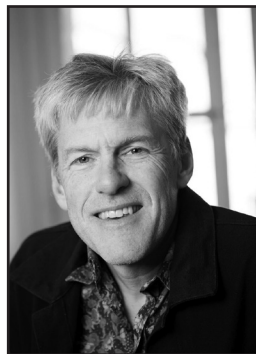

Medieval Zeal and Modern Blame

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I have come to think that the most important medieval contribution to the history of philosophy is the freewill problem. That's a large claim, but if the importance of an idea is measured by that idea's influence, then I think there's little doubt that the claim is true. To be sure, philosophers have been wondering about our ability to do otherwise all the way back in the recorded history of philosophy, and doubtless before that too. But the freewill problem in its distinctive modern form requires a particular conception of freedom and a particular conception of human nature, both revolving around a special power within us, the power of will. Today both this conception of our nature and this understanding of what it is to be free are widely taken for granted. But these are ideas that philosophers developed over centuries, and that appeared in their present form only toward the end of the Middle Ages.

The clearest indication of the influence of these medieval debates is that, in a sense, you already know how these debates go, even if you *think* that you know very little about medieval philosophy. All the familiar ingredients are here. There is the threat of causal determinism, an idea expressed with great force and precision within Arabic philosophy and passed into Latin just in time to establish itself in the curriculum of the early European universities.¹ Then there is the characteristically medieval idea of the will as the controlling faculty within us, the principal source of human behavior. And finally, there is the libertarian impulse to make that will a first cause, an unmoved mover capable of freely choosing between alternatives in such a way as to be completely in control of that choice. Some of the elements of this story go back to Greek antiquity and can be found in other philosophical traditions. But it all comes together only in the later Middle Ages, in the movement that now goes under the

label of voluntarism. The story the voluntarists tell is so familiar, in its broad outlines, as to be positively boring, but the fact that it now looks so boring is precisely their great achievement. Oh, they're the ones who wrote that song? Yes, they did.

1

What I would like to focus on today is the less familiar question of why the freewill problem arose in the European tradition when it did. That it took so long for medieval Christian philosophers to articulate these ideas—we are talking about the end of the thirteenth century, some nine hundred years after Augustine wrote the *Confessions*—can in part be given an institutional explanation: it simply took a very long time for European philosophy to recapture the sophistication it had achieved in antiquity. Although isolated geniuses had appeared from time to time in the earlier Middle Ages, it was only with the formation of the universities at Paris and Oxford (and soon elsewhere) that philosophy could undergo the great renaissance that took place from the mid-thirteenth century until the Black Plague of the mid-fourteenth century. Yet although this explains why it is no surprise to find voluntarism appearing with such sophistication when it does, the story does not explain why the idea of an undetermined will became so widely accepted in the later Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. The degree of consensus that emerged would be hard to exaggerate. Within a few decades of the first articulations of the view, there ceased to be significant dispute over the truth of the doctrine that the human will stands outside the deterministic course of the natural world. We are made to have within us the supernatural power to be a first mover, and in virtue of that to have a freedom quite unlike anything found in nature. This became the consensus view of European philosophy until the Reformation, when theologians like Martin Luther challenged this picture. The success of Protestantism, in turn, created the space for philosophers like Thomas Hobbes to call for a return to the compatibilist traditions that prevailed before the rise of voluntarism, on which we are free just so long as we are acting in accord with our own judgment about what is best.²

Again, there is an institutional explanation for these developments. The rise of voluntarism coincides with the famous Condemnation of 1277: a list of 219 propositions that were henceforth not permissible to teach at the University of Paris, on pain of excommunication.³ Included on that list were various theses that were understood to preclude a deterministic account of the will's free choice, and this made it very difficult to speak out at Paris against the voluntarists. Even so, this does not explain why voluntarism held sway for so long, even beyond Paris, and of course

it does not explain why the will's indeterminacy featured prominently in that condemnation in the first place. It seems, then, that there must be a deeper reason why voluntarism took such a firm hold over later medieval European thought. And the need for an explanation will be all the greater if you think, as I do, that the commitments of the voluntarists are, on their face, very hard to accept. They ascribe to the will a *sui generis* power, as an undetermined first mover, that is found nowhere else in nature. The very coherence of such a power is doubtful, and it is not clear that, were we to possess it, it would make us more free. It is easy to see why ideas such as these had appeared only rarely before the rise of the voluntarists. What is puzzling is why they suddenly take such a firm hold.

