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Heavenly “Freedom” in Fourteenth-Century Voluntarism

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Abstract

According to standard late medieval Christian thought, humans in heaven are unable to sin, having been “confirmed” in their goodness; and, nevertheless, are more free than humans are in the present life. The rise of voluntarist conceptions of the will in the late thirteenth century made it increasingly difficult to hold onto both claims. Peter Olivi suggested that the impeccability of the blessed was dependent upon a special activity of God upon their wills and argued that this external constraint upon their wills did not eliminate their freedom. Later voluntarists largely agreed with Olivi in attributing the confirmation of the blessed to be dependent upon God’s activity in some way, but disputed the means by which and the extent to which the wills of those in heaven could be said to retain their freedom. This paper will examine various attempts made to either harmonize these two claims or else to soften the blow of rejecting one of them; among the authors surveyed will be Peter John Olivi, John Duns Scotus, Henry of Harclay, William of Ockham, Walter Chatton, and Margurite Porete.

Introduction¹

Among medieval Christian thinkers, it was widely held that humans in heaven and the good angels are unable to sin and yet are also significantly free – and not just free, but even more free than humans in the present life. Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, the 12th century text that for centuries was the standard textbook for graduate students in theology is representative in its presentation of these claims:

[T]he good angels have been confirmed by such grace that they cannot become evil ... And yet [they] have free choice because the good angels choose the good and reject evil without any compelling necessity, but by their own spontaneous will assisted by grace.²

The angels and saints who already live happily with the Lord and are already so confirmed in the grace of blessedness that they neither can, nor wish to bend to evil, do not lack free choice. ... [A]fter the confirmation of blessedness, there will be in man a free choice by which he will be unable to sin, as it already now is in the angels and saints who are with the Lord; and certainly the choice will be so much the freer the more immune it is from sin and the more prone to good.³

¹ Throughout, all translations are my own unless cited otherwise.

² Peter Lombard, *Sentences*, Book II, d. 7, ch. 2 (translation by Giulio Silano, from Lombard 2007:28).

³ Peter Lombard, *Sentences*, Book II, d. 25, chs. 3-4 (translation by Giulio Silano, from Lombard 2007:117-118).

Surely one can be forgiven for finding the conjunction of these two claims – that the blessed are unable to sin and are nevertheless free – puzzling, if not straightforwardly contradictory. Attempting to explain how both these claims can be true animated a great deal of Christian philosophical theology in the middle ages; the puzzle has also received a significant amount of discussion within contemporary philosophy of religion.⁴

Of course, one straightforward way to reconcile these two claims is to reject the principle that freedom requires the ability to do other than one does, perhaps by endorsing a compatibilist account of freedom such that one’s actions may be free despite the absence of alternative possibilities. This strategy was frequently employed throughout the Middle Ages: Aquinas arguably makes just such a move. In brief, Aquinas holds that one chooses freely just when one chooses according to a considered judgment of reason (contrasting free actions with those actions that result from non-rational causes), and that the will is free so long as it is not coerced by something external to the agent. Thus, since the intellects of the blessed are perfected by the beatific vision and so cannot be mistaken in their considered but non-coerced judgments, their wills are eternally but freely fixed upon the good.⁵ In a similar vein, Anselm gave what became a popular medieval solution: he largely dissolves the puzzle by defining freedom as the power to maintain a morally upright will. As such, the ability to sin is not a part of freedom, but is rather the ability to enslave oneself. Given this definition of freedom, the fact that the blessed are unable to sin in no way limits their freedom.⁶

But the Anselmian claim that the ability to sin is no part of freedom is one that has little purchase in the contemporary debate. Rather, the contemporary discussion is strongly driven by the assumption that “significant freedom” includes the ability to commit wrongdoing.⁷ Contemporary authors have thus tried to give some other explanation of the sinlessness of the blessed, say, by appealing to character traits that are freely-formed in the present life and that preclude sinning in heaven in order to hold that the blessed have freedom in some derivative sense.⁸

Peter John Olivi, one of the key progenitors of the late medieval voluntarist tradition, similarly contended that, contra Anselm, the ability to sin is an essential part of creaturely freedom. Olivi’s claim made the puzzle of heavenly freedom a more pressing one in the fourteenth century, especially for those voluntarist authors who adopted Olivi’s understanding of freedom. In what follows, I briefly

⁴ For the contemporary debate, see, e.g., Sennett 1999; Pawl and Timpe 2009; Cowan 2011; Pawl and Timpe 2013; Brown 2015; Boeninger and Garcia 2017; Tamburro 2017; Kittle 2018; Matheson 2018; Kittle 2020; and Hartman 2021. Much less discussed is the related puzzle concerning the doctrine of the “obstinacy” of the damned – namely, why humans in hell and fallen angels are unable to choose rightly; though see Hoffmann 2021:243-262 for some discussion.

