UNIT 3 DUNS SCOTUS

Contents

3.0 OBJECTIVES

- To introduce the students to the life and work of John Duns Scotus in general;
- To enable the students appreciate some of the nuances of this great philosopher and theologian; and
- To focus on the metaphysical orientation of Scotus.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

John Duns Scotus (1265/66-1308) was one of the most important and influential philosopher-theologians of the High Middle Ages. His brilliantly complex and nuanced thought, which earned him the nickname "the Subtle Doctor," left a mark on discussions of such disparate topics as the semantics of religious language, the problem of universals, divine illumination, and the nature of human freedom. This unit first lays out what is known about Scotus' life and the dating of his works. It then offers an overview of some of his key positions in four main areas of philosophy: natural theology, metaphysics, the theory of knowledge, and ethics and moral psychology (Williams 2009).

3.2 LIFE HISTORY

We do not know precisely when John Duns was born, but we are fairly certain he came from the eponymous town of Duns near the Scottish border with England. He, like many other of his compatriots, was called "Scotus," or "the Scot," from the country of his birth. He was ordained a priest on 17 March 1291. Because his bishop had just ordained another group at the end of 1290,

we can place Scotus' birth in the first quarter of 1266, if he was ordained as early as canon law permitted. When he was a boy he joined the Franciscans, who sent him to study at Oxford, probably in 1288. He was still at Oxford in 1300, for he took part in a disputation there at some point in 1300 or 1301, once he had finished lecturing on the *Sentences*. Moreover, when the English provincial presented 22 names to Bishop Dalderby on 26 July 1300 for licenses to hear confessions at Oxford, Scotus' was among them. He probably completed his Oxford studies in 1301. He was not, however, appointed as a master at Oxford, for his provincial sent him to the more prestigious University of Paris, where he would lecture on the *Sentences* a second time.

The longstanding rift between Pope Boniface VIII and King Philip the Fair of France would soon shake the University of Paris and interrupt Scotus' studies. In June of 1301, Philip's emissaries examined each Franciscan at the Parisian convent, separating the royalists from the papists. Supporters of the Pope, a slight majority that included Scotus, were given three days to leave France. Scotus returned to Paris by the fall of 1304, after Boniface had died and the new Pope, Benedict XI, had made his peace with Philip. We are not sure where Scotus spent his exile, but it seems probable that he returned to work at Oxford. Scotus also lectured at Cambridge sometime after he completed his studies at Oxford, but scholars are uncertain about exactly when.

Scotus completed his Parisian studies and was incepted as a master, probably in early 1305. As regent master, he held a set of *quodlibetal* questions (his only set) within two years of his inception. His Order transferred him to the Franciscan house of studies at Cologne, where we know he served as lector in 1307. He died the next year; the date traditionally given is 8 November. Pope John Paul II proclaimed his beatification in 1993 (Hause 2007).

3.3 HIS MAIN WORKS

Scholars have made considerable progress in determining which of the works attributed to Scotus are genuine. Moreover, many key texts now exist in critical editions: the philosophical works in the St. Bonaventure edition, and the theological works in the Vatican edition. However, others have not yet been edited critically. The Wadding *Opera omnia* is not a critical edition, and the reliability of the texts varies considerably. Despite its title, Wadding's *Opera omnia* does not contain quite all of Scotus' works. Most importantly, what Wadding includes as the Paris *Reportatio* on Book 1 of the *Sentences* is actually Book 1 of the *Additiones magnae*, William of Alnwick's compilation of Scotus' thought based largely but not exclusively on his Parisian teaching. The Parisian *Reportatio* exists in several versions, but most of it only in manuscript. Scholars are still uncertain about the exact chronology of the works.

Early in his career, Scotus wrote a number of logical works: questions on Porphyry's *Isagoge* and on Aristotle's *Categories*, *On Interpretation*, and *Sophistical Refutations*. His Oxford lectures on the *Sentences* are recorded in his *Lectura*, and his disputations at Oxford are recorded in the first set of his *Collations*. Scotus probably began his *Questions on the Metaphysics* in the early stages of his career as well, but recent scholarship suggests that Scotus composed parts of this work, in particular on Books VII-IX, after he left England for Paris, and perhaps late in his career. Scotus also wrote an *Expositio* on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and a set of questions on Aristotle's *On the Soul*, but

more study is needed to determine their relationship with the rest of Scotus' corpus (Hause 2007).