My suggestion is that this libertarian approach to the will took hold in the Middle Ages because it was needed to justify the zealous attitudes toward morality that dominated medieval Christian philosophy. To see what I mean, we need to take a brief look at antiquity. From Socrates forward, morality in the ancient Greek tradition is regarded as a matter of the highest concern, but it is something we should each be concerned about because it matters to our own happiness. Accordingly, Socrates counsels the Athenian jurors that one "should look to this alone whenever he does anything: whether his actions are just or unjust, the deeds of a good or bad man." At the same time, he offers them a self-interested reason to follow that advice: "from virtue comes money and all the other things that are good for human beings, both in private and in public life." This pair of views—morality is of the utmost concern, because it is what best promotes our own happiness—runs all through the later history of ancient Greek thought, through many permutations. To account for the demands of ethics in these terms encourages an attitude of calm forbearance toward the bad behavior of others, who sin only because they know not what they do. This is the attitude that Socrates recommends the jurors take toward him: if in fact he has done wrong, he should be subjected not to a regime of punishment but to "private instruction and admonishment."⁴ This becomes the guiding ideal for how the ancient philosophers respond to the demands of morality. In their urbane intellectualism, they take a serene satisfaction in having achieved their own good, and aspire to a dispassionate pity for those who, in their ignorance, fail to do as well.

In one form or another, this attitude can be found in all the great figures of ancient European philosophy, even as late as Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. In the culminating remarks of a long discussion explaining why there is evil in a world governed by divine providence, Lady Philosophy remarks that we ought to have more

sympathy for those who do wrong than we do for those to whom wrong has been done. The wrongdoer "ought to be brought to justice not by a prosecution counsel with an air of outrage, but by a prosecution kind and sympathetic, like sick men being brought to the doctor." As a result, Lady Philosophy continues, the rational response to immorality is not zealous recrimination but sympathetic concern: "there is no reason at all for hating the bad. For just as weakness is a disease of the body, so wickedness is a disease of the mind. And if this is so, since we think of people who are sick in body as deserving sympathy rather than hatred, much more so do they deserve pity rather than blame who suffer an evil more severe than any physical illness."⁵

For all the influence that the *Consolation* had on medieval culture, this Socratic element in Boethius's story becomes increasingly hard to find as the Middle Ages develop. In its stead, medieval philosophers approach the moral domain with a zeal that is quite unlike the calm sympathy of antiquity. The weight of moral goodness and badness is understood to demand an intensely emotional response, whether that be of righteous anger in response to wrongdoing, or of joyous love in response to moral goodness. It is tempting to say that this happens because of changes within broader European culture, related to the rise of Christianity. But my suspicion is that this gets the story backwards: that religions preach moral zeal to their flocks because this is the message that human beings by nature are strongly inclined to heed. This suggests, in turn, that we understand the Socratic tradition not as a reflection of the broader culture of antiquity, but as a rebellion against the usual human impulse to respond in harshly censorious ways to the perceived wrongdoing of others. Socrates's *Apology*, after all, hardly won over the jurors of Athens. In general, the high-minded moral attitudes of the ancient philosophers were thought of as paradoxical, scarcely believable, and far from the ordinary sentiments of the wider culture. When I speak of medieval moral zeal, then, I mean to describe not a special feature of Christian culture, but simply the regression to a mean that characterizes many human cultures in many times and places.

Such questions go beyond the purview of even the most ambitious historian of ideas. Retreating, then, to the philosophical territory where my expertise lies, what is clear is that medieval philosophers, rather than resist the moral zeal of their surrounding culture, embraced it, and constructed a theory of the will that could justify it. At the same time, the ethical approach that underwrites the Socratic story gradually falls apart. As the Middle Ages progress, Christian philosophers move away from the ancient idea that we should be moral because that promotes our happiness in this life. Instead, the rules of morality acquire their status

not because they are in our self-interest, but because they represent the will of God. To scorn the moral law is to scorn God. Such a fault has a badness that transcends all other sorts of badness, and so merits the strongest sort of zealous recrimination. To love the good, on the other hand, becomes tantamount to loving God, and this is something we should do with all our hearts and souls and minds. To ascribe this sort of gravity to moral conduct requires, in turn, a theory of human agency on which we are responsible for what we do in a very robust sense. The voluntarists offer such a theory, by describing a faculty of will that purports to give human beings an autonomy, a control over their actions, that sets rational agents apart from everything else in nature. Within Greek philosophy, in contrast, such concerns could scarcely arise, because their whole ethical worldview was built around the idea that we ought not to respond to wrongdoing with zealous recrimination. The project of showing how human beings are *ultimately* responsible for what they do accordingly had little point.⁶

It took European philosophers until the thirteenth century to see clearly that they needed this sort of story about ultimate responsibility. That discovery, and the theory of freewill that they subsequently constructed, is what I regard as the most important medieval contribution to the history of philosophy. It is important because of its enduring influence on how we understand human nature, and it is also important because it underwrites our persistingly medieval attitude toward morality. Let me pause to highlight that last point. Perhaps there are those among you who have been listening to this talk with the comfortable conviction that all this history has nothing to do with you. You would be wrong. Part of the reason that voluntarism remains so boringly familiar is that the moral zeal on which it is founded is itself an attitude that remains utterly familiar both in philosophy and in the wider modern culture. For all of the erudition that has been devoted in recent centuries to describing a less zealous approach toward moral blame, the characteristic approach to morality of our era remains intensely censorious. It remains normal and natural within modern culture to respond to the moral failings of others with a severity that can be justified only if something like voluntarism is true. The Socratic attitudes that Boethius describes—"sympathy rather than hatred" and "pity rather than blame"—look as alien today as they did to medieval readers. And this means in turn that, for all the evident obscurity of the idea of the will as an undetermined first cause, our culture *needs* that idea just as much as did the voluntarists. Some seven hundred years on, the libertarian theory of the will retains an enduring appeal.

