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Abstract: Among the most widely discussed of William of Ockham's texts on ethics is his *Quodlibet* III, q. 14. But despite a large literature on this question, there is no consensus on what Ockham's answer is to the central question raised in it, specifically, what obligations one would have if one were to receive a divine command to not love God. (Surprisingly, there is also little explicit recognition in the literature of this lack of consensus.) Via a close reading of the text, I argue, contrary to much of the literature, that Ockham believes that if one were given this command, one would be obligated to refrain from loving God and would also be able to fulfill this obligation without any moral wrongdoing. Among other results, this study will help clarify Ockham's much-discussed claim that loving God is "a necessarily virtuous act."

Keywords: William Ockham, Divine Command Theory, Moral Obligation

On Loving God Contrary to a Divine Command: Demystifying Ockham's *Quodlibet* III.14

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Introduction

When it comes to William of Ockham's writings on ethics, the single passage most discussed in the secondary literature might well be question 14 in the third set of his *Quodlibeta septem*.[1] Here Ockham gives perhaps the last discussion of his academic career on issues such as whether the moral status of every human action is merely contingent and the extent of God's power over moral obligation. This passage has generated a volume of scholarly discussion greatly disproportionate to its size; despite comprising a mere fourteen paragraphs and less than five pages in the critical edition, nearly every modern discussion of Ockham's ethics includes some sustained analysis of the passage.

Yet despite the expansive literature on this brief question, there is no clear consensus on what Ockham's answer is to the issues raised in it. In this text, Ockham responds to an objection regarding what would be morally right for one to do if one were to receive a divine command to *not* love God; his response involves discussing which actions could be performed by an individual who was given such a command. But the precise nature of this hypothetical divine command and the ultimate resolution of the objection are subjects of significant disagreement. Some think that Ockham's considered view is that the command in question cannot be obeyed, others that the command cannot be disobeyed. Some cast the passage as Ockham recognizing an insoluble paradox that endangers his previous ethical commitments,

[1] Throughout, I use the following abbreviations when discussing Ockham's works: *Ordinatio in librum primum Sententiarum* [*Ord.*], *Reportatio in libros II, III, IV Sententiarum* [*Rep.*], *Quodlibeta septem* [*Quod.*], *Quaestiones Variae* [*Var. Ques.*], *Brevis summa libri Physicorum* [*BrevPhys*], *Summa logicae* [*SL*]. All references to Ockham's works are to the standard critical editions, *Opera theologica* [*OTh*] and *Opera philosophica* [*OPh*]. All translations are my own unless noted otherwise, though I have closely consulted the translation in William of Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions*, trs. Alfred J. Freddoso and Francis E. Kelley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 211–15.

others as a logical puzzle that is easily dismissed. Just a small sampling of the dispute here should be sufficient to convince the reader of the range of the debate.

One group of interpreters take the main point of this quodlibet to be that a supposed divine command to not love God cannot be obeyed. Terence Irwin is one who gives this reading:

> It is logically possible for God to give us a command that we could not obey. … God might command us not to love God; we could not be moved to obey this command unless we loved God, but if we loved God we would not be obeying this command. Hence we could not obey God's command not to love God.[2]

Tania Holopainan says something rather similar:

> According to Ockham, if God gives the kind of command that He be not loved, the will cannot then obey it. In that case, no act of will can be an act which would fulfill the divine law...[3]

And A.S. McGrade says much the same (although he speaks of this quodlibet as if the case in question concerns the possibility of a creature being commanded to *hate* God, rather than being commanded to just *not love* God).

> …although it seems God can without contradiction command someone to hate him, such a command could not be *obeyed*. … God presumably cannot wish for the impossible. This would imply that God cannot will the *fulfillment* of an impossible command, but as far as Ockham's general principle is concerned, God could wish us to *attempt* the impossible and hence order us to do so.[4]

(For those not previously familiar with the debate, note that McGrade is running together two different passages here: in the early *Rep.* IV, q. 16, Ockham considers a possible command to hate God, while in his much later *Quod.* III.14 he discusses a possible command to not love God. McGrade's discussion treats the latter passage as an elaboration of the former; this leads him to conflate these two distinct hypotheticals and treat the quodlibet's discussion as if it concerned a command to hate God. I will say more later about the case of being commanded to hate God.)

Thomas Ward also holds that the command to not love God cannot be obeyed, albeit he sees this problem as only arising if the individual being commanded is one who already completely loves God:

> But as long as your love for God inspires you to do what he tells you, you can't do what he tells you. So the command can't be fulfilled. … The paradox here is that the person most disposed to follow divine commands is the person unable to do so in this case, but there is nothing contradictory about the paradox. Someone who has a lower-level love for God, or no love for

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[2] Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 720.
[3] Taina M. Holopainen, *William Ockham's Theory of the Foundations of Ethics* (Helsinki: Publications of Luther-Agricola-Society, 1991), 141.
[4] A.S. McGrade, "Natural Law and Moral Omnipotence," in P.V. Spade, *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 280, emphasis in the original.

