the body, plus the rational soul.<sup>5</sup> A second class of theories held that the rational soul is the only substantial form of a human being, that it both shapes the body and gives rise to all the capacities associated with life. This unitarian account was first articulated by Thomas Aquinas. It was perhaps his most original and most divisive contribution to philosophy. One critic, Peter John Olivi, referred to it as a "brutal error," and it was condemned by successive archbishops of Canterbury.<sup>6</sup>

There were several reasons why the issue was so controversial. First, the substantial form was thought to fix the identity conditions of whatever it informs. That is, a body remains the same body only as long as it retains the same form. But if a human being has only one substantial form, then the body goes out of existence at the moment of death, when soul and body separate. Aquinas wholly endorsed this result, remarking that "Just as one does not speak of an animal and a human being once the soul has left – unless equivocally, in the way we speak of a painted or sculpted animal – so too for the hand and eye, or flesh and bones" (*ST* I, q. 76, a. 8; cf. Aristotle, *De anima* II 1, 412b19–22). In addition to raising various theological problems,<sup>7</sup> this result struck many as absurd. Ockham, for instance (*Quodlibet* II 11), wondered what could possibly explain why something new (a corpse) comes into existence at death with all (or virtually all) of the physical qualities possessed by the living body. Surely it is much easier to suppose that the same body endures through death. But this can be so only if it has its own substantial form, apart from the soul.

Underlying this debate was a further and more general worry about the cogency of Aquinas's account. As noted already, all sides agreed

that the rational soul is immaterial. But how can it be immaterial and at the same time the form of the body? This was an issue that all scholastics had to confront, especially after 1312 when the Council of Vienne declared it heretical to hold that "the rational or intellectual soul is not *per se* and essentially the form of the human body."<sup>8</sup> But the problem was especially pressing for Aquinas and his followers, because they needed the rational soul to give shape to the body, to give rise to the body's nutritive operations, to be the inner principle behind sensation, *and at the same time* to be immaterial. How can the soul do all of those things and yet be immaterial? Aquinas's solution (*ST I*, q. 77) rests on a distinction between the soul's essence and its powers. In its own right, the soul is a substantial form, whose essence is unknown or at least hidden. What we can know of the soul is what we can observe of its operations, which leads us to infer that the soul has certain powers. These powers "flow" from the soul's essence, but they are not that essence. Hence the human soul gives rise to our ability to digest food, which is as physical a process as anything in nature. But the human soul also gives rise to our capacity for thought, which all agreed is not a physical process. Since Aquinas distinguished the soul and its powers, he saw no difficulty in reconciling these roles. His opponents, adhering more closely to Augustine's conception of mind, refused to distinguish the soul's essence and its powers, a stance made easier by their pluralism regarding substantial form.

By identifying the rational soul as a human being's only substantial form, Aquinas made considerable trouble for himself and his followers. But he claimed one notable advantage for his account: its contribution to solving the soul-body problem. What exactly was this problem? In contrast with early modern thinkers, medieval philosophers did not regard the soul-body problem as a problem about causality. The notion of an immaterial being acting on matter was considered unproblematic, and although causation in the other direction was generally not allowed, causality in one direction was enough to explain interaction. For the body to act on the soul's immaterial powers – intellect and will – bodily information was simply transformed by the intellect into an immaterial state.<sup>9</sup> The medieval version of the soul-body problem was instead the problem of how to reply to Platonic dualism. Although almost none of Plato's writings were known at first hand, authors like the fourth-century Nemesius

of Emesa had described how Plato "did not hold that an animal is made up of soul and body, but that it is the soul using the body and (as it were) wearing the body." As Nemesius observed, "This claim raises a problem: How can the soul be one with what it wears? For a shirt is not one with the person wearing it" (*De natura hominis* 3 [375] 51-52). Augustine had insisted that a human being is soul *and* body (*City of God* XIX 3), but he had little to say about how the two parts of the soul-body pair were bound together. Aristotelian hylomorphism saw the soul as actualizing a potentially living body, but this did not by itself solve the problem of the unity of the individual human being. Scotus, who pursued metaphysical questions farther and deeper than anyone else in the Middle Ages, simply granted that "there is no cause for why this actuality and that potentiality make one thing *per se* . . . except that this is potentiality with respect to that, and that is actuality" (*Ordinatio* IV.11.3.53 [282] VIII 652-53). Nothing more can be said.

Aquinas could say something more. As noted earlier, the substantial form supplies the identity conditions for a body and each of its parts. Each part exists just as long as it is actualized by the form of the whole of which it is a part. Moreover, the substantial form was understood to play a causal role in sustaining all the intrinsic properties of a substance. Substances have the enduring characteristics they do because of their distinctive underlying form.<sup>10</sup> This conception of form yields an exceptionally clear account of substantial unity: since its form is what individuates and causally sustains all the parts of a substance, none of them can exist or endure apart from it. Therefore, if the human soul is the one substantial form of the human being, body turns out to be indivisible from soul in the strongest sense. Unsurprisingly, given its explanatory force (and the way it still leaves room for the soul to exist apart from the body), Aquinas's unitarian account would become the dominant view by the end of the era.<sup>11</sup>

