CHAPTER FOUR

Teleology in the Later Middle Ages

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A history of teleology might be expected to register an upward spike of enthusiasm through its middle chapters, as the heightened religious commitments of European philosophy inspired a soaring interest in finding ultimate reasons for why the world is the way it is. In fact, however, teleological explanation is one of the legacies of antiquity that received a surprisingly muted response in the Middle Ages. As we will see, there was little enthusiasm for Aristotle's naturalized approach to teleology, and grave doubts over whether final causes are a legitimate kind of cause at all. The one place where reflection on ends did play a robust role in medieval philosophy was in ethics. Even here, however, the consensus of antiquity—that human beings are and ought to be ultimately motivated by their own happiness—met with growing resistance and eventually outright rejection.

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4.1. Final Causes in Nature

Although the character of teleological explanation shifted in the Middle Ages, there was never any doubt over the fundamental assumption that nature, in some sense, acts for a purpose. Averroës, for instance, in the series of commentaries that lies at the foundation of the European revival of Aristotelianism, insisted that the principle that nature acts for a purpose is "maximal and fundamental" in both physics and theology.[1] This is to say that, for anyone working in one of these two sciences, it should be accepted as a self-evident first principle that there is a goal at which the natural world aims. If this is denied, Averroës argues, then the rest of the Aristotelian causal framework goes with it: matter would not be for the sake of form, and there could be no agents or movers, since nothing acts or moves except for the sake of something. Likewise, without this sort of teleological framework, divine science "could not prove that God has concern for the things that are here."[2]

Thomas Aquinas similarly introduces into the foundation of his theology the idea that nature, somehow, exhibits teleological directedness. Just as the *Summa theologiae* begins its discussion of the divine nature by establishing that God exists, so the second part of the *Summa*, devoted to the acts of human beings, begins by establishing that all human actions are for an end, and more generally that "it is necessary that all agents act for the sake of an end."[3] Like Averroës (and Avicenna before him), Aquinas insists that "the final cause is the first among all causes." This view—that every natural event has a final cause or, to use

1 *Long Commentary on the Physics* Bk. II sec. 75, in *Aristotelis opera cum Averrois commentariis* (Venice: apud Junctas, 1562; reprint, Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1962). I follow the Latin version because the original Arabic is lost.

2 *Long Commentary on the Physics* Bk. II sec. 75.

3 *Summa theologiae* 1a2ae 1.2c. All translations of Aquinas are my own, and refer by title and the standard enumeration of articles as found in his *Opera omnia*, ed. Leonine Commission (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1882–). On Aquinas's teleology more generally, see Stephan Schmid, "Teleology and the Dispositional Theory of Causation in Thomas Aquinas," *Logical Analysis and History of Philosophy* 14 (2011): 21–39.

the common slogan, that nothing in nature is pointless (*vanum*)—was almost unanimously accepted during the Middle Ages.[4] As a start toward cataloging the various commitments of the standard theory, let us say that medieval teleology is **universal**.

The Aristotelian theory of the four causes—formal, material, efficient, final—goes hand in hand with an account of the epistemic ideal that the sciences ought to pursue. Averroës explains that the enumeration of causes in *Physics* Book II "is necessary, because the goal of this study of the science of natural things is a science made certain and perfect, and we do not believe that we know (*scire*) something perfectly unless we know it with its first causes, up until we reach its proximate causes."[5] This sort of ideal understanding of the natural world requires grasping all four of the causes. To know in this way is to have knowledge of the best sort, knowledge of the reason why (in Latin: *scientia propter quid*). As Aristotle had put it, "study of the reason why (*to dioti*) is what reigns supreme in knowledge."[6] Any of the four causes might be particularly salient to an explanation of the reason why, but inasmuch as knowledge ideally requires an explanation in full, it requires a grasp of the final cause.

To pursue this fourfold explanatory project in natural philosophy, the Aristotelian seeks to understand the nature of a thing. This nature will be the proximate intrinsic explanation for why natural entities behave as they do. At this point, however, a deep disconnect emerges between Aristotle and standard medieval views. Aristotle seems to have thought of natures as possessed of their teleological orientation in a

4 For some unusual examples of dissent, see Yitzhak Melamed's contribution to this volume. It should be noted as well that it is doubtful whether universality extends beyond the natural domain. Aristotle himself, for instance, suggests that mathematical truths do not have an end (*Physics* II.9, 200a15–19). All references to Aristotle are by title and standard Bekker page and line numbers, as published in the *Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

5 *Long Commentary on the Physics* II.27. Averroës is commenting on the start of *Physics* II.3. This conception of *scientia*—science or knowledge; *epistēmē* in Greek; *'ilm* in Arabic—gets its canonical statement at *Posterior Analytics* I.2, 71b9–12.

6 *Posterior Analytics* I.14, 79a24.

way that removes the need for any appeal to some extrinsic supernatural plan. Considering the objection that nature cannot be thought to act for an end in the way that an artisan does, because nature does not deliberate, Aristotle responds that nature works not so differently from an art like shipbuilding. The shipbuilder does not need to deliberate; he just knows what he is aiming at. Nature works similarly:

> If the shipbuilding art were in the wood, it would produce the same results by nature. Thus, if the final cause is present in art, it is present also in nature. This is made quite clear by the case of a doctor's doctoring himself. Nature is like that.[7]

Aristotle seems, in this suggestive series of images, to ascribe teleology to nature in a way that does not require any external guidance.[8] Later medieval authors, however, generally decline to take this path. Aquinas's commentary on the passage is characteristic. The artist does not deliberate, Aquinas suggests, because the artist has *already* deliberated and no longer needs to. The art of shipbuilding might come to be in the wood, then, if the shipbuilder could somehow insert it there, just as God actually does in natural cases. What the passage shows, then, is that "nature is nothing other than the conception (*ratio*) of a certain art, namely, the divine, endowed to things, by which those things are moved to determinate ends."[9]

This perspective gets developed more fully in Aquinas's argument from *Summa theologiae* 1a2ae 1.2 for the thesis that all agents act for an end. The truth of this thesis, he thinks, can be shown from the fact that every agent has to be determined to some definite effect; otherwise, "it would no more do one thing than another." Aquinas characterizes this

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7 *Physics* II.8, 199b28–31.

