



Duns Scotus Denis Hawkins

§1

John Duns the Scotsman was born about 1270, became a Franciscan, lectured at Oxford and at Paris, and died prematurely in 1308. His principal works are the two commentaries on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, called from their places of origin the *Opus Oxoniense* and the *Reportata Parisiensia*; mention must also be made of the brief disquisition *De Primo Principio*. *The De Rerum Principio*, however, is an earlier product of the thirteenth-century Franciscan school, while the *Theoremata* and the *Grammatica Speculativa* are instances of the logic-chopping of a later period, when the views of Ockham were in the ascendant.

On many questions Scotus is less thoroughly Aristotelian than Aquinas. Aquinas had adopted the Aristotelian principle that the natural object of the human intellect was the being of sensible things; Scotus, in conscious opposition, maintains that every intellect as such is capable of apprehending the whole range of being

(*omnis intellectus est totius entis communissime sumpti*). Yet the opposition is not so violent when we see what each meant in detail. The test application is in the theory of the mode of knowledge belonging to the disembodied soul after death. Here the new Aristotelianism, with its insistence on the natural unity of body and soul, had raised a problem. Henry of Ghent went to the length of asserting that the disembodied soul could obtain new knowledge only by a miraculous infusion. Aquinas is much more moderate. As the soul can exist without the body, so it is in that state capable of the activity of pure thought which is appropriate to a spiritual being. Although such a mode of knowledge is in itself superior to the kind of thinking which draws its material from sensation, it is not naturally available to the disembodied soul with the clearness and distinctness which would make it a complete substitute for terrestrial experience. Nevertheless, however imperfect a spirit it may be, the soul after death is in natural communication with other spirits (ST I, q. 89, a. 1)

Scotus admits that in our present condition the primary adequate object of the human intellect is the being of sensible things. But this, he says, is not due to the nature of the intellect as such, nor does it even follow simply from the union of body and soul. It is a fact that our present knowledge results from the co-operation of our sensible and intellectual faculties, but this seems to be no more than a contingent and preparatory stage of human nature. The soul, when disembodied at death, will begin to act naturally as a pure intellect and, even when reunited with the body, will not lose the power of purely spiritual communication which is, after all, the natural prerogative of every intellect (*Opus Oxoniense* I, dist. 3, q. 3, no. 24). That is the real extent of his disagreement with Aquinas on this question. It is more than a difference of emphasis, but it is not a radical opposition.

§ 2

With this confidence in the efficacy of intellect Scotus approaches the problem of the relation between the structure of thought and the structure of fact. The Abelardian theory of abstraction had left this somewhat obscure; Scotus takes the matter up again and, following a tendency observable among some of the earlier thirteenth-century Franciscans, makes a much debated contribution to its clarification. This is the celebrated theory of the formal distinction.

The validity of abstract thought had been asserted by Abelard in the formula that one factor was considered separately from another but not as really separate from it. The mental activity of abstraction operated upon fact in such a way as to isolate elements which did not really exist in isolation. Hence the content of universal concepts was real, while their form of universality came from the mind.

The distinction, then, between factors thus isolated by abstraction was not a real distinction; it was made by the mind, but it had a foundation in fact. Evidently another question remained to be asked, and it was asked by Scotus. What was this foundation in fact? What could be the foundation in fact for a distinction if it was not some sort of distinction which itself belonged to the realm of fact? It was not in the full sense a real distinction, a distinction between things. Nevertheless Scotus could not acquiesce in the ambiguous designation of a distinction of reason with foundation in fact. He preferred to speak of a formal non-identity or distinction, a cleavage less radical than a real distinction but more than a mere distinction of reason.

Scotus seeks to draw up a list of the varying degrees of unity and the corresponding degrees of distinction. The loosest kind of unity is a mere unity of aggregation, in which things happen to be together, or to be thought of together, but there is no structural principle which makes them an intelligible unity. Such is a heap of stones or, to take a modern example, the heterogeneous collection of objects to be found in a surrealist picture, when the onlooker simply wonders how on earth they came to be in the artist's mind at the same time.

