“In Harmony with Reason”: John Duns Scotus’s Theo-aesth/ethics

Abstract: Over the past two decades, the debate has intensified over the nature of John Duns Scotus’s (meta) ethics: is it a purely voluntarist “divine command” ethics or is it still based on rational principles? The former side is exemplified by Thomas Williams and the latter by Allan Wolter. Scotus claims that even the divine commandments that are not based on natural law are still somehow “in harmony with reason.” But what does this mean? Richard Cross in a recent study claims that God’s reasons for establishing certain moral norms are “aesthetic.” However, he fails to show clearly what is “aesthetic” about these reasons or why God’s will would follow “aesthetic” principles in legislating moral norms. This article clarifies both points, first, by painting an up-to-date picture of what constitutes “aesthetic” principles, and second, by providing a more accurate model of the way the human volitional faculty operates and addressing the problem of the “freedom of the will” from a present-day point of view.

Keywords: Duns Scotus, aesthetics, beauty, ethics, will, freedom, determinism, divine command, neurobiology

The Debate

It is difficult to convince a twenty-first century reader that medieval theology can still have any relevance. However, a recent debate about the nature of John Duns Scotus’s ethics opens up a possibility of examining two areas that have not been seriously treated together for a long, long time: ethics and aesthetics. The debate escalated a few years ago when Thomas Williams openly challenged the view of Scotus’s ethics held by Allan Wolter, a revered veteran of Scotus studies in the United States. The confrontation between Williams and Wolter that ensued has been amply described, for example, by Stephen Dumont1 and Richard Cross,2 and a brief account will suffice. Based on certain statements of Scotus, in his paper “The Unmitigated Scotus” Williams advanced the thesis that Scotus is really “a voluntarist divine command theorist,”3 who maintains that the moral value of an action depends exclusively on the divine will, and that Wolter presented an ideologically “mitigated” version of Scotus’s ethics that saved him from the stigma of the divine command model. In return, Wolter, who was in his nineties at the time, fired a parting shot at Williams with “The Unshredded Scotus” by pointing out that Williams’ position is based on shreds of Scotus’s texts taken out of context. If one considers the entire body of Scotus’s work, Wolter argued, one has to admit that God’s activity in promulgating moral laws is constrained by “factors other than God’s arbitrary

2 “Natural Law, Moral Constructivism, and Duns Scotus’s Metaethics.”
3 “The Unmitigated Scotus,” 180.

*Corresponding author: Oleg Bychkov: St. Bonaventure University
will.” Such factors, notably, include the law of non-contradiction and therefore the created things’ natures that cannot be violated without a contradiction.4

The debate specifically concerns the so-called second table of the Decalogue. While all agree that the first two or three commandments of the Decalogue that govern human behavior in relation to God belong to natural law, the moral norms contained in the second table are not part of natural law and God can dispense with any of these norms.5 Scotus’s persistent and cryptic mantra, however, is that the norms contained in the second table are “in harmony with reason.” The reason why Wolter and his supporters are so determined in their efforts to defend the Catholic theologian against the divine command stigma is that such a view of a capricious God and random moral law leaves humans no way to determine what the correct moral behavior is, while Scotus’s other persistent mantra is that God does not trap humans leaving them with no way to salvation. Williams attempts to remedy this problem by stating that God has given humans intuitive and immediate mechanisms to know the arbitrary moral law.6 However, Dumont rightly dismisses this position due to any lack of textual evidence in Scotus. At the same time, he equally dismisses Wolter’s position that God’s moral legislation has rational constraints that can be detected by the human intellect. According to Dumont, both Williams and Wolter are right in some sense. God’s will is far freer in Scotus than in the previous tradition. However, God’s will does seem to be constrained by the mysterious principle of being “in harmony with reason.” Although at this point most serious commentators, including Cross, agree that there are constraints on God’s will in Scotus, until recently no commentator, including Wolter, has been able to explain what exactly those constraints are, nor to provide a good explanation of what exactly the mysterious principle “in harmony with reason” means. I maintain that Dumont has failed as well.

The Textual Evidence

As Wolter insisted, at this point it would be best to ask Scotus himself. Although textual evidence on this matter is rather consistent across all the three major courses of lectures that Scotus has given, two Oxonian, earlier and later, and one Parisian, I would like to focus on the newest evidence from Scotus’s Parisian lectures that I am in the process of editing and translating.