8 See Mariska Leunissen's contribution to this volume for further discussion of this intriguing thought.

9 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Physics* II.14.8.

determination as an "intention for the end," and then he proceeds to distinguish between two sorts of cases: the case of rational agents who move themselves toward an end by determining their own intentions; and the case of nonrational agents, who are moved by another. Here is how he characterizes the latter case:

> Those that lack reason tend toward an end on account of natural inclination, as if moved by another rather than by themselves. For they do not grasp the concept (*ratio*) of an end, and so they cannot *order* anything toward an end, but are only *ordered* toward an end, by something else. And so all of nonrational nature is compared to God like an instrument to a principal agent.[10]

Although teleology is universal throughout nature, the only way it can be present in a nonrational being (including animals and plants as well as inanimate objects) is if something else—a rational being that has the concept of an end—forms an intention with regard to some end and orders that being to it. We do this all the time with nonnatural motion, and as an illustration of this Aquinas offers the example of an arrow. In the case of natural motion, however, this kind of ordering requires that a being be endowed with a nature. The only being that could do that, Aquinas assumes, is God. Natural teleology thus takes on the twin features of being **intelligent** and, in nonrational cases, **extrinsic**.

It would be natural to suppose that medieval authors insist on intelligence and extrinsicality just because they like to put their gods at the center of everything. But the story is more complicated and interesting than that. As is well known, Aristotle's four causes (*aitiai*) are best viewed as *explanations* in a very broad sense of the word. Thus it contributes to an explanation of the natural order to understand the teleological orientation of a thing's nature. To think of this

10 *Summa theologiae* 1a2ae 1.2c.

sort of explanation as a *final cause*, in our modern sense, is liable to mislead. Even as far back as the later medieval period, however, there was already a tendency to think of efficient causation as the paradigm case for what it is to be a cause. In effect, the medieval conception of *causa*—the Latin word—is already very much like our conception. This is an important part of the story of why later medieval metaphysics became increasingly vulnerable to the reductive approach of early modern mechanism. After all, if each of the four causes essentially works like an efficient cause, then it is easy to suppose that all the natural philosopher really needs is efficient causes: bodies moving other bodies. Eventually, this mechanical philosophy would undermine later Aristotelian theories of form and matter, but in some ways its most striking impact occurs earlier, in the medievals' own quite un-Aristotelian conception of final causality.[11]

When final causes are conceived of on the model of efficient causes, it is natural to think of them not as intrinsic tendencies within a thing's nature, but rather as concrete objects in the world. The shipbuilder is working for the sake of a specific boat that is slowly coming into existence. God has an individual plan in mind for each and every thing that exists. The theory, then, is **particular** and **forward-looking**. On this sort of approach, there is no room for the sort of account—familiar from modern biology—that understands teleology in terms of generalized dispositions that can be given historical explanations. That oak trees evolved over millions of years to be genetically disposed to grow tall is no kind of teleological explanation, from this point of view, even

11 For the growing dominance of the efficient cause as the paradigm of causality, see Robert Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes, 1274–1671* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), esp. 100–101, 198–199, 557–559. For the special case of final causality, see Stephan Schmid, "Finality without Final Causes? Suárez's Account of Natural Teleology," *Ergo* 2 (2015): 393–425, who focuses on the late (circa 1600) scholastic example of Francisco Suárez, where it becomes explicit that all causes are expected to work along the lines of efficient causes. Michael Frede has argued that the tendency to treat all causality along the lines of efficient causality first arises with the Stoics ("The Original Notion of Cause," in *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987], 125–150), though I know of no reason to think that the Stoics shaped later medieval views in this specific area.

if we add that this happened so that oak trees would compete more successfully for sunlight. That might be a case of nature's acting *as if* it has an object in mind, but this oak tree is of course not looking ahead to a future day when it will reach above the neighboring trees and capture a greater share of the light that shines down on this particular forest. That sort of thing obviously requires cognition and desire. To be sure, the demands of explanation drive us toward generalizations on the basis of these particulars. Indeed, scientific demonstrations in the Aristotelian tradition require universal claims as their premises. At a *causal* level, however, teleology holds between particulars, just as much as in the case of efficient causation.

When final causes are understood in this way, the theory immediately becomes vulnerable to an obvious objection: how can something that does not yet exist, and perhaps never will exist, be a cause? Given the particular and forward-looking character of the theory, the difficulty is obvious enough. And it is equally obvious that it will not do to ascribe some sort of magical influence to this possibly future object. As Aristotle himself had remarked, ends are active only "metaphorically."[12] But that remark leaves considerable leeway in constructing a reply to the present objection. The most important reply, judging from how often it is cited, is Avicenna's, who puts the question this way: "Why have you made it a prior cause when in truth it is the effect of every cause?"[13] His answer turns on distinguishing between the final cause's reality as an existent object and its status as a "thing" (*shayʾ*) in the mind. When the object is taken in the first way, it is an effect, but in the second way it is a cause.[14]

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12 *On Generation and Corruption* I.7, 324b14–15.