⁵ Aquinas claims that the wills of the blessed are free even though fixed in goodness in *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, ch. 138.2, and argues that their wills are fixed in their goodness as a result of the perfection of their intellects in *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV, ch. 92.6-7. For his definition of free choice, see, e.g., *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 83, a. 1, *resp.*, as well as *Summa Theologiae* I-IIae, q. 13, a. 2, *resp.* In this space of course I cannot do justice to the complexities of Aquinas’s views on free agency; for a more complete discussion that argues that Aquinas is not a compatibilist about freedom, see Hoffmann and Michon 2017 and also Hoffmann 2021:40-54.

⁶ See Anselm, *De libertate arbitrii*, *passim*, but especially chs. 1-3, 9, 12-13. As Kent 2017 notes, after Anselm, “Bonaventure, Robert Grosseteste, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Giles of Rome all denied that freedom of choice requires the ability to sin” (1075).

⁷ As per Plantinga 1974:166.

⁸ As in both Sennett 1999 and Pawl and Timpe 2009.

review Olivi's contention that creaturely freedom must include the ability to sin. I will then discuss a cluster of strategies employed by voluntarists in Olivi's wake to account for the freedom of the blessed. I close by looking in some detail at a related solution to the puzzle offered by the fourteenth-century mystic Marguerite Porete, a thinker not often considered together alongside academic theologians such as Scotus and Ockham.

Late Medieval Voluntarism and the Freedom to Sin

It has been frequently commented that it is difficult to give anything like necessary and sufficient conditions for marking a given medieval thinker as a voluntarist, though this has not dissuaded many from trying.⁹ Regardless of whether there is a precise position that can be identified as voluntarism, what is clear enough that there is a family of related positions adopted by a significant number of philosophers and theologians in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, especially by authors who are either members of the Franciscan order or who show considerable Franciscan influence.¹⁰

These thinkers tend to privilege the will over the intellect, both in the psychology of decision-making and the grounding of ethical norms. The will is more noble than the intellect, they say, and acts of the will more important than acts of the intellect. This, in turn, leads to other notable voluntarist positions, such as that the source of heavenly beatitude is in the will and its enjoyment of God, rather than the intellect and its vision of God.

The voluntarists also stress the active nature of the will, hold that human freedom stems from the will rather than the intellect, and insist that the will's activity need not be determined by the considered judgments of intellect.¹¹ Indeed, that the will is able to act contrary to what reason judges should be done is sometimes taken to be the characteristic thesis of those thinkers now commonly lumped under the voluntarist label. Robert Pasnau, for one, suggests that this view "is perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of medieval voluntarism," and argues it leads to other two other views he identifies as also characteristic of voluntarism, namely that the will is "the primary locus" of both selfhood and moral worth: it is the state of our wills, these thinkers maintain, that defines who we are and whether we are good.¹²

Among the most important figures in the thirteenth-century rise of voluntarist views is Peter John Olivi. In his *Quaestiones in libros Sententiarum* (often referred to as his *Summa*), in addition to offering a new

⁹ E.g., Williams 2013:168 states that voluntarism is "more an approach than a thesis or set of theses," while Pasnau 2022:47 asserts that "no one has ever produced a clear and systematic account of what the voluntarist movement was."

¹⁰ I set aside here two other schools of thought that are often labeled as voluntarisms: (1) "psychological voluntarism," which is typically characterized as little more than a decided interest in the appetitive powers and their place in human nature, and (2) "theological voluntarism," the view that which moral obligations obtain is due to the free activity of the divine will. For these distinctions, see especially Kent 1995:94-96 but also Williams 2013:168-169.

