



John Duns Scotus Maurice de Wulf

Life and Works.

John DUNS SCOTUS was born in 1274 according to some, according to others in 1266. It is disputed whether he first saw the light in Ireland, Scotland or England: the probabilities seem in favour of Ireland. At an early age he was received into the Franciscan order. At Oxford he followed the lectures of William Ware, who, with Petrus de Trabibus, was fostering a new tendency in Franciscan studies. He also felt the influence of Roger Bacon, and the anti-Thomistic spirit of Oxford must undoubtedly have inspired him with many of his hostile criticisms of Thomism. He himself taught at Oxford in 1294, or perhaps earlier. Thence he passed to Paris in 1304. While yet at Oxford he defended the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin, but it was not for the purpose of promoting a cause so dear to him that he left Oxford for Paris, as the legend would have us believe. In 1308 he set out for Cologne, on the order of his superiors. He died there that same year — at the early age of about thirty-four.

At Oxford, Scotus wrote his *Commentaries on Aristotle* (the *Logic*, the treatise *De Anima* and the *Metaphysics*; the authenticity of the commentaries on the *Physics* is doubtful); his great *Commentary on the Book of Sentences* (*Opus Oxoniense*); the *De Rerum Principio*; and the *Theoremata*. The works he wrote at Paris were collected by his disciples under the title of *Reportata Parisiensia* or *Opus Parisiense*. His *Quodlibeta*, which form his last work, are the public defences which secured for him the degree of doctor of theology at Paris.

General Features of His Philosophy.

We may say that Richard of Middleton, who died about the same time as Duns Scotus, but without having undergone the influence of the latter, is the last representative of the older Franciscan school. We see, in fact, from the letters of Peckham, that about the year 1284 the Oxford Franciscans were showing inclinations to admit a larger element of Aristotelianism. But it was Duns Scotus who really gave the studies of the order a distinctly *new orientation*. He brought into fashion a peripateticism that was *sui generis*: his personal genius gave an original stamp even to the earlier scholastic theories that survived in his philosophy. We therefore naturally find that philosophical parties and sections are much more numerous and sharply divided in the Franciscan than in the Dominican order.

Duns Scotus was a *destroyer of systems*. He attacked most of his contemporaries: St. Thomas, St. Bonaventure, Giles of Rome, Roger Bacon, Robert of Middleton, Godfrey of Fontaines, and more especially Henry of Ghent. He rarely referred to his adversaries by name, but those who were familiar with his controversies could not be mistaken about the identity of the various personalities attacked. This critical but courteous handling of the opinions of others contributed not a little to the freshness and popularity of Scotus's teaching. But oftentimes his long array of divergent opinions and his laboured load of arguments and refutations have the effect of obscuring the philosopher's own thought. The positive, constructive side of his system is less developed than the negative, critical side: whence results a want of equilibrium which diminishes

the value of the whole and makes Scotism compare unfavourably with Thomism.

The study of the works of the earlier scholastic period is rendered more difficult by their *defective methods* of exposition and their obscurity and *diffuseness of style*. The *Reportata* mark a distinct improvement in these respects. Yet all the writings of Scotus suffer from an excessive use of distinctions and a frequent ambiguity of thought which indicates a relapse into the earlier style of dialectic controversy. Hence they show to disadvantage in comparison with the calm, majestic sobriety of thought and language, of which St. Thomas possessed the secret. It was his own admirers who first called Duns Scotus the *Subtle Doctor*; but posterity has often applied in an uncomplimentary sense the title which he first received in flattery.

In his commentaries on Aristotle Scotus does not always interpret the teaching of the Stagirite in the same sense as St. Thomas. Neither does he, however, any more than the latter, follow Aristotle blindly, as one might be led to believe from a brief exposition of the Scotist system.

His system is indeed only a statement, coloured by personal variations, of the great, general scholastic synthesis. By going back to its principles we may easily mark out the stock of ideas it possesses in common with Thomism. This is admitted by the Franciscans themselves: "The divergence commences as soon as the two doctors begin to use this common stock for the purpose of enlarging the domain of knowledge and truth". Let us see what are the main points of divergence.

Mutual Relations of Theology and Philosophy.