There are numerous statements in Scotus, many of them collected by Williams, that seem to suggest that moral law, apart from the central commandment to love God, depends entirely on God’s will. For example, the “principal reason why baptism is non-repeatable is... that God has instituted it in this way... and there is no other reason for that except his will.”7 The only reason why moral rules are permanent is because God’s will has decided to stick to them, not because there are other reasons: “this mark [of baptism] is indelible not because it cannot be erased in an absolute sense, but because God will never erase it, for he has decreed that this will be an indelible sign; nor is there any other cause for this except his own will.”8 Similar statements abound. Scotus also states explicitly that God’s absolute will is not bound by the order of created nature.9

At the same time, there is some ambiguity in Scotus’s texts. While God’s absolute will certainly could have chosen things to be otherwise than they are now, even “if all those things were brought into existence otherwise and according to other laws established and ordained by God’s will, they would not have been brought into existence inordinately, but would still be ordered [according to just laws] just as [things are ordered] now.”10 This clearly suggests that there are multiple models of moral law that God’s absolute will can pursue, but that each of these models would be equally orderly, presumably “in harmony with reason.”

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4 “The Unshredded Scotus,” 319.
5 Cross, “Natural Law,” 175.
6 Williams, “The Unmitigated Scotus,” 181.
7 Reportatio IV-A, dist. 6, q. 7, n. 65, f. 236va. The text of Reportatio IV-A is quoted according to my upcoming edition-translation of this text (Franciscan Institute Publications).
8 Rep. IV-A, dist. 6, q. 9, n. 107, f. 238vb.
9 Rep. IV-A, dist. 3, q. 3, n. 34, f. 231rb.
10 Rep. IV-A, dist. 1, q. 5, n. 130, f. 228va.
Furthermore, the statements in Scotus that describe various constraints on God’s will, which seem to support Wolter’s position, are equally plentiful. The two most common constraints are that even God cannot change the past11 and that even God’s absolute power cannot violate the law of non-contradiction,12 the latter constraint being used by Wolter. For example, Scotus says that it is impossible “for God to produce cold through heat, because these forms in themselves and in their qualities are formally repugnant to each other. Hence just as God is not able to force something cold, while remaining cold, to produce heat, in the same way he is not able to force a natural agent, remaining natural, to create or produce its effect in a supernatural way.”13 Thus God cannot cause anything contrary to a thing’s nature. For example, “although God could cause some vision in a bat, nevertheless he could not cause in it an eagle’s vision, nor its way of seeing.”14 Nor can God “make two bodies exist simultaneously in one and the same place, because [even] God’s omnipotence cannot make formally repugnant things formally compatible as long as their natures remain intact, because they include a contradiction.”15

However, the most interesting class of statements on moral law in Scotus are what one could call arguments ex convenientia, ex consonantia, or ex congruentia. The gist of them is that although God’s will is not technically speaking forced to make certain decisions, and although one cannot find rational explanations for these decisions, his decisions in the area of moral law are still somehow “fitting,” “congruent,” or “in harmony” with reason. The principles of fittingness, harmony and congruence, which are certainly detectible by humans, seem to apply to God’s will as well. For example, “if an evil man could not administer the sacrament of baptism, the wickedness of one person could impede the bestowal of grace and salvation on another” “through no fault of his or her own,” “which seems utterly unjust” and “unfitting (inconveniens); therefore, God has instituted the sacrament as a sign that can be given by any minister, good or evil.”16 Such “unfitting” cases, of course, cannot be accounted for rationally any more than moral imperatives in humans. Further, Scotus holds certain doctrines purely on faith, for example that baptism leaves an indelible mark on the soul. Unlike previous theologians, he claims that there are no rational explanations for such doctrines. And yet he often tries to explain why they are “congruous” or “fitting.”17 One of the most commonly mentioned contexts where Scotus uses the “in harmony with reason” argument is his discussion of the divine positive law in Book 4, Distinction 17. This is how the discussion appears in the Parisian lectures. According to Scotus, there are three types of moral principles. Some of them, for example that God is to be loved, are naturally self-evident. Some are “in harmony” with such principles. In addition, “there are still other [precepts] that are equally in harmony with such principles—but in such a way that their opposites are just as much in harmony with these [principles] as the [precepts] we discussed previously.” “Rituals and customs which belong merely and exclusively to positive law, such as sacrifices, offerings, and such,” belong to this third class and are thus “outside of natural law.” For example, the New Testament sacraments do not fall under natural law, for they are neither naturally self-evident nor can be “compellingly deduced” from the principles of natural law.18 And yet, according to Scotus, both the New Testament rituals and customs and their alternatives, for example, the Old Testament rituals, would be “in harmony with reason.”