¹¹ Hoffmann 2021:71 identifies nine distinct theses that he claims are "characteristic of voluntarist approaches to free will." In addition to those already mentioned or alluded to, he adds these: that command is an act of the will, not of reason; that the will is a self-mover; that the object willed is not a sufficient condition for the will's act; and that willing evil does not presuppose some deficiency in reason.

¹² Pasnau 2022.

definition of personhood in terms of freedom and the ability to freely engage in self-reflection,¹³ Olivi also broke new ground by arguing, contrary to the Anselmian consensus, that the ability to sin is an essential part of creaturely freedom.¹⁴ (Olivi even insists that the ability to sin is not merely a defect in the will, but rather is a “great and noble feature [*entitatem*] of created freedom.”¹⁵) Olivi gives several reasons for thinking that the ability to sin must be a part of freedom – among them, that freedom must involve the ability to perform either of two opposing actions, that this ability serves as the key difference between creaturely freedom and divine freedom, and more – but his central argument relies on the claim that one can only be morally responsible for what one does freely; thus, if the ability to sin is not part of freedom, then no sin is done freely, and thus no one is responsible for their sinful acts – a conclusion deeply at odds with both common sense and Christian belief.¹⁶ Further, not only is the ability to sin part of created freedom, it is an *essential* part of such freedom; given the limitations and imperfections inherent to created being, God cannot create a free creature without giving it the ability to sin.¹⁷

But if the power to sin is an essential part of created freedom, how then can the blessed in heaven be sinless? Olivi’s response to this question has two parts. First, he argues that even though the power to sin is essential to creaturely wills in their initial state, it is not essential to the will that it be readily disposed to committing sin:

Insofar as the ability to sin refers to a sort of remote power, or insofar as it refers to a possibility that pertains to a will that does not possess a habit that determines the will toward what is contrary to sin, then the ability to sin is essential to our will. But insofar as the ability to sin refers to a sort of proximate power, a power that is disposed or is easily disposable and moveable by itself toward evil, then the ability to sin is not essential to our will and so it can be taken away by grace and consummated glory.¹⁸

So, Olivi contends, since it is not essential to our wills that it be *disposed* toward sinning, only that it be *capable* of sinning, God can provide a habit of grace that disposes the will toward right action, making sin difficult and unlikely for the blessed. However, Olivi notes that the freedom of the blessed in heaven is freedom only in an equivocal sense: just as ‘being’ is said only equivocally of substances and accidents, so ‘freedom’ is said equivocally of the power of free choice and of the habit of grace that perfects the

¹³ “A thing’s being a person [*eius personalitatem*] is the same as being a thing existing through itself that is free, capable of ruling [*dominativa*], and that possessively reflects (or can reflect) back on itself, so that it occupies itself by means of a certain free reflection.” Olivi, *Questions in secundum librum Sententiarum*, q. 52 (Olivi 1926, II:200). For commentary, see Perler 2021.

¹⁴ For a fuller summary and analysis of Olivi’s case, see Kent 2017.

¹⁵ Olivi, *Questions in secundum librum Sententiarum*, q. 41 (Olivi 1926, I:696).

¹⁶ “If Anselm’s definition of freedom were sufficient and contained everything essential to freedom, then it would necessarily follow that demons and the damned do not have the use of free choice, nor do they perform any act that proceeds from freedom insofar as it is free ... from which it follows that the only words or deeds of ours that would be caused by our free choice insofar as it is free would be those which are virtuous.” Olivi, *Questions in secundum librum Sententiarum*, q. 41 (Olivi 1926, I:697).

¹⁷ Olivi, *Questions in secundum librum Sententiarum*, q. 40 (Olivi 1926, I:684).

¹⁸ Olivi, *Questions in secundum librum Sententiarum*, q. 40 (Olivi 1926, I:688).

blessed. While we can say truly that the blessed are more free than we are, Olivi seems to imply that this is true only because the word ‘freedom’ is being used in two different senses.¹⁹

Thus, Olivi’s answer to our puzzle – how it can be true both that the blessed are free and that they are unable to sin – seems to be that neither is entirely true. The blessed are not, strictly speaking, unable to sin; at least insofar as their wills are concerned, the ability to choose sin is still present in them. Further, insofar as they are unable to actualize this ability as a result of their being so disposed by grace, to that degree they are not free, at least not in the same sense that we are free.