> God at all, or even no belief in God, could perform the action commanded… [A] divine command not to love God cannot be obeyed by someone who loves God above all.[5]

So, there are a significant number of scholars who all agree that the central thesis of the quodlibet is that God can give a command that is impossible to obey. Though no one points it out, this reading seems to commit Ockham to a denial of the "ought implies can" principle (assuming, as is plausible, that Ockham takes a divine command to be at least sufficient for generating moral obligation).[6]

However, a fair share of the literature takes Ockham to be making a strikingly different move here, with this second group of scholars taking the passage to affirm that it is indeed possible to act in accordance with this command to not love God. Thus Marilyn Adams:

> In *Quodl*. III.14, Ockham observes that if God were to command us not to love him, we would not be able to love God above all and for God's own sake. For the latter involves a generalized commitment to obey *all* God's commands, and in this case one of these commands forbids love of him.[7]

Peter King agrees with Adams. King argues that Ockham's point is not that one cannot obey a command to not love God, but rather that one cannot positively love God once given the command to not do so. Thus the problem is not in God giving a command that cannot be obeyed, but rather that a command of this sort curtails what other actions are possible for the agent:

> Ockham's response is to hold that in such circumstances [viz., having been given a command to not love God] the agent cannot in fact elicit the act of loving God above all else for his own sake…[8]

So, according to King and Adams, if anything the agent cannot *disobey* this command; once commanded to not love God, it is impossible for the agent to elicit such love.

Thomas Osborne agrees with Adams and King that Ockham's central response is to hold that one cannot love God in this situation, although he thinks that this conclusion only holds if there is already a standing command that God should be loved:

> Ockham is supposing that a command to love God is in effect, and he is considering what would happen if God were to command that for a time someone study rather than love Him. The conclusion is that it would be impossible for the person to love God because such love requires obedience to God's commands.[9]

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[5] Thomas Ward, "The Incoherence of Ockham's Ethics," in *Grounding in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Magali Rogues (Brill, forthcoming).

[6] Whether Ockham thinks a divine command is *necessary* for moral obligation is of course the central question in the ongoing scholarly debate whether his ethic is just a thoroughgoing divine command theory, and reasonable cases can be made both for and against. But I cannot think of any reason for one to claim that a divine command is not *sufficient* for obligation on Ockham's view.

[7] Marilyn McCord Adams, "Ockham on Will, Nature, and Morality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, ed. Paul Vincent Spade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 261.

[8] Peter King, "Ockham's Ethical Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, ed. Paul Vincent Spade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 232.

[9] Thomas M. Osborne, "Ockham as a Divine-Command Theorist," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005), 15.

So, the first set of scholars holds that Ockham's position is that the command to not love God cannot be obeyed, while the latter set instead hold that it cannot be disobeyed (a somewhat unusual case where "ought" seems to imply "must").

Additionally, in an apparent attempt to have their cake and eat it too, in a recent addition to the literature J. Caleb Clanton and Kraig Martin suggest that Ockham affirms that it is *both* impossible to obey *and* impossible to disobey such a command:

> After all, if someone, S, were to obey the divine command to not love God, then S would be *both* not loving God *and* loving God (i.e., by willing what God wills for *S* to will) in the same act. Alternatively, if *S* were to disobey the divine command to not love God in an effort to love God above all else, then *S* would be *both* loving God *and* not loving God (i.e., by refusing to will what God wills for *S* to will).[10]

Though they do not note it, this third sort of interpretation presents a particularly paradoxical situation. On Clanton and Martin's reading, it seems that God can give a command that is such that no action would count as either obedience or disobedience to that command!

More such citations could be presented here, but suffice it to say that the literature on this short question is somewhat of a mess.[11] (More surprisingly, out of all the scholars mentioned here only Osborne explicitly points out that there is a disagreement in how to understand this passage.) This is not a large interpretative debate where the two sides differ on the relative importance of disparate passages that suggest somewhat different accounts; rather, this is a case where there seems to be no shared understanding of what is even being asserted in one short discussion of limited dialectical complexity. (The morass is all the more puzzling to me given that Ockham's prose is not especially muddled or dense; we are not trying to interpret Hegel here, or even Scotus.) In what follows, I argue that, so long as one keeps the dialectic between Ockham and his imagined objector straight, the points that Ockham makes in this question are actually quite straightforward. In hopes of forestalling confusion over this passage for future generations, I will step through the core of the text paragraph-by-paragraph, explaining Ockham's claims according to his own order of presentation.

Five Claims of *Quodlibet* III.14

It will help to be clear from the start precisely what I am arguing. I intend to show in the remainder of this paper that in *Quodlibet* III.14 Ockham affirms the following five claims:

1. *The Contingency of Moral Status*: No act of a creaturely will is necessarily virtuous, strictly speaking.

[10] J. Caleb Clanton and Kraig Martin, "William of Ockham, Andrew of Neufchateau, and the Origins of Divine Command Theory," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 94 (2020): 413.
[11] See Osborne, "Divine-Command Theorist," 15.

As we will see, he holds this for two main reasons: first, since no such act exists necessarily, the moral status of the acts cannot be necessary; second, every act of a creaturely will could be caused by God alone, in which case the act would have no moral status at all.[12]

2. *Loving God Above All is Actually Always Virtuous*: As a matter of fact, given God's actual commands, whenever any creature elicits an act of loving God above all else, that act is virtuous.

As is well-known, Ockham says in this text that loving God above all else is "necessarily virtuous," but only in some qualified sense of that term; that qualified sense, I will argue, turns out to be the limited modal claim that loving God is always virtuous given God's actual commands.

3. *Possible to be Commanded to Not Love God*: God can, in the actual world, consistent with his actual commands, also command some individual to not elicit an act of loving God at some time t.
4. *Impossible to Disobey a Divine Command to Not Love God*: If God commands an individual to not elicit an act of loving God at some time t, it is impossible for that individual to disobey that command by eliciting an act of loving God above all else at t (though it is possible for the individual to disobey the command by eliciting a lesser kind of love).
5. *Possible to Obey a Divine Command to Not Love God*: If God commands an individual to not elicit an act of loving God at some time t, it is possible for that individual to obey the command by not eliciting an act of loving God at t.