#### COGNITION

Among the various ancient schools of philosophy, none posed a more serious challenge to Christianity than skepticism. One might be a Christian and a Platonist, like Augustine, or a Christian and an Aristotelian, like Aquinas, or conceivably even a Christian and a

Stoic. But it is hard to see how the beliefs of a Christian could be reconciled with a skeptic's suspension of all belief.<sup>12</sup> Augustine described in the *Confessions* how he fell under the sway of skepticism for a time, becoming someone who had "lost all hope of discovering the truth" (VI 1) and "believed it impossible to find the way of life" (VI 2). He quickly came to reject this stance, diagnosing the skeptic as someone who mistakenly holds out for the wrong standard of certainty: "I wanted to become as certain about things I could not see as I was certain that seven and three are ten . . . I desired other things to be just like this" (VI 4). Those who limit their beliefs to what meets this test will be doomed to withhold assent in almost all cases. But why should this be the standard for adequate justification? Why is that kind of certainty the only acceptable kind? We have already seen Augustine appeal to self-knowledge for one kind of certainty. In other cases he defends a more relaxed standard of justification, one that leaves a prominent place for the evidence of the senses and, crucially, the authority of others:

I considered the innumerable things I believed that I had not seen, events that occurred when I was not present . . . many facts concerning places and cities that I had never seen, many things accepted on the word of friends, many from physicians, many from other people. Unless we believed what we were told, we would do nothing at all in this life. (VI 5)

If this holds true in everyday life, it holds all the more true where religious belief is concerned. In this way, Augustine turns the challenge of skepticism to the advantage of Christianity, arguing that the lack of certainty that threatens theistic belief in fact threatens all our beliefs. If we have good reasons for rejecting global skepticism, then we should consider whether these might also be good reasons for rejecting religious skepticism.<sup>13</sup>

Later thinkers seem to have regarded Augustine's treatment of these issues as decisive. Skepticism simply ceased to be a prominent topic of discussion until the end of the Middle Ages. Instead, attention was focused on how knowledge is acquired. Here the issue was not how to define knowledge – the question that Plato originally posed and that dominated later twentieth-century epistemology – but how to understand the cognitive operations that generate it. The complex and sophisticated theories of cognition developed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had various roots. Most

obviously, there were Aristotle's brief remarks on the intellect and his more detailed discussion of sensation. Equally important were Augustine's extensive observations on mind and perception, in the *Trinity* and elsewhere. A third major source was the Islamic tradition, particularly Alhazen's influential treatise on optics and Avicenna's brilliant and original development of Aristotle's thought.

All medieval work on cognition takes as its basis a fundamental distinction between sense and intellect. The sensory powers were indeed regarded as powers of the soul, but they were taken to be powers that require physical organs, and that we share with nonrational animals. Writing a half-century before Descartes's depiction of lower animals as nonsentient machines, Francisco Suárez noted a similar tendency in some of his contemporaries. "This view is intolerable and enormously paradoxical," he wrote (*De anima* I 5), given that we have the same sensory organs inside and out, the same kinds of behavior in response to stimulus, and the same ability to store memories of particular impressions. In all, Suárez argued, we have as much evidence for sensation in animals as we do in infants and the severely retarded.

Human beings are special among the animals, for medieval thinkers, because we have a mind, a cognitive power that is not part of the brain or in any way physical. Such immateriality was taken to explain how the mind could engage in abstract, conceptual thought. Whereas the physical senses were limited to the apprehension of particular images and objects, the intellect was regarded as unlimited in its representational scope, able to grasp not just a particular quality but the very nature of the quality, a nature that was the same in all individuals possessing the quality.<sup>14</sup> Hence the mark of the mental was not intentionality but conceptualization, and the divide between the physical and the nonphysical was located not at the boundary of consciousness but at the boundary of abstract thought.

Medieval philosophers devoted primary attention to the mind, but the senses were not ignored. Avicenna proposed a distinction that became fundamental between two kinds of sensory objects, forms and intentions (*Liber de anima* I 5 [115] 86). In general, a form is the kind of sense object that the five external senses are suited to grasp: color, size, shape, sound, and so forth. An *intention* is a characteristic of the object that gets conveyed by the object's form but that cannot be detected by the five senses themselves. This terminology allows



Avicenna to distinguish two levels of sensory processing, which he describes as the external and the internal level. The external senses are the familiar five senses, which have particular sensory qualities as their objects. There are likewise five internal senses (*Liber de anima* I 5, II 2, and IV I [115] I 87–90 and 117–19, II 1–11; *Najat* II 6 §3 [119] 30–31):

- common sense (also called phantasia), which collects impressions from all five of the external senses
- imagination (also called the formative power), which retains the images collected in the common sense
- the imaginative power (in human beings: the cogitative power), which composes and divides sensory images
- the estimative power, which makes judgments that go beyond external appearances (the sheep recognizes it should flee the wolf)
- the power for memory (in human beings: recollection), which retains impressions formed by the estimative power

This terminology is drawn largely from Aristotle, augmented by a complex earlier Islamic tradition.<sup>15</sup> But Avicenna goes well beyond Aristotle's uncertain suggestions by collecting these disparate faculties under the heading of internal senses and giving them specific locations in the brain and definite functions. Later medieval authors – notably Averroes (*Liber de medicina* II 20), Albert the Great (*De homine*, qq. 35–41), and Aquinas (*ST* I, q. 78, a. 4) – would develop their own accounts of the internal senses, building on Avicenna's suggestions and modifying the terminology in complex ways.