(Before moving on, I should note that, later in his *Summa*, in his famous long question on human freedom, Olivi seems to give a quite different answer about this, sounding rather more like Anselm and Aquinas.²⁰ According to this text, when the will is disposed by the accidental quality of grace and is in the state of glory, then it is impossible for the will to in any way to diminish or destroy its love for God. As a result of this overpowering love, the very notion of sinning or displeasing God is “maximally repugnant and detestable” to the blessed, such that the choice between meritorious actions and their sinful opposites no longer pertains to the will. Further, while in the earlier passages Olivi stressed that the ability to sin is essential to freedom, in this question, when discussing the wills of both the blessed in heaven and the damned in hell, he insists that all that is essential to freedom is that the will be a self-mover, not that it have any power to choose between meritorious and sinful actions:

In all these [postmortem] states, free choice can and does operate as something that is moved from itself, although in these states it could not unqualifiedly [will] everything and its opposite [*in quaecumque opposita*]. For being able to operate from itself is essential to its freedom, (and, indeed, operating in this way is essential to its free use) so that it could never exist without the first [namely, being able to operate from itself] nor could there be free use without the second [namely, operating from itself]. But to be able to [will] everything and its opposite – especially something meritorious and something demeritorious – does not pertain to its essence or its free use in such a way that it could not exist without that.²¹

Here Olivi fully endorses that the blessed are free and unable to sin, and that the puzzle is resolved by claiming that freedom consists only in being the ultimate source of one’s choices. Whether the claim here – that the choice between opposites is not essential to human freedom – can be made consistent with what he said in the earlier discussion, is sadly impossible to adjudicate in this short article.)

For reasons unrelated to his views on free will, Olivi’s works were condemned and there were wide prohibitions against reading and citing him. Despite this, in the decades following Olivi, many thinkers quietly adopted his claim that the ability to sin is an essential component of creaturely freedom, but attempted to provide a more satisfactory resolution to the puzzle of how the blessed in heaven are free. As we will see, though, these attempts largely recapitulate Olivi’s attempt; the voluntarists who follow after Olivi generally maintain either (i) that the inability to sin is not a result of anything intrinsic to the creature’s will but is due to some action of God’s that applies externally to the will, or (ii) that the

¹⁹ Olivi, *Questions in secundum librum Sententiarum*, q. 41 (Olivi 1926, I:699).

²⁰ See Olivi, *Questions in secundum librum Sententiarum*, q. 57 (Olivi 1926, II:305-394). This passage is much commented on; see, e.g., the sources referenced in Kent 2017:1075, fn. 5.

²¹ Olivi, *Questions in secundum librum Sententiarum*, q. 57 (Olivi 1926, II:378)

blessed are not free in the same sense that humans in the present life are free, or (iii) both. There are, though, some subtle differences in the various explanations given, to which I will now turn.

Scotus, Harclay, Ockham, and Chatton on the Cause of the Impeccability of the Blessed

The paradigmatic voluntarist thinkers of the fourteenth century, John Duns Scotus (d. 1308) and William of Ockham (d. 1347), hewed closely to Olivi's solution, as did their near contemporaries Henry of Harclay (d. 1317) and Walter Chatton (d. 1343).

In his *Ordinatio*, Scotus argues that the inability to sin is not due to anything intrinsic to the blessed themselves, but rather is due to an extrinsic impediment that prevents them from actualizing their capability. If some individual is blindfolded for a period of time, then, Scotus contends, it is true that the individual is unable to see for that time, but this does not imply the individual lacks the power of sight; rather, the impediment just prevents the individual from actualizing their power. (He refers to this as having a "remote and intrinsic power" while lacking a "proximate power.") Further, he argues, there could be a *permanent* obstacle placed before one's eyes, such that one could *never* actualize the power of sight; but it would still be the case nevertheless that one intrinsically possessed the remote power of sight. Similarly, he claims, the blessed and the blessed angels retain their remote power for sinning, and nothing intrinsic to the blessed prevents their wills from sinning, but God externally forestalls any actualization of their power to sin.²² Scotus insists that this is only by God's free decree: that the blessed are unable to sin is not a matter of absolute necessity, but given what God has decreed, it is not possible for them to sin because God will not cease from preventing them from sinning.²³