The next kind of unity is unity of order, in which different things are connected by some intelligible principle of structure. Such is in the realm of thought the unity of a series, and in the realm of fact the unity of a house or a machine. Then comes the unity of qualification (*unitas per accident*), in which one factor, though not necessarily connected with another, nevertheless determines it and makes one thing with it. Thus, when I am thinking, my thoughts are, although transitory, genuine determinations of myself and make one thing with me. Still closer is the unity of essential principles, such as matter and form, related as potentiality and actuality (*unitas per se compositi ex principibus essentialibus per se actu et per se potentia*). Such a unity cannot be dissolved without the thing itself ceasing to be.

A fifth kind of unity is described as the unity of simplicity. This is a genuine identity, in which factors are not merely united but are really one. In a thought, act and content are no more than distinguishable elements in one simple event. Yet we do not mean the same by an act of thinking and the content of a thought. However true it is that act and content are really one, the distinction between them is not altogether made by me; it is presented to me, and I perceive it in fact. It is in such cases that Scotus speaks of formal nonidentity. It is not until formal meaning (*ratio formalis*) is the same that it becomes possible to speak of the most absolute kind of

unity which is formal identity (Op. Oxon. I, dist. 2, q. 7, nn. 42-4).

This theory of the formal distinction became a typical thesis of the Scotistic school and was attacked with equal determination by the representatives of the other scholastic traditions. It was alleged to be a confusion between the structure of thought and the structure of fact. It was held that there followed from it a real identity of different instances of the same universal, so that humanity in Peter and humanity in Paul was in some sense the same thing. Scotus, however, was sufficiently careful to contrast formal identity with real identity, and it cannot be denied that he was attempting to answer a legitimate question provoked by the abstract and analytic character of thinking. His view cannot be left out of account when we are seeking a just conception of the relationship between thought and fact.

§ 3

Scotus has a theory of being very different from that of Aquinas, or perhaps it would be more exact to say that he gives a very different meaning to the terms *esse* and *ens*. Being is, for him, simply the most universal and the poorest in content of all notions. It is precisely on this ground that Scotus adheres to the common formula that being is not a genus. For it is not a positive residue left after all the differentiations of being have been removed by conceptual abstraction; rather it has no positive content and is equivalent to what is not nothing (*Se extendit ad quodcumque quod non est nihil*).

This concept of being is strictly one in all its applications. Hence, in opposition to the Thomists, Scotus asserts that being is univocal, defining an univocal concept as one whose unity is sufficient to involve contradiction if it is both affirmed and denied of the same subject (Op. Oxon. I, dist. 3, q. 2, no. 5).

The opposition is more verbal than real. For, if an univocal concept is defined in this way, St. Thomas would have no difficulty in admitting that what he meant by being is univocal. Moreover, being as Scotus understood it is univocal in every sense.

From the Thomistic point of view it might be said that the Scotistic notion of being belongs altogether to the side of essence as opposed to that of existence. To be a being means simply to have an essence of some sort. It is only a logical consequence, therefore, when Scotus denies the distinction of essence and existence. *Simpliciter falsum est quod esse sit aliud ab essentia* (It must then be admitted that Scotus did not grasp what Aquinas was about in his theory of being, and it might be supposed that there was an enormous lacuna in his metaphysic. In the end, however, he reaches a metaphysic not far removed from that of St. Thomas; this is because the place left vacant by the Thomistic notion of existence is filled by the new concept of thisness (*haecceitas*).

For Scotus recognizes that all the elements which he has hitherto revealed, all that can be attributed to things, including being itself as he understands it, are of themselves universal. The individuality of real things is not yet accounted for. Hence, beyond all that in reality corresponds with universals or combinations of universals, he claims that things exhibit a principle of individuality, a thisness, which is not reducible to any other factor. "The singular adds an entity over and above the entity of the universal. Consequently the apprehension of the universal is not the complete ground of an apprehension of the singular adequate to the whole knowability of the Singular" (Op. Oxon. IV, dist. 9, qu. 2, no. 10).

Thisness is not a universal like other universals, for it is precisely the principle of

individuality. The thisness of this is by its very notion different from the thisness of that. *Haecceitas est de se haec* (Rep. Paris. II, dist. 12, qu. 5, no. 8). The understanding of a thing is complete when we have not only fully analysed it in universal terms but have perceived these factors as belonging to something which is this. Hence understanding attains to the singular and has finished its task only when it has attained the singular.