13 *The Metaphysics of "The Healing"*, ed. and trans. M. E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), VI.5 §2. Translations of Avicenna are my own, from the Arabic, and cite by book, chapter, and section number.

14 Avicenna develops this view at *Metaphysics* VI.5 §§27–32. For an overview of his conception of final causes, see *The Physics of "The Healing"*, ed. and trans. J. McGinnis, 2 vols. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2009), I.2 §8 and I.11 §§1–2. For a detailed discussion, see Kara Richardson's contribution to this volume.

Avicenna describes this understanding of final causality as "one of the principles of the natural philosophers,"[15] which suggests that he does not regard this as his own innovation. Whatever its origins, the view permeates later medieval thought. Aquinas, for instance, as the very first objection to the second part of the *Summa theologiae*, considers this: "A cause is naturally prior. But an end has the character (*ratio*) of something ultimate, as the name itself suggests. Therefore an end does not have the character of a cause." To this he offers a terse reply: "An end, even if it comes last in execution, still comes first in the agent's intention. And in this way it has the character of a cause."[16] John Duns Scotus too defends this account at some length, describing it as how "the end is commonly spoken of, namely in intention and in reality (*in re*)."[17] According to the standard medieval account, then, teleology is understood to be **intentional**. The ship under construction exerts final causality inasmuch as it exists intentionally in the mind of the shipbuilder. The view remains particular and forward-looking, but achieves this by harnessing the view's intellectuality, which makes possible not just the conceptualization of an end as an end, in the way we saw Aquinas describe, but also the intentional directedness that gives rise to directedness in action.

Although this seems to have been the standard view, it met with some resistance, in particular from Averroës. He accepts the distinction between the final cause as it exists in the soul and as it exists outside the soul. But whereas Avicenna had characterized the first of these as the final cause, Averroës argues that this is instead an efficient cause (*fāʿil*) of motion, whereas the end outside the soul is the final cause. He illustrates the point as follows:

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15 Avicenna, *Metaphysics* VI.5 §31.

16 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a2ae 1.1 ad 1.

17 *Questions on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. G. J. Etzkorn and A. B. Wolter (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1997–98), Book V question 1, in codex K n. 51.

> The hammam, for example, has two forms, a form in the soul and a form outside the soul. If the form that is in the soul arises in us, then we desire the hammam and move toward it—that is, toward the form that exists outside the soul—that is, toward entering the hammam. The form of the hammam, then, with respect to its being in the soul, becomes an agent *(fāʿila)* for the desire and the motion, whereas with respect to its being outside the soul it becomes an end for the motion and not an agent.[18] (*Long Commentary on the Metaphysics* XII.36)

Averroës does not here attack Avicenna by name, but when these texts entered into the Latin tradition they were regularly understood to offer competing accounts of how to identify the final cause. On both views the hammam is the final cause, but the Avicennian view avoids the seeming absurdity of making something that may exist only in the future (or may never exist) exert backward causality. The hammam *does* exist now, in the mind of the one who seeks a bath. Averroës does not dispute that we can understand the hammam to exist in the soul, but he thinks that we should focus on that mental hammam only if we seek to understand the efficient cause of the action. It is not the hammam in the soul that the bather seeks, but the physical hammam in the medina.

William Ockham takes Averroës's side in this debate, explicitly citing the hammam text: "The end causes through its proper reality so that its own proper reality is desired. That reality need not exist when the effect is caused."[19] In a way, the question here looks

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18 *Tafsīr mā baʿd al-ṭabīʿa [Long Commentary on the Metaphysics]*, ed. M. Bouyges, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1990), Bk. XII sec. 36, my translation.

19 *Quodlibetal Questions*, trans. A. Freddoso and F. Kelley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), IV.1. The issue is discussed in more detail, with references to both Averroës and Avicenna, in Ockham's *Quaestiones variae* q. 4, in *Opera theologica* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1967–89), 8: 114–117. This text, however, is based on the *reportatio* of an unsympathetic and marginally competent student (8:13*), and so should be approached with some care. I discuss this dispute between the Avicennian and Averroistic view in more detail in "Intentionality and Final Causes," in *Ancient and Medieval Theories of Intentionality*, ed. D. Perler (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 301–323.

fundamental, inasmuch as it requires a choice between two very different candidates for the role of final cause: is it something in the mind or something in the world? Yet ultimately there is perhaps little more at stake than a squabble over labels. All parties to the debate agree that we can distinguish between the hammam as it exists in the world and as it exists intentionally in the mind. All parties agree that, of course, it is the real bath that is sought, and all parties agree that deliberate action occurs through some conception of, and desire for, the real thing. Which one we decide to refer to as the final cause will have various implications—for instance, it will influence whether we think something that does not exist can be a "cause." But ultimately these issues look to be mainly verbal. Either way, the view retains its distinctive features, being universal, intelligent, particular, forward-looking, intentional, and (in nonrational cases) extrinsic.