Thus Scotus follows Olivi in holding that the ability to sin is retained by the blessed and they are restrained from sinning by an external cause. But Scotus does deviate from Olivi insofar as Scotus insists the blessed are still free in heaven in the fullest sense of the term. His argument for this claim is decidedly curious, though, and deserves to be quoted at length. In response to an objection that God's determining their will would take away their freedom, Scotus agrees that the blessed would not be free if they possessed a habit of charity that was of such a degree that it made sinning impossible, because in such a case the will would be enslaved to its own habit, rather than being the cause of that disposition's manifestation:

It is contrary to the will's freedom that it be absolutely determined by an inhering habit to will rightly. This is because the will would not be a will unless it were a prior cause with respect to its habit, such that it is apt to use the habit and determine the habit to acting and not to be determined by the habit in such a way that the opposite act is not within its power, for then it would be entirely (with respect to this case) subjected to the habit.²⁴

However, Scotus insists, it is no limitation of the creaturely will's freedom if it be determined by the divine will, because the creaturely will is always subject to the divine will as to a prior cause:

²² Scotus, *Ordinatio* IV, d. 49, p. 1, q. 6, nn. 349-352, 368 (Scotus 1950: XIV:377-378, 382-383).

²³ Scotus, *Ordinatio* IV, d. 49, p. 1, q. 6, n. 365 (Scotus 1950: XIV:381-382).

²⁴ Scotus, *Ordinatio* IV, d. 49, p. 1, q. 6, n. 367 (Scotus 1950: XIV:382).

To be absolutely determined to will rightly, such that the opposite act is not within the will's power, is unqualifiedly not contrary to the will's freedom. It is determined in this way by the divine will ... But it is not contrary to the will's freedom or its nature that it be impeded from one action and determined to another action by a cause that is prior to it, as the divine nature is.²⁵

But it is hard to see how this is supposed to satisfy the objection. Someone who is permanently unable to walk because they have been permanently tied down to a chair is not free to walk, no matter how much they retain the power for walking. And surely it makes no difference to the individual's freedom whether they were tied down by a prior cause or not. Whether they have been tied down by God or by another human being, in either case they are not free to walk. And so Scotus seems simply mistaken to claim that having their will constrained by a prior cause is not a limitation on the freedom of the blessed.

Henry of Harclay, writing just a few years after Scotus, also agrees with Olivi that the power to sin is essential to freedom and so contends that the wills of the blessed always retain the power to sin. The reason that the blessed do not sin is not because of anything intrinsic to their wills but is only a result of God "upholding the will so that it not sin". Nevertheless, Harclay insists, this divine support comes about as a result of the will "freely desiring and willing that God hold it firmly so that it not turn away from the ultimate end." Given this, he says, God's activity of preserving the will is not an imposition on freedom, but is rather the result of a free choice.²⁶

So, we might infer, on Henry's view it is not precisely true to say that the blessed are free now; they are certainly not free to sin, given that God prevents their wills from doing so. But since their impeccable state results from freely choosing to ask God for support and maintenance, the blessed have some sort of derivative freedom: their present impeccable state is the result of a free decision, and that is freedom enough.

Harclay's student, William of Ockham, offers two alternative accounts of how the blessed in heaven might be unable to sin in his own commentary on the *Sentences*, though he endorses neither of these two possibilities as more probable than the other. One possible explanation for the sinlessness of the blessed, he claims, is connected to his view that the actual act of heavenly love for God in the will is caused to be there by God alone, without any causal contribution from the created will itself. Ockham speculates that perhaps this divinely-created act of beatific love is metaphysically incompatible with any sinful act, such that the very presence of such love precludes the will from causing a sinful act, much as the will's causing any act A at some instant precludes it from also causing not-A at that very instant.²⁷ An alternative possible explanation for the sinlessness of the blessed comes from his account of divine concurrence. Ockham, like most medieval Christian theologians, holds that no created cause can produce its effect without God concurring along with the created cause to produce the relevant effect; as such, it is possible for God to prevent any particular activity in the created world by merely refraining from concurring with the relevant cause.²⁸ Ockham suggests that this could account for why the blessed are unable to sin in heaven: maybe, he says, God simply refuses to concur with any created will to produce a sinful act in heaven. Were God to hold back his concurrence in this way, no blessed will would

²⁵ Scotus, *Ordinatio* IV, d. 49, p. 1, q. 6, n. 367 (Scotus 1950: XIV:382).

