
UNIT 4 DUN SCOTUS AND WILLIAM OF OCKHAM

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, placing ourselves in the post-Thomistic period, we focus our attention on two Franciscans: John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, in their commonness and disagreement with the Dominican Thomas Aquinas.

By the end of this Unit you should be able to:

- Clarify the positions held by Aquinas and Scotus;
- Explain the univocity of being;
- Distinguish formal distinction and individuation;
- Clarify psychology and ethics of Scotus; and
- Explain Universals according to Ockham, and his principle of simplicity

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The thirteenth century was the golden age of scholastic speculation. With the beginning of the fourteenth century the signs of a speculative decline or disintegration became obvious. What hastened this decline is the overemphasis on language and logic, together with an increasing scepticism about the power of reason, so confidently proposed by Aquinas. The long-standing marriage of philosophy and religion began to come apart during this time. In the late scholastic period or in the post-Thomistic period two Franciscans beckon our attention: John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. What is common to both is their disagreement with the Dominican Thomas Aquinas.

4.2 JOHN DUN SCOTUS

LIFE AND WORKS

Little is known of the early life of Duns Scotus. He was ordained a priest on March 17, 1291 and on that basis it is inferred that he was born early in 1266. He entered

the Franciscan order, studied and taught at Oxford (1300) and at Paris (1302-1303). After a short exile, he was back in Paris by 1304. In 1307 he was transferred to Franciscan study house at Cologne, where he died the following year. He is known as *Doctor Subtilis* (Subtle Doctor), on account of his shrewd reasoning and his perception of fine distinctions, *Doctor Maximus* (the highest doctor), and *Doctor Marianus* (the Marian doctor).

Several works are attributed to the authorship of Duns Scotus. But, all are not authentic. Of the authentic ones, the most important are the *Opus oxoniense* (Oxford Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard. It came to be known later as the *Ordinatio*) and the Treatise *De primo rerum omnium principio* (A Treatise on God as First Principle).

THE RIVALRY WITH ST. THOMAS

As a thinker Scotus entertained a speculative rivalry, albeit healthy, with Aquinas. He proposed ideas that are different from that of Thomas Aquinas, often as an improvement upon the ideas of Aquinas. This prompts some writers to make the accusation that he differs from Thomas just for the sake of being different. It is also true that at times he misinterprets Aquinas. For example, Scotus insisted on the intellectual intuition of the singular object in opposition to the Thomistic position that the immediate object of intellectual apprehension is the universal. Scotus opined that accepting the Thomistic position would amount to the denial of the divinity of Jesus and that would be a heresy. Again, Scotus held that the concept of being is *univocal* rather than *analogical* as held by Thomas.

The difference between Scotus and St. Thomas is, more truly, the result of the difference in their philosophical perspective. Scotus is a follower of the Augustinian-Franciscan tradition (the platonic stream), that is more voluntaristic, in contrast to Aquinas, who is a follower of the Aristotelian-Dominican tradition that is more intellectualistic. In any case, Duns Scotus will definitely serve as a good source to make a critical evaluation of the Thomistic system.

PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

Aquinas was very careful to preserve the prudential equilibrium between the disciplines of philosophy and theology. In him they are distinct but complementary. This balance is gradually being lost in the post-Thomistic period. In the prologue to the *Ordinatio*, Scotus at length speaks of the relation between theology and philosophy. Philosophy is a work of reason unaided by faith. It is an autonomous science and enjoys a status of its own. Theology is a practical science and not a speculative science as Aquinas had asserted. Its principles are accepted on authority and faith. Thus there began the widening of the gap between theology and philosophy. Theology is reduced to the *supernatural* and philosophy to the *natural*. The principle *gratia naturam non tollit, sed perficit* (grace does not take away nature, but perfects it) will gradually be forgotten. This will culminate in the modern phenomenon of complete alienation between faith and reason.

THE THEORY OF BEING

Scotus was purely a metaphysician. He held that metaphysics, along with mathematics and physics, is a theoretical science pursued for its own sake. He identifies the subject of metaphysics as *being qua being*. We are, in a sense, natural

metaphysicians. (A view Scotus finds implicit in the opening remark of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* that *all men desire by nature to know*). The primary object of the intellect is being in general. Scotus does not accept the Thomistic position that soul essentially depends on the body.

THE UNIVOCITY OF BEING

Scotus argued in favour of the *univocity* of being. There is a single unified notion of being that applies equally to God and creatures. This notion serves as the ground of metaphysics as a science. There is a danger here of accusing Scotus of denying the distinction between creator and creatures. He did not mean that God and creatures are being in the same way.

In the *Opus Oxoniense* he wrote of the concept of being that "it extends to all that is not nothing." Being is that which is opposed to non-being. God, as much as creatures, is opposed to non-being. Therefore, being is univocally applicable to God and creatures. It is an all-embracing concept. *Being is that which is*: that is the position of Scotus. He is open to grant that God and creatures are opposed to nothingness in different ways. (*Being is that which is in its own way*: that is the Thomistic position)

MATTER AND FORM

The subtle doctor developed a metaphysics that contained many new elements, nuances, and clarifications of traditional Augustinianism. All material beings are composed of matter and form. They are positive and actual entities. Matter as distinct from nothing is a positive reality and therefore actually something. Hence, for Scotus, primary matter is not a pure potentiality, as it is for the Aristotelians, but an actuality capable of receiving further perfection. Matter and form are essentially ordered to one another and hence the union between matter and form is substantial.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use space provided for you answer

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is the basis for the rivalry between Scotus and Aquinas?