Ockham puts in the mouth of his objector the claim that God can command an individual to not elicit an act of loving God at a certain time, but he accepts that this is indeed a coherent and possible command. But whether the command can be obeyed or disobeyed is somewhat complicated: I will argue that Ockham's view is that, once given the command, the highest kind of love for God is no longer possible for the agent, but a lesser kind of love is still possible, and it is within the agent's power to actively obey the command by not eliciting the proscribed act.

With respect to the scholarship mentioned in the introduction, then, I hold that Adams, King, and Osborne largely have the right of it in holding that Ockham's point is that, once given a command to not love God, it is then impossible to love God above all and thus impossible to disobey God's command to not do so. But none of their treatments fully explicate the entirety of Ockham's point in this question, none of them clearly show how and why the other lines of interpretation have gone awry, and none of them makes entirely clear why he mentions a second, lesser kind of love at the end of the passage.

On the Contingency of Moral Status and the Goodness in Loving God

The main line of argument[13] of *Quod.* III.14 begins as so:

[12] At least, the act would have no moral status for the creature; it is less clear whether the act would have any moral status for God. See fn. 17 below for further discussion.

[13] In the first seven paragraphs of the question, Ockham argues that all actions other than acts of the will – that is, acts of the intellect, acts of the sensory appetites, external movements, and the like – cannot be intrinsically

> Regarding the affirmative claim [that some act of the will is necessarily virtuous], I say first that no act is necessarily virtuous according to the literal meaning of the words. This is proved as follows: No act is necessary, and consequently no act is necessarily virtuous. Also, because every act can be brought about by God alone, and consequently such an act is not necessarily virtuous because an act of this sort [namely, one brought about by God alone] is not within the will's power.[14]

This is the first bit of the question that seems to have tripped up some interpreters.[15] But Ockham's point here is quite simple: speaking strictly and precisely, no act of a creaturely will is necessarily virtuous, because no act of a creature's will exists necessarily. Every creaturely act exists only contingently, and so, Ockham the logician reminds his reader, the moral status of all such acts are also contingent, strictly speaking. (Though I do not believe any other interpreter has noted it, this claim precisely parallels Ockham's frequently-made point that no sentence is necessarily *true*, strictly speaking, because all sentences are contingent entities.[16]) Furthermore, even assuming the relevant act of will exists, it does not necessarily follow that the action has any moral status at all, because acts that God directly brings about in the will of a creature (without any activity of the creature's will) have no moral status.[17] So then, if Ockham is going to call a creaturely act necessarily virtuous in any sense whatsoever, it must be under the assumption that (1) the act exists and (2) the act was partly caused by that very creature's will. Thus Ockham affirms claim #1, the Contingency of Moral Status.

Ockham does continue on to give a qualified sense of what it is to call an act necessarily virtuous:

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virtuous, so that the moral status of all such actions always depends upon the moral status of acts of the will. This is all relatively clear and uncontroversial in the literature, so I pass by it without comment.

[14] "*Circa affirmativam exponentem* [*scilicet quod aliquis actus voluntatis est necessario virtuosus*] *dico primo quod de virtute sermonis nullus actus est necessario virtuosus. Hoc probatur, tum quia nullus actus necessario est, et per consequens non est necessario virtuosus; tum quia omnis actus potest fieri a solo Deo, et per consequens non est necesssario virtuosus, quia talis actus non est in potestate voluntatis.*" (*Quod.* III, q. 14, *OTh* IX, 253-257, lines 35-41).

[15] Ward, for one, seems to overlook that Ockham's use of the term 'necessarily virtuous' invokes some looser notion of necessity, as he criticizes Holopainen for holding that loving God is only necessarily virtuous in some conditional sense. See Ward, "Incoherence," fn. 20.

[16] Ockham holds that, since all sentences are contingent, no sentence is necessarily true in a strict sense. However, a sentence can be said to be necessarily true in a loose sense if and only if it is not possible for the sentence to exist and be false. See, e.g., *Ord.*, Prologue, q. 8 (*OTh* I, 222); *SL* II.9 (*OPh* I, 275), and *BrevPhys*, Prologue, ch. 2 (*OPh* VI, 6). Note the similarity between this loose sense of a sentence's being necessarily true and his loose sense of an act's being necessarily virtuous, as explained below.

[17] At least, an act caused by God alone will not be morally good or bad for the creature; this is a claim Ockham implicitly relies on in multiple places, but he states it most explicitly in *Rep.* III, q. 11: "If an act in the will were totally caused by God, it would not be called morally good or bad, since those names connote an activity of the will . . . If God were to make in my will an act conforming to right reason while my will is not acting in any way, then that act would be neither meritorious nor virtuous. So, it is required for the goodness of an act that it be in the power of the will having that act." (*Rep.* III, q. 11; *OTh* VI, 389) As for whether an act caused by God alone is morally good or bad for God, that is less clear, but Ockham does repeatedly insist that God is indebted to no one, and it seems to me he thereby intends to imply both that God has no moral obligations and also that God's acts are immune to ordinary moral appraisal. See, e.g., *Ord.* d. 47, q. un., where Ockham argues that God does not act wrongly when he brings about a bad state of affairs because there is nothing that God is obligated to not bring about (*OTh* IV, 680–5). Do note, however, that Ockham somewhat distances himself from this claim, expressing concern about whether it might border on heresy.