While Scotus is faithful to fundamental principles concerning those relations, he develops and amplifies those principles in a sense profoundly at variance with the views of St. Thomas. In the first place Scotus *lays extreme emphasis on the distinction between philosophy and theology*. Not merely in their *formal* objects, but also in their *material* objects, do the two sciences differ: theology, is exclusively concerned with *supernatural* data: while, on the other hand, whatever human reason can discover by the play of its own natural forces belongs to the domain of philosophy proper. Moreover, theology is neither a science of *affection* (St. Bonaventure) nor of *speculation* (St. Thomas), but a science of *conduct*, of *morals*, a *practical science*. Those new theories deserve the notice of the historian; they are symptomatic. Yet, the doctrine of Scotus has nothing in common with the Averroïstic theory of the two truths; for, if he lessens the harmony between the two sciences, Scotus, in the second place, *proclaims the subordination of philosophy to theology*. Indeed his deep conviction about the inferiority of philosophy makes him avoid even the possibility of a conflict between the two sciences. He is excessive in his misgivings about the unaided, natural power of the understanding, and retrenches perhaps unduly the scope of its investigations. He would have reason simply veil its face before mystery, with a docile and reverential silence. Nothing could be more remote from such an attitude than any suggestion of revolt; for, reason, in the third place, recognizes that *nothing could be possibly more conformable to reason (rationabilius) than faith in the word of God*.

Matter and Form.

Here Scotus openly appeals to the authority of Avicbron, whom he took to be a Christian philosopher. He teaches, firstly, that all contingent beings are composed of matter and form; and he thus refers to its true source this theory, which his predecessors had fathered upon St. Augustine: in this he is at one with St. Thomas.

Scotus next distinguishes three kinds of primary matter: "materia primo prima, secundo prima, tertio prima". *Materia primo prima* is the indeterminate element of contingent things, apart from union with any form. Devoid of all determinateness, it has nevertheless *reality*, in

so far as it constitutes the term of God's creative activity. Matter does not exist in Nature in this initial state of absolute indeterminateness — as *materia primo prima* — but God's omnipotence could call it into separate existence. By its first union with a substantial form, matter appears endowed with the attributes of quantity: as *materia secundo prima*. Subject now to the substantial changes of Nature it corresponds with what St. Thomas calls *materia prima* simply. *Materia tertio prima*, which serves as basis for accidental changes, is of minor importance, corresponding to the *materia secunda* of Thomism.

This *materia primo prima* gives the system of Scotus a marked individuality, for *it is a something endowed with a real unity*. Spiritual and corporeal substances thus possess not merely a *homogeneous* common element; a veritable community of essence envelops them all. In this sense it may be said that all contingent things share in a common element into which they plunge their roots, notwithstanding the individual differences between them. God, Infinite Actuality, on the one hand, on the other a created universe, knit with essential unity deep down in the very foundations of its contingency: such is the philosophical expression of that mysterious bond of union between all creatures, from which the sweet and tender effusions of St. Francis of Assisi derived their inspiration. The *materia primo prima* became, later on, a favourite target for Thomists in their attacks on the great rival system of metaphysics.

Scotus likewise extended the notion of form. Every substantial form is a principle of intrinsic determination, but not necessarily of *complete* determination, of its matter. After a form has spent all its perfection on given matter, the compound so formed can in turn serve as potency or matter for an ulterior substantial form from which it will receive a higher mode of being. We have thus a whole *hierarchy* of determining principles, from generic and specific forms down to the individual form itself which is the last and highest, and which gives the being its final perfection.

Common Essence and Individualized Essence.

On the relation between *individual and universal*, Scotus teaches that the individual alone possesses full and complete substantiality in nature (*secundum naturam*); the universal, as an independent form, is a product of thought (*secundum intellectum*). At the same time, the essence itself, which necessarily assumes individuality in the real world or universality in the sphere of intellectual thought, is something in itself (*secundum se*); it is ontologically anterior to the twofold determination. The *essentia secundum se*, which St. Thomas holds to be only a concept of the individual substance apprehended under a certain aspect, is for Scotus an objective *reality, sui generis*, having a unity of its own. Not only is the *materia primo prima* endowed with some special sort of real being, but each and every universal form, generic and specific, in a word, *each separate element of essence*, capable of entering as constituent into various substances, has its own special being or reality: which thus binds into a peculiar sort of real *unity* all the subordinate individual things in which that common or class element is found. *Cuilibet universali correspondet in re aliquis gradus entitatis in quo conveniunt contenta*. How are we to reconcile this teaching with the distinct, substantial *individuality* of the things of Nature around us? Scotus offers a characteristically subtle explanation: the *unity of essence* which belongs to every element of essence prior to, and independently of, its “contraction” in the individual thing, is less than *individual unity*. It implies in fact not only the function of uniting all the individuals in a community of being, but also incapacity to give that complement of actuality which constitutes the complete and independent substance of the individual thing. And to mark this nice shade of discrimination between unity of essence and individual unity, Scotus invented a new distinction which he called the *distinctio formalis a parte rei*. While the *distinctio realis* exists between two really different things, and the *distinctio rationis* multiplies our concepts of one and the same thing, to enable us to consider it from different (*d. rationis*

cum fundamento in re) or identical (*d. rationis sine fundamento in re*) standpoints, the *distinctio formalis a parte rei* points, in one and the same individual substance, to the objective forms or formalities that are realized in it, and really in it, *independently of any intellectual act of ours*. Having once established this *distinctio formalis a parte rei*, Scotus makes extensive use of it in his metaphysics. It exists between *materia primo prima* and its various substantial forms, between God and His attributes, between the soul and its faculties, and in general between the metaphysical grades of being. It pervades the whole Scotist system, and has given the latter a name: by his “formalism” Scotus wished at all costs to remain true to scholasticism.