A theory of sensation requires some account of sensory representation. Within the internal senses the perceptible properties of bodies were said to be represented by *phantasms*. More generally, information from the external world was said to be passed to the senses and into the intellect through a series of forms or "*species*." Augustine had spoken of four such species: in the object, in the sense, in memory, and in the mind (*Trinity* XI 9.16). The most important medieval work in this area came from an eleventh-century Islamic author, Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham), whose *Optics* has to count as the most impressive premodern account of perception. In careful detail, Alhazen studied the physical and psychological underpinnings of vision, tracing the propagation of visual forms through the medium

and into the eye and exploring the ways in which we thereby acquire information about the various sensible properties of the object, such as its color, distance, shape, size, motion, and so forth. Latin authors, led by Roger Bacon, studied this work in the thirteenth century, and it quickly became standard to conceive of cognition as the product of a multiplication of forms or species through the air, into the sensory organs, and ultimately into intellect.<sup>16</sup>

There was general agreement that all such species, even the abstract "intelligible" species, represent objects in virtue of somehow being likenesses of them. Beyond this, however, there was considerable disagreement about how species play their representational role. Among thirteenth-century authors, for example, Robert Kilwardby followed some remarks of Augustine's in holding that sensible qualities make a physical impression on the sensory organs, producing a species there, and that sensation occurs when the immaterial sensory soul then perceives those impressions (*On Imagination*, ch. 3).<sup>17</sup> Aquinas, in contrast, took a more Aristotelian line, holding that the sensory organ's reception of a species just is the sensation.<sup>18</sup> On this kind of view, sensation is a physical event, a passive informing of the sense organ from outside. Later in the thirteenth century Olivi attacked views of this second sort for their passivity and attacked views of the first sort for making the internal impression the object of perception. On Olivi's own view, perception occurs in virtue of the mind's "virtual attention" outward to the objects themselves.<sup>19</sup> The mechanisms of this account are obscure, but it is clear that Olivi wanted to eliminate both sensible and intelligible species in favor of a direct grasp of the object itself. Although Aquinas insisted that the species is not the thing perceived, but that *by which* external things are perceived (see, e.g., *ST I*, q. 85, a. 2), Olivi claimed that a species must inevitably "veil the external thing and impede its being attended to in itself as if present" (*II Sent.*, q. 58, ad 14 [271] II 469). This debate went on through the Middle Ages and began again with Locke and his critics, this time over the role of *ideas*.

Some issues regarding the senses had parallels for intellect. Those who rejected sensible species, such as Olivi and later Ockham, also rejected intelligible species.<sup>20</sup> Aquinas's account of sensory passivity also held at the intellectual level: "Our intellect's operation consists in being acted on in a certain way" (*ST I*, q. 79, a. 2) – it consists, in other words, in receiving intelligible species. There were also

enormous differences between the sensory and intellectual levels. Most significantly, philosophers in the Aristotelian tradition distinguished between two intellectual powers, the agent intellect and the possible intellect (or, more aptly, the active and receptive intellects). The possible intellect starts out as a *tabula rasa*, building up conceptual knowledge through sensory input. The agent intellect is responsible for transforming that sensory data into something intelligible. This is to say that the agent intellect, through the process of abstraction, takes information that is material and particular and makes it into something immaterial and abstract. In this way, the perception of a black cat can give rise to the concept *black* or the concept *cat*.

Everything about the agent intellect was obscure and controversial. It was supposed to perform its transformative operation by abstraction, but there seems to have been little understanding of how that would work.<sup>21</sup> One possible reason for the neglect of this issue is that medieval energies were focused on a more basic question: is the agent intellect even a part of the human soul? Aristotle's remarks on this topic (*De anima* III 5) were cryptic, and later medieval authors were confronted with a confusing jumble of philosophical authorities. Avicenna, whose views were particularly influential, conceived of the agent intellect as a separate substance, related to the human soul as the sun is related to our eyes (*Liber de anima* V 5 [115] II 127). This view was endorsed by prominent Christians, including Roger Bacon (*Opus tertium*, ch. 23; *Opera . . . inedita*, ed. J. S. Brewer [London, 1859]) and Henry of Ghent (*Quodlibet* IX 15). Just as influential, and much more controversial, was Averroes, who sometimes seems to have thought that both the agent intellect and the possible intellect are separate substances (e.g., *Commentarium magnum de anima* III 5). This peculiar sounding doctrine of *monopsychism*, according to which one intellect is shared by all human beings, was embraced by some arts masters in the thirteenth century – in particular, Siger of Brabant (see his *Questions on De anima* III) – but was fiercely rejected by theologians such as Bonaventure and Aquinas. Bonaventure, writing in the early 1250s, held that “however one dresses up [*coloret*] this view, it is bad and heretical: for it goes against the Christian religion . . . against right reason . . . and against sensory experience” (II *Sent.* 18.2.1).<sup>22</sup>