2

Having done my best to win back your attention, let me return to the history. As a good first example of how moral considerations drove a libertarian conception of freewill, we might consider the most reluctant of medieval voluntarists, John Buridan. Buridan was the most influential figure at the most important center for philosophy—the University of Paris—throughout the second quarter of the fourteenth century. He is one of those philosophers whose tastes run toward the austere reductive, even when that seems to be at odds with the manifest appearances. We all know the type: a materialist about the mind, doubtful of personal identity over time, parsimonious in their ontological commitments, and so on and so forth. Buridan tends in all of these directions.⁷ But what about freewill? What we would expect is for him to embrace compatibilism or even hard determinism. And indeed he feels the appeal. After setting out at length, carefully and persuasively, the case for causal determinism, he reports that “on account of these arguments, many have been compelled to say that everything in the future has happened of necessity.”⁸ Philosophers feel *compelled*, he says, because of the force of the arguments. Given how forceful the arguments are that Buridan himself recites, it seems clear that he himself feels the pull. And yet, he thinks, causal determinism is dangerous: “this opinion is without a doubt grave and extremely dangerous both to the faith and to morals.”⁹ What makes it so dangerous? It is not just that Buridan feels bound to the authority of the Church. Although he does quote from the 1277 condemnations, he makes it clear that he sees principled philosophical reasons to worry about causal determinism. As he later explains:

We have few arguments to refute this opinion, except based on our catholic faith, and because if we were predetermined in all of our acts then they could not be ascribed to us as meritorious or demeritorious. This is repugnant not just to our faith but also to the science and principles of morality. Hence we attribute that freedom to us more than to brutes only so as to secure the ascription to us of acting well or badly, meritoriously or demeritoriously.¹⁰

So, even if many of the great figures of earlier Christian philosophy had thought they could harmonize their ethical beliefs with what looked to be the axiomatic philosophical truth of determinism, Buridan follows his contemporaries in concluding that this will not work. For all the appeal of

the case for determinism, it cannot be made compatible with medieval ethics.

Interestingly, however, Buridan makes it clear that he does not find it easy to abandon his austere reductive tendencies. And so he tells us not that he *does* believe that the will can escape the determinism of the natural world, but that this is what he *wants* to believe:

And so I want to believe, unconditionally and firmly, from a faith that is one with experience and with the claims of the saints and philosophers who concur and firmly adhere to this belief, that the will, with everything else standing the same, can do opposite acts.¹¹

With this he carefully articulates the central thesis of libertarian freewill. Some think that we should read between the lines in interpreting such remarks, as if Buridan is signaling to us that he feels obliged by authority to profess things that are rationally indefensible.¹² It seems to me, to the contrary, that Buridan is being transparently open here, acknowledging that he finds it difficult to disavow determinism, but honestly professing that he thinks it *should* be disavowed, for a reason that is perfectly rational and philosophically respectable: that it cannot be squared with “the science and principles of morality.”

In effect, Buridan stands at a crossroads in the history of ethics. He feels drawn in two directions: toward the ethical views of the culture that surrounds him, and toward the causal framework that underpins natural philosophy. He is sure that these two things cannot be reconciled, but he hesitates over which to embrace and which to reject. The previous passage, in which he tells us that he “wants” to take the path that preserves ethics at the expense of a coherent account of causation, is immediately followed by an explanation of why that is the path he prefers:

No one ought to withdraw from the common path on account of arguments that are insoluble to him, especially in matters that may touch the faith or morals. For he who believes that he knows everything and that he can be deceived in none of his opinions is a fool. For concerning a straw right before your eyes, there are a hundred arguments or questions that will be posed, about which the wisest of doctors will reach contrary opinions. For each of these, then, at least one of those doctors will be deceived, if not both. So

I am not surprised that, with respect to this highest of matters, I cannot satisfy myself through arguments and solutions.¹³

The passage makes clear that, to Buridan, the voluntarists' conception of human agency looks unintelligible: the arguments against it are "insoluble" and the voluntarists' own account "cannot satisfy." Even so, he counsels that we should set aside such perplexity and endorse the consensus views of our community in the areas of religion and ethics. Philosophical uncertainty, he tells us, is inevitable about even the seemingly plainest of things, like "a straw right before your eyes." In the face of such endemic philosophical disagreement, we should give preference to "the common path," particularly where religion or morality is concerned. Speculative reasoning about metaphysical matters, of the sort advanced in favor of causal determinism, is too shaky a foundation to support a task as dangerous as seeking to revise the community's beliefs concerning the "highest of matters."