The *Principle of Individuation* — that which gives individual identity and distinguishes the individual from all other individuals of the same class — results, according to Scotus, from the determination conferred on the being by its most perfect form, the form which, in the genesis of things, is the term of their real production. This form puts a definite impress on the specific essence (*contrahere speciem*); it determines the latter to be *this* individual and not *that* or any other, *adesse hanc rem*. This led Scotus’s disciples to say that “haecceitas” is the Principle of Individuation. According to this teaching, spiritual beings and separated human souls are individualized within their respective species.

Essence and Existence.

Duns Scotus was anxious to establish between essence and existence a closer union than St. Thomas, without at the same time denying their objective diversity. By applying the *distinctio formalis a parte rei*, he treats this and similar delicate matters according to the general economy of his metaphysics.

Theodicy.

God in Himself — The manifold Divine perfections commingle in the unity of the Infinite Essence. To this leading idea Scotus adds some secondary notions in keeping with his general metaphysics. Firstly, he asserts his “formal” distinction between the Divine attributes: which seems to endanger the *unity* itself of the Divine Essence. Then again, he makes the concept of being *univocal*. God and the creature are not indeed *species* of a common *physical genus*, Being. They are, however, included in one and the same *metaphysical genus* of Being. Being belongs properly to both; but God possesses it *per se*, the creature *per participationem*: in this restricted sense, Scotus would admit that the concept of being is applied univocally to God and contingent things. But while thus bolder than St. Thomas on this point of according to man, within the limits indicated, a *proper* knowledge of the *being* of God, Scotus on the other hand depreciates our intellectual faculties by denying them the power of demonstrating the *life* of God, or His *omnipotence* to accomplish directly, should He wish, the works of created causes. In conformity with the general theory of Scotus on the activities of spiritual substances, the will of God is conceived as nobler than His intelligence; and freedom is an essential property of all Divine volition. He gives expression again to this idea in dealing with the relations between God and the creature.

God and the creature. — The Divine ideas are not the very essence itself of God, for this would imply, according to Scotus, an objective dependence of the Divine essence on the creature, prior to all acts of intellect. They are rather objective presentations of the creature in the Divine intelligence. This is a *nuance* of the exemplarism theory.

Scotus attacks the arguments brought forward by Henry of Ghent to prove that creation took place *in tempore*, and inclines himself towards the Thomist solution of the question. Not only does the *existence* of creatures depend on a decree of the Divine free will: their *nature* too has its ultimate foundation in the (free) will of God, and not in His intelligence (St. Thomas). Thus

again, by another application of his “voluntarism,” the limits of the natural and the supernatural are determined, not by the inner constitution of things, but, in ultimate analysis, by a volition of the Infinite Being. Similarly, contingent future events are conditioned in the Divine intelligence by the Divine will: sovereign mistress of the nature of things, the Divine will decides and fixes the moral law, the constitution of civil society, etc. This same anxiety to safeguard, in the case of man, the essential freedom of all volition, made Scotus an opponent of the Thomistic *praemotio physica*.

General Principles of Physics.

Scotus boldly rejects the theory of the *rationes seminales*, so dear to the earlier Franciscan school. He attacks St. Bonaventure’s main argument for the *inductio formarum* in matter. Dealing with the interplay of the three factors that concur in the generation of things, Scotus is inclined to lay great stress on the Divine intervention.

Vital action is irreducible to the plasticity of the matter in which it is found: it reveals an agency of a higher order. Wherefore, besides its material or corporeal form, every living organism possesses a distinct vital form. Scotus is more liberal than Henry of Ghent; but he does not admit the necessity of multiplying substantial principles in chemical combinations (*mixta*) (Alexander of Hales, Albert the Great), or, *a fortiori*, in the simple elements (St. Bonaventure).

Psychology.