How could anyone believe that all human beings share a single intellect? The theory sounds less odd when considered in its broader

context. First, Aristotle's brief remarks on the intellect have struck many as inviting such a conclusion.<sup>23</sup> For Christians, moreover, this separate intellect could be identified with God, a line of thought that might seem to mesh with the Augustinian conception of divine illumination. Augustine had famously argued that at least some human knowledge is attainable only if we are illuminated by God:

When we deal with things that we perceive by the mind, namely by the intellect and reason, we are speaking of things that we look upon immediately in the inner light of Truth, in virtue of which the so-called inner man is illuminated and rejoices... When I'm stating truths, I don't even teach the person who is looking upon these truths. He is taught not by my words but by the things themselves made manifest within when God discloses them. (*The Teacher* 12.40)

Although Augustine never supposed that human beings lack their own intellects, he so stressed our dependence on a light of truth above the mind as to make the mind itself seem incomplete.

Divine illumination held a central place in medieval epistemology until the thirteenth century, when it was gradually displaced by Aristotelian empiricism. Bonaventure staunchly remarked that "the light of a created intellect does not suffice for a certain comprehension of any thing without the light of the eternal Word" (*Christ our one teacher*, n. 10, *CT* III 84). He was well aware, however, that Aristotle's influence had to be acknowledged, and so he sought a compromise:

Although the soul is, according to Augustine, tied to the eternal laws, because it somehow attains that light through agent intellect's highest focus and through the higher part of reason, nevertheless it is undoubtedly true, in keeping with what the Philosopher says, that cognition is generated in us through the senses, memory, and experience, from which the universal is assembled in us, which is the source of art and knowledge. (*Christ our one teacher*, n. 18, *CT* III 88)

This is striking not only because Bonaventure leaves room for the empiricism of *Posterior Analytics* II 19, but also because even the Augustinian language of the first few lines has been infected with the Aristotelian agent intellect. By the end of the thirteenth century the next great Franciscan master, Duns Scotus, had dispensed with illumination entirely. When it comes to knowledge of "infallible truth, without doubt and deception," Scotus insisted that human

beings "can achieve this, by purely natural means" (*Ordinatio* I, d. 3.1, q. 4, n. 258). God does in a sense illuminate the mind, but he does so by making the world intelligible, giving it a structure and coherence such that our minds, on their own, can grasp truths in science, mathematics, and philosophy.<sup>24</sup>

The twilight of illuminationist epistemology coincided with renewed interest in skepticism. Henry of Ghent, still defending the theory of illumination in the 1270s, began his influential theological *Summa* with a series of articles on skepticism and illumination. The first article considers ancient skepticism at length, arguing to the contrary that human beings can apprehend a thing "as it is, without any mistake or deception" (*Summa quaestionum ordinariarum*, art. 1, q. 1, *CT* III 97). If this is what it means to know a thing, then Ghent concludes that human beings can have knowledge. But he goes on in the very next question to qualify this claim dramatically, remarking that if we limit ourselves to natural means then "it is altogether impossible for us to have an altogether certain and infallible cognition of truth" (q. 2, *CT* III 119). In this way, Henry continues to find a place for divine illumination.

By the fourteenth century illumination was no longer a topic of serious investigation. Disputes over skepticism and the limits of human knowledge now occurred most often in the context of a distinction between two types of cognition: abstractive and intuitive. Scotus introduced this terminology as a distinction between cognition that "abstracts from all existence" and cognition that "can be of a thing insofar as it is present in its existence" (*Lectura* II, d. 3.2, q. 2, n. 285). Imagination, then, counts as abstractive, whereas perception is ordinarily intuitive. Innocuous as this distinction seems, it became enormously influential and controversial. There were, in particular, disputes over how to define the two kinds of cognition and disputes over whether there could be intuitive cognition of non-existent objects. This in turn led philosophers and theologians to take more seriously the possibility of sensory illusion and intellectual error, issues that had not been seriously pursued since Augustine's era.<sup>25</sup>

The high-water mark of medieval skepticism came with Nicholas of Autrecourt. Writing to the Franciscan Bernard of Arezzo in the 1330s, Autrecourt begins with Bernard's definition of an intuitive cognition as that "through which we judge that a thing exists,

whether or not it does exist." Autrecourt argues that it follows from this definition that one can never be certain that a perception is veridical. Consequently, contrary to Aristotle's claim that "sensations are always true" (*De anima* III 3, 428a11), Autrecourt concludes that "you are not certain of the existence of the objects of the five senses" (first letter, n. 11). Moreover, "you are not certain whether anything appears to you at all" (n. 12), and indeed "you do not know whether your own intellect exists" (n. 15). In a second letter Autrecourt goes even farther, arguing that the principle of noncontradiction is the only firm footing for certain knowledge. But since virtually nothing of what passes for philosophical knowledge can be derived from that principle, "Aristotle in his entire natural and theoretical philosophy possessed such certainty of scarcely two conclusions, and perhaps not even of one" (second letter, n. 23).