The Aesthetic Solution

The most obvious solution to the conundrum about the nature of Scotus’s metaethics almost suggests itself. Indeed, the principle of being “in harmony with reason” while not being susceptible to rational analysis

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13 Rep. IV-A, dist. 1, q. 1, n. 52, f. 226va.
17 Cf. Rep. IV-A, dist. 6, q. 9, n. 103, f. 238vb.
sounds a lot like Kant’s aesthetic principle of being “purposive without a purpose.” Moreover, as I have previously demonstrated on several occasions, Scotus does provide aesthetic solutions in other areas of his philosophical theology, for example, in his epistemology, when he defends Anselm’s proof of the existence of God.19 So in 2007 after hearing Dumont’s paper on the Williams/Wolter debate I suggested to him that, just as in Kant, the solution here must be aesthetic. If God’s moral legislation is not entirely arbitrary, and if the constraints on God’s legislative activities in the area of morals are not rational, they must be aesthetic. In fact, my insight was by no means new, even though it had not been applied to the Williams/Wolter debate prior to that time. For example, Mary Beth Ingham has done previous work on Scotus’s ethics trying to advance the thesis that some of the principles of God’s handling of moral issues in Scotus are aesthetic, just as they were in some ancient schools of philosophy, notably Platonic and Stoic. For example, Ingham notes, according to Scotus, moral situations “admit of a type of aesthetic judgment”20 and “morally good acts” can be seen as works of art and as beautiful.21 Incidentally, my previous research has established that thirteenth- and fourteenth-century schoolmen were well familiar with both the Platonic and the Stoic aesthetic reasoning in ethics through indirect sources.22

However, in 2007 I had neither the time nor the data to substantiate my suggestion properly. So the person who first applied the aesthetic solution directly to the debate about the nature of Scotus’s metaethics was Richard Cross. In his 2012 essay on Scotus’s metaethics, after having examined the history of the argument, Cross makes a statement that although claims about moral duties do not necessarily compel God to will them, “it’s not that God does not have reasons for favoring these claims”; however, these reasons are “aesthetic.” “God cannot command just anything, since the aesthetic requirement places limitations on what he can do.”23 “God perceives the aesthetic qualities” or the “aesthetic appeal” “of certain moral norms, and on the basis of this perception endorses these norms.”24 More precisely, God sees that they are “in harmony’ with the first principle of practical reasoning” and that “they ‘fit’ with the nature of the beings governed by the norms.”25 According to Cross, these “aesthetic reasons” are “much more robust that we might imagine” although they “fall short of the merely logical constraints” that are used, for example, by Aquinas.26 Cross defines “aesthetic judgments” that God supposedly makes in Scotus as being “akin to detecting contradictions” in logic27 but “falling short of the logical requirements in contradiction.”28 Cross maintains that “there are many possible harmonious scenarios, incompatible with each other and governed by different and conflicting moral norms”;29 for example, under some scenarios God can even permit bigamy or command murder.

However, not unlike Williams, after staking this bold claim, Cross does little more than to reassert it multiple times, leaving many questions unanswered and little or no textual evidence presented. For example, why are these constraints “aesthetic” rather than merely logical or practical? After all, not all cases of using something that fits or is convenient are aesthetic, for example in fixing cars or choosing the right size clothes to wear. Second, Cross does not demonstrate that the operation of the faculty of the will can be compatible with aesthetic principles in an absolute sense, in the absence of a creaturely sensory-perceptual system which God lacks. Third, Cross provides no textual basis in Scotus that would prove that God himself actually uses aesthetic criteria in ethics, or that God, like humans, has an aesthetic taste.