²⁶ Henry of Harclay, *Ordinary Questions*, q. 7, n. 54 (Harclay 2008, I:317).

²⁷ Ockham, *Reportatio* II, q. 15 (Ockham 1967, V:341).

²⁸ For a detailed analysis of Ockham's account of divine concurrence, see Toth 2019.

ever produce a sinful effect (perhaps, one might say, not for lack of trying, but without God's concurrence the created will would also be unable to even try to sin).²⁹

On either of Ockham's proposals, the sinlessness of the blessed is to be accounted for by God's activity – much as we saw postulated by Olivi, Scotus, and Harclay. But Ockham is not inclined to agree that this divine activity in no way interferes with the freedom of the blessed. Rather, he straightforwardly insists, the blessed are neither free to love God nor free to sin:

Given this, it is clear in what way there is freedom in the blessed . . . There is no freedom with respect to those acts that are caused by God alone or with respect to the opposites of those acts. This is because they cannot cease from the former acts (which are totally caused by God) and they cannot elicit the latter acts (because of the formal incompatibility between the latter acts and the former acts that are caused by God alone). So, since God totally causes the beatific act in the will of a good angel, that good angel does not have freedom with respect to the beatific act, nor with respect to its opposite (i.e., hating God).³⁰

However, though the blessed are neither free to love God nor free to sin, they are free with respect to any actions that are such that both performing that action and not performing it is compatible with the beatific love of God. For instance, if there are actions that are either merely morally permissible or morally supererogatory in heaven, then the blessed would be free to either perform those actions or to refrain from them, because the divinely-caused act of beatific love neither necessitates nor precludes the existence of those acts.³¹ But this freedom possessed by the blessed is only a subset of the freedom enjoyed by those on earth who have such freedom with respect to all of their acts, including acts of loving God and of sinning.

Elsewhere, Ockham adds a bit of nuance to this position, telling his reader that there are multiple senses of freedom. We can speak, somewhat improperly, of freedom as the absence of coercion or enslavement, particularly the enslavement to sin or punishment, and the blessed in heaven are free in these senses (and, indeed, more free than those in the present life) because the blessed are neither coerced nor enslaved in their choices. But the proper sense of freedom to be used in philosophical discussion is the ability to do otherwise than one does while holding all circumstances fixed (in Ockham's definition, "that the thing has within its power to not produce as well as to produce, without any change on its part or on the part of anything else"), and the blessed lack freedom in this philosophical sense.³²

Walter Chatton, Ockham's colleague and frequent critic, adds to the arguments of his predecessors. Similarly to Scotus, Chatton argues that the sinlessness of the blessed cannot be due to any habit that they possess, because no habit can completely expel from the will the freedom to choose between

²⁹ Ockham, *Reportatio* II, q. 15 (Ockham 1967, V:343).

³⁰ Ockham, *Reportatio* II, q. 15 (Ockham 1967, V:344-345). Translation taken from Hagedorn 2021:240 (slightly emended).

³¹ Ockham, *Reportatio* II, q. 15 (Ockham 1967, V:345).

³² Ockham, *Ordinatio* d. 1, q. 6 (Ockham 1967, I: 501-502). Translation taken from Hagedorn 2021:95 (slightly emended). See also Ockham, *Reportatio* II, q. 15 (Ockham 1967, V:354-356).

opposites.³³ He objects in the same way to a proposal that their impeccability is the result of some powerful volition by which “the will, from its liberty, plunges itself with such great effort and so efficaciously that it cannot pull back;” again, Chatton insists, no past volition can strip the will of its present freedom.³⁴ Further, if it *were* possible for some habit or some powerful volition to make the blessed sinless, then it should be possible (at least in principle) to become sinless on earth as well by the same means; but this implication he presumes to be impossible (not to mention unorthodox).³⁵

But Chatton offers no informative account of what does keep the blessed from sinning. Instead, he states only that the sinless of the blessed is the result of God’s promise that whoever remains good to the end of this present life will be made sinless. The offering of this promise is an act of divine mercy, Chatton claims; the fulfillment of the promise is an act of divine justice.³⁶

In the end, although Scotus, Harclay, Ockham, and Chatton all offer somewhat different accounts of the process, all of them agree on the fundamental point that the blessed are sinless as a result of some activity on God’s part, not in virtue of some activity or feature of the created individual herself. This activity is differently described as God actively restraining the creaturely will (Scotus), holding it close (Harclay), refusing to cooperate with it (Ockham), or fulfilling God’s promise to it (Chatton), but in each case it is God who makes the blessed unable to sin.