#### WILL, PASSION, AND ACTION

It is sometimes said that the will is a medieval discovery and that ancient theories of human nature were developed in the complete absence of any such faculty. This is controversial,<sup>26</sup> but what seems clear is that Augustine was the first major philosopher to give a detailed account of the will in something like its modern sense. Fittingly, given Augustine's methodology, he first did so through reflection on his own case, in the *Confessions*, analyzing his tortured path toward religious conversion. The opening chapters of that autobiography trace his intellectual journey from careless adolescence through Manichaeism, skepticism, and Neoplatonism, and finally to complete acceptance of Christianity. But the real drama begins only at the point where "all doubt left me" (VII 10). This, he had supposed, would be the end of the story. But he came to discover that – contrary to Socrates in the *Protagoras* – knowing what is right is not sufficient for doing what is right. What was the problem?

I was held fast not by the iron of another but by my iron will. The enemy had a grip on my will and from there made a chain for me and bound me. From a distorted will comes lust, and servitude to lust becomes habit. When there is no resistance to habit, necessity follows. By these links, as it were, connected to one another (hence my term a chain), a harsh servitude held me under constraint. (VIII 5)

Although Augustine was intellectually ready to change his life, his will was not willing. How could this be? All that was necessary at this point was an act of will: "Not just the going but also the arriving there would have required nothing other than the willing to go" (VIII 8). What could prevent him from willing that which he wanted? The problem was that his will was split in two. What was necessary was "willing strongly and wholly, not the turning and twisting one way and another of a will half-wounded, struggling with one part rising up while the other part falls down" (VIII 19).

Later medieval authors debated at length the relationships between will and intellect and between will and the passions. What is perhaps most significant in these discussions is the conception of will as a faculty subject to complex dispositions. Just as we commonly think of the mind as acquiring beliefs and memories over time, Augustine conceives of the will as shaped by habitual decisions. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle had described how acquiring the right sort of habit from an early age "is very important, indeed all-important" (II 1, 1103b25). Augustine was no student of Aristotle, but he develops much the same point and situates it within his theory of the will. This would be crucial to later medieval ethics, according to which the all-important virtues of charity and justice are dispositions of the will.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, it was this conception of the will that shaped Augustine's theory of grace. Just as genuine understanding requires that the intellect be illuminated by God, so moral goodness requires that the will be infused with virtue. A will that has been badly habituated from a young age – like his own – can find itself in the iron grip of necessity. Such necessity made it literally impossible for Augustine to convert on his own. "The labor is beyond me until you open the way" (*Confessions* XI 22). As he grew older, Augustine came to put ever more stress on the role of grace, arguing that even the free acceptance of grace requires grace. In the end, he succeeded in having the contrary view of his contemporary Pelagius regarded as a heresy. These questions were destined to remain at the forefront of medieval thought. In the fourteenth century Thomas Bradwardine was so disturbed by some modern views that he composed an extensive treatise *On God's Cause against Pelagius*, arguing that "no philosophical or moral virtue is a true virtue, absolutely right or just, without charity and grace perfecting it." Without these, "every such action is in some way a sin" ([339] 327C).

Overshadowed by these notorious debates over grace was some very subtle late medieval work in action theory. Aquinas's theory of action – to take the most studied instance – is standardly said to involve twelve discrete steps on the way to a voluntary act.<sup>28</sup> Among the most pressing questions in this area was the relationship between reason and the passions. St. Paul had famously described how “The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh. They are in conflict with one another, and so you do not do the things you want” (Galatians 5:17). Augustine saw his own early years as an illustration of such remarks (cf. *Confessions* VIII 5). He came to analyze the phenomenon as a failure of will – not so much weakness of will, as we now call it, but a flawed disposition of will, making it impossible to will “strongly and wholly” in a way that would be efficacious.

Although the Pauline text suggests that spirit and flesh are matched in an even fight, medieval authors tended to view the relationship between the will and the passions as asymmetrical, inasmuch as only the will (*voluntas*) could give rise to voluntary actions.<sup>29</sup> If the passions were literally to conquer the will in the way Paul suggests, the resulting action would be an involuntary one, for which the agent would not be directly responsible. (Such cases would be exceedingly rare. Even then, one might be indirectly responsible for being disposed to have such overwhelming passions.) Moreover, most later medieval authors identified the will as “rational appetite,” meaning that it chooses what the intellect has judged to be good. This makes the conflict between will and passion still more puzzling, since the passions now seem ineligible to influence the will. Yet, of course, we do all suffer temptation. Indeed, Adam and Eve's original sin was thought to have made such temptation an inescapable part of this life. Thus not even St. Paul could keep his flesh from lusting against his spirit. To make sense of this influence, the flesh was viewed as doing its work indirectly, by shaping how the mind conceives of a situation.<sup>30</sup>

The description of will as rational appetite did not go unchallenged. One of the most interesting critiques was that of Scotus, who proposed two kinds of inclinations within the will. Developing a suggestion made by Anselm (*On the Fall of the Devil* ch. 14; *The Harmony of the Foreknowledge, the Predestination, and the Grace of God with Free Choice* ch. 19), Scotus distinguished between an



inclination for one's own advantage (*affectio commodi*) and an inclination for justice (*affectio iustitiae*). The first explains our inclination toward what is good for ourselves; this is the aspect of our will that Scotus thinks is captured by the phrase *rational appetite*, in virtue of which we pursue that which most contributes to our own happiness. We are also inclined, however, to do what is good regardless of whether it has any connection to ourselves. This inclination for justice explains our freedom to resist pure self-interest. In Scotus's view, it grounds our crucial capacity to love God for his own sake rather than for our own reward.<sup>31</sup>