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19 Bychkov, “‘But Everyone Experiences the Opposite’”; idem, “‘Aesthetic’ Epistemology.”
20 Ingham, The Harmony of Goodness, 94.
21 Ibid., 95.
22 Bychkov, Aesthetic Revelation.
23 Cross, “Natural Law,” 196.
24 Ibid., 191.
25 Ibid., 188.
26 Ibid., 189-90.
27 Ibid., 190.
28 Ibid., 191.
29 Ibid., 191-92.
Present-day Models of Aesthetics and Free Will

In order to address the third question, one needs to ask Scotus himself. However, first I suggest to address Questions One and Two by providing up-to-date sketches of two areas: first, the nature of the neurobiological mechanisms that are called aesthetic; second, the nature of what traditionally has been called the faculty of the will. Humans, of course, have no direct access to God’s faculties. However, at the time of Scotus the standard theological approach was to gain an understanding of God’s faculties by looking at the operation of human faculties—the “image and likeness” of God—and attributing their “perfect” versions to God. In the Prologue to his Parisian lectures Scotus says that humans in this life can have some idea of God by observing “pure perfections” in creatures, which are qualities that imply no defect or limitation, and attributing them to God. More specifically, Wolter notes that “Scotus modeled his view of the divine will upon the perfection he ascribes to the human will.” Imperfections are removed from wisdom and will and “keeping the same meaning of wisdom and of will, these are attributed to God in a most perfect way.” For example, according to Wolter, both the divine and human will can determine themselves. However, both Scotus and, sadly, many modern interpreters of Scotus operate with outdated models of both the will and aesthetics in humans, which skews their understanding of the divine faculties as well. For example, the common assumption has been that humans have “free will” as some sort of a monadic independent agent, or a “ghost in the machine,” which possesses the almost magical power of deciding any way it wants to, irrespective of any constraints.

The present-day model of aesthetics

Recent research in the areas of neurobiology, evolutionary biology, and mathematical modeling of feedback-excitation processes paint a very coherent picture of what constitutes aesthetic processes in nature and art. Research in experimental neurobiological aesthetics describes how artistic forms function in our brain and consciousness. The resulting model of art can be called “neuro-nodal,” and it can be summarized as follows. Our brain’s circuitry consists of certain neural nodes, or clusters of neurons, that are responsible for various types of neuro-processing and are linked into a network. Each node can be excited to a certain degree by various neural inputs, such as those that one would receive by observing or listening to a work of art. If not enough of such nodes are excited, the excitation subsides and there is no strong reaction: the object of perception is “boring.” If too many of the nodes are excited and the excitation is too strong, the system is overwhelmed, and no positive reaction results: the object is “stressful” or painful. If, however, such a network of nodes is excited just in the right way, so that the excitation neither subsides nor overwhelms the system, but is sustained, the object is perceived as “interesting,” “exciting,” “stimulating,” “attractive” and under certain conditions “beautiful.” A research team led by Martindale experimented with visual geometrical figures, measured the level of excitation of the brain and, indeed, found that only certain very specific and precise configurations (angles, proportions, etc.) triggered sustained excitation and helped prevent either boredom or stress. These were, one could say, the objective laws of beauty, or aesthetic principles in visual forms.

What can one glean from these scientific observations and the model itself? First, the nature of artistic and aesthetic form is not exclusively “subjective”; there are certain configurations of patterns that would produce a sustained excitation of neuro-nodal networks in most, if not all, humans, and they have an objective and real existence, even though at any particular moment in time these structures may not exist anywhere materially, but only theoretically.

Second, a given real artistic form is an adequate rendition of such a theoretical structure or pattern: it will work only when the artifact achieves the precise specifications or configuration that will ensure a

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32 Ibid., 318-19.
33 Martindale, “A Neural-Network Theory of Beauty.”
continuous excitation of neuro-nodal networks in the brain. The neuro-nodal model accounts precisely for
the characteristic feature of the artistic-creative process that has been reported by many an artist: namely
that the form they are trying to achieve is “already there” (e.g., in the stone) and they are simply trying to
“free” it until it becomes apparent, so the artist simply works, and is not satisfied, until the point when
that adequateness to the prototype (i.e., a structure that is ideal for sustained neuro-nodal excitation) is
reached. The assessment of the aesthetic qualities of an artwork on the part of the perceiver is more passive
but is still based on the same principle: the work is the more “aesthetic” the closer it reveals its prototype,
that is, those forms and objects that do produce aesthetic reactions—do not depend solely on the individual will or intentions of the artist, nor
merely on someone’s subjective idiosyncrasies: they are based also on the mind-independent principles of
physics and the neurobiological apparatus of the brain.