In this unsettled epistemic situation, Buridan feels able—indeed, he feels *obliged*—to make a choice about what to believe. The choice might, of course, have been to suspend belief. Instead, he chooses to believe—or at any rate to *try* to believe—the common ethical understanding of his era, even though he cannot make sense of the conception of human agency that it requires. Whether or not Buridan succeeds in believing this libertarian framework is unclear. But, biographical speculation aside, for all practical purposes this is the position he takes, both in the classroom and on the written page. The voluntaristic consensus gets once again confirmed. Given Buridan's proclivities, it is easy to imagine him making a different choice, choosing the path of scientific intelligibility and then taking up the challenge to reform the ethics of his day. Yet although he takes pains to highlight the difficulty of the choice, in the end he barely explores what that other path would look like. He makes no effort to imagine an ethical system that would be consistent with causal determinism, whether that means returning to the framework of antiquity or creating some new understanding of moral responsibility.

3

Having offered an example of how the success of voluntarism is driven by moral commitments, let me now try to articulate more precisely just what it is about medieval ethics that precludes a compatibilist solution to the freewill problem. The root of the incompatibility, I will argue, lies not with the bare notion of moral responsibility, but with the severity of the attitudes toward such responsibility that medieval

Christian philosophy embraces. To see this, it will be helpful to take a closer look at the figure who first developed the voluntarist program in detail, Peter John Olivi. In a lengthy discussion of freewill that seems to have appeared within months of the 1277 condemnations, Olivi argues that the denial of libertarian freedom “impugns the most evident lights and experiences of truth.”¹⁴ But these “lights” are not what one might expect. For one thing, his argument does not rest on the power to do otherwise. Indeed, he thinks that, after death, we will find ourselves in one of two eternal Frankfurt cases, as we would now put it, locked into either perfect goodness or perfect badness. He does think there is a powerful experiential argument for the will’s indeterminacy—this is something that “all human beings sense with the greatest of certainty within themselves”¹⁵—but he knows that many have not found that sort of introspection to be persuasive. Nor does he make the familiar argument from the appropriateness of rewards and punishments. He is quite aware that the determinists have a story here just as much as the libertarians do. And, as far as God’s punishments in the next life are concerned, Olivi recognizes that those judgments are ultimately unknowable, even if the faith counsels us to maintain certain hopes and fears in this area.

The “evident lights and experiences” that Olivi refers to are, primarily, the reactive attitudes that he thinks we all share within the moral domain. He is confident his opponents will not be willing to abandon those attitudes. And yet he thinks these attitudes are plainly unjustified if human beings are simply a part of the natural order, directed by the same causal principles that direct the rest of nature. He lists seven pairs of attitudes:

1. Zeal and mercy
2. Friendship and hostility
3. Pride and shame
4. Gratitude and ingratitude
5. Obligation and freedom
6. Trust and mistrust
7. Fear and recklessness

For each of these attitudes, Olivi argues that it could not be justified in the absence of genuinely indeterministic freedom. Consider what he says about the first item on the list, the zeal that comes with righteous indignation when someone goes morally astray. First, Olivi explains that we properly take this sort of attitude only against a certain sort of agent:

No one properly adopts the zeal of anger—the attitude of rebuke and punishment—against a bad act done by a beast or by someone lacking the free use of reason. But this is the attitude we do adopt, and that we think we *should* adopt, both against a bad act done by someone who has the free use of reason, and also against the agent who does it, insofar as he has free use of reason.

Notice that zealous anger is appropriately directed both against the bad action that is done and against the agent who does it. Olivi wants nothing to do with that cloying slogan, *love the sinner, hate the sin*. Zealous anger is appropriate, however, only when directed at agents of a certain sort: agents with “free use of reason.” Why there? He goes on immediately to explain:

For it is only with respect to that kind of agent that the one who is angry senses that the agent ought not to have done the thing, and that he could have taken precautions and avoided it. The emotion (*motus*) of zeal or anger is founded on this sensation. But the sensation would be utterly false and based on an utterly false object if, when the agent was doing this bad thing, he did not have the free power for not doing it.¹⁶

We ought to feel zealous anger—and we *do* feel zealous anger, Olivi thinks—only toward agents whom we “sense” to satisfy two conditions: first, they are doing something they ought not to have done; second, the action is one they could have avoided. This two-part apprehension is the foundation for the emotion. But the apprehension on which the emotion rests would be “utterly false” if the agent were not possessed of libertarian freedom. The falsity of the sensation would then undermine the emotion, and the emotion itself would be unjustified.