The real significance of Ockham's view is his strikingly skeptical attitude toward teleology. For most of the twentieth century, medieval scholarship labored under the misimpression that Ockham's overall philosophical outlook is corrosively skeptical. As we have learned more, it has become obvious just how wrong this is. Ockham makes bold and creative positive claims across all areas of philosophy, in areas like logic, ontology, ethics, and mind.[20] Yet when it comes to final causation Ockham really does take just the sort of skeptical position that his old reputation might lead one to expect. For although he accepts that cognitive beings can grasp and desire ends—and that we have good reason to believe that they do so—he does not think that we have good philosophical grounds for supposing that natural causes are aimed at any sort of end. He recognizes, to be sure, that the faith requires maintaining that God has a plan for *everything*, which entails

20 The work that makes this case in most detail is Marilyn McCord Adams's magisterial two-volume *William Ockham* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987). Although she does not discuss final causality, she does consider these questions in some detail in "Ockham on Final Causality: Muddying the Waters," *Franciscan Studies* 56 (1998): 1–46.

that all natural causes are in fact aimed at an end. Yet he does not think that this is something reason can establish. Thus, to the question of why fire heats the wood rather than cools it, it is enough of an explanation to cite the thing's nature. Moreover, given Ockham's overarching commitment to parsimony, this is not just an epistemic possibility but is in fact what someone *ought* to say who is committed to following reason alone:

> Someone strictly following reason would say that the question "for the sake of what" has no place in natural actions, because he would say that there is no question to be asked about that for the sake of which fire is generated. This has a place only in voluntary actions.[21]

Lest there be any doubt just how far this takes Ockham from Aristotle's teleological orientation, he expressly considers "all the arguments of the Philosopher,"[22] and claims that they are conclusive only in the case of free agents whose actions lack the uniformity exhibited by the rest of nature. For everything else, the necessity of nature is a perfectly adequate explanation.[23]

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21 Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions* IV.1.

22 Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions* IV.1.

23 Accordingly, at *Summula philosophiae naturalis* II.6.51–63 (in *Opera philosophica* [St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1967–89], 6:229–230]), Ockham takes Aristotle to be committed, in nonvoluntary natural cases, only to a looser sense of final cause in which nature acts merely *as if* it had a known and desired object.

It is worth noting that in one respect Ockham's theory allows more scope for teleology, in that he expressly enlarges the standard view to include nonrational animals, which he allows can act for an end in virtue of desiring it (see *Summula* II.6.12–24). Here, then, intentionality is sufficient for teleology without intelligence, suggesting that Ockham, unlike Aquinas, does not think genuine teleological action presupposes a *concept* of the end.

John Buridan, a generation after Ockham, provides another example of medieval skepticism regarding natural teleology. For discussion see Henrik Lagerlund, "The Unity of Efficient and Final Causality: The Mind/Body Problem Reconsidered," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 19 (2011): 587–603; Pasnau, "Intentionality and Final Causes"; and James J. Walsh, "Teleology in the Ethics of Buridan," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 18 (1980): 265–286.

4.2. Final Causes in Human Action

Ockham's skepticism regarding natural teleology is unusual for the era. Even so, his position points to the real center of gravity of later medieval discussions. Because all teleology was ultimately intellectual, it could be invoked universally in the natural world only as a claim about the divine plan. And although no one could doubt (at least not publicly) that there is a divine plan for everything, it was not considered the job of the natural philosopher to speculate regarding what that plan might be. Philosophers from this period accordingly have a great deal to say about material, formal, and efficient causes, but not so much to say about final causality. There is an exception to this rule, however, in the case where, as Ockham says, the role of final causes *is* clear—the case of voluntary actions. So if one wants to see final causes at work in later medieval philosophy, the place to look is not natural philosophy but rather ethics. Here teleological thinking plays a central role. Here again, moreover, ancient views are transformed in the most striking of ways.

According to the nearly unanimous verdict of antiquity, human beings act to promote their own happiness. This was thought to be true both as a descriptive fact about our psychology, and also as a normative claim about what we ought to do. Of course, much ingenuity was devoted to explaining how this kind of self-interest could serve as a basis for the other-regarding considerations of morality, but it seems that no one in the ancient world was even tempted to ground morality in something other than our ultimate self-interest. According to the standard history, this consensus remained in place until Scotus and Ockham came along in the fourteenth century and advanced a voluntaristic ethic unmoored from the inclination toward self-interest. Depending on one's perspective, this marks either the first great defense of genuine human freedom, or the start of a slow slide toward the irrationalism of modernity.

Something like this broad narrative may be correct, but the details are tremendously complex. To establish a baseline for later medieval developments, one might start with Cicero, whose ethical writings had considerable influence on the Middle Ages. His work *On Duties* (*De officiis*) begins by treating it as obvious that the good cannot be identified with one's own personal interest (*commodum*). This might suggest that, even here, the moral has been detached from self-interest, but as the treatise continues it becomes clear that this is not so. Cicero ultimately contends that we cannot help but pursue personal advantage:

> People overturn the fundamental principles established by nature when they divorce the advantageous (*utilitas*) from moral rectitude (*honestas*). For we all seek to obtain what is advantageous, we are irresistibly drawn toward it, and we cannot in any way do otherwise. For who is there who would turn away from what is advantageous? Indeed, who does not exert himself to the utmost to secure it? But because we cannot find it anywhere except in good report, propriety, and moral rectitude, we accordingly hold these to be the first and the highest of things, whereas what we term advantageous we consider not so much a shining distinction but instead a necessity.[24]

From Cicero's point of view, morality has its force only because, as it happens, it is generally to our advantage to act morally. If the world were to change in such a way that "propriety" and "rectitude" no longer worked to our advantage, then we would have neither reason nor ability to adhere to such principles. The first sentence makes clear that Cicero was familiar with the idea that morality and self-interest might be wholly separate domains. It is not as if he was unable even to conceive of such a thing. But, in keeping with the philosophical traditions

24 Cicero, *De officiis*, trans. W. Miller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), III.28.101.

before him, he regarded ethical egoism as the only naturalistically plausible morality.

