3 Late Medieval Theology and the Reformation

Contestation: The ideas of the leading Reformers find their intellectual origins in (late) scholasticism.

**Universals** are what particular things have in common, namely characteristics or qualities, e.g. the colour red.

- **Strong realists**, like Plato, held universals to exist independently in the realm of ‘the forms’.
- **Moderate realists**, like Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, believed that universals exist in the mind as concepts, and in material creation as properties (either universals or tropes), but are not independent entities.

However, in the *via moderna*, the pendulum swung from realism to nominalism:

- **Nominalists** believed universals are merely names, i.e. words rather than existing realities. They have no referents in nature.

McGrath thinks the term ‘nominalism’ has been misused in characterising the *via moderna* as a whole. We should also distinguish

- **Conceptualists**, like William of Ockham, for whom universals refer to *mental concepts*, not merely words, i.e. in this sense they exist, but *only in the mind*.

The debate about universals

![Diagram of the debate about universals]

3.1 Nominalism

The *via moderna* is united by **anti-realism** with respect to the extra-mental existence of universals and created natures, but divided between **nominalists** and **conceptualists**.

William of Ockham and Gregory of Rimini are often charged with advancing an atomising form of nominalism that destroyed the High Scholasticism of Aquinas and Magnus. In his defence, McGrath claims Ockham as a conceptualist who ‘appears to succeed in safeguarding concepts from being relegated to the status of purely internal mental constructs’.
Nominalism and Luther

Nominalism did not have a single theological programme. Within the *via media*, different soteriologies developed with 'radically different theologies of justification' (some *(semi-)Pelagian*).

i. On the one hand, Luther was a **nominalist**: 
   ‘... even the older Luther regarded himself as a “nominalist.” In a remarkable fragment of his Table-Talk, Luther discussed the difference between “terminism” and “realism,” correctly identifying the latter as including Albertists, Thomists, and Scotists (in other words the *via antiqua*), and the former Ockhamists. According to Luther, the Ockhamists argued that the term *humanitas* named all humans individually and did not refer to a common humanity, existing in all humanity, as Thomas and the older realists maintained... it is clear that he appreciated the essential difference between “realism” and “nominalism” (or “terminism”), and wished himself to be regarded as terminista modernus.’

ii. On the other hand,
   ‘... it would be an imprudent scholar who suggested that a “nominalist” epistemology implied a soteriology similar to that of [the semi-Pelagian teaching of Gabriel] Biel. It is clear that a “nominalist” philosophy is devoid of specific soteriological connotations.’

ei. Luther rejected Pelagianism (and denounced Biel).

**Question**: But is it true that abandoning metaphysical realism has no soteriological connotations? (McGrath’s first claim is true, but his second seems defensive and inconsistent).

We should distinguish between two streams both designated “nominalist” but radically divergent:

i. The *via moderna*.

ii. The *schola Augustiniana moderna*.

3.2 Via moderna

* The rise of the *via moderna*
   ‘... the later medieval period witnessed a polarization within many university faculties of arts arising from the rival views of “realists” and “nominalists”.’

It was a heterogeneous movement:

‘... although William of Ockham may be credited with the initiation of the movement, its specific local forms at the Universities of Oxford, Paris, Heidelberg, and Tübingen were shaped by personalities with differing concerns and emphases’.

Nevertheless, it was united by two key elements:

i. the dialectic between the **two powers** of God,

ii. **theological voluntarism**.

McGrath discusses them separately. However, they are intimately connected:

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7 Sometimes known as the *via nominalium* or *via modernorum*.

8 Eg. at Paris, Jean Buridan and Nicolas Oresme; at Heidelberg, Marsilius of Inghen; at Tübingen, Gabriel Biel and Wendelin Steinbach.
For Aquinas, God’s absolute power (potentia absoluta) is ‘filtered’ through his ordained power (potentia ordinata) in his acting according to his character (justice) with respect to creation.

God’s justice involves his giving to “each thing what is due to it by its nature and condition”.

Thus God’s ordained power is restricted by His character in relation to the created natures of the things He has chosen to make. These natures are cached out in terms of universals.