While still at Oxford, Scotus began reworking the *Lectura* into his *Ordinatio*, a fuller, more sophisticated commentary on the *Sentences*. Then he departed for Paris, where he continued his work on the *Ordinatio*, incorporating into later sections material from his Parisian lectures on the *Sentences*. These Parisian lectures exist only in various versions of student reports. Scotus' early disputations at Paris are recorded in the second set of his *Collations*.

Scotus died just a few years later, leaving behind a mass of works he had intended to complete or polish for publication. Nevertheless, he soon exercised as great an influence as any other thinker from the High Scholastic Period, including Bonaventure and Aquinas. Despite fierce opposition from many quarters, and in particular from Scotus' admiring confrere William Ockham, the Scotist school flourished well into the seventeenth century, where his influence can be seen in such writers as Descartes and Bramhall. Interest in Scotus' philosophy dwindled in the eighteenth century, and when nineteenth century philosophers and theologians again grew interested in scholastic thought, they generally turned to Aquinas and his followers, not to Scotus. However, the Franciscans continuously attested to Scotus' importance, and in the twentieth century their efforts sparked a revival of interest in Scotus, which has engendered many studies of high quality as well as a critical edition of Scotus' writing, eleven volumes of which are now in print. It remains to be seen whether Scotus' thought will have as great an impact on contemporary philosophy as Aquinas's or Anselm's (Hause 2007).

In the following section, we will only take up some of the main themes of this subtle doctor, in rather simplified style. We first deal with his idea on God, including his proof for God's existence. Then we take up his notion of simplicity, metaphysics and relation between philosophy and theology.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) What are some of the main works of Duns Scotus?

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2) Why is Scotus called the "subtle doctor"?

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3.4 PROOF FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

Scotus' argument for the existence of God is rightly regarded as one of the most outstanding contributions ever made to natural theology. The argument is enormously complex, with several sub-arguments for almost every important conclusion which we can only briefly sketch here as shown in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Williams 2009).

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.

In an essentially ordered series, by contrast, the causal activity of later members of the series depends essentially on the causal activity of earlier members. For example, my shoulders move my arms, which in turn move my golf club. My arms are capable of moving the golf club only because they are being moved by my shoulders.

With that distinction in mind, we can examine Scotus' argument for the existence of a first efficient cause (Williams 2009):

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)

Scotus then goes on to argue that there is an ultimate goal of activity (a being that is first in final causality), and a maximally excellent being (a being that is first in what Scotus calls "pre-eminence").

Thus he has proved what he calls the "triple primacy": there is a being that is first in efficient causality, in final causality, and in pre-eminence. Scotus next proves that the three primacies are coextensive: that is, any being that is first in one of these three ways will also be first in the other two ways. Scotus then argues that a being enjoying the triple primacy is endowed with intellect and will, and that any such being is infinite. Finally, he argues that there can be only one such being (Williams 2009).

3.5 THE UNICITY OF GOD

Don Scotus further elaborates on the unicity or oneness of God. God is, if you will, a kind of "highest good", not just for humans but for everything; yet we assert that there is but one God. Why? Can there not be multiple Gods, all of whom serve as "highest goods" in some theological scheme? In short, why is polytheism impossible? I say "impossible" because, according to Scotus, it is not merely a matter of faith or dogma that there is only one God: it is a matter of logical necessity (Carson 2007).

Scotus begins with the assumption that any will that is infinite wills things in the way that they should be willed. This he takes to imply a principle that we may call the principle of natural will: a correct will loves what is lovable to the extent that it is lovable and to the extent that the will is capable of loving, hence an infinite will will love whatever is lovable to the extent that it is lovable without exception. Suppose, then, that we posit two such infinite wills, that is, two Gods, calling one A and the other B. Both A and B, then, will love whatever is lovable to the extent that it is lovable and without exception; since both A and B are infinitely lovable, then each will love the other infinitely. Here Scotus introduces an assumption that must be unpacked. He says that everything loves its own being more than any other, just so long as it is neither a part nor an effect of this other. We may call this the principle of natural love: fundamentally it means that, given a particular nature (e.g., human, dog, divine), the conscious awareness and will of any being with that nature will be most intimately familiar with its own being rather than that of any other particular nature and, hence, most naturally able to will and to do what is best for that particular nature (here "to love" means something along the lines of "having what is best for X at heart and in one's will").