Another important scientific discovery which both confirms that structures other than conscious or will-
based can be self-shaped and allows one to picture more precisely how this process happens in consciousness
is the experimentally backed theory of synchronization (or ‘sync’) in feedback excitation systems, expounded,
e.g., by Strogatz. 34 According to this experimentally proven theory, any system that allows for feedback
excitation, that is, for the elements of the system to have mutual influence upon one another, under certain
conditions can become auto-synchronized and thus acquires a certain order, balance, and equilibrium all
by itself, without a volitional agent. This accounts, among other cases, for the phenomenon of resonance,
or spontaneous synchronization of even inanimate entities. An artistic form could be easily seen as a regular
pattern that all by itself emerges from such a self-ordering system with feedback excitation, except an
incredibly complex one. The human brain and thus consciousness is clearly such a self-ordering system that
is based on multiple levels of feedback loops. Under certain conditions, as has been demonstrated by the
neuro-nodal model, i.e., when a specific pattern or shape of a specific configuration is present in the brain-
mind, it will “resonate” with the finely tuned neuro-nodal network through feedback excitation resulting
in an “aesthetic” experience. An artistic or a highly “aesthetic” form is a kind of ideal shape that allows for
optimal excitation. Such a form is truly self-shaped or self-sufficient, because it has arisen dynamically out of
the characteristics of a complex system of feedback excitation itself. It is also “objective” because it is implicit
in the parameters of the objectively and really existing system. In the case of artistic form, this system includes
not merely the human brain-mind, and not merely an inanimate physical object, but both the brain-mind and
the “matter” of the artwork (whatever the medium) that now interacts with and is part of the system. Given the
configuration of the system, a concrete artistic form shapes itself into existence.

The idea that aesthetic and artistic forms are patterns implicit in extremely complex feedback loop
systems such as living organisms with sensory perception can be supported by recent studies in the
evolutionary biology of aesthetics, many of which are summarized by Rothenberg. 35 Already Darwin noticed
that not all evolutionary forms can be explained by adaptation and introduced the term “sexual selection,”
which is now being reinterpreted as “aesthetic selection.” Evolutionary biologists who study aesthetics
group human artistic forms together with naturally evolved beautiful, interesting and curious forms or
activities of animals such as the peacock’s tail, displays of birds of paradise, bird or whale songs, or the
“art” of bowerbirds. Although biologists themselves use diverse terminology, basically their claims amount
to stating that all these forms are the optimal patterns of self-excitation that reflect the characteristics
of corresponding feedback excitation systems formed by living and sentient organisms. For example,
evolutionary biologists can speak of the mechanism of “correlation between genes for preference and genes
for traits,” or of a “coevolution of evaluation and its signal,” or even of a “feedback between preference
and trait” that can involve cultural as well as genetic mechanisms.

34 Strogatz, Sync.
35 Rothenberg, Survival of the Beautiful.
36 Fisher as quoted by Rothenberg, Survival of the Beautiful, 68.
37 Prum as quoted by Rothenberg, Survival of the Beautiful, 79.
38 Prum as quoted by Rothenberg, Survival of the Beautiful, 84.
The evolutionary model sounds very similar to the neuro-nodal neurobiological model because the traits that are being aesthetically selected for are precisely those that create a feedback excitation in the perceptive mechanisms in the brains of the females. The aesthetic forms that emerge in this way indeed appear all by themselves and do not require any volitional agent nor depend on any volitional agent. Evolutionary biologists operate with the concept of “emergent order,” self-organization with time which brings out latent possibilities.39 Artistic or aesthetic forms are neither purely subjective nor purely objective: they evolve in a feedback loop between objectively existing forms and mechanisms and their “subjective” perception in the mind of the females.

Another important conclusion here is that the possibilities for aesthetic traits and artistic forms that emerge—at least those that have any staying power—are not infinite but are limited by the constraints of the systems involved, i.e., by some “laws of aesthetics.” In aesthetic selection or artistic emergence, only some patterns are possible: one could choose one model or another, but not a random combination of elements. Thus Rothenberg corrects Prum by pointing out that “nature will let only some things happen, because it is a world that evolved purely arbitrarily, but according to rules.”40 The rules in question here are the rules of form,41 or of emergent order.