> Nevertheless, an act can be understood to be necessarily virtuous in another sense, namely, that the act could not be vicious given the established divine command. Similarly, that the act cannot be caused by a created will without being virtuous. Understanding 'a virtuous act' in this sense, I say, second, that some act can be necessarily virtuous in this sense.[18]

Ockham here gives additional conditions for a creaturely act being necessarily virtuous. In addition to (1) the act's existing and (2) the act's being partly caused by that creature's will, Ockham claims that (3) it must be the case that "the act could not be vicious given the established divine command," and (or else?) that (4) "the act cannot be caused by a created will without being virtuous." Here is where the confusion of the passage really begins, and, in all fairness to Ockham's interpreters, here the fault mostly rests with Ockham. First, is he speaking of some specific divine command or commands here – perhaps the command to love God with one's whole heart, or perhaps the whole Decalogue – or is he speaking of just any arbitrary divine command, whether actual or merely possible? Second, are conditions 3 and 4 meant to be disjunctive or conjunctive – is meeting either of them (together with conditions 1 and 2) sufficient for an act to be necessarily virtuous, or must the act meet all of conditions 1-4? Finally, what could possibly lead Ockham to say that conditions 3 and 4 are *similar*?

I do not think answering these questions is necessary for untangling the scholarly confusion about the paragraphs that follow and so I do not want to get bogged down here. But my best guess is that what Ockham means here is that conditions 3 and 4 are "similar" because we're meant to read *stante praecepto divino* as applying to both clauses. That is, his claim is that an act is necessarily virtuous if, given the actual divine commands, that act cannot be vicious; or else, likewise, given the actual divine commands, that act cannot fail to be virtuous. Now, being vicious and not being virtuous are generally not identical for Ockham; he recognizes that it is entirely possible for an act to be morally neutral. In particular, every act whose moral status is determined extrinsically (i.e., every act whose moral status depends upon the moral status of some other act) is morally neutral in itself; even some acts of the will are neutral in this way. But those acts of the will that have their moral status intrinsically cannot be neutral; they are intrinsically either virtuous or vicious, with no middle ground.[19] So, for such acts of the will, failing to be virtuous turns out to be just the same as being vicious. And so, if we assume that *stante praecepto divino* is intended to apply to both condition 3 and condition 4, those two conditions turn out to be coextensive, just slightly different ways of describing the same criterion. (A further reason to think condition 4 is just a re-description of condition 3 is that a parallel text only mentions the third condition.[20])

But all of this is just speculation: Ockham never applies these conditions in a way that would further elucidate them and the Latin as written does not obviously apply *stante praecepto divino* to both clauses. But even if my guess is wrong, what I take to be clear from this passage is that what Ockham means by "necessarily virtuous" is more akin to natural necessity than to metaphysical necessity. Just as for a thing to be naturally necessary is for it to always come about given the actual laws of nature that obtain, so for an act to be necessarily virtuous in this limited sense only requires it to always be virtuous

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[18] "*Tamen aliter potest intelligi actum esse necessario virtuosum, ita scilicet quod non possit esse vitiosus stante praecepto divino; similiter non potest causari a voluntate create nisi sit virtuosus. Et sic intelligendo actum virtuosum, dico secondo quod sic potest aliquis actus esse virtuosus necessario.*" (*Quod.* III.14, lines 43-45)

[19] For Ockham's account of morally indifferent acts, see the final *dubium* in *Rep.* III, q. 11 (*OTh* VI, 383–90).

[20] In the parallel text Ockham just says that a necessarily virtuous act is one that "is virtuous in such a way that it cannot become vicious given the established divine command" (*Var. Ques*., q. 7, a. 1; *OTh* VIII, 328).

given the actual divine commands that hold. The unstated implication seems to be that if the relevant divine commands were to change, the moral status of the "necessarily virtuous" act might change as well, just as what is naturally necessary would change if the laws of nature were to change.[21]

In the next bit of text, then, Ockham affirms claim #2, that Loving God Above All is Actually Always Virtuous:

> Third, I say that an act that is necessarily virtuous in the aforementioned sense is an act of the will, for an act by which God is loved above all things and for his own sake is such an act, for this act is virtuous in such a way that it cannot be vicious, nor can this act be caused by a created will without being virtuous.[22]

Here Ockham affirms that loving God above all else is necessarily virtuous (in his loose sense of being necessarily virtuous); that is, an act of loving God above all else is always virtuous when the act is caused by the creature's will, so long as the divine command to love God holds. He immediately goes on to give five brief arguments why, given the actual divine commands that are in force, the love of God cannot be elicited without being virtuous:

> This is so, first, because everyone is obligated to love God above all things at some[23] time and place, and consequently the act cannot be vicious. Second, because this act is foremost of all good acts. Also, only an act of the will is intrinsically praiseworthy and blameworthy. Also, according to the saints no act is praiseworthy or blameworthy except because of a good or bad intention, and intention is an act of the will; therefore, etc. Also, according to Anselm only the will is punished because only the will sins; therefore, etc.[24]

Note that the first of these arguments is just that everyone as a matter of fact has an obligation to love God (perhaps as a result of Christ's first commandment, that one must love God with all one's heart, mind, and soul); the thrust of the argument is that an act of loving God above all else cannot be vicious because of the standing general obligation to love God above all else.