In the case of our two Gods, A and B, we find that each of them is infinitely lovable, hence B is to be infinitely loved by A. And yet A must naturally love itself more than anything else, including B. But if A loves itself more than it loves B, then it does not love B infinitely, even though B is deserving of infinite love from A. If A does not love B infinitely, A is not acting in accordance with its own nature and, hence, cannot be infinite. So either A loves B as much as it loves itself and, hence, violates the principle of nature love; or A loves B less than A loves itself and violates the principle of the natural will. Both are conceptual impossibilities, hence the actual existence of more than one God is conceptually impossible.

The principle of the natural will and of natural love are, I think, unfamiliar to us and yet perfectly acceptable. If they seem strange, though, Scotus offers an ancillary argument based on this one. He remarks that there are two ways in which A may love B. Either A may love B for its own sake, or it may simply use B. If it merely uses B, the love is inordinate. If it loves B for its own sake because of B's nature, then, having the same nature as B, A will love itself for its own sake as well. But this means that A is beatified by two distinct objects, both A and B, neither of which depends upon the other, for A is made happy by itself just as much as it is by B. But it is conceptually impossible to find perfect beatitude in two distinct objects, because either one may be destroyed without any loss of beatitude, hence complete beatitude is not dependent upon either object.

It seems to be something like this latter argument that Aristotle must have in mind in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: humans have only one final good because the very notion of a "final good" seems to entail that there could only be one such thing. Scotus' arguments, in other words, have that logical flavour that so characterizes Scholastic argument generally (Carson 2007).

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Briefly give the proof for God's existence, according to Scotus.

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2) How does Scotus show the unicity of God?

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3.6 SCOTUS ON SIMPLICITY

In *De primo principio,* Scotus proposes one very simple argument for [God's lack of essential properties]: if God were composed of essential parts, each one would either be finite or infinite. If finite, then God would be finite. According to Scotus' definition of infinite the infinite exceeds the finite by a non-finite measure. Thus, no matter how many the parts, they do not add up to infinite. If infinite, then – absurdly – the parts would not be less than the (infinite) whole. Further, Scotus appeals to the fact that composition of matter and form requires a causal explanation (an efficient cause), and the causal interrelation of the parts themselves, are considered as potency and act (PF).

As taken from Richard Cross (2005) the argument can be simplified as thus:

1. If God is composed of parts, then each part must be finite or infinite
2. If any given part is finite, then God is finite, which is absurd
3. If any given part is infinite, then it is equal to the whole, which is absurd
4. Therefore, no parts in God are finite or infinite
5. Therefore, there are no parts in God.

Now, given this, (2) would need to be defended. Scotus, does it by arguing that any finite part of God would be necessarily exceeded by Him infinitely; but that would imply an infinite number of parts would be required to exceed the finite part, and since you can never add up to infinite, the entire notion is absurd. Thus Scotus concludes that God is not composed of parts and so is simple.

3.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF METAPHYSICS

Metaphysics, according to Scotus, is the "real theoretical science": it is real in that it treats things rather than concepts, theoretical in that it is pursued for

its own sake rather than as a guide for doing or making things, and a science in that it proceeds from self-evident principles to conclusions that follow deductively from them. The various real theoretical sciences are distinguished by their subject matter, and Scotus devotes considerable attention to determining what the distinctive subject matter of metaphysics is. His conclusion is that metaphysics concerns "being *qua* being". That is, the metaphysician studies being simply as such, rather than studying, say, material being as material (Williams 2009).

The study of being *qua* being includes, first of all, the study of the transcendentals, so called because they transcend the division of being into finite and infinite, and the further division of finite being into the ten Aristotelian categories. Being itself is a transcendental, and so are the "proper attributes" of being — one, true, and good — which are coextensive with being. Scotus also identifies an indefinite number of disjunctions that are coextensive with being and therefore count as transcendentals, such as infinite-or-finite and necessary-or-contingent. Finally, all the pure perfections (see above) are transcendentals, since they transcend the division of being into finite and infinite. Unlike the proper attributes of being and the disjunctive transcendentals, however, they are not coextensive with being. For God is wise and Socrates is wise, but earthworms — though they are certainly beings — are not wise.