Moral theory, was, however, on the brink of change—indeed, the most radical change in its history so far—as a result of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. This is not to say that the Gospels provide an accurate historical record of those teachings, that the teachings were particularly original, that they amounted to a moral theory, or that they immediately transformed ethics. But the massive influence of Christianity on European philosophy exerted a steady pressure in various domains, and nowhere more so than in ethics. For it was, indisputably, the central message of the Gospels that we should let self-interest give way to a generalized concern for all people. Here is Matthew 22:34-40:

> Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Both of these commandments are taken directly from the Hebrew Bible,[25] and further historical parallels are not hard to find, not just for these familiar claims, but also for the golden rule and the injunction to love one's enemies.[26] Yet even if the Gospel message is scarcely

25 See Deuteronomy 6:5: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength"; Leviticus 19:18: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

26 For the golden rule in Confucianism as well as in western antiquity, see Jeffrey Wattles, *The Golden Rule* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Stoicism also deserves mention here for its commitment to impartiality among all human beings (see, e.g., Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], 265–276).

original, its focus on an other-regarding ethics poses a challenge to any Christian philosopher intent on staying within the sort of egoistic framework that Cicero inherits from the Greek tradition.

To be sure, the challenge need not be regarded as insurmountable. After all, ancient ethics itself sought to wield eudaimonism to account for other-directed values such as friendship, justice, and sacrifice for the common good. Naturally, then, this was the initial tendency of Christian ethics as well. Augustine, for instance, takes for granted that if we are to embrace a Christian life, this will be only because we perceive it to be in our self-interest:

> To desire a happy life (*beata vita*), to want a happy life, to yearn for, wish for, pursue a happy life—I hold this to belong to all human beings. So I see that I understated the claim that this desire for a happy life is common to philosophers and Christians; I ought to have said that this belongs to all human beings, absolutely all of them, good and bad. For those who are good are good in order to be happy, and those who are bad would not be bad unless they hoped they could thereby become happy.[27]

The trouble is that, in this fallen state, we have a great difficulty both with seeing what our ultimate good consists in and with steadfastly pursuing it.

The obvious question, then, is whether our natural teleological drive toward our own happiness is compatible with the ethics of the Gospel. According to one line of thought, we are incapable of living up to those ideals on our own, without the supernatural grace of God. This sort of

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27 Sermon 150 n. 4, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. J. E. Rotelle (New York: New City Press, 1990–), 3/5:32. There is some measure of disagreement regarding Augustine's commitment to eudaimonism, and it may be that his view changes over time. For accounts that emphasize his continuities with antiquity, see Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics: A Historical and Critical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007–9), vol. 1, §224 and Bonnie Kent, "Augustine's Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. N. Kretzmann and E. Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 205–233.

pessimism about human nature, however, in combination with the idealistic altruism of the Gospels, threatens to undermine the teleological underpinnings of the view. For if we suppose that our natural drives are ultimately a product of the divine plan, then the problem arises of why God would have created us with natures incapable of adhering to the moral standards he has revealed. The answer at this point turns on the doctrine of original sin. We were *not* created with such flawed natures, but rather given the knowledge and inclinations to pursue the good steadfastly. Still, we were also given free will, and when Adam and Eve freely chose evil, they and their descendants lost the inborn grace that would have allowed them to remain steadfast in the good. This idea runs through Augustine,[28] and appears in Anselm with the idea of the will's two affections, one for our own advantage, which is always with us, and another for justice, which we have lost due to original sin.[29] One finds it as well in Bernard of Clairvaux and in various scholastic sources, including this remarkable passage from Albert the Great:

> The love of concupiscence is due to nature, and is always curved into itself. Whatever it loves it twists back toward itself—that is, toward its own private good—and unless it is elevated above itself by sanctifying grace, everything that it loves it twists back toward its own good and loves on account of itself.[30]

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28 For a concentrated statement of Augustine's views, see *The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Little Ones* II.17.26, in *Works*, 1:23.

29 See *On the Fall of the Devil*, chaps. 12–14 and *De concordia* III.11–13, in *Basic Writings*, trans. T. Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007).

30 Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae* part II 4.14.4.2c, in *Opera omnia*, ed. P. Jammy (Lyon, 1651), 18:112b. See also Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, trans. M. S. Burrows, in *Christian Spirituality: The Classics* (London: Routledge, 2009), chap. 9: "in the beginning man loves God, not for God's sake, but for his own." Bernard is cited at the end of the thirteenth century by James of Viterbo, *Quodlibet* II.20, who defends this sort of sharp demarcation between our natural inclinations and the inclinations we ought to have, which we can hope to attain only supernaturally, through God's grace. This view, in turn, is sharply criticized by James's contemporary, Godfrey of Fontaines, who seeks to hold together our natural teleology and our normative ends. Both sides of this exchange are translated in A. S. McGrade, John Kilcullen, and Matthew Kempshall, *The Cambridge Translations of Medieval Philosophical Texts*, vol. 2: *Ethics and Political Philosophy*

The difficulties that beset original sin and grace are obvious and notorious, but for now we need remark only on how such views pull ethics away from the teleological framework of antiquity. Our natural inclinations no longer provide a framework for establishing the good that we ought to seek. Indeed, the very question of what our true natures are becomes clouded over by the possibility of a punishment that infects our whole species.

