

# John Duns Scotus

## 1. His Life and Works

- called "The Subtle Doctor"
- born in 1265 (or 1266) in Scotland; died in Cologne in 1308
- While very young, he entered the Franciscan Order.
- It appears that Scotus began his formal studies at Oxford in October 1288 and concluded them in June 1301.
- sent to Paris to study
- On his return to England he taught at Oxford.
  - In the academic year 1298-99 he commented on the Sentences of Peter Lombard.
- In 1303, as a student at the University of Paris, he wrote his commentary on the Book of Sentences.
- returned to Oxford
- On 18 November 1304 Scotus was appointed the Franciscan regent master in theology at Paris.
- For reasons no one quite understands, Scotus was transferred to the Franciscan studium at Cologne, probably beginning his duties as lector in October 1307.
- His principal writings are:
  - Opus Oxoniense* (named so from Oxford), his great commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (this work contains the better part of Scotus' thought)

*Quaestiones subtilissimae in metaphysicam Aristotelis*

*Reportata Parisiensia*, which are new notations on his commentary on the Sentences

*Quaestiones quodlibetales*, which contains twenty-one questions

*De primo principio*, which contains a profound exposition of Scotist theodicy.

## His Thought

- "In the course of human generation the knowledge of truth always increases."
- founder of Scotism
- confronts himself explicitly and extensively with previous thinkers, including Thomas Aquinas, with whom he often disagrees.
- His theory of knowledge
  - Scotus does not accept Augustinian illumination. Instead, he holds that intellectual cognition takes its origin from sensation through the process of abstraction.
  - He distinguishes, however, between the proper object of the intellect and its de facto object. The proper object of this faculty is "being" – the entire field of being without restriction ("ens in quantum ens") – through which the intellect can know immaterial essences, even without the aid of sensations. In the field of fact (Scotus' "objectum de facto") or in actual conditions and as a consequence of original sin, what moves the intellect is only those things that are presented to sensation ("quidditas rei sensibilis"). The passage between sensation and intellectual cognition (ideas, concepts) is abstraction.
  - Whereas for Thomas Aquinas abstraction consists in an act on the part of the active intellect which illuminates the phantasm (sense image), for Scotus the universal concept is the result of causality by which the phantasm itself supplies the physical universal.

- 
- The intellect, determined in a certain causal way by the physical universal, gives it intentional being – or in other words, makes it a real concept predicable of many.
  
  - Individuality comes from the principle of individuation that Scotus calls "haecceity" (*haecceitas*).
    - Scotus calls the extra-mental universal the "common nature" (*natura communis*). The common nature is common in that it is "indifferent" to existing in any number of individuals. But it has extra-mental existence only in the particular things in which it exists, and in them it is always "contracted" by the haecceity.
    - The humanity-of-Socrates is individual and non-repeatable, as is the humanity-of-Plato; yet humanity itself is common and repeatable, and it is ontologically prior to any particular exemplification of it.
  
  - Metaphysics
    - For Scotus there is no real distinction between essence and existence.
  
    - Regarding the concept of being, Scotus holds that it is univocal, as against St. Thomas, who teaches that it is an analogous concept.
  
  - voluntarism
    - In opposition to Thomistic intellectualism, Scotus, at one with the whole Augustinian tradition, affirms the primacy of the will, a primacy which he extends also to God. God has created the world through an act of His will.
    - Everything becomes radically contingent.
    - Since God is free, His will cannot be bound to any object. Hence it is not absurd that fire be cold, water hot, earth lighter than air – in other words, that the universe be ruled by laws opposite to those which presently govern it.