Contrasting Duns Scotus with St. Thomas, it is customary to emphasize their divergences in psychology; yet we must not forget that even here the two great doctors subscribe to the same broad, fundamental principles. Bearing this in mind let us examine the main features of the Scotist psychology. These relate to the nature of the understanding and of the will, to the inner constitution of the human being and to the immortality of the soul. The “formal” distinction asserted by Scotus between the soul and its faculties, is merely an application of his metaphysics, as outlined above.

First, as to the *intellectual faculty*, its nature and acts. Claiming for the intellect an immediate apprehension of the individual reality, Scotus advocates, in addition to our abstract and universal knowledge of things, which is in its nature *distinct*, the existence of an antecedent, intuitive knowledge, which reveals to us in a *confused* manner the concrete, singular being (*species specialissima*). This concept of the singular arises on the first contact of our intelligence with the external object and is produced simultaneously with our sense knowledge of the latter. We may well demand in what this intuitive concept of the concrete differs from our sense perception of it, and whether the distinction between them is not a difference in clearness of product rather than in the nature of the mental process involved. But this is not all. For, although *in the present state of life on earth* the essences of sense-realities are the only proper object of our understanding, the intelligibility of these essences does not exhaust the representative capacity of this faculty considered in itself, absolutely, as a channel of knowledge. Indeed everything that has any *real being can*, absolutely speaking, fall within the scope of human intelligence, the suprasensible no less than the sensible; and it is always within the power of God’s omnipotent free will to enlarge the sphere of action of our nature. As for the *genesis* of our ideas, all of them alike, the noblest no less than the lowliest, have their origin in the same sense process: Scotus has left us some severe but not unmerited criticisms of the special illumination theory propounded by Henry of Ghent and other Augustinians.

Secondly, as regards *the will* and its *pre-eminence over intelligence*: while St. Thomas is “intellectualist,” Duns Scotus is “voluntarist.” He sees the superiority of the will in its essential attribute of *liberty*, in its *mode of action* and in its *ethical significance*. All volition is free; the will

is never necessitated by the intellectual presentation of the good. Even in presence of the absolute good it retains its power of absolute self-determination, its freedom of action (*libertas exercitii*); for, says Scotus, it is always free to turn away from the intellectual presentation. Henry of Ghent maintains, with St. Thomas, the distinction between necessary volition and free volition; Duns Scotus rejects the distinction. *Nihil voluntas necessario vult*. As to the *manner in which the will exercises its activity*, Scotus agrees with the explanation of Henry of Ghent. Knowledge of the good is a *conditio sine qua non* for volition, but nothing more. Abstracting from the general concurrence of God with the activity of all creatures, it may be said that the will is the sole and total cause of its determinations. Scotus and Henry again agree that the will is *active*, after the manner of the *intellectus agens*. In its *ethical* relation to *conduct*, the will is the sole subject of the moral virtues, for virtue is a *habitus electivus*, and all *electio* belongs, to the will. It is likewise the will that obtains for us, by the perfect exercise of its activity, the formal possession of our last end.

Thirdly, as regards *soul and body*, man is a composite substance, and the soul is the form of the body. But besides the soul, there is in each individual a *forma corporeitatis* which endows the body with the organic structure it possesses. By this duality of formal principles Scotus did not wish in any way to compromise the *unity* of the human individual or the intimate, immediate union of all his constituent elements. This is sufficiently evident from the fact that Scotus was an active opponent of the teachings of his confrère, Peter John Olivi.

Fourthly and lastly, we have to notice the rather singular attitude of Scotus on the *immortality of the soul* and the proofs of a future life. Briefly, he holds that human reason is unable to prove peremptorily the immortality of the soul: faith alone can give us certitude on the matter. He examines the usual proofs brought forward in peripatetic philosophy and pronounces them wanting in cogency. The doubts of Scotus were collected by William of Ockam and were afterwards exploited against scholasticism by the Averroists and by the philosophers of the Renaissance. But it should be borne in mind that the teaching of Scotus on this point had an exclusively *negative* significance. He never for a moment dreamt of invoking *positive* arguments in favour of the mortality of the soul. His system has therefore in it no taint of *anti-scholasticism*: it differs profoundly both from the materialism that denies the immortality of the soul and the Averroism that makes immortality impersonal.

Conclusion.

The characteristic and original element in the philosophy of Duns Scotus, and the key to the understanding of his system, is its “formalism”. It is this that colours his peripateticism, impregnates his whole system and makes it *one* consistent whole. It is this, too, that sets him over not only against St. Thomas, but also and equally against the representatives of the earlier Franciscan school.—It was this, finally, that plunged him into a pathless ocean of metaphysical speculation which he confused, while exploring it, by creating fictitious, misleading and superfluous beacon-lights — in defiance of a precept which he himself pretended to approve of: *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*.

Maurice de Wulf. *History of Medieval Philosophy*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907.

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