Yet with the recovery of Aristotle's complete corpus in the thirteenth century, Christian philosophers in western Europe began to take seriously again the idea that we might be able to ground at least the fundamentals of ethical theory in eudaimonism. Aquinas is the leading example of this trend. Human beings have an ultimate end, their own happiness, that shapes all of our voluntary choices:

> The will naturally tends towards its ultimate end: for every human being naturally wills happiness (*beatitudo*). And this natural willing is the cause of all other willings, since whatever a human being wills, he wills for the sake of an end.[31]

For Aquinas, this thesis rests on more than simply the empirical observation of human self-interest. It rests instead on an intricate theory of rational choice that treats the will as essentially rational appetite, fixed by nature to desire the human good. The character of that good, in turn, is grasped by intellect, through reflection on the distinctive function of a human being, as a rational animal, in a world governed by divine providence. Human beings who correctly deliberate along these lines, and steadfastly choose in accord with those deliberations,

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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For a detailed discussion of these thirteenth-century debates, see Thomas Osborne, *Love of Self and Love of God in Thirteenth-Century Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

31 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a 60.2c.

will do both what is morally correct and what promotes their own self-interest.

Can a strictly eudaimonistic teleology along these lines account for the other-directed principles of the Gospels? An easy route to an affirmative answer begins by pointing out that our ultimate happiness in this context is the beatitude that comes from the reward of eternal life in heaven. If we have reason to think that following the teachings of the Gospel is the path that will earn this reward from God, then self-interest quite unproblematically yields a commitment to Christian ethics. This, however, by all accounts, is the wrong sort of commitment. God must be loved more than us, which precludes loving God (and God's commands) only as a means to our own happiness. Nor will it work to resolve, in light of this situation, that to get the result I need I must somehow habituate myself to love God more. That still puts one's love of God within the scope of a choice made for instrumental reasons. One's own flourishing, rather than God's, remains the ultimate end. And, indeed, how could it be otherwise, given the strictures of Aquinas's theory? For how could we truly, ultimately love God more than ourselves, if whatever we will, we will for the sake of our own happiness?

Aquinas's answer, which departs remarkably from the view of his teacher Albert the Great, is that we do so because we expand the boundaries of our self. Although it is an unshakeable principle that one's love, if it is to be the voluntary love of rational appetite, must be grounded in the pursuit of one's own happiness, this leaves room for an enlarged conception of the self. So Aquinas reasons as follows: "Angels and human beings naturally love themselves. But that which is one with something is that very thing. Hence anything loves that which is one with itself."[32] The task then becomes to identify the various forms of union that can serve as a ground of love, and Aquinas speaks of the

32 *Summa theologiae* 1a 60.4c.

union that arises through political community, friendship, family relations, and shared species membership. Sometimes he describes the cause of love in these sorts of cases as *similarity*,[33] which might give the unfortunate impression that we love others out of a kind of cognitive confusion: what we really love is ourselves, but others remind us of ourselves, and so our natural self-love accidentally spills over onto others. This is the sort of story that would later find a place in a theory, like David Hume's, that takes root in our nonrational passions. But Aquinas can hardly approve of will's rational appetite being grounded in our mistaking one thing for another. Rather, the point must be that in some very real way we *are* the same as other people.

Inasmuch as these forms of union obviously amount to less than full numerical unity, Aquinas allows that we love ourselves more than other people. In particular, he argues, the biblical injunction to love others "as ourselves" does not require that we love others as much as ourselves.[34] But what about cases—preeminently, the case of God—where we are required to love others *more* than ourselves? In explaining these sorts of cases Aquinas shifts over to a different sort of metaphysical relationship between ourselves and others, that of part to whole. Merely as a matter of self-interested prudence, one ought to be concerned about the whole community in which one lives, because "one's proper good cannot exist without the common good."[35] But this is of course the same sort of narrowly self-interested reasoning that Aquinas wants to transcend. So he needs a stronger claim, that putting the common good first is required by the same rational principles that ground the eudaimonistic framework. The hand naturally sacrifices itself to save the whole body; the citizen sacrifices himself for the republic; in general, "any part naturally loves the common good of the whole more

33 See, e.g., *Summa theologiae* 1a2ae 27.3.

34 See, e.g., *Summa theologiae* 1a 60.4 ad 2.

35 *Summa theologiae* 2a2ae 47.10 ad 2.

than he loves his particular proper good."[36] And just as one cares about the republic as a whole, so one cares about the leader of that republic on whom its well-being relies. All the more, then, one will love God, and indeed will love God above all things: "because the universal good is God himself, and under this good is contained angels, human beings, and all creatures . . . , it follows that angels and human beings, even by their natural love, love God more and more principally than they love themselves."[37]

In insisting that this love is *natural*, Aquinas means to reject explicitly those views that treat concern for others as grounded in a supernatural charity that transcends our natural moral inclinations. This would require treating our natural state as fundamentally flawed, whereas in fact "it is impossible for any natural inclination or love to be perverse."[38] But given the insistent rationalism of the theory, he can account for such apparent altruism only if he can square it with our overriding teleological commitments. He attempts to do so by insisting on the role played by the part-whole relationship. Where one stands to another as merely partially united, one's obligations are imperfect, as we have seen. But parts take their identity from the whole in a way that somehow makes their own good subservient to the good of the whole: "every part naturally loves the whole more than itself. And every individual naturally loves the good of its species more than the

36 *Summa theologiae* 2a2ae 26.3c. The idea that citizens will sacrifice themselves for the good of the commonwealth was an ethical commonplace of Aquinas's era, perhaps in part because of its prominent endorsement at John 15:13. See, for instance, Henry of Ghent's explanation for why this is morally right even for someone who has no hope of reward in the next life (*Quodlibetal Questions on Moral Problems*, trans. R. J. Teske [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2005], XII.13). Aristotle had spoken approvingly of such a case at *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.8, 1169a25, though his rationale for such an action—one does it for a last great burst of glory—was so startlingly egoistic that even a devotee such as Aquinas seeks some other way to account for such cases. Compare Scotus, who denies that self-sacrifice for country can in any way be understood in terms of self-interest (*Ordinatio* III.27 nn. 48–50, in *Selected Writings on Ethics*, trans. T. Williams [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017], 171).