The case of zealous anger is the leading example in the Olivian argument, and it fits the modern stereotype of the Middle Ages as an era of stern moral censoriousness. The stereotype shows up most famously in Nietzsche, who contends that the whole point of the will is to provide the priestly class with a tool for censoring others: “the doctrine of will has been invented essentially for the purpose of punishment, that is of finding guilty.”¹⁷ Depending on your taste, this may strike you as pleasingly subversive, gratingly cynical, or just plain paranoid. One thing it probably will not look like is a piece of careful historical analysis, but in fact there is something surprisingly apt about Nietzsche’s remark. The medieval Christian conception of the will, as the controlling force within

us, undetermined by outside forces, precisely is designed to account for the zeal of medieval moral attitudes. But one thing that Nietzsche misses is how this zeal runs in both directions. It encompasses angry rebuke, but it also encompasses joyous love. Olivi's discussion is careful to emphasize this point. He pairs the zeal for punishment with the attitude of mercy, "a sweet outpouring of goodness and kindness."¹⁸ This is followed by the attitude of friendship, which we hold "on the friend's account and for the sake of that friend, for otherwise it would not be properly and perfectly friendship."¹⁹ This attitude too, like all the others, is fitting only if its object is a genuine person with the freedom to control their own lives. (We cannot properly be friends with a computer simulation—or so it would have seemed to Olivi, and so it still seems to many of us, at least for now.) When we focus on attitudes of this sort, it becomes clear that medieval moral zeal runs in two directions. Although Olivi himself uses the term to refer to an "attitude of rebuke and punishment," we might also speak of the zealous love that characterizes the medieval attitude toward the good. The central Gospel message, after all, is that love will set us free.

Olivi intends this inventory of our reactive attitudes to yield an argument for voluntarism. Without that sort of libertarian freedom, all of these attitudes would be based on a foundation that is "utterly false and based on an utterly false object." The emotion itself would thus turn out to be unfounded. Here again we come to the crossroads glimpsed earlier. Rather than affirm the prevailing moral norms of his era, the Olivian argument might have run in the other direction, toward the conclusion that there is something wrong with those familiar moral attitudes. Olivi might have counseled us to turn away from the anger associated with rebuke and punishment, toward Boethius's "sympathy rather than hatred." Instead, he embraces the reactive attitudes of his culture in all of their zealous righteousness, and uses that as the basis for an argument that human beings must stand apart from the natural order in our ability to control our own agency. He does, it should be noted, see the possibility of taking the other path. For rather than simply taking for granted that these seven pairs of attitudes are well founded, he considers that we might just hug the monster and accept that these attitudes are based on a false conception of human nature, and therefore unfounded. This cannot be, he argues, because these attitudes are manifestly conducive to our flourishing as human beings. How, he asks, can these attitudes be wholly unjustified when they are so important to our lives? As he puts it, "it is impossible that human beings, the more they follow the greatest falsity, are always more and more improved and made perfect in every good."²⁰

In this way, the Olivian argument for voluntarism rests on the demands of moral responsibility. Its focus is a certain aspect of moral responsibility: not on the objective question of whether rewards and punishments are efficacious, but on the subjective question of whether our reactive attitudes in the moral sphere are justified. In the medieval context, this is a subtle and innovative idea, but once again I fear that, to a modern audience, this may look boringly familiar. Peter Strawson, after all, has made famous the idea that our subjective attitudes toward others are crucial to the freewill debate, and it is he who popularized the phrase “reactive attitudes.”²¹ Up to a point, Olivi and Strawson see the issues in remarkably similar ways, even down to the detail that each stresses both our negative and our positive attitudes. Even so, they reach exactly opposite conclusions, the one championing libertarian freedom and the other dismissing it. To see just where they diverge, we can distinguish three steps in the Olivian argument. First, Olivi regards our reactive attitudes as both inescapable and salutary, inasmuch as they shape our relationships to ourselves and to others as persons. Without these attitudes, and the freedom on which they are founded, Olivi memorably remarks that we would no longer be persons, but instead mere “intellectual beasts.”²² Second, he contends that these attitudes could not be so important to our lives if they were not well founded—that is, if they turned out to be unjustified in light of the truth about human nature. Third, he argues that these attitudes are justifiable if and only if we have libertarian freedom. Strawson agrees with Olivi on the first step. But he declines to enter into the familiar dispute over the third step, because he rejects what Olivi assumes at the second step. Our attitudes are what they are, Strawson thinks. We cannot abandon these attitudes, and it would be bad for us as human beings even to try. The metaphysical question of whether these attitudes are well founded is therefore a pointless question to ask, and so the freewill dispute itself is an idle exercise.

Olivi’s view has the advantage of making our moral practices intelligible. The moral zeal we bring to our interactions with other persons is appropriate because of what it is to be a person. For Strawson, in contrast, there is an explanatory gap in our moral attitudes. We do ascribe a special sort of importance to the moral domain, and we think that this domain has special application to human beings, but we cannot give a satisfying account of why those attitudes are fitting ones for us to hold. Strawson thinks that we may have to resign ourselves to this failure of intelligibility; that is a better outcome, he thinks, than indulging in the metaphysical fantasy of libertarian freedom. At this point, in pondering these rival perspectives, it is useful to recall the case of John Buridan. In effect, Buridan accepts Olivi’s first two steps, and he accepts that our

attitudes can be justified *only if* we have libertarian freedom. But he does not think that libertarian freedom is *sufficient* to justify our attitudes, because he thinks the voluntarist program is itself not fully intelligible. As we saw him put it earlier, in light of the endemic disagreement throughout philosophy, “I am not surprised that, with respect to this highest of matters, I cannot satisfy myself through arguments and solutions.” So Buridan too, like Strawson, resigns himself to the limits of philosophical satisfaction, but he locates the source of unintelligibility differently, and so he finds himself reluctantly endorsing voluntarism.