(Before moving on, I should note that there's a scholarly debate whether Ockham thinks loving God above all else is *the* necessarily virtuous act or merely *a* necessarily virtuous act.[25] Perhaps curiously, I

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[21] My thanks to an anonymous referee for helping me see the connection to natural necessity here.

[22] "*Tertio dico quod ille actus necessario virtuosus modo praedicto est actus voluntatis, quia actus quo diligitur Deus super omnia et propter se, est huiusmodi; nam iste actus sic est virtuosus quod non potest esse vitiosus, nec potest iste actus causari a voluntate creata nisi sit virtuosus…*" (*Quod.* III.14, lines 60-66)

[23] How precisely to translate *pro loco et tempore* is a bit of a mystery. In their edition of Ockham's quodlibets, Freddoso and Kelley render it "everyone in his own time and place is obliged to love God above all things" (*Quodlibetal Questions*, 213). King's translation of the passage reads, "everyone, no matter where or when, is obligated to love God above all else" (King, "Ockham's Ethical Theory," 232). Near the end of the paper I explain why I think the translation "at some time and place" (or, perhaps, "at a certain time and place") is indeed what Ockham intends here.

[24] "*…tum quia quilibet pro loco et tempore obligatur ad diligendum Deum super omnia, et per consequens iste actus non potest esse vitiosus; tum quia iste actus est primus omnium actuum bonorum. Praeterea solus actus voluntatis est intrinsece laudabilis et vituperabilis. Praeterea secundum Sanctos nullus actus est laudabilis vel vituperabilis nisi propter intentionem bonam vel malam; intention autem est actus voluntatis; igitur, etc. Praeterea secundum Anselmum sola voluntas punitur, quia sola peccat; igitur etc.*" (*Quod.* III.14, lines 66-72)

[25] King translates using the definite article, ascribing to Ockham the view that "the act of the will that is intrinsically virtuous is an act of loving God," ("Ockham's Ethical Theory," 232). Ward appears to agree, as he claims this

have not seen anyone in this debate point to the parallel passage in *Var. Ques.*, where Ockham says that "willing to do something because it is a divine command" is necessarily virtuous in the qualified sense.[26] But whether both kinds of acts – intentionally obeying a divine command and loving God above all else – are necessarily virtuous, whether any other acts are such, and/or whether Ockham changed his mind about *the* virtuous act between writing these two texts, is largely irrelevant for my purposes here.)

One additional strength of my interpretation – namely, that here Ockham is only affirming that loving God above all is always virtuous in the actual world, rather than some stronger modal claim – is that it helps clear up a seeming contradiction in Ockham's texts. As I noted earlier, in *Rep.* IV, q. 16, while arguing that even the wills of the blessed are still in some sense free to turn away from God, Ockham discusses the possibility of God commanding some creature to hate God. In that text Ockham clearly affirms that such a command is possible and even holds that in such a case it would be morally right for the creature to hate God:

> Every created will can conform itself to a divine command. But God can command a created will to hate him, and so a created will can do this. Furthermore, everything that can be a right action in this life can also be a right action in the next life. But hating God can be a right action in this life (e.g., if it were commanded by God); therefore, it can also be a right action in the next life.[27]

Now, if one understands the argument of *Quod.* III.14 as holding that loving God is necessarily virtuous in such a way that such love is virtuous in all possible worlds, then these two passages seem to contradict each other; how can hating God be possibly morally right if loving God is necessarily morally right?[28] But recognizing that in *Quod.* III.14 Ockham is only affirming that loving God above all else is actually always virtuous clears up this tension. As a matter of fact, given the actual divine commands, loving God is always morally right; but were God to give a command to hate him, then the act of loving God would no longer be morally right.

On the Command to Not Love God

Next, Ockham considers a potential objection to his position, and here is where much of the confusion in the secondary literature arises. Recall that Ockham has asserted that loving God above all is actually

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quodlibet implies that "the love of God above all [is] an unusual or extra important moral obligation" ("Incoherence," fn. 20). Freddoso and Kelley's translation does not explicitly make this commitment, translating the passage much as I do; their Ockham says that "*an* act that is necessarily virtuous in the way just explained is an act of the will, since an act by which God is loved above all things and for his own sake is *an act of this sort*." (Freddoso and Kelley, 213, my emphasis). Osborne explicitly notes that "although Ockham emphasizes that the love of God is intrinsically virtuous, in many passages he suggests that there can be many such acts," although he does not say what passages he has in mind ("Divine-Command Theorist," 7).

[26] *Var. Ques*., q. 7, a. 1 (*OTh* VIII, 328). While doing final revisions of this paper, I became aware of Matthew Dee's recent PhD dissertation, *William of Ockham's Divine Command Theory* (University of South Florida, 2019); Dee rightly notes the parallel text in and discusses it alongside *Quod.* III.14 throughout his chapters 2–3.

[27] *Rep.* IV, q. 16 (*OTh* VII, p. 352).