Aesthetic mechanisms, then, are those that allow for both the creation and perception of emergent order, or emergent patterns and forms that are governed by some constraints (the laws of aesthetics) which allow only some types of forms and patterns to emerge, but in almost infinite variations. It is already clear that all scientific models of aesthetic mechanisms are reminiscent of Scotus’s constraints on the divine will, which is supposed to operate neither purely arbitrarily nor in a manner that can be grasped by human reason, but according to a number of constraints that allow it to generate multiple alternative patterns of moral laws, but not just any pattern.

**The present-day model of the faculty of the will**

Now we need to look at how present-day science describes the operation of the volitional faculty. It is remarkable that the most typical determinist-reductionist model of the will in recent science does not go far beyond the way Schopenhauer described the operation of the will in his *Prize Essay on the Freedom of The Will*. In line with his major philosophical work, Schopenhauer questions whether the so-called free will in humans is essentially different from the mechanical “wills” of inanimate objects,42 down to things like atoms, which all possess some sort of a drive that propels them. According to Schopenhauer, the movements of inanimate objects are, of course, purely deterministic, or in his terminology “necessary.” Schopenhauer concludes that there is no essential difference between the mechanisms that propel various kinds of entities to move or act; all movements are deterministic or necessary. The only difference between higher animals such as humans and lower animals and even inanimate objects is that higher animals possess far more ‘degrees of freedom,’ to borrow a technical term from mechanics, meaning that there are infinitely many more options that are available to them and more motivations that drive them.43 The “freedom” of the will is essentially this kind of freedom of movement in a mechanical sense, not the metaphysical freedom discussed by philosophers and theologians. The movements of the human will are just as deterministic or necessary as those of all other entities. It is true that motives in humans are more like “fine, invisible threads” compared to the “coarse, visible ropes” of animal motives. But “the difference does not go beyond this. A thought becomes motive, as does an intuition, as soon as it is able to act on the will that lies before it. But all motives are causes, and all causality entails necessity.”44 The human being

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40 Ibid., 103; cf. 275-6.
41 Ibid., 104.
43 Ibid., 30.
44 Ibid., 31.
“has a capacity for deliberation and, by virtue of it, a far greater choice than is possible for the animal. In this way, the human being certainly is relatively free, namely from the immediate compulsion of objects that are present through intuition and act as motives on his will.... At bottom it is this relative freedom that educated but not deep-thinking people understand by freedom of the will.... But such freedom is merely relative, namely, in reference to what is present through intuition, and merely comparative, namely in comparison with the animal. Only the mode of motivation is changed by it; on the other hand, the necessity of the effect of the motives is not in the least suspended or even only diminished.”

The human will, then, can be presented as a fine-tuned balancing mechanism that responds to a variety of stimuli. The final result is deterministic, but due to the complexity of the interaction of various stimuli it is almost impossible to predict and therefore it produces an impression of pure arbitrariness, or “free will.”

“The capacity for deliberation, arising from that comparative freedom, gives us nothing but a conflict of motives, one that is very often painful, over which irresolution presides, and whose scene of conflict is the whole mind and consciousness of the human being. For one allows the motives repeatedly to try their strength on one’s will, one against the other. One’s will is thus put in the same position as that of a body that is acted on by different forces in opposite directions—until at last the decidedly strongest motive drives the others from the field and determines the will. This outcome is called decision and, as the result of the struggle, appears with complete necessity.”

Schopenhauer’s model is almost exactly reproduced by the determinist-reductionist school in neuroscience, for example, represented by Eagleman. This view, dubbed “bleak” by Gazzaniga, was further fueled by some experimental data that seemed to demonstrate that the human brain makes its decisions subconsciously and deterministically, much like in Schopenhauer’s model, and they are only later presented to the human consciousness as a fait accompli, while the “interpreter” faculty that is responsible for a coherent conscious world picture paints these results as “freely willed” by our conscious volitional faculty. To use a typical description, our “consciousness is like a tiny stowaway on a transatlantic steamship, taking credit for the journey.” The human subconscious brain is like a “team of rivals” each pulling in their own direction, and the “freely willed” decisions are in fact the results of these purely deterministic group efforts. Eagleman sums up: “it is not clear how much the conscious you—as opposed to the genetic and neural you—gets to do any deciding at all”; “although our decisions may seem like free choices, no good evidence exists that they actually are.” There seems to be no place for the “ghost in the machine” in the human brain; “no part is independent and therefore ‘free’”; “in our current understanding of science, we can’t find the physical gap in which to slip free will—the uncaused causer.”