4

And yet, what philosopher—particularly in a presidential address—wants to leave their subject dissatisfied? I propose, then, in this final section of the paper, to consider whether there might be some alternative path through Olivi’s dialectic. Of the three options I have considered—those of Olivi, Buridan, and Strawson—only Olivi arrives at a view that he takes to be fully rationally justifiable. Is there any other satisfying way forward? In considering the options, what stands out is that all three accept the initial step: that our normal reactive attitudes are inescapable and salutary. I want to suggest that the problem lies there. Notoriously, the most straightforward way of rejecting that first step is hard incompatibilism, which in effect anticipates the second and third steps and avoids them by eschewing from the start the very idea of moral responsibility.²³ If this brings us down closer to the level of the other “beasts” that share our planet, then that is perhaps just as it should be. Put so starkly, this sort of skepticism regarding moral responsibility offers no plausible path to resisting Olivi’s first step, inasmuch as it calls into doubt a commitment to our moral practices that really is inescapable and salutary. We cannot, and we should not, doubt that human beings are morally responsible for the good and bad that they do. But to accept that someone is morally responsible for an action leaves open the question of what our reaction to that fact should be. The hard incompatibilist assumes, as do both Olivi and Strawson, that we face a binary choice: either we embrace the zealous moral attitudes of the wider culture, or we give up moral responsibility entirely. We can, however, have both moral responsibility and a naturalistic understanding of human agency if we recognize that what makes libertarianism seem so compelling is not the bare fact of moral responsibility, but the severity of the attitudes we bring to bear upon it. It is moral zeal that is incompatible with determinism, not moral responsibility. So although we should be compatibilists with regard to determinism and moral responsibility, we should acknowledge the incompatibility between determinism and our common moral attitudes.

If the claims of the voluntarists seem incredible, then we ought to reconsider the zeal of our moral attitudes.

To reject Olivi's first step in this way requires showing that our zealous moral attitudes are neither inescapable nor salutary. That we could escape them seems at least possible, at least to some degree. At a minimum, if these attitudes, in their fully zealous form, cannot rationally be defended, then it seems quite appropriate for philosophers at least to try persuading the wider culture to turn down the volume just a bit. That's precisely what the philosophers have been doing for millennia when it comes to *belief*, urging the folk to take more seriously the demands of rationality when it comes to our convictions about how the world is. The ancient ethicists made similar arguments with regard to our reactive attitudes, but this was precisely the tradition that medieval ethics interrupted, and that philosophers, at least in the European tradition that emerges from the Middle Ages, have tended to neglect ever since. Moreover, once we see that attitudes like anger and love come in degrees, we might avail ourselves of the sort of approach found in recent epistemology, where the all-or-nothing concept of *belief* has been supplemented by the graded concept of *credence*. Something along those lines would be useful for our reactive attitudes, because it would allow us to move past the unhelpful binary that pits Strawsonian dogmatism against blame-skepticism.

When reactive attitudes are conceived of as graded, it becomes nearly trivial to conclude that we would be *better off* with a somewhat less zealous attitude toward morality. We do not have to buy into the idea that all moral anger is unjustified to accept that things would go better if there was at least somewhat less zeal in our lives, both coming at us and coming from us. The truth of this claim strikes me as so obvious as to require no further discussion.²⁴ If there is any obstacle here, it is perhaps that the terms of the Olivian argument hold for loving admiration just as much as for zealous anger. And while it is easy to think that the world would be better off with less anger, it is hard to believe that it would be better off with less love. This is precisely why Olivi highlights both negative and positive attitudes like "a sweet outpouring of goodness and kindness." But reflection on such cases serves, if anything, to reinforce the argument I am making. Our attitudes of moral approval tend, in general, to be far less zealous than our negative attitudes. We nod our head in approval when someone does the right thing; we take a certain satisfaction in it. In general, we treat moral excellence in much the way we treat epistemic excellence, athletic excellence, or any other sort of human achievement: we applaud, we are pleased, we admire the accomplishment. In very prominent cases there may be a

prize. The ferocious zeal we bring to moral condemnation looks to be largely missing from our practices of moral approbation. This asymmetry suggests that we might reasonably restrain our moral anger without being obliged to reign in our moral love. Indeed, the same reflections that lead to a downward calibration of zealous anger might encourage an upward calibration of our zealous love for moral goodness.