#### FREEDOM AND IMMORTALITY

Differing conceptions of human nature lead directly to disagreements in ethics and political theory, the focus of the next three chapters in this volume. Two convictions were of fundamental importance to medieval authors in this regard: that human beings are free, and hence worthy subjects of praise and blame; and that human beings are immortal, and hence subject to eternal happiness or suffering. Though philosophers differed in how they analyzed and argued for these propositions, there was almost universal belief in their truth. Even Bradwardine, for all his anti-Pelagianism, acknowledged that "All the theologians, all the logicians, all the moral philosophers, and almost all the natural philosophers unanimously testify that free decision<sup>32</sup> must be posited" (*On God's Cause* [339] 443D). There was controversy, nevertheless, as to how freedom of will could be reconciled with divine providence, grace, and foreknowledge, on one hand, and with the determining influence of intellect, on the other. In the latter connection, it is common to speak of a theory being more or less intellectualist or voluntarist, depending on whether it gives a greater or lesser role to intellect or will. This is, however, not a very useful way to understand the debate, because all agreed that the will is crucial for free decision. The central question was *how* the will performs its crucial task. Specifically, how and to what extent is it determined by intellect and other forces? Philosophers today distinguish between *compatibilists*, who believe that the will can be free even if determined by outside factors, and *libertarians*, who argue that the will can move itself spontaneously. Much the same issues were in play during the Middle Ages, when the kind of

determinism in question was typically God's grace and providence or the intellect's judgment regarding what is best. Augustine once again was influential, but although his remarks on free will were extensive (see, e.g., *On Free Choice of the Will* III and *City of God* V 10), his views on the crucial issues are often hard to determine.<sup>33</sup> Anselm's views are likewise difficult to interpret, but he seems to come closer to something like compatibilism. He explicitly denies that free will requires the dual ability, at a single moment, to choose or not choose a thing, arguing that someone so upright as to be unable to sin is more free than someone who is able to either sin or not sin (*On Freedom of Choice*, ch. 1). Elsewhere he considers the case of an angel created in stages, who has been created up to the point of being "ready to will but not yet willing anything" (*On the Fall of the Devil*, ch. 12). This angel could not move itself to that first act of willing, Anselm claims, because "whatever moves itself to willing, first wills itself so to move." Since the angel, *ex hypothesi*, does not will anything, it cannot move itself to will, and so it needs something else to move it. Anselm thus seems to deny that the will has the power to move itself spontaneously.<sup>34</sup>

Scholastic philosophers debated this issue vigorously. Aquinas did not clearly defend either side (at any rate, scholars disagree on the point),<sup>35</sup> but the next generation of philosophers took clear positions. Henry of Ghent, Olivi, and Scotus defended a libertarian-style account. Godfrey of Fontaines and later John Buridan were in effect compatibilists.<sup>36</sup> Godfrey, writing in 1289, proposed that in discussing free will "We should not deny what is first and most certain because of ignorance and doubt about what is secondary." One such certain principle is that nothing can move itself.

Therefore if it seems to someone that, on the supposition that the will does not move itself, it is difficult to preserve the freedom that on his view he wants to posit in the will, in the way he likes, he should not on the basis of this secondary claim proceed to deny prior and more certain claims. Rather, on account of the certainty of the prior claims that he has to suppose, he should study how to make these compatible with the secondary claims. (*Quodlibet* VI 7 [275] 170)

In other words, rather than abandon a basic principle of metaphysics – that nothing can move itself – we should reconsider our assumptions about what freedom requires. Others would question

this alleged principle of metaphysics. Scotus, the most influential defender of the will's spontaneity, distinguished between two ways in which a thing might be indeterminate: either because it is insufficiently actualized, or because it has a "superabundant sufficiency" that allows it to move itself in any one of various ways (*Quaestiones super libros Metaphysicorum* IX 15.31-32 [285] 152-55; [284] 610). The will is special because it is indeterminate in this second way. So, given its exceptional nature, "it seems truly stupid to apply universal propositions about active principles to the will" (*Quaestiones* IX 15.44 [285] 158-59; [284] 614). As for why the will has this capacity, Scotus remarked – much as he had regarding the unity of body and soul (see above) – that there is no further explanation to be had. "There is no other cause to be given for why it chooses in this way except that it is such a cause . . . There is no other cause except that it is the will" (*Quaestiones* IX 15.24, 29 [285] 150-53; [284] 608, 610).<sup>37</sup>

Still, despite such disagreements, medieval authors were in broad agreement on the importance of the will and the reality of human freedom. The reason they could agree on this point was that they agreed on the connection between freedom and moral responsibility. Aquinas was merely stating a truism when he remarked that "Without free decision there could be no merit or demerit and no just punishment or reward" (*Truth*, q. 24, a. 1). Medieval views about just punishment and reward were, however, typically projected beyond the present life. In a sermon on the Apostles' Creed, Aquinas remarked that without the hope of a better life to come, "death would without doubt be dreaded intensely, and a human being would do anything bad before suffering death" (*In symbolum apostolorum* 11.1001). So while free will made moral responsibility possible, personal immortality gave such responsibility its force, by opening up the prospect of eternal salvation or damnation.