This dialectic gets modified in two ways as it enters the via moderna.

i. Under Scotus, the divine will is elevated above the divine character; there are two restrictions: (1) God cannot ordain any contradictions and (2) God ordains his own glory.

ii. Under Ockham, the natures (or universals) that survived under Scotus are sliced away by Ockham’s razor.

The result is an expanded view of what God can do by divine fiat, a modified conception of God’s sovereignty emphasising his libertarian freedom, and a severe contraction in human knowledge independent of what God chooses to disclose through special revelation.

iii. Later, Descartes’ challenges the idea that God’s freedom is restricted even by logical necessity: he can even create square circles, if he wants to.

The via moderna, in emphasising God’s freedom to create a different plan of salvation, sought to distinguish hypothetical and actual means of salvation. This new voluntarism affected how the dialectic of the two powers was then interpreted:

‘Through the appeal to this dialectic, the theologians of both the via moderna and the schola Augustiniana moderna were able to eliminate unnecessary theological concepts and hypotheses. In effect, this dialectic underlies “Ockham’s Razor”… This radical elimination of unnecessary theologoumena [theological opinions]… indicates a revision of the ontologically inflationary theologies of High Scholasticism in favour of a more conceptually economical deontological theology.’

**Observation:** Whether or not you think all the theological concepts these theologians eliminated were ‘unnecessary’ might depend on whether or not you embrace their anti-realism...

**(2) Voluntarism**

Secondly, the via moderna advanced the idea that things in this world are good or bad solely by God’s will or decree, not by any inherent quality in them that makes them intrinsically good or bad.

It follows that

‘the meritorious value of an act [in God’s sight] need therefore bear no direct relation to its moral value, in that the ratio meriti [reasonable merit] is understood to lie in the divine will – more specifically, in the extrinsic denomination of the acceptatio divina [divine acceptance],... the relation between the moral and meritorious realm de potentia ordinata is ultimately arbitrary.’
This will is reliable and ordained in this world ("ordained power") because God freely chooses to enter into covenants, yet things could have been different in some other world ("absolute power").

The notion of **covenant** must now bear the weight of regulating God's actions in this world. The notion of natural necessities, grounded in created natures, disappears.

Heiko Oberman considers this a positive feature of Luther's nominalism: in clearing away the clutter of metaphysical realism, humanity's only claim upon God and its only way to know (about) him is through the vehicle of a radically contingent covenant. By a sovereign act of will, God makes promises we can rely on. These promises are disclosed in special revelation.

**Question:** Are we in danger of creating a false dichotomy? Realists like Aquinas also believed in covenants...

This gave rise to **divine command theory** in ethics:

‘What is good is what is accepted as such by God. The divine will is thus the chief arbiter and principle of justice, establishing justice by its decisions, rather than acting according to the basis of established justice. Indeed, a study of the meaning of *iustitia Dei*, the “righteousness of God,” according to the theologians of the *via moderna*, indicates the totally arbitrary foundations of the concept: the “righteousness of God” is nothing more and nothing less than the embodiment of the arbitrary decisions of the divine will.’

McGrath suggests that ‘the pervasiveness of such a voluntarism ... suggests an **important degree of continuity** between early Reformed theology and the late medieval tradition.’

**Note:** Since Robert Adams work in the 80s, strict divine command theory has been less favoured among contemporary Protestant philosophers. **Modified divine command theory** (MDCT) grounds normative moral properties in the nature of God. On this view, divine commands

i. constitute the **content** of morality but

ii. derive their **obligatory force** from the divine nature.

Note that this implicitly reverses the conceptual priority of God's will over his character or intellect, and therefore rejects the **voluntarism** associated with Scotus and Ockham (but not before its impact on Christian theology...)

MDCT falls short of recovering Aquinas' view, however, which includes a **teleological** component in accordance with his **realism** with respect to created natures: what is good or bad for us is determined by the ends set by our nature, and God will never command us to do what is bad for us. Because God loves us, he cannot in fact fail to will what is good for us.

“... as ‘it belongs to the best to produce the best,’ it is not fitting that the supreme goodness of God should produce things without giving them their perfection. Now a thing's ultimate perfection consists in the attainment of its end. Therefore it belongs to the Divine goodness, as it brought things into existence, so to lead them to their end.” (ST I.103.1)

It follows that, to the extent that we can know created natures, we can **infer** something about normative ethics independently of special revelation or rationalist intuition (**natural law**). Cf. Romans 1:18-32.
A deflationary view of Justification

In the **doctrine of justification**, God acts to remove the guilt and penalty of a believer’s sin, at the same time declaring a sinner to be righteous through Christ’s atonement.