But then how are the blessed free on their accounts? Despite Scotus’s protestations, it does not seem that having their wills determined by God is compatible with the blessed being free. Similarly for Harclay’s claim that the blessed have derivative freedom inasmuch as God’s preserving their wills is downstream of a free decision on their behalf, this also may seem a subterfuge (though perhaps not a wretched one), especially if one wishes to affirm the traditional claim that the blessed are more free than those in this life.³⁷ If the power to sin is an essential feature of creaturely freedom, as all these voluntarists follow Olivi in thinking, then Ockham seems to have the right of it when he says that all these accounts (his own included) do not preserve what is essential to freedom, and so the blessed are free only in some more limited sense, such as the sense of no longer being subject to sin or pain.

Now, maybe there is nothing for the voluntarist to do but admit the puzzle of heavenly freedom cannot be solved, given the assumption that the ability to sin is essential to freedom. Or maybe what is needed is a rather *unorthodox* suggestion, in every sense of that term.

Marguerite Porete

³³ Chatton, *Reportatio super Sententias* II, d. 7, q. 1, n. 10 (Chatton 2002, III:259).

³⁴ Chatton, *Reportatio super Sententias* II, d. 7, q. 1, nn. 17, 20 (Chatton 2002, III:260-261).

³⁵ “This argument – that a habit in some degree renders it more difficult to suspend a praiseworthy act, and [a greater habit could render it impossible to suspend this sort of act] -- would equally prove that a habit in this life could immobilize the will.” Chatton, *Reportatio super Sententias* II, d. 7, q. 1, n. 5 (Chatton 2002, III:259).

³⁶ Chatton, *Reportatio super Sententias* II, d. 7, q. 1, nn. 27-28 (Chatton 2002, III:262).

³⁷ It is perhaps worth noting here that the overwhelming focus of the contemporary discussion mentioned in fn. 3 has been whether derivative freedom of much the sort that Harclay propounds counts as significant freedom.

In the previous section, we saw how four commonly discussed voluntarist thinkers of the early fourteenth century followed Peter Olivi's basic strategies for reconciling the sinlessness of the blessed with their freedom: all these authors either hold (i) that the inability to sin is not a result of anything intrinsic to the creature's will but is due to some action of God's that applies externally to the will, or (ii) that the blessed are not free in the same sense that humans in the present life are free, or (iii) both.

A near contemporary who is seldom mentioned in discussions of fourteenth-century voluntarism is the beguine mystic Margurite Porete (d. 1310).³⁸ But her vernacular work *The Mirror of Simple Souls* contains many of the doctrines characteristic of voluntarism; it also, as we shall see, offers a solution to the puzzle of heavenly freedom that can be seen as continuous with the proposals of Olivi, Scotus, et al., while also being a radical departure from their most basic assumptions.

Porete's book is structured as a dialogue between three figures (Reason, Love, and Soul), and offers an account of spiritual enlightenment and moral perfection. According to Porete, the ultimate goal of the soul should be a complete dissolution of one's self into God, the ceding of all that is human and individual in exchange for full union with God.³⁹ But apart from this call for ultimate abnegation of self, and apart from her suggestion that one can achieve sinless perfection even in the present life,⁴⁰ Porete presents in *The Mirror* many theses that are shared or at least continuous with the views of the late medieval voluntarists.

Like the paradigmatic voluntarists, Porete clearly holds the will to be more noble to the intellect: throughout the text of *The Mirror*, the reader is repeatedly reminded of the superiority of love (the will's act) to reason (the intellect's act). Porete details beatitude in terms continuous with the voluntarists, speaking of the ultimate end as divine fruition, perfect charity, and the union of the creaturely will with the divine will. Much as they took freedom to be located in will rather than reason, in *The Mirror* the character of Love speaks of the imperfect as in servitude to Reason, while the perfected are free because of the presence of love.⁴¹ And, as we will see, there is reason to think that she identifies the source of one's individual personhood with one's will, just as her contemporary Olivi did.