There was little disagreement about the fact of human immortality, but extensive debate over whether it could be proved. Aquinas believed it could be. His central argument depended on showing that the human soul has a function – thought – that it exercises without any bodily organ. He then reasoned that if the soul has such a function, it can exist without a body, and that the body's corruption would therefore not bring about the soul's corruption (see, e.g., *ST* I, q. 75, a. 6). This does not yield the conclusion that *human*

*beings* are immortal. Full human immortality would require the resurrection of the body, something that was not generally considered provable.

Even the demonstrability of the soul's immortality was rejected by many later authors, including Scotus (*Opus Oxoniense* IV 43.2 [286] 149), Ockham (*Quodlibet* I 10), and even Cajetan, Aquinas's great Renaissance commentator (*In de anima* III 2).<sup>38</sup> Scotus argued as follows. Even if the intellect functions without any bodily organ, this does not show that the intellect's function could endure without a body, because there might be other ways in which the intellect's function depends on the body. In fact, Aquinas and Scotus were in agreement that our intellect does need the body for its normal operation. Both held that the intellect must constantly turn toward sensory images (phantasms) in the course of thinking abstractly. So, even for a meaningful immortality of the soul, Aquinas needed to establish something further. He needed to establish that the soul would take up a new mode of cognition once apart from the body.<sup>39</sup> He was in fact prepared to argue just that. He thought that our soul, once separated from the body, would think like the angels, albeit in an inferior way (*Quaestiones disputatae de anima*, qq. 15–21; *ST* I, q. 89). Not surprisingly, there was doubt about whether this could be proved. As scholastic philosophy became increasingly rigorous in its methods, such debates over *provability* became increasingly common.

## NOTES

1. Some early Christians, such as Origen, held that souls were created before their bodies were created. Augustine left open this question (see, e.g., *Confessions* I 6). By the time of Aquinas, however, preexistence was no longer treated as a serious option, and there was an almost universal consensus that the soul is infused well after the point of conception. For a survey of thirteenth-century views, see R. Dales [545].
2. This careful definition allows Augustine to say that the mind, although not a body, is extended throughout the body in a special way: "it is a whole in the whole body, and a whole in each part of the body" (*Trinity* VI 6.8).
3. See also *Trinity* XV 12.21, *On Free Choice of the Will* II 3, and *City of God* XI 26. For further discussion of Augustine's first-person method, see G. Matthews [73], chs. 3–4 and chapter 12 in this volume.

4. See Avicenna, *Liber de anima* I 5 [115] I 79–80; Aristotle, *De anima* II 3, 414a31–32. For an early scholastic description of the soul's powers, see *CT* III 9–34, an anonymous work dating from around 1225.
5. For the early thirteenth century, see, for example, Philip the Chancellor, *Summa de bono* IV 8 [379] 284. The most notable later pluralists are Henry of Ghent (*Quodlibet* IV 13), John Duns Scotus (*Ordinatio* IV, d. 11, q. 3 [282] VIII 604–56), and William of Ockham (*Quodlibet* II 10–11), all three of whom disagree among themselves in various ways (see M. M. Adams [318] 647–69). For a detailed survey of views in this area, see R. Zavalloni, *Richard de Mediavilla et la Controverse sur la Pluralité des Formes* (Louvain, 1951).
6. Aquinas articulates his view in various places: for a concise statement, see *ST* I, q. 76, arts. 3–4. For Olivi, see II *Sent.*, q. 71 [271] II 637. On the Oxford condemnations, promulgated first by Robert Kilwardby in 1277 and then by John Pecham in 1284, see D. A. Callus [239] and J.-P. Torrell [260] 304–05.
7. Discussion focused on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the endurance of Christ's body in the tomb. For a brief account, see M. M. Adams [318] 650–52.
8. See H. Denzinger [24] no. 902. The target of this condemnation was the aforementioned Olivi, who took the rational soul to inform a certain *spiritual matter* that was distinct from the corporeal matter we call the body (see II *Sent.*, q. 51, and R. Pasnau [274]). This decree would be reaffirmed by the Lateran Council of 1513, making trouble for a whole new generation of Catholic philosophers in the early modern era.
9. For scholastic authors, this transforming role was standardly played by agent intellect (see, e.g., Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 79, a. 3; q. 84, a. 6). Augustine seems to have thought that even sensation required this sort of spiritual transformation (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis* XII 16). Ockham, at the other extreme, was idiosyncratic in believing that the material could act on the immaterial. See, e.g., *Reportatio* II 12–13 [308] *OTh* V 275.
10. See, e.g., Aquinas: "every natural body has some determinate substantial form. Therefore since the accidents follow from the substantial form, it is necessary that determinate accidents follow from a determinate form" (*ST* I, q. 7, a. 3).
11. See the discussion in D. Des Chene [546] ch. 4. For a late scholastic exception to this consensus, see Jacob Zabarella, a sixteenth-century Paduan philosopher, [622] 395.
12. For information on ancient skepticism, see M. Burnyeat [38].
13. For further discussion of Augustine's methodology, see N. Kretzmann [71]. Augustine returns to these issues in many places, including *Against*