37 *Summa theologiae* 1a 60.5c.

38 *Quodlibet* I.4.3c.

good of itself as an individual."[39] This yields for Aquinas a startlingly strong form of altruism, but it has its limits. Although our concern for the human species should be greater than our concern for ourselves, we will have only an imperfect concern for the good of other species. And even in the case of God, quite remarkably, Aquinas makes clear that our self-transcending love for God comes not from some abstract fact about his goodness, but from God's relationship to us: "God will be, for any person, the whole rule of love (*ratio diligendi*) from the fact that God is the whole good for human beings. For if we suppose, *per impossibile*, that God were not the good for human beings, then he would not be the rule of love." [40] Aquinas thus gets the result that we should love God above all things, even above ourselves. But this holds only because of God's relationship to us.

Is this still eudaimonism? Aquinas is attempting to reconcile two doctrines that, perhaps, cannot be reconciled: the Aristotelian idea that our unique ultimate end is our own happiness, and the Christian ideal that we should love God above ourselves. Aquinas's strategy for reconciliation is to expand the self, but this finds little support in his metaphysics. Quite apart from what we might think of the idea that partial degrees of unity—e.g., sameness of species—can ground moral commitments, this claim faces the difficulty that Aquinas does not think members of the same species literally share any sort of universal form or property. Properties, for Aquinas, are particulars.[41] Nor does the shift from part to whole resonate with Aquinas's larger theory. We might expect the hand to look out for the whole animal, because the animal is the complete substance, and substances are what have the

39 *Summa theologiae* 1a 60.5 ad 1.

40 *Summa theologiae* 2a2ae 26.13 ad 3. For illuminating discussions of the relationship between self-interest and morality in Aquinas, see Scott MacDonald, "Egoistic Rationalism: Aquinas's Basis for Christian Morality," in *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy*, ed. M. Beaty (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 327–354, and David Gallagher, "Thomas Aquinas on Self-Love as the Basis for Love of Others," *Acta Philosophica* 8 (1999): 23–44.

41 See, e.g., *De ente et essentia* 3.80–82: "no commonness is found in Socrates; rather, whatever is in him has been individuated."

most fundamental claim to existence within Aquinas's system. But a species has no such primacy, relative to individual members of the species, nor does the universe as a whole. It is appealing, from an intuitive moral point of view, to think that we might put the good of the universe ahead of our own good, and so love above all else the creator of that universe. But this does not seem to be a conclusion that can be credibly derived from Aquinas's form of eudaimonism.

It should be no surprise, then, that the major rivals to Thomism in later scholastic thought introduce dramatic changes to the Aristotelian framework. If we consider, first, Scotus, we find a kind of minimal intervention in eudaimonism that, by making a change at the teleological foundations, leads to a dramatically different kind of ethical theory. The change Scotus makes is to embrace Anselm's dual affections of the will, but with the affection for justice now understood as something innate within the will rather than as a contingent gift of grace. The result is that whereas Aquinas treats the will as necessarily aimed at the unique final end of happiness, Scotus sees the will as free to choose between unconstrained self-interest (arising from the will's "affection for advantage") and the moral law (arising from the will's "affection for justice"). It is natural here to understand Scotus as doubling the sort of teleological framework one finds in Aquinas, so that the will must choose between two ends, self-interest and justice. But this overstates the difference between their views. Scotus accepts that the will always chooses under the aspect of its own happiness—this remains, on his theory, our ultimate end, and so to that extent the view remains fundamentally eudaimonistic.[42] Accordingly, he does not describe the will's affection for justice as inclining the will toward a distinct end—as if

42 See John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* II.6.2 nn. 61–62 (*Selected Writings on Ethics*, 118), where "the good angels were neither able nor willing to nill happiness for themselves." For the picture of the two affections as offering us a choice between two teleological ends, see, e.g., Calvin G. Normore, "Picking and Choosing: Anselm and Ockham on Choice," *Vivarium* 36 (1998): 23–39. For Scotus's theory as starkly antieudaimonistic, see, among others, Thomas Williams, "From Metaethics to Action Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, ed. T. Williams, 332–351 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and Irwin, *Development of Ethics*, vol. 1, §25.

one affection pulls the will toward the good even while another affection pulls it toward its own selfish pleasure. Rather, Scotus repeatedly describes the affection for justice as a power to "moderate" our desire for happiness.[43] Its function is not to allow us to choose something other than our own happiness—this is a choice we could not make—but to ensure that we pursue happiness in the right way. The inclination toward justice thus serves as a kind of side-constraint, a concern for the moral law that motivates us to put boundaries around our pursuit of self-interest.[44]

Such boundaries are necessary, Scotus thinks, because our will to happiness, left unchecked, wills immoderately to maximize every sort of self-advantage that it encounters: "its act could not be moderated so as not to be elicited to the maximal extent that it could be elicited."[45] This sort of unfettered teleological drive toward advantage is fine for other animals, but for us it leads to sin, because it causes us to will in ways that ignore the moral law. Here the difference with Aquinas is instructive. When Aquinas insists that we will everything for the sake of happiness, he counts on a rational agent's ability to weigh greater and lesser, proximate and remote, part and whole, and arrive in the end at the ultimate good that is God. From this perspective, Scotus's worry about unfettered maximization seems misplaced, because it ignores the very sort of ability to reason toward the correct ultimate end that lies at the core of a eudaimonistic ethics. But Scotus, like Albert the Great, does not think that even the most enlightened self-interest will