I realize that all of this risks devolving into empty platitudes unless it is paired with some sort of systematic story about how we should calibrate these reactive attitudes. When it comes to credences, we want them to be proportioned to our evidence. How might this epistemic framework be applied to the domain of moral responsibility? As far as I can see, there is no objective measure in the world against which we can calibrate the intensity of our emotions. If I am outraged by our president's moral turpitude, and you are outraged just a bit more, how could we ever decide which response is more fitting? It seems hopeless to seek the rationally correct degree of moral anger, in the way we might hope to find the rationally correct credence. Even so, philosophy can aspire to offer some principled guidance regarding our reactive attitudes, by reflecting on the nature of moral agency. Ethics in the ancient Greek tradition attempted to do just that. Moral failure, from Socrates through the Stoics, is primarily, if not exclusively, an intellectual failure—a failure on the agent's part to grasp what is best for them. This diagnosis is meant to help us correct our natural tendencies toward an excess of moral zeal. Instead, we should respond to someone who fails morally in the way we would respond to someone who fails to master a skill. We should respond, in Boethius's words, with "sympathy rather than hatred."

Although I endorse the sentiment, the underlying moral theory is not a perspective to which we can return. For all the effort that we teachers of ancient philosophy put into selling the old Socratic dream to our students, we know from bitter experience that the world is not the way. Immorality is not mainly a matter of ignorance. And it just is not true, on any reasonable interpretation of Socrates's words, that "from virtue comes money and all the other things that are good for human beings." Christian medieval philosophers reached these same conclusions. Yet rather than seek some other basis for continuing the Socratic project of tempering our native moral zeal, they endorsed the intensely censorious attitudes of their prevailing culture. In turn, the ideas of the voluntarists have retained their influence because modern culture has continued to embrace these zealous attitudes.

Although we cannot go back to the Socratic tradition, we can take from that tradition the aspiration to understand our moral agency in a way that allows us to replace moral zeal with something more rationally justifiable and less socially destructive. Although Socrates was wrong to suppose that immorality is a product of ignorance, he was right to think that we should respond to immorality *in the way* we respond to ignorance. We would do well to think of immorality as something like illiteracy, and devote ourselves not to blaming people for being in such a condition, but to helping them overcome it. An important step toward this recalibration of our reactive attitudes is to understand the conception of the will that the voluntarists long ago constructed, so that we can then set about deconstructing it. This means not just bringing the will, and with it human agency, back into the natural domain of causes, but also resisting the very idea of the will as a primitive and therefore mysterious source of agency. It was this step, even more than their libertarianism, that set voluntarism against the ancient project to make human agency intelligible and therefore corrigible. Each of us, the voluntarists claim, has complete control of what we choose to do, but by insisting on that perfect self-control they made us each a mystery both to ourselves and to others. Our moral standing comes to lie within our deep self, in the ineffable quality of our will. The domain of moral appraisal shrinks down, in Thomas Nagel's famous phrase, to an extensionless point,²⁵ leaving no space for others to react constructively to an agent's moral failures, and making it hard even to appreciate their moral successes. The most natural response is one of baffled outrage, or uncertain gratitude. We should be able to do better.

Bernard Williams, in the closing lines of his famous paper on moral luck, urged the embrace of a concept of morality that is "less important . . . than ours is usually taken to be."²⁶ Here a distinction is in order. As Socrates long ago argued, there is nothing more important than our adhering to the principles of morality. This should be affirmed no matter what we think about human freedom. The distinctive legacy of voluntarism, which endures to this day, is to encourage us to put all the weight of that importance onto the shoulders of the individual human agent, who is taken to be fully in control and uniquely responsible, as the prime mover from which all voluntary actions spring. Here lies the problem. We should not take our moral values to have less importance, but we should strive to recognize that individuals lack the singular importance as moral agents that we are prone to ascribe to them. This does not mean retreating all the way to the hard extreme of denying all moral responsibility. It means instead recognizing that an individual person is simply one cause among many, and that explanations in the moral domain will often be historical and structural rather than individualistic.²⁷

No doubt, we each deserve plenty of blame for our failings, but such blame should be tempered with understanding and sympathy.

To summarize. I have said that the voluntarists' conception of the will and its freedom is the most important idea of medieval philosophy, and it should be clear by now that I also count it among the period's worst ideas. For even while voluntarism encourages us to lift up our voices in joyous praise of those who do good, it also licenses the sort of censorious zeal that Socrates long ago struggled against. And even while modern culture has slowly moved away from a religious moral perspective, it has retained an essentially medieval attitude with respect to human nature and morality. To adapt a remark by the biologist E. O. Wilson, the challenge of humanity is that while we have developed god-like technologies, we have retained our paleolithic emotions and a medieval conception of the self.²⁸ Of course, even if I were inclined to cast blame, it would be absurd to blame medieval philosophy for the prevalence of such zeal in modern culture. Such attitudes seem to come naturally to us, and hardly require philosophical encouragement. Still, what philosophers ought to be doing is actively *discouraging* our censorious moral impulses. If the tendency of religion, all too often, is to pander to our worst impulses, the task of philosophy should be to find a better way. This was Socrates's project, and to the extent we have lost sight of its value, that is in part because of the shadow that medieval voluntarism has cast on our modern understanding of the self. We should rid ourselves of the idea that we each contain within us a mysterious source of agency, a will, that gives us complete control and so complete responsibility for our actions. Once that goes, we might be able to come to see that moral failure is something like the failure to master a skill. We should treat it in the way we treat illiteracy, as a failing not of the individual but of the larger society, to be addressed through sympathetic intervention rather than through zealous scorn.