However, such a reductionist deterministic model raises concerns even among some scientists. Thus some question the sophistication of the experiments and the validity of the dualist model of brain/mind used by scientists. The impossibility of self-causation is questioned, and some scholars conclude that the arguments against free will are just as inconclusive as those for it. A much more balanced model in science, however, which can be exemplified by Gazzaniga, rejects stolid determinism which is based on “upward” causation and the rejection of “downward” causation in the brain. Gazzaniga’s model, with which I tend to concur, embraces a more dialectical view, which views human willful activity as an emergent property that is not rigidly determined by either upward or downward causation, but consists in a dialectical balance

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46 Ibid., 32.
47 Eagleman, Incognito.
48 Gazzaniga, Who’s In Charge?
49 Ibid., 103.
50 Eagleman, Incognito, 4.
52 Eagleman, Incognito, 162.
53 Ibid., 166.
54 Smith, “Taking Aim at Free Will.”
55 Tse, The Neural Basis of Free Will.
56 Balaguer, Free Will.
57 Gazzaniga, Who’s In Charge?
between the forces involved. Scholars like Gazzaniga recognize that “mental states that emerge from our neural actions do constrain the very brain activity that gave rise to them” and “do influence our decisions to act one way or another.”\footnote{Ibid., 107.} In other words, our brain/mind is a kind of a feedback excitation system described by Strogatz. The outdated language of causation—what causes what—is inapplicable to feedback systems where patterns simply emerge by themselves in the process of a dialectical mutual interaction between their components. “When micro-level complex systems that are far from equilibrium self-organize into new structures, with new properties that previously did not exist,” Gazzaniga writes, they “form a new level of organization on the macro level.”\footnote{Ibid., 124.} Emergent properties are a different level of structure or organization “with completely different types of interactions governed by different laws, and one emerges from the other but does not emerge predictably.”\footnote{Ibid., 125.}

This more balanced view leads Gazzaniga to question the deterministic view that volition is a \textit{post factum} illusion.\footnote{Ibid., 129.} He concludes: “I do not think that brain-state theorists, those neural reductionists who hold that every mental state is identical to some as-yet-undiscovered neural state, will ever be able to demonstrate it. I think conscious thought is an emergent property. ...Mind is a somewhat independent property of brain while simultaneously being wholly dependent upon it. I do not think it possible to build a complete model of mental function from the bottom up.”\footnote{Ibid., 130.} “Control,” or Scotus’s self-determination of the will, is an emergent property.\footnote{Ibid., 138.} The proper model should not be bottom-up causality but rather complementarity.\footnote{Ibid., 140.} “The course of action taken appears to us as a matter of choice, but the fact is, it is the result of a particular emergent mental state being selected by the complex interacting surrounding milieu.”\footnote{Ibid., 141.}

**Conclusion: Does God Have an Aesthetic Taste?**

This balanced and dialectical view of the operation of the will presents its activity as an emergent property and portrays volitional mechanisms as strikingly similar to aesthetic mechanisms as previously described. Both mechanisms are self-forming and self-constraining. In both cases, a wide variety of patterns can emerge, but not just any pattern, due to self-generated constraints. The will of an intelligent entity, then, be it humans or God, by analogy with humans, is not some monadic homunculus or a mysterious ghost in the machine, an abstract free agent assumed by previous inadequate models, but a certain self-forming emergent process. If this is the case, then there is no reason why the will cannot be portrayed as operating according to aesthetic principles, that is, creating multiple patterns under the conditions of being self-constrained. The only thing that is left to prove is whether Scotus actually does see God as operating in an aesthetic way. In other words, does God, according to Scotus, have an “aesthetic taste”? Indeed, as recent scientific research shows, pretty much any biological or even physical system with a feedback loop is self-forming, so the principle of “spontaneous self-constrained generation of possible patterns” is not restricted to aesthetic or artistic forms. In order to prove that aesthetics is involved, one needs to prove the presence of aesthetic perception or a sense of beauty.