The study of the Aristotelian categories also belongs to metaphysics insofar as the categories, or the things falling under them, are studied as beings. (If they are studied as concepts, they belong instead to the logician.) There are exactly ten categories, Scotus argues. The first and most important is the category of substance. Substances are beings in the most robust sense, since they have an independent existence: that is, they do not exist *in* something else. Beings in any of the other nine categories, called accidents, exist in substances. The nine categories of accidents are quantity, quality, relation, action, passion, place, time, position, and state.

3.8 RELATION BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

Scotus does not hold that science and faith can contradict each other, or that a proposition may be true in philosophy and false in theology and vice versa. Incorrect, also, is the statement that he attaches little importance to showing the harmony between scientific knowledge and faith and that he has no regard for speculative theology. Quite the contrary, he proves the dogmas of faith not only from authority but, as far as possible, from reason also. Theology presupposes philosophy as its basis. Facts which have God for their author and yet can be known by our natural powers especially miracles and prophecies, are criteria of the truth of Revelation, religion, and the Church. Scotus strives to gain as thorough an insight as possible into the truths of faith, to disclose them to the human mind, to establish truth upon truth, and from dogma to prove or to reject many a philosophical proposition. There is just as little warrant for the statement that his chief concern is humble subjection to the authority of God and of the Church, or that his tendency a priori is to depreciate scientific knowledge and to resolve speculative theology into doubts. Scotus simply believes that many philosophical and theological proofs of other scholars are not conclusive; in their stead he adduces other arguments (Minges 1909).

He also thinks that many philosophical and theological propositions can be proved which other Scholastics consider incapable of demonstration. He indeed lays great stress on the authority of Scripture, the Fathers, and the Church but he also attaches much importance to natural knowledge and the intellectual capacity of the mind of angels and of men, both in this world and in the other. He is inclined to widen rather than narrow the range of attainable knowledge. He sets great value upon mathematics and the natural sciences and especially upon metaphysics. He rejects every unnecessary recourse to Divine or angelic intervention or to miracles, and demands that the supernatural and miraculous be limited as far as possible even in matters of faith. Dogmas he holds are to be explained in a somewhat softened and more easily intelligible sense, so far as this may be done without diminution of their substantial meaning, dignity, and depth.

In Scripture the literal sense is to be taken, and freedom of opinion is to be granted so far as it is not opposed to Christian Faith or the authority of the Church. Scotus was much given to the study of mathematics, and for this reason he insists on demonstrative proofs in philosophy and theology; but he is no real sceptic. He grants that our senses, our internal and external experience, and authority together with reason, can furnish us with absolute certainty and evidence. The difficulty which many truths present lies not so much in ourselves as in the objects. In itself everything knowable is the object of our knowledge. Reason can of its own powers recognize the existence of God and many of His attributes, the creation of the world out of nothing, the conservation of the world by God, the spirituality, individuality, substantiality, and unity of the soul, as well as its free will. In many of his writings he asserts that mere reason can come to know the immortality and the creation of the soul; in others he asserts the direct opposite; but he never denies the so-called moral evidence for these truths (Minges 1909).

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How is simplicity applied to God?

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2) What is the significance of metaphysics according to Dun Scotus?

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3.9 LET US SUM UP

Through his sharp intellect and rigorous reasoning, Scotus has been able to give a new understanding of philosophy. Moving slightly away from the Thomistic tradition, he has given new proofs for God's existence and speaks of the unicity of God. He is primarily a metaphysician, who does not think that his rational exercise (philosophy) does not contradict his spiritual quest (theology).

3.10 KEY WORDS

Modus tollens : The rule of logic stating that if a conditional statement ("if p then q") is accepted, and the consequent does not hold (not-q), then the negation of the antecedent (not-p) can be inferred (See Logic Notes).

Simplicity : the state, quality, or an instance of being simple. It is freedom from complexity, intricacy, or division into parts:

Transcendentals : Proper attributes of being that goes beyond the division of being into finite and infinite. The scholastic transcendentals are "one", "truth," "beauty," etc (See Metaphysics Notes).

Unicity : The condition of being united; quality of the unique.

3.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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