Scotus on the Decalogue: What Sort of Voluntarism

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Scotus divides the Ten Commandments into two “tables”. The first table contains the first two commandments, and possibly the third. The second table lists all the remaining commandments. In effect, the first table tells us to love God above all else, while the second table tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

According to Scotus, the first table is necessarily binding for us, but the second table is not. The first table binds us necessarily because its truth (that God ought to be loved) does not depend in any way on God’s will. The first table is self-evidently true to every intellect—including God’s—and thus not even God can remove our obligation to obey it. The second table binds us only contingently because it is a law that God has freely established by an act of will. Therefore God can dispense from it; like a king he has the authority to repeal (temporarily or permanently) the laws he has set up. And according to Scotus, scripture proves that God not only can dispense from the second table, but has actually done so.

Scotus, then, is a voluntarist about part of the moral law. If we asked Scotus to explain why we must obey the second table, he would appeal

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2 The first commandment (Exodus 20:2-6) prohibits the worship of any god besides the Lord, and the second commandment (Exodus 20:7) prohibits misusing the name of the Lord. The third commandment is to observe the sabbath. Scotus is unsure whether the third commandment is part of the first table or the second (Ioannes Duns Scotus, Sent., III d. 37 n. 7, Opera omnia, XV, Paris 1893, 826; Wolter, 278). Citations of Scotus refer first to the Wadding-Vives edition, then to the text in Allan B. Wolter, Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality, Washington, D.C. 1986. The translations are Wolter’s.

3 Scotus, Sent., III d. 37 n. 6, XV, 826; Wolter, 276.

4 Scotus, Sent., III d. 37 n. 9, XV, 843; Wolter, 280; see also Romans 13:9.

5 Scotus, Sent., III d. 37 n. 6, XV, 826; Wolter, 276.

6 Scotus, Sent., III d. 37 n. 1, XV, 741; Wolter, 270.

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to God's free decrees at some point in his explanation. But at what particular point would he do so? As we shall see, there is more than one way to be a voluntarist. So precisely what kind of voluntarism did Scotus hold? That is the central question of this essay.

After reviewing some crucial background material in part one, I will consider five different interpretations of Scotus’ voluntarism; each presents Scotus as a different kind of voluntarist. In part two, I will examine the first four interpretations and argue that each fails. Finally, in part three I will develop my own interpretation. I hope that even readers who dismiss my interpretation will find this a useful introduction to the diversity possible within theistic metaethics—an area of philosophy far richer than is often acknowledged.

I. Background: Kinds of Goodness in Scotus

Before exploring the different sorts of voluntarism that Scotus may have held, it is helpful to consider his account of the various kinds of goodness. His discussion of goodness introduces ideas that are useful both in constructing and ruling out various interpretations of his voluntarism.

In *Quodlibet*, Scotus describes two kinds of natural goodness. A thing’s primary or essential natural goodness is its degree of being, or place in the hierarchy of being. The more entity a thing has, the more primary or essential goodness it has. A thing has secondary or accidental natural goodness insofar as it is “perfectly suited to or in complete harmony with something else—something which ought to have it or which it ought to have.”

Scotus explains his conception of secondary natural goodness by showing how it applies to both attributes and substances. A given attribute is suitable to—or “good for”—certain substances, if for those substances “it is a good or a perfection”; so for example, “health is said to be good for man because it suits him.” A substance is naturally good if it has all the perfections that are “appropriate to it”; for example, “food is called good because it has an appropriate taste.”

Scotus says that we can evaluate acts on “both counts” because “an

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8 Scotus, *Sent.* II d. 7 n. 11, XII, 386; Wolter, 218.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.