The parallel between the Thomistic notion of existence and the Scotistic notion of thisness should be obvious. Both these great metaphysicians decline to lose themselves in abstractions, but lead us back to the real world by an emphasis on the individuality of the existent. Scotus brings out very forcibly the unique character of individuality. Nevertheless we miss in him the recognition of the fundamental identity of individuality and existence which is the distinguishing mark of the metaphysic of Aquinas.

§ 4

Having thus noticed the principal innovations of Scotus, we can glance at the rest of his system, observing what effect they have upon it. His conception of matter, like that of St. Bonaventure and the earlier scholastics, belongs more to physics than to metaphysics. First matter is what is in common to all material things and, although it is not in fact to be discovered without form, there is no absolute reason why it should not exist separately.

Scotus criticizes the Thomistic view of matter as pure potentiality in the order of essence. Matter, he says, cannot have simply the objective potentiality of what might exist but does not exist. For it is an element in real things, part of the object of the divine creative activity, and the persistent subject of substantial change. Such a factor must have the subjective potentiality of something which is itself real but is capable of further determination. It is described simply as potentiality because it is the least actual of entities, being in potentiality to all forms, substantial and accidental, but it is already, although in the humblest possible way, an actual reality in itself. There is no greater difficulty in supposing two actual realities in a composite thing than there is in supposing that a composite thing exists at all. In other words, Scotus rejects the Thomistic conception of first matter on the ground that it is unintelligible and reducible to nonentity.

With this view of a composite entity it is possible to preserve the natural notion of an organism as possessing a hierarchy of substantial forms. These forms are received successively in the process of development of a living thing, and they disappear gradually in the process of its decomposition. The dead body of an animal still retains for a time the corporeal forms which constituted the proximate disposition for the reception of its vital principle. Hence the spiritual soul of man, which must be attributed to the creative activity of God, is the principle of life, of sensation and of thought, but presupposes an organized body, which is the proper product of the generative activity of the parents.

The spiritual character of thought is immediately evident to anyone who reflects on his act of thinking. *Quilibet enim experitur in se intelligere; et experitur in se, quando intelligit, quandum operationem quae non est alicuius organi* (Rep. Paris. IV, dist. 43, q. 2, no. 8). For matter is essentially divisible or voluminous, while the act of thinking is introspectively known to be simple and indivisible. It is equally plain by

reflection that the act of thinking belongs to the individual man, so that the theory of Averroes that thinking is the work in us of a separate and impersonal intellect must be rejected with contumely as *vilissimus et irrationabilissimus inter errores omnes philosophorum*.

Scotus assigns a certain primacy to the will over the intellect, but the common contrast between the alleged voluntarism of Scotus and the intellectualism of Aquinas is a rather artificial antithesis. It amounts more to a personal preference in consideration than to an abstract difference of doctrine. As a seventeenth-century writer quaintly puts it, Scotus, “not unmindful of courtesy, behaved respectfully to the intellect”. But he likes to think of understanding as leading to volition, so that the will is regarded as the supreme personal activity. While the intellect must wait upon evidence and is constrained by the objects presented to it, the will chooses freely the orientation which the personality gives to itself. Nothing belongs to yourself more completely than your will and its acts.

Scotus, however, is anxious that we should not think of intellect and will as if they were two agents within us with disparate activities; this, he considers, would be the result of speaking of them as really distinct. Intellect and will are, in fact, one reality with the soul. Nevertheless there is a difference of meaning in the terms designating the faculties of intellect and of will and the essence of the soul itself. Hence the distinction is not purely verbal, but there is room for an application of the theory of the formal distinction. Intellect and will are formally distinct from each other and from the essence of the soul.

§ 5

It has sometimes been said that Scotus betrays hesitations about the validity of the philosophical demonstration of the existence of God, and that his conception of God is one of an arbitrary cosmic will rather than of a supremely rational and benevolent creator and ruler of the universe. Since these accusations are based on the *Theoremata*, which Scotus did not write, they need not be taken into account. His authentic thought on the subject is firm, constructive and well balanced.

