Shortly before the “Babylonian Captivity” of the popes in Avignon, Pope Boniface VIII issued two papal bulls repudiating the claims of King Philip IV of France: *Ausculta Fili* in 1301 and *Unam Sanctam* in 1302. The latter bull, which particularly outraged Dante and numerous others, taught that the papacy possessed supreme authority over both the ecclesial and the temporal spheres. Over the next few decades, prominent theologians involved in debate about papal authority included James of Viterbo, Giles of Rome, and Augustinus Triumphus on the “hierocratic” side, and John of Paris, Marsilius of Padua, and William of Ockham on the “anti-hierocratic” side.

For Ockham, troubles began in the 1320s. Having traveled to the papal court in Avignon to defend the theological orthodoxy of certain of his philosophical theses, Ockham came to the view that Pope John XXII’s teachings on apostolic poverty were heretical. Most importantly, John XXII had “declared it heretical to deny that Christ and the apostles had had rights of ownership in the things they used”.1 Excommunicated in 1328 by Pope John XXII, Ockham wrote a number of works between 1332 and his death in 1347 addressing the question of papal power and “papal heresy”.2

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Ockham’s contributions to the debate about papal authority have received mixed evaluations. Among his advocates, Arthur Stephen McGrade interprets Ockham as speaking for a “balanced dualism” as opposed to Marsilius of Padua’s claim that the lay ruler possessed all jurisdiction. By contrast, critics such as Yves Congar argue that Ockham’s approach to papal authority, like the approaches of his fourteenth-century interlocutors, distorted Catholic thinking on ecclesial hierarchy for centuries to come. Contrasting Ockham negatively with high-medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, Congar observes that in Ockham’s ecclesiology, “Theological positions and conclusions were determined not so much by inherent reasons, arrived at after contemplative consideration of the deep inner nature of things, as by purely positive authorities, decretal texts the strength of whose coercive value was carefully assessed.” Likewise, theological judgments became based upon the exception rather than the rule: “On the subject of realities, an attitude based on consideration of normality yielded to a damaging approach, by way of exceptional cases, possible dispensations and the most far-fetched hypotheses.”

Does Ockham’s theology of the papacy reflect a “balanced dualism”, or does it in fact tend toward “purely positive” theology based upon “exceptional cases”? This essay will explore Ockham’s understanding of papal authority as exhibited in his response to the teachings of John XXII. I will focus on two texts: his 1334 “Letter to the Friars Minor,” urging his brethren to take up his cause, and his more formal Dialogus, specifically its tractate “On the Power of the Pope and Clergy.”

5 Ibid., pp. 106 sq.
6 Brian Tierney raises a problem: “In the Dialogus Ockham deliberately adopted a mask, hiding his own opinions in the disquisitions of a Magister who expounded all the possible answers to problems proposed by a Discipulus, without committing himself to any particular solutions [...]. The Dialogus is particularly hard to use. One can prove anything about Ockham by simply ascribing to him the opinions expressed by the Magister in this treatise. We shall therefore follow the rule of never attributing to Ockham the views expressed in the Dialogus unless there is evidence from his other writings that he actually held an opinion presented there” (Origins of Papal Infallibility 1150–1350: A Study on the Concepts of Infallibility, Sovereignty and Tradition in the Middle Ages, Leiden 1972, p. 206). I will treat the arguments of the Dialogus with...