[28] Lucan Freppert, for one, explicitly states that Ockham must have changed his mind between the *Reportatio* and the *Quodlibeta* on the basis that it would be impossible to rightly hate God if the love of God is necessarily virtuous. See his *The Basis of Morality According to William of Ockham* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1998), pp. 121–5.

always virtuous; so, naturally, the imagined objector tries to fashion a counterexample according to which an act of loving God above all else would fail to be virtuous:

> You might object as follows: God can command that he not be loved for some time, since he can command an intellect (and likewise a will) to be so intent on studying that it could in no way think about God for that time. Now suppose that the will elicits an act of loving God at that time. Then that act is either virtuous (but this cannot be said, because the act is elicited contrary to a divine command) or else the act is not virtuous, and then the claim [of the objection] is established, namely, that some act of loving God above all things is not virtuous.[29]

The objection is this: suppose, for the sake of argument, that Ockham is right that loving God above all is actually always virtuous. Then, what if God commands Brennan to *not* elicit an act of loving God on Thursday morning at 10 AM so that she can intensely focus on her math class instead? Well, the objector suggests, then, Ockham's claim is in danger: if Brennan does elicit an act of loving God above all else at 10 AM, she is disobeying a divine command and so her act is not virtuous, and so it is not the case that loving God above all else is actually always virtuous.

Ockham, in his response, does not take any issue with the possibility of God giving a command to not think about God at 10 AM on Thursday:

> I respond that if God could command this – as it seems that he can without contradiction – then I say that the will cannot elicit this sort of act at that time.[30]

Ockham affirms (or at least sees no reason to doubt) that God can give Brennan this command, and so holds claim #3, that it is Possible to be Commanded to Not Love God. The core of his response to the objection is that there is some act that Brennan cannot elicit at 10 AM on Thursday ("the will cannot elicit this sort of act at that time"). But what act is he talking about that cannot be elicited? As I see it, it is misreading this sentence that leads to many interpretive missteps. Some seem to think that Ockham means the will cannot elicit an act of *hating* God,[31] others that the will cannot elicit an act of *loving* God,[32] and yet others that what cannot be done is *refraining from loving* God.[33]

To correctly understand what Ockham is arguing here, we must remember the objector's scenario: the objector is trying to figure out what happens *if Brennan loves God above all else at 10 AM on Thursday*. It is this act of loving God that the objector suggested would serve as a counterexample to Ockham's

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[29] "*Si dicis quod Deus potest praecipere quod pro aliquo tempore non diligatur ipse, quia potest praecipere quod intellectus sit sic intentus circa stadium et voluntas similiter, ut nihil possit pro illo tempore de Deo cogitare. Tunc volo quod voluntas tunc eliciat actum diligendi Deum; et tunc aut ille actus est virtuosus, et hoc non potest dici, quia elicitur contra praeceptum divinum; aut non est virtuosus, et habetur propositum, quod actus diligendi Deum super omnia non est virtuosus:*" (*Quod.* III.14, lines 74-81)

[30] "*Respondeo: si Deus posset hoc praecipere, sicut videtur quod potest sine contradiction, dico tunc quod voluntas non potest pro tunc talem actum elicere...*" (*Quod.* III.14, lines 83-85)

[31] E.g., "[A]lthough it seems God can without contradiction command someone to hate him, such a command could not be *obeyed*." McGrade, "Natural Law," 280.

[32] E.g., "For this reason, Ockham holds that 'the will is not able to elicit an act of [loving God above all things] during that time'—namely, the time when God commands *S* to hate or not love God." Clanton and Martin, "Origins of Divine Command Theory," 414.

[33] E.g., "[S]uppose that, loving God above all, you seek to obey the command [that you not love him]. . . .[But] the command can't be fulfilled." Ward, "Incoherence," 6.

claim that loving God above all is actually always virtuous, and it is this act that Ockham now claims is impossible for Brennan to elicit:

> For if the will were to elicit an act of this sort [i.e., an act of loving God above all else], then it would love God above all things and consequently it would carry out the divine command, for loving God above all things is to love whatever God wills to be loved. But from the fact that it would love him in this way, the will would not carry out the divine command from the example. Consequently, by loving God in this way, the will would both love God and would not love God; it would carry out God's command and not carry out it.[34]

But why does Ockham think that Brennan cannot elicit an act of loving God at 10 AM? Well, he claims *loving God above all else* entails *willing what God wills for one to will*. If one loves God, one obeys God's commands.[35] (As Osborne very rightly points out, the entailment is not bidirectional: if one loves God above all else, then that individual will obey God's commands; but obedience to God's commands does not entail that one loves God.[36] I say more about this below.) So, if Brennan elicits an act of loving God above all else at 10 AM on Thursday, then Brennan will follow God's commands for her at 10 AM on Thursday. But God commanded her to not love God at that time and study her math instead; so, following God's command would involve *not* eliciting an act of loving God. So, by hypothetical syllogism, if Brennan elicits an act of loving God above all else at that time, then Brennan will not elicit that act of loving God at that time. But now we have a direct contradiction: her having an act of loving God would imply that that very act was not elicited. Thus, Ockham concludes claim #4, that it is Impossible to Disobey a Divine Command to Not Love God.

Why does Ockham keep specifying that he's speaking about an act of loving God *above all else*? Because he believes that Brennan could elicit a different kind of love of God instead, one that does not generate the same paradox:

> However, the will could love God with a simple and natural affection, which is not the love of God above all things.[37]

The unstated implication here must be that the simple and natural "affection" for God does not entail obeying all God's commands the way that the love of God above all else does so entail. So, one can consistently have this simple affection for God without generating any contradiction in action, and so it is not entirely impossible to disobey God's command: Brennan could successfully disobey God's command by eliciting just this simple kind of fondness of God.