*the Academicians, The Advantage of Believing, Trinity XV, and City of God XI.*

14. See, e.g., Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 14, a. 1; q. 84, a. 2.
15. See H. A. Wolfson [553]; D. L. Black [479].
16. On the role of Bacon in developing earlier Islamic theories, see K. Tachau [552] ch. 1.
17. Augustine suggests this account in various places, e.g., *On Music VI 5*, trans. R. C. Taliaferro (New York, 1947); *The Magnitude of the Soul*, trans. J. J. McMahon (New York, 1947) 23–24; *The Literal Meaning of Genesis XII*. For discussion see G. O'Daly [75].
18. See, e.g., *ST I*, q. 85, a. 2, ad 3: "There are two operations in the sensory part. *One occurs solely in virtue of an impression; in this way the operation of a sense is completed by its receiving an impression from something sensible.* The other operation is the forming in virtue of which the imaginary power forms for itself an image of an absent thing, or even of something never seen." Cf. Aristotle, *De anima II 11*, 423b32: "To sense is to be affected in a certain way."
19. See *II Sent.*, q. 23; q. 58, ad 14; q. 72, q. 74, and R. Pasnau [551] chs. 4–5.
20. Such claims also extended to the mental word (see chapter 3 in this volume), which Olivi identified as the act of thought (see *CT III 136–51*). For Ockham, see E. Stump in *CCOck 168–203*, as well as the text translated in A. Hyman and J. J. Walsh [17] 670–79.
21. See P. King [549] for discussion of this point.
22. For another fierce reply to the theory, see Aquinas's short treatise *De unitate intellectus*. For an anonymous defense of monopyschism by an arts master at the University of Paris, see *CT III 35–78*.
23. Most famous is *De anima III 5*, speaking of agent intellect: "This intellect is separate, unaffected, and unmixed, being in essence activity... It is not the case that it sometimes thinks and at other times not. In separation it is just what it is, and this alone is immortal and eternal" (430a17–23).
24. For text and translation of the key question, see John Duns Scotus [286] 96–132. For further discussion of divine illumination, see R. Pasnau [550].
25. Particularly important were the views of Peter Aureol and William of Ockham. For Aureol see *CT III 178–218*. Ockham's view has been the subject of extensive discussion and disagreement in modern times. See, most recently, E. Karger in *CCOck 204–26*. For a striking instance of skepticism's influence in the early 1330s, see the selection from William Crathorn at *CT III 245–301*. For Scotus on intuitive and abstractive cognition, see R. Pasnau in *CCScot 285–311*.

26. A. Dihle [547] stresses the importance of Augustine. T. Irwin [548] argues for will in Aristotle; C. H. Kahn [69] gives a good sense of the complexity of the whole issue.
27. See B. Kent [558] and chapter 10 in this volume.
28. See A. Donagan in *CHLMP* 642–54.
29. See, e.g., Anselm, *On Freedom of Choice*, chs. 5–7; Aquinas, *ST IaIIae*, q. 77, a. 1.
30. For Aquinas's views in this area, see P. King [243] and N. Kretzmann [247].
31. See Scotus [288] 179–81 and 469–73; for discussion, see A. Wolter [301]. How are these two inclinations to be weighed? That it is *rational* for us to love God more than ourselves was defended by Aquinas (*III Sent.*, d. 29, q. un., a. 3), Godfrey of Fontaines (*CT II* 271–84, 301–06), and, it would seem, by Ockham (*CCOck* 273–301).
32. "Free decision" translates *liberum arbitrium*, which was the standard medieval phrase for what we call free will, from Augustine through Anselm and into the scholastics. It was not customary among medieval authors to speak of the *will* as being free, although many authors concluded in the end that free decision is a capacity belonging to the will. Still, the medieval terminology is useful because it leaves open the question of whether our capacity for free decision really is the product of our faculty of will.
33. See C. Kirwan [70] and E. Stump in *CCAUG* 35–78.
34. See S. Visser and T. Williams [147], who read Anselm as a kind of libertarian.
35. For three very different accounts, see E. Stump [259], S. MacDonald [249] and R. Pasnau [255].
36. See the selections in Henry of Ghent [221] and the discussion of Olivi in R. Pasnau [273]. For Buridan, see J. Zupko [345] and Buridan in *CT II* 498–586. In [21] I, O. Lottin presents many interesting texts, in Latin, from throughout the thirteenth century.
37. For discussion, see P. King [296] and T. Williams [299].
38. See chapter 13 in this volume for discussion of the dispute among Renaissance scholastics.
39. On the turn toward phantasms in Aquinas, see *ST I*, q. 84, art. 7 and R. Pasnau [255] ch. 9. For Scotus, see *Lectura II*, d. 3.2, q. 1, n. 255; *Lectura I*, d. 3.3, q. 1, n. 300; *Ordinatio I*, d. 3.3, q. 1, n. 392; *Ordinatio I*, d. 3.1, q. 3, n. 187. On Aquinas's difficulties in establishing the soul's immortality, see J. Owens [254].