- The immortality of the human soul cannot be known by reason, but only by faith.
- Reason needs faith according to Duns Scotus more than according to Aquinas.
- Ethics: a mild voluntarism
  - In God, as in man, the will has primacy over the intellect.
  - But this does not mean that the will of God is blind and directed by caprice. The will of God is illumined by the divine intellect and that the primacy of the will of God does not negate this natural order, which is valid also in God.
  - From the possibilities presented by His intellect God chooses one.
  - First of all, says Scotus, "the will of God of necessity loves God's goodness." Consequently, all that is essentially bound up with the essence of God is also willed necessarily by the divine will
    - as, for example, the first three commandments of the Decalogue.
  - Regarding the rest of the entire field of possibles which forms, as we have noted, the field of pure contingency, the will of God is free; but this is not to say that it acts indeliberately.
  - He chooses that order in which His goodness is more greatly manifest, without being necessarily bound to this particular order of contingency (God is bound only to will His own essence).
    - \* Hence He is always free to will the opposite when this change contributes more greatly to His goodness.
  - The moral act for Scotus is the result of due proportion between the potency (the will which must be free), the object (which must be good in itself), and the end (which must tend toward God in place, time, and manner).
    - \* While for St. Thomas an object which in itself is evil, but which through ignorance is apprehended as good, is the object of a morally good act, Scotus denies that this can be so: the object also must be good.

- Eschatology
  - Scotus holds that the essence of eternal life does not consist, as St. Thomas states, in the beatific vision of God, but in love of God.
  - One and the same thing can be the object of knowledge and of love, but the viewpoint is different; for as regards knowledge, the thing is "truth," and as regards will, or love, it is "good."
  
- Is God primarily goodness or truth?
  - The question whether God is Truth before Goodness or Goodness before Truth, does not make any sense. Considered as the object of love, God is Goodness. Considered as the object of knowledge, God is Truth.
  - There is no priority, but merely a difference in viewpoint. The Beatific Vision is an act of possession of the unity of God by the soul, in the highest degree of its own unity.

## Proof of the existence of God

Scotus begins by arguing that there is a first agent (a being that is first in efficient causality). Consider first the distinction between essentially ordered causes and accidentally ordered causes. In an accidentally ordered series, the fact that a given member of that series is itself caused is accidental to that member's own causal activity. For example, Grandpa A generates a son, Dad B, who in turn generates a son of his own, Grandson C. B's generating C in no way depends on A – A could be long dead by the time B starts having children. The fact that B was caused by A is irrelevant to B's own causal activity. That's how an accidentally ordered series of causes works.

- (1) No effect can produce itself.
- (2) No effect can be produced by just nothing at all.
- (3) A circle of causes is impossible.
- (4) Therefore, an effect must be produced by something else.  
(from 1, 2, and 3)

- (5) There is no infinite regress in an essentially ordered series of causes.
- (5a) It is not necessarily the case that a being possessing a causal power C possesses C in an imperfect way.
- (5b) Therefore, it is possible that C is possessed without imperfection by some item.
- (5c) If it is not possible for any item to possess C without dependence on some prior item, then it is not possible that there is any item that possesses C without imperfection (since dependence is a kind of imperfection).
- (5d) Therefore, it is possible that some item possesses C without dependence on some prior item. (from 5b and 5c by modus tollens)
- (5e) Any item possessing C without dependence on some prior item is a first agent (i.e., an agent that is not subsequent to any prior causes in an essentially ordered series).
- (5f) Therefore, it is possible that something is a first agent. (from 5d and 5e)
- (5g) If it is possible that something is a first agent, something is a first agent. (For, by definition, if there were no first agent, there would be no cause that could bring it about, so it would not in fact be possible for there to be a first agent.)
- (5h) Therefore, something is a first agent (i.e., an agent that is not subsequent to any prior causes in an essentially ordered series – Scotus still has to prove that there is an agent that is not subsequent to any prior causes in an accidentally ordered series either. That’s what he does in step (6) below). (from 5f and 5g)
- (6) It is not possible for there to be an accidentally ordered series of causes unless there is an essentially ordered series.
- (6a) In an accidentally ordered series, each member of the series (except the first, if there is a first) comes into existence as a result of the causal activity of a prior member of the series.
- (6b) That causal activity is exercised in virtue of a certain form.
- (6c) Therefore, each member of the series depends on that form for its causal activity.
- (6d) The form is not itself a member of the series.
- (6e) Therefore, the accidentally ordered series is essentially dependent on a higher-order cause.
- (7) Therefore, there is a first agent. (from 4, 5, and 6)