It is controversial as to whether or not the historical doctrine of justification included an intrinsic or subjective component, in addition to a forensic or extrinsic component, and whether or not Luther’s views on the subject represent an innovation.

In the 12th century, the internalist conviction was worked out in the form of a ‘**created habit of grace**’ infused into a believer.

In the **via antiqua**, the infusion of a ‘**created habit of grace**’ is deemed a matter of necessity, *ex natura rei* (from the nature of the thing): God cannot declare something to be righteous that is not in fact righteous.

However, Ockham argued that, whilst God may use ”created habits of grace” in justification in his ordained power, they are not *necessary* in his absolute power. Ockham’s anti-realism forestalls any necessity that may arise from the case: God’s say-so is sufficient.

This opened the possibility for thinking of justification as being simply the result of **divine decree**. For some of the teachers of the **via moderna**, this decree was bestowed in response to good works.

**Caution:** Calvin is more subtle. Michael Horton writes:

‘... we discern complementary emphases in Calvin’s account: the righteousness of Christ that justifies us is “outside of us”, although by virtue of the mystical union Christ himself – including his righteousness – cannot remain outside of us. He avoids both a strict realism on one side and an arbitrary nominalism on the other.’

*Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ, Horton 2007*

However, McGrath argues that

‘Calvin makes clear that the basis of Christ’s merit is not located in the intrinsic value of Christ’s offering of himself (which would correspond to an intellectualist approach to the ratio meriti Christi), but in the divine decision to accept such an offering... The continuity between Calvin and the late medieval voluntarist tradition... at this point will be evident.’

**Observation:** It seems one can take the doctrine of union with Christ in more realist or nominalist directions.

**From ontological to covenantal causality**

Within the **via moderna**, thinkers like Gabriel Biel argued that God had freely chosen to make a covenant in which he bound himself to justify all those who did *quod in se est* ("did their best").

In this **covenantal understanding** of justification, Christ’s role is reconceived as a legislator imposing the terms of a covenant.
Luther would subsequently reject this view as Pelagian, but without rejecting the deflationary framework of Biel and Ockham, with its anti-realist and voluntarist underpinnings.

In the schola Augustiniana moderna, ‘there was a growing trend to conceive primarily justification in personal or relational terms, and thus avoid the ontological conceptualization of the matter... characteristic of the earlier medieval period [ie. the via antiqua].’

3.3 Schola Augustiniana Moderna

The Augustinian order can be divided into old-style realists and new-style nominalists in the schola Augustiniana moderna, inaugurated by Gregory of Rimini. These moderns

- accepted nominalism and voluntarism, rejecting the old-style realism,
- held a deflationary view of justification identified with an extrinsic denomination (the divine acceptance),
- espoused a ‘strongly pessimistic view of original sin’,
- believed in double predestination, and
- were ‘ferociously anti-Pelagian’, opposing thinkers like Gabriel Biel due to the ‘radically theocentric theology of Augustine’s anti-Pelagian writings’.

Significantly, Luther’s theological breakthrough of 1515-16 preceded his acquaintance with writers in the schola Augustiniana moderna (from 1519).

3.4 Late medieval theology and the origins of Reformed theology

- Zwingli’s influences, whilst including Duns Scotus initially, include the circle of Erasmian humanism.
- Calvin’s writings suggest he was strongly influenced by the schola Augustiniana moderna and its nominalist, voluntarist, and anti-Pelagian views. However, biographical proof is lacking.

3.5 Late medieval theology and the origins of Lutheran theology

- Luther’s early education was situated within the via moderna (esp. Gabriel Biel), not the schola Augustiniana moderna.

  His arrival in Wittenberg in 1508 was part of its transition from the via antiqua to the via moderna, not the cause of it.

- His theological breakthrough of 1515-16 was in reaction to Pelagian elements of the via moderna – in particular, the teaching of Gabriel Biel.

- McGrath seems to see Luther’s reformation as essentially a shift from the via moderna to the schola Augustiniana moderna, with which he subsequently came into contact in 1519.