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[34] "*…quia ex hoc ipso quod talem actum eliceret, Deum diligeret super omnia, et per consequens impleret praeceptum divinum, quia hoc est diligere Deum super omnia: diligere quidquid Deus vult diligi; et ex hoc ipso quod sic diligeret, non faceret praeceptum divinum per casum; et per consequens sic diligendo, Deum diligeret et non diligeret, faceret praeceptum Dei et non faceret.*" (*Quod.* III.14, lines 85-91)

[35] Cf. John 14:23 in the Vulgate: "If someone loves me, they will follow my words."

[36] "Divine-Command Theorist," 15-16. There are also epistemological worries in the background that Ockham is aware of but usually elides; assume for the sake of argument that Brennan knows what God has commanded her to do.

[37] "*Posset tamen Deum diligere simplici amore et naturali, qui non est dilectio Dei super omnia*…" (*Quod.* III.14, lines 91-92)

On Obeying the Command to not Love God

But can Brennan successfully obey the command to not love God? Here Ockham is not quite as explicit, but note that the command here is not a difficult one: the command is to just sufficiently focus one's mind on studying that one's will does not elicit an act of loving God, and this is an entirely ordinary sort of occurrence. It would be quite strange if it were impossible to act in this way. Furthermore, Ockham points out that even an atheist is able to act in such a way as to fulfill the command:

> Supposing that someone does not believe that God exists, that person cannot love him, because nothing can be loved except what exists or can exist.[38]

So, if the atheist can fulfill the command to not love God, it is hard to see why Brennan could not do so. After all, to fulfill the command, all she needs to do is simply refrain from eliciting an act of love at 10 AM, which she can do just by focusing on her math instead. So, presumably, it follows that it is possible to obey the command to not love God.

But there is a potential complication here.[39] What is clear is that the atheist is capable of not eliciting an act of loving God. And, likewise, it seems clear that Brennan is capable of not eliciting an act of loving God. But is *doing what is commanded* – not eliciting the act of loving God at 10 AM – the same as *obeying the command* to not love God? Surely Brennan can do the former. Can she do the latter?

This concern seems to motivate at least some of the scholars I discussed at the beginning. Irwin in particular clearly states that one can only *obey* God's command if one first loves God, that in order for an act to count as *obedience* it must be that the relevant act is performed out of love. Indeed, I think Irwin takes this to be the key point of the whole passage, glossing *Quod.* III.14 as follows:

> In Ockham's view, we obey God's commands because we follow the precept of non-positive morality that enjoins the love for God.… God might command us not to love God; *we could not be moved to obey this command unless we loved God*, but if we loved God we would not be obeying this command.… This argument presupposes that the only motive for obeying God that we need to consider is love for God. Ockham is not considering obedience out of 'servile' fear of God's power to harm us, but obedience on moral grounds, and hence obedience based on the love of God.[40]

Irwin's claim that moral obedience must be founded in the love of God seems to derive from Ockham's discussion of the fourth degree of virtue in *On the Connection of the Virtues*:

> The fourth degree of a virtue is when someone wills to perform this sort of deed according to the previously discussed conditions and circumstances, and does so just on account of a love of God, e.g., because the intellect has dictated that deeds of this sort should be done just on

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[38] "…*posito quod aliquis non credat Deum esse, non potest eum diligere, quia nihil potest diligi nisi quod est vel potest esse*." (*Quod.* III.14, lines 92-94)

[39] My thanks to an anonymous referee for helping me see this concern much more clearly.

[40] Irwin, *Development of Ethics*, 720, emphasis added.

> account of a love of God. Only this degree of virtue is the perfect and true moral virtue about which the saints speak.[41]

And Ockham also agrees that fear of harm might give one a pragmatic reason but not necessarily a moral reason to obey a command, when he argues that one does not have a moral obligation to obey commands given by earthly tyrants:

> [A]lthough sometimes permitted power is to be obeyed to avoid the power's wrath in case greater evil or damage results, it is nevertheless not to be obeyed for conscience sake. If there were no motive for obedience but its wrath alone, disobedience would be permissible – someone captured by a robber or pirate (a little one or a great!) rightly escapes, if he can.[42]

Nevertheless, I do not think Irwin establishes the point here that Brennan can only obey God's command if she already loves God. The fact that only the *perfect* degree of moral virtue requires the love of God indicates that Ockham accepts that one can act morally without the love of God; likewise, Ockham regularly notes that the pagan philosophers performed virtuous acts, albeit acts of a different kind and degree than the virtuous acts performed by Christians.[43] So, love of God is not necessary for doing what is right or doing what one ought.

Further, just because disobeying a pirate's command is morally licit does not entail that Jim is not obeying Long John Silver when Silver tells Jim to get in the rowboat and Jim complies. Acting in conformity to a received command just is obeying that command, regardless of the motive for the obedience or the question of whether disobedience is morally permitted. Indeed, when Ockham speaks about the obedience that creatures owe to the divine will, he centers his inquiry on the claim that creatures are obligated to conform to the divine will by willing what God wills those creatures to will; the question of the motive for the creature's conformity does not arise in that context.[44] So long as Brennan acts in conformity with God's command, I argue, she is obeying God's command, regardless of whether her motivation to obey comes from love, fear, just being the highly suggestable type, or whatever.[45]

Additionally, there seems to be another way to respond to Irwin here which largely sidesteps the whole paradox, one I have avoided discussing heretofore because Ockham does not mention it in this passage

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[41] *Var. Ques*. q. 7, a. 2 (*OTh* VIII, 335–6). The sourcing from here to Irwin is indirect: Irwin cites Adams on this point, who cites Ockham. For the intermediary source, see Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Structure of Ockham's Moral Theory," *Franciscan Studies* 46 (1986), 27–31.