NOTES

1. For the Arabic roots of causal determinism see, e.g., Richardson, "Efficient Causation from Ibn Sīnā to Ockham." On this subject and many others touched on in this essay, I have more to say in my forthcoming book on the voluntarist movement.
2. See Hobbes, *Of Liberty and Necessity*; Luther, *De servo arbitrio*. Luther seems to have no quarrel with the idea that our wills are indeterministic; still, he thinks it a mistake on theological grounds to suppose that we have the sort of freedom that allows for genuine moral worth.
3. See the essays collected in Aertsen, Emery, and Speer, *Nach der Verurteilung von 1277*.
4. *Apology* 28b, 30b, 26a. See too *Republic* I, 337d. I have learned much here from Bonn, *Plato's Anti-Harm Principle*.

5. *Consolation of Philosophy* IV.4. For a more extended late-ancient discussion along the same lines, see Epictetus, *Discourses* I.18. For broader reflections on the difference between ancient and modern ethics, see Williams, *Shame and Necessity*.
6. There is a large and sophisticated literature on the will's status in antiquity, exploring the question of where we first find the concept of will. Notable general discussions include Dihle, *Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity*; Frede, *A Free Will*; Sorabji, "The Concept of Will."
7. It is controversial, in each of these cases, just how far his reductive tendencies extend. For a good overview see Zupko, *John Buridan*.
8. *Quaest. Ethic.* III.1, 151. A translation of this important work, by Joseph Stenberg et al., is in progress.
9. *Quaest. Ethic.* III.1, 152.
10. *Quaest. Ethic.* X.2, 857.
11. *Quaest. Ethic.* III.1, 152.
12. Scholarship on Buridan's view is divided. Compare, e.g., Pironet, "The Notion of *Non Velle*" with Lagerlund, "Buridan's Theory of Free Choice." For the general question of Buridan's alleged esotericism, see Pluta, "Persecution and the Art of Writing."
13. *Quaest. Ethic.* III.1, 152.
14. *Summa* II.57 (II:316). No published translation of this fascinating work is yet available, though I am indebted to Neil Lewis for sharing with me his provisional translation.
15. *Summa* II.57 (II:327). William Ockham, an important later proponent of voluntarism, similarly stresses experience as the path by which we can "evidently grasp" the will's libertarian freedom, even if that conclusion cannot be demonstratively proved (*Quodlibet* I.16).
16. *Summa* II.57 (II:317). On the role of these affections in Olivi's account see e.g. Pasnau, "Olivi on Human Freedom," pp. 15–18, and Perler, *Eine person sein*, pp. 329–40. Aquinas also offers a defense of zealous anger—anger aimed at retribution—at *Summa theol.* 1a2ae 46–47 and 2a2ae 108. (My understanding of Aquinas's view is indebted to forthcoming work from Jeffrey Hause.)
17. *Twilight of the Idols*, 64.
18. *Summa* II.57 (II:319).
19. *Summa* II.57 (II:319).
20. *Summa* II.57 (II:317).
21. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment." For a careful comparison of Olivi to Strawson, see Coren, "Freedom, Gratitude, and Resentment."
22. *Summa* II.57 (II:338). On freedom and personhood in Olivi, see Bobillier, *L'éthique de la personne*, ch. 2, and Perler, "Olivi on Personhood and Reflexivity."
23. Prominent modern examples of this kind of view include Galen Strawson, *Freedom and Belief*, and Derk Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life*. Their ultimate views, however, are perhaps not so far from the position I am trying to articulate.
24. It should be noted, however, that a sophisticated body of work has grown up in recent years around the question of when, if ever, moral anger is justifiable.

See, e.g., Hirji, "Outrage and the Bounds of Empathy"; Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*; Wallace, "Trust, Anger."

25. Nagel, "Moral Luck," 36.
26. Williams, *Moral Luck*, 39.
27. The philosophical literature on blame and responsibility largely ignores the domain of non-individualistic explanation, even though such ideas have long preoccupied social and political theory, going back at least to Rousseau. Prominent recent discussions include Tilly, *Durable Inequality*, and Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.
28. Wilson's often-quoted remark is reported in an unsigned *Harvard Magazine* article from 2009: "the real problem of humanity is the following: we have paleolithic emotions; medieval institutions; and god-like technology."

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