He prefers to lay emphasis on the central metaphysical considerations rather than on the Aristotelian proof of the first unmoved mover, which lent a certain imaginative aid to the mediaeval mind in arriving at the existence of God. From any property of an effect which that effect can acquire only from a cause of a certain kind, you can, he says, conclude to the existence of a cause of that kind. Hence the existence of God is demonstrable both in physics or natural philosophy and in metaphysics, physics arriving at an unmoved mover and metaphysics at a first being. The strictly metaphysical proof, however, provides a much more positive knowledge of God, “for it is a more perfect and direct knowledge of the first being to know him as the first being or necessary existent than to know him as the first mover” (Oxon., Prol., q. 2, no. 21).

The fundamental evidence, then, of the existence of God resides in those characteristics of the objects of experience which are taken into account by the metaphysician. It is because we find that the things around us are manifold, contingent and composite that we are able to see that they must have an ultimate cause which is one, necessary and metaphysically simple. But for Scotus the hallmark of contingency is to be discovered in being finite; infinity is the most essential characteristic which

thought must attribute to the necessary being.

Infinity can be defined in two ways. In itself it is such that nothing of entity is wanting to it which can be found together in one being; in relation to finite beings it is such that it transcends them not by some determinate proportion but beyond any proportion which can be determined (Quodlibet V, no. 4). This infinity of being is the privilege of God. Like Aquinas, then, Scotus arrives at an *ens infinitum*, but, while for Aquinas the stress is on *ens*, for Scotus it is on *infinitum*. In the philosophy of St. Thomas,

God is infinite being because he is being itself; with Scotus's different and more restricted notion of being, the mode of infinity demands the chief attention and provides the metaphysical impetus.

In speaking of God as *ipsum esse*, too, Scotus shows another verbal coincidence with St. Thomas, but the no later philosopher understands the formula as meaning rather the fullness of essence, the sum of all perfections. It is the nature of such a being to exist, whatever else may exist or not exist. Hence its very notion, provided that this can be seen to be self-consistent, is a guarantee of its existence. Here Scotus finds a justification for the argument of St. Anselm.

The infinite being can only be a spiritual being, since a material thing is essentially a finite quantum divisible into finite parts. Consequently the divine life is the supreme activity of intelligence and will. God's will is altogether in harmony with his intelligence *Deus rationabilissime vult*. Hence, in the logical order, the first motion of God's will is towards himself as the supreme value, the second towards the creation of persons who will be able to love him in their degree, and the third towards the creation of the means which those persons will require. Scotus sees in the decree of creation not only the divine goodness ungrudgingly diffusing itself but the desire of a person for other persons who will enter with him into communion of love *Deus vult habere alios diligentes* (Op. Oxon. Ill, dist. 32, q. i, no. 6)

Created things partially reflect the perfection of the creator, and the unity of order in the universe reflects the unity of simplicity in God. God enjoys a threefold primacy. As first in the order of causes he is the most completely actual being, containing virtually every possible kind of actuality; as first in the order of ends he is the highest value, containing virtually every possible kind of value; as first in the order of eminence he is the most perfect being, containing transcendently every possible kind of perfection (De Primo Principio, c. 3, no. 11.)

With such a being it must be the most real desire of a created person to enter into communion, and Scotus, like Aquinas, is ready to speak of a natural desire to enter into the fullest possible intimacy with God, although the fulfilment of this desire must depend upon the will of God to communicate himself and is, therefore, supernatural.

Such is the third of the great thirteenth-century metaphysical systems. St. Bonaventure, although deeply affected by the rediscovery of Aristotle, had deliberately kept as closely as he could to the tradition of St. Augustine. St. Thomas Aquinas, basing himself wholeheartedly on Aristotelian principles, showed that the new philosophy was capable of reconquering the religious conclusions of the old. Duns Scotus occupies something of an intermediate position, liking to follow Bonaventure but taking a considerably more Aristotelian line. St. Thomas is undoubtedly the greatest of the three, and his system is the closest-knit and most comprehensive, but those who are sympathetic with scholastic thought will want also to consult the others, and metaphysical thinking would be considerably impoverished if it were

deprived of the contributions of St. Bonaventure and of Duns Scotus.

Denis Hawkins. *A Sketch of Medieval Philosophy*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1946. This text is in the public domain.