[42] William Ockham, *A Short Discourse on Tyrannical Government*, ed. A.S. McGrade, tr. John Kilcullen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 79.

[43] For just one example, see *Rep.* IV, qq. 3-5 (*OTh* VII, 58): "When one abstains from an act of sexual intercourse for the sake of God and because God commanded one to abstain in this way, then God (or God's command) is the final cause of this abstinence; and it is thus for all other virtues acquired by a good Christian, because God is always the chief intended end. However, a philosopher, even though they might abstain from such acts, nevertheless does so totally because of another end: either for the sake of preserving one's nature for proficiency in knowledge or for the sake of some other such end. Therefore, there was a different partial object of abstinence for the philosopher and for the good Christian; consequently, there was a different virtue of a different nature."

[44] See *Ord.*, d. 48, q. un (*OTh* IV, 686–91).

[45] Freppert claims that, for Ockham, "love and obedience are equivalent." (*Basis of Morality*, 124). I think the considerations in the main text are sufficient to rebut this point; but for further argument against Freppert's equivalency thesis, see Dee, *William of Ockham's Divine Command Theory*, pp. 94–100.

nor do any of the commentators seem to consider it. But elsewhere Ockham regularly distinguishes between habitual love and occurrent acts of love, and he holds that although some acts are incompatible with other acts and some habits incompatible with other habits, no act is naturally incompatible with any habit.[46] Now, the habitual love of God might be sufficient on its own to motivate one to obey divine commands, and having that habitual love at a given time is compatible with not eliciting an act of love at that same time. So, if one is convinced with Irwin that love for God is the only thing that could motivate obedience to God's command, it seems that Brennan could readily obey God's command as a result of maintaining her habitual love of God, even while she obeys the command by refraining from any occurrent act of loving God at 10 AM.

Either way, I suggest we have good reason to think Ockham endorses claim #5, that it is Possible to Obey a Divine Command to Not Love God.

Now, Adams agrees that it is possible to obey the command to not love God, but she has a further worry about Brennan's obedience. She is concerned that, by refraining from loving God, Brennan will be violating her other moral norms. According to Adams's interpretation, hating God or refraining from loving God would violate an existing moral obligation, since she reads Ockham as holding that right reason always generates a standing obligation to love God:

> …Ockham's God could also thwart such attempted sacrificial loyalty to himself by commanding rational creatures not to love or commanding them to hate Him. This external circumstance would put rational creatures in the bind of not being able to conform to their norms…[47]

But, contra Adams, obeying a command to concentrate on one's math homework instead of God is not itself sinful or contrary to right reason. Now, she may well be correct that being given a command to positively elicit an act of hating God would place a creature in such a moral dilemma, but she is mistaken to think that the command to not elicit love for God at a certain time fails under the same umbrella. Not eliciting an act of loving God at 10 AM on Thursday is not itself a sin according to Ockham, since one is only obligated to have such an act at some time and place, not at every time and place. As he clearly affirms elsewhere, Ockham believes that divine commands to positively perform a given action generally only bind in a particular situation or at a particular place and time; the only commands that bind one at all times are the negative commands to refrain from a given action:

> Someone sins mortally when they do not conform themselves to the divine will at a time and place at which they are obligated to do so in order for them to be saved. But, as was said before, it is not the case that everyone is obligated to do so at all times; this is especially so with respect to affirmative commands, although everyone is always obligated by the negative commands.[48]

The command to love God, being an affirmative command, does not bind one to elicit an act of loving God at all times; rather, one is only obligated to love God at some time or other, and perhaps at some specific particular times. (Perhaps one is obligated to elicit the act of loving God while praying in church, say.)

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[46] See especially the discussions of the connections of the virtues at the end of *Rep.* III, q. 12 (*OTh* VI, 421–8) and the end of *Rep.* IV, qq. 3-5 (*OTh* VII, 59–60).
[47] Adams, "Will, Nature, and Morality," 265. See also her "Structure of Ockham's Moral Theory," 27–31.
[48] *Ord.*, d. 48, q. un. (*OTh* IV, 690).

Further, it simply cannot be the case that everyone is always obligated to elicit acts of loving God, for, as Ockham points out in a different context, there are times at which one has no acts of will at all. E.g., one has no acts of will while asleep,[49] and so the command to love God above all things cannot be an obligation to elicit that sort of act of will at every moment. So, contra Adams, simply not eliciting an act of love for God cannot, in general, be a sin or a breach of ethical norms, especially not in the case where God has commanded Brennan to instead concentrate on her math homework for a given stretch of time.

Conclusion

It is difficult to see how progress can be made on large-scale interpretive issues in Ockham's ethics when such confusion reigns regarding the central thrust of such a widely discussed passage. In order to discern whether Ockham is an unmitigated divine command theorist, a proponent of some heterodox natural law view, or something else altogether, we must first come to some accurate and grounding understanding of the key texts in his corpus. Recognizing that Ockham thinks one can in fact not love God for a given time and that doing so violates no ethical norms is a key building block for an accurate understanding of his ethical theory. Seeing that he believes that loving God above all else entails obeying all God's commands, but that the obedience does not entail the love, is another crucial piece of that puzzle.[50]

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[49] "If [two men] are sleeping, there will not be an act of intellect or an act of will in either of them." (*Rep.* IV, qq. 10-11; *OTh* VII, 196)

[50] Thanks to Sonja Schierbaum for the conversation that inspired this paper.

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