In line with his ancient and early medieval sources, such as the Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Stoic traditions, which are transmitted to the later Middle Ages by Christian thinkers such as Augustine or pseudo-Dionysius, Scotus views moral goodness as a kind of decoration or beauty of the soul, an inner spiritual harmony and proportionality, just as a harmonious arrangement of physical parts serves as the basis of sensory beauty. This view is consistent throughout all three versions of his lectures on the Sentences. Thus
according to Lectura I, dist. 17, p. 1, q. un, n. 57, charity is the “decoration of the will” (ornatus voluntatis; cf. a similar account in Ordinatio I, dist. 17, n. 62, where “moral goodness” appears as decor). The account from his Parisian lectures (Rep. I-A, dist. 17, part 1, q. 2, n. 67) sounds as following: “For justice is the great beauty of the soul, namely which distinguishes the just from the sinner.... In this way justice is a certain beauty and godlike likeness. All likeness and beauty, however, is a reason for loving in any thing.”

Scotus compares moral goodness as a type of spiritual harmony to musical harmony. According to the later Oxonian lectures, what makes the sound pleasing is not its intensity but the order in which one strikes the strings: “the sound mostly comes from the striking of the sounding body rather than from the order in which this striking is done; at the same time, it is rather the order of striking, and not the intensity or the force of striking that makes the sound more pleasing to the ear; in fact, the force of striking can be more intense and yet the sound would be less pleasing, or not at all pleasing to the ear, for it would not be a harmonious sound” (Ord. I, dist. 17, n. 152; cf. Lect. I, dist. 17, n. 95).

But is God capable of perceiving this beauty and reacting to it? Although in his later Oxonian course of lectures Scotus is silent on the matter, in his earlier Oxonian course (Lect. I, dist. 17, p. 1, q. un, n. 58-59) he seems to suggest that the moral beauty of the human soul is the cause of its acceptance by God: “the habit [of charity]... is the decoration of the soul and makes the soul acceptable to God” (n. 58); “just as the wooing [of the beloved by her lover]... is accepted on account of the beauty of the lover, in the same way... since charity is the decoration of the soul which makes it beautiful, a [charitable] act is perceived and accepted on this account by God who loves the soul on account of the beauty of virtue” (n. 59). With this context in mind, Ingham broadly attributes this view to Scotus, including his Parisian course of lectures, which postdates his early Oxonian course. However, in truth Scotus modifies his earlier view in his Parisian course. Although he still thinks that God loves the soul on account of its beauty, it is no longer the reason for its acceptance: “just as this is evident in the case of beauty in bodily things and [its] likeness in the souls, in the same way the beauty of the soul is a proper reason for further love by which God loves others than himself” (Rep. I-A, dist. 17, p. 1, q. 2, n. 68). “But the example of beauty is not relevant in this way to the case at hand, because the beauty of the beloved, neither intrinsic nor extrinsic, is not the reason for its acceptance, on account of the fact that the person is pleasing” (ibid., n. 69). Although by his absolute power God can accept whoever he wants to, including sinners, his aesthetic taste still prefers the souls that exhibit beautiful moral behavior.

Whatever the exact scenario may be, there is clear textual evidence that according to Scotus, God has aesthetic taste, just like us. And if he has aesthetic taste in perceiving moral beauty, there is a good chance that his legislative activity in the area of moral law will be similarly based, in order that his laws might allow for beautiful harmonious patterns in the soul to play out. And even if the beauty of the soul is not the reason for acceptance, it is quite possible that God, as in Milton’s Paradise Lost (Bk. 3, 107), does and devises certain things simply out of pleasure! So it is quite credible, both conceptually and contextually, that if the basis for the second table of the Decalogue is not rational nor purely arbitrary, it is aesthetic. The dilemma that Wolter and other “mitigating” commentators faced is thus resolved: since humans obviously have an aesthetic taste as well, they, just like God, can tell whether or not a certain moral law is “in harmony” with the possible aesthetic patterns.

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66 Scotus, Lectura in librum primum Sententiarum, 201.
67 Idem, Ordinatio, 163-64.
69 Idem, Ordinatio, 213.
71 Scotus, Lectura in librum primum Sententiarum, 201.
73 Scotus, Reportatio I-A, 480.
References