Porete seems to agree with Olivi that the ability to sin is essential to the freedom of creaturely wills, and so it is impossible for the blessed to retain their creaturely wills, be free, and be impeccable. However, rather than giving up on either the freedom or the impeccability of the blessed, Porete sees the solution as giving up on creaturely wills. According to her, the solution to the puzzle of heavenly freedom is for the blessed to lose their wills altogether, replacing them with the divine will. Every party to the debate always agreed that God is completely free, despite being unable to sin; indeed, that was what Olivi thought was *the* defining difference between creaturely freedom and divine freedom. Porete's idea, I

³⁸ Christina Van Dyke (forthcoming) connects Porete with the early fourteenth-century voluntarists, noting that "if one were discussing the comparative roles of reason and will, Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* would pair nicely with Duns Scotus's views on the primacy of love over intellect." Though, as she has recently noted, Porete is more extreme than the paradigmatic voluntarists insofar as she thinks not merely that intellect is less noble than the will but is even an impediment to union with God. See Van Dyke 2022:174-176.

³⁹ All citations and quotations from Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* are from the translation by Ellen Babinsky found in Porete 1993.

⁴⁰ According to Van Dyke 2018, Porete's insistence that moral perfection was possible in this life, even without participation in the sacraments of the church, is what led to her execution for heresy.

⁴¹ E.g., *Mirror of Simple Souls* ch. 8 (Porete 1993:85-86).

take it, is that if creatures are able to possess divine freedom, then it necessarily follows that they will be unable to sin.

Now, of course, Porete the mystic speaks in largely metaphorical ways of this replacement of the creaturely will with the divine will. At times she speaks as if the perfected soul has no will at all, e.g., “[this Soul] has nothing to sin with, for without a will no one can sin,”⁴² and “[t]hey no longer possess any will.”⁴³ But in many other passages, which I think are closer to what she takes to be the literal truth of the matter, she speaks of the creature’s will being replaced with the divine will. For example, Porete says it is impossible for the creature to make themselves perfect because of their finitude, but God makes creatures perfect by supplying his own will to the creature:

If this Annihilated Soul wills the will of God – and the more she wills it, the more she would will to will it – she cannot possess this through the smallness of creaturehood . . . But God wills that she would will this, and that she would possess such a will. Such a will is the divine will . . . *This divine will, which God makes her will, courses through her* in the veins of divine Understanding and the marrow of divine Love and the union of divine Praise.⁴⁴

And similarly:

[I]t is no longer her will which wills, but now the will of God wills in her.⁴⁵

And again:

Because all that this Soul wills in consent is what God wills that she will, and this she wills in order to accomplish the will of God, no longer for the sake of her own will. And she cannot will this by herself, but it is the will of God which wills in her. Which is why it appears that this Soul has no will without the will of God, who makes her will all that she ought to will.⁴⁶

But if Olivi was correct when he argued that the will is the locus of human personhood, then to what extent does the individual even remain once their will has been supplanted by the divine will? Has Porete secured the freedom and sinlessness of the blessed in heaven only by expunging their very individuality? I presume Porete sees this point, and accepts the implication. This is why the full title of her work is *The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls*, why she speaks of perfected souls as having been “annihilated,” and why, she says, in the end, “this Soul understands nothing except [God], and so loves nothing except Him, praises nothing except Him, for there is nothing except Him.”⁴⁷ Porete believes the only way to ensure the sinlessness of the blessed is to annihilate their very individuality, for that is the very source of their sinfulness. In the end, the most promising voluntarist solution to the puzzle of heavenly freedom may be the annihilation of every will and every volition that is not God.

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⁴² *Mirror of Simple Souls* ch. 89 (Porete 1993:165).

⁴³ *Mirror of Simple Souls* ch. 9 (Porete 1993:86).

⁴⁴ *Mirror of Simple Souls* ch. 12 (Porete 1993:93), emphasis added.

⁴⁵ *Mirror of Simple Souls* ch. 7 (Porete 1993:85).

⁴⁶ *Mirror of Simple Souls* ch. 11 (Porete 1993:91).

⁴⁷ *Mirror of Simple Souls* ch. 118 (Porete 1993:193).

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