43 See *Ordinatio* II.6.2 nn. 49–62, in *Selected Writings on Ethics*, 114–118.

44 For a reading of Scotus that, like mine, stresses that the affection for justice is not simply a second countervailing impulse, see Peter King, "Scotus's Rejection of Anselm: The Two-Wills Theory," in *John Duns Scotus, 1308–2008: Investigations into His Philosophy*, ed. L. Honnefelder et al., 359–378 (Münster: Aschendorff, 2011). But King, it seems to me, goes too far in claiming that the affection for justice "has no motivational force whatsoever" (376). Although its role is only to moderate the desire for happiness, still it exercises that influence out of a love for something else, justice. (But justice, so understood, is not an end that competes with the end of happiness.) Hence Scotus argues that the perfection we receive from the infused virtue of charity is a perfection to *the affection for justice* (see *Ordinatio* III.27 n. 17, in *Selected Writings on Ethics*, 163).

45 *Ordinatio* II.6.2 n. 56, in *Selected Writings on Ethics*, 116.

lead us to put God's end truly above our own. Hence there has to be some other motivation at work within the will. For Albert, as with most earlier medieval authors, that motivation is supplied by the grace of God. What is distinctive about Scotus is that he identifies it as a natural inclination.

In turning Anselm's affection for justice into one of the will's natural capacities, Scotus shares Aquinas's ethical naturalism. But because he does not accept Aquinas's strategies for expanding the scope of self-interest, he cannot ground this affection in any sort of connection to ourselves. Explicitly considering Aquinas's impossible counterfactual scenario involving a God who is disengaged from humanity, Scotus reaches a different conclusion: that the act of loving God above all else "is not desiring a good for the one loving insofar as it is advantageous for the one loving; instead, its act is tending toward the object for its own sake, even if *per impossibile* its advantageousness for the one loving were ruled out."[46] Where self-interest clashes with rules that dictate loving and obeying God, the will faces an open choice between two rival inclinations.

For a medieval view that, rather than constrain our teleological orientation, seeks to eliminate it entirely, one needs to look a generation later, to William Ockham. He denies the foundational Aristotelian doctrine that there must be a single ultimate end at which all actions are directed, and he further denies the Aquinian view that beings are aimed at the good of the universe more than their own good.[47] This is not to deny that we do have an ultimate end, and that ours is happiness. In this minimal sense, even Ockham subscribes to eudaimonism, but this is a thin sense indeed. As we saw earlier, Ockham allows that agents can set ends, and he thinks we should take it on faith that God has created us in order to be happy in heaven with him for all eternity.

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46 *Ordinatio* III.27 n. 16, in *Selected Writings on Ethics*, 163.

47 For both claims, see Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions* IV.2, in *Opera theologica*, vol. 9, lines 165–178 and 122–128.

But he does not think we can establish through natural reason that this has in fact been established as our end.[48] Moreover, even granted that this is the divinely established end of human life, it does not follow that the human will has any such natural inclination toward happiness. Because of the will's radical autonomy, he denies that it has any natural inclination at all, and so "the will is not naturally inclined to its ultimate end."[49] Accordingly, the will can make choices that go against its own happiness, even its own recognized happiness, which is to say that the will can choose contrary to the dictates of its own intellect.[50]

Do these conclusions mire Ockham's ethics in irrationality? On the contrary, the foundations of his ethics are, if anything, *more* rooted in reason than is the prior eudaimonistic tradition. After all, there is nothing especially *rational* about the pursuit of one's own happiness, as opposed to anyone else's happiness. In the eudaimonistic tradition, this is taken simply as an obvious fact about us as beings of nature. Moreover, Ockham adheres to the traditional characterization of morally good action as action in accord with right reason. But, like Scotus, he takes moral reasoning to be grounded not in enlightened self-interest, but rather in recognizing the existence of a perfectly good being whom we should love above all else, and whose commands we should follow. Reason, Ockham argues, can establish the rightness of all this.[51] Where Ockham's view diverges even from Scotus's is in refusing to postulate an innate volitional inclination to adhere to reason, or

48 *Reportatio* IV.16, in *Opera theologica*, 7:346.

49 *Ordinatio* I.1.6, in *Opera theologica*, 1:507.

50 In *Ordinatio* I.1.6, Ockham describes various limited scenarios under which the will can choose against its own happiness. The full radicalness of his view emerges only at *Reportatio* IV.16 (in *Opera theologica*, 7:350), where he maintains that "with the intellect's judging that this is the ultimate end, the will can nill that end"—not because of some special circumstance, but just because the will has the power to nill whatever it can will. More generally, "the will can be moved against the judgment of reason" (doubt 2 at *Opera theologica*, 7:354, with concessive response at 7:357–358), and can will something bad even without its having any appearance of being good (*Quaestiones variae* 8, in *Opera theologica*, 8:442–445).

51 On the rational foundations of Ockham's moral theory, see Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Structure of Ockham's Morality," *Franciscan Studies* 46 (1986): 23–24.

to justice, or to anything at all. The will is radically open in its choices. This means that there is no internal link between moral goodness and desirability. Perhaps for the first time in the history of ethics, the good becomes choice-worthy for purely external reasons: simply because it *is* good, independently of any benefit it might have for the agent, or any natural inclination the agent might have to prefer it. This is precisely the result Ockham is after: by abandoning teleology even here, Ockham makes morality *wholly* the responsibility of the free agent who chooses, or fails to choose, to be motivated by the good.

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