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FORMAL DISTINCTION AND INDIVIDUATION

Every being has a unity. But, not every being is simple. For Scotus, each concrete being has a multiplicity of metaphysical elements that are real, positive and distinct.

Scotus speaks of *real distinction* (*distinctio realis*) and *formal distinction* (*distinctio formalis*). The real distinction is one that exists between two different things, for example, between a human and a tree. The *formal distinction* is the result of a rational consideration about one thing in its various aspects, as for example, the distinction between man and his soul. In reality, they are identical or one is part

of the other. This is *distinctio formalis a parte intellectus*.

Scotus speaks also of another formal distinction, the *distinctio formalis a parte rei*. In this case it is not the mind that makes the distinction but the distinction is present in the thing itself. Thus, according to Scotus, a man has various forms; he has a common human form (*humanitas or natura communis*), but he also has a form that distinguishes him from all other men. This is a formal distinction *a parte rei*, and Scotus calls it *haecceitas* (*thisness*). (*Thisness* consists in *haec res* (this thing)). Peter and Paul both contain full human essence, but Peter possesses an additional *formalitas*, which is *Peterness*, and Paul possesses *Paulness*. This is Scotus' **principle of individuation**, which is not only material, as in Thomistic metaphysics, but also formal.

We may feel a little bit exasperated with these distinctions. But, in fact, they reveal the inner constitutional richness of a single being. At the same time we cannot disagree with those who argue for more simplicity in thinking.

GOD'S EXISTENCE

Man has no intuitive knowledge of God in this life. Hence, the existence of God stands in need of rational proof and that must be *a posteriori*. This is the basic stand of Scotus. In proving the existence of God Scotus walked a path that is different from that traversed by Anselm and Thomas Aquinas.

By his natural power human can know some truths concerning God, like God is one, God is supreme etc. But we cannot know by this power that God is a trinity. The philosophers through a consideration of God's effects can attain more knowledge about God. By considering creatures as God's effects the human mind is able to form concepts which apply to God. But one must remember that such concepts when applied to God will only be imperfect.

Scotus proved the possibility of a first efficient cause, starting from the intrinsic possibility of every created being. Since created beings exist, it is absolutely certain that they can exist (principle of non-contradiction). The reason for this possibility cannot be found in *nothing*, for *nothing* cannot be a cause. To say that a thing has nothing for its cause is to say that it has no cause. The cause of the intrinsic possibility of creatures must be found in a being that is distinct from all created beings. This being either exists by itself or by reason of another. If it exists by reason of another it will be contingent. Hence, it is necessary to postulate a transcendent necessary cause.

For Scotus the primary existential characteristic of the first being is *infinity*. It signifies the intrinsic mode of God's being. Infinity of God is more than merely an attribute of God. It is the most perfect concept, because infinite being includes virtually infinite truth, infinite goodness, and every perfection that is compatible with infinity.

PSYCHOLOGY

Man is a composite being, composed of separable entities, body and soul. Only in this life the soul is dependent on the body. This dependence, however, is not intrinsic to the soul as such. It is rather the result of a punishment. At death there will be the disintegration of this composition. It seems Origen influenced Scotus in this point. The human intellectual activity is an activity that transcends the power of the senses. From this he infers that man has a rational soul, which is the form of man.

In agreement with the Augustinian tradition, Scotus accepts the primacy of the will over the intellect. The intellect and will are natural powers. The intellect is a cognitive power that is not free, because when something is presented to the intellect as true, it cannot but accept it. On the other hand, the will is a free power, because even if something is presented to it as good, it still remains free to accept or reject it. Here again, there is disagreement between St. Thomas and Scotus. According to St. Thomas, when the will is confronted with the supreme good, it cannot but choose it. According to Scotus, not even the supreme good can determine the human will. Yes, he is a philosopher of total freedom.

Scotus speaks of two inclinations of the will. The first towards one's own good and advantage, the second towards the achievement of justice appropriate to the objective value of all things. This second inclination consists in the ability to overcome the natural self-centered inclination and to opt for the *affection for true justice* (*affectio iustitiae*). It is the human option for the other, the *love of willing-well* to another (*amor benevolentiae*). In such altruistic love, the will becomes the will as just and free. It is this will that is free and just that enables us to love God and our neighbour. Love is superior to faith. It is better to love God than to know him. The perversion of the will is more serious than the perversion of the intellect.

MORALITY AND FREEDOM

Scotus firmly asserted the absolute freedom of God's will and the pre-eminence of human freedom. (Opposition to Averroes). The objective norm of the moral law is the divine essence.

In man as in God, liberty is the supreme value. The divine will is seen as taking precedence over the divine intellect. (Aquinas argued for the primacy of the divine intellect). Free will expresses the highest perfection of human nature. The primacy of the will is characteristic of his ethics. Like Augustine he believed that "the will commanding the intellect is the superior cause of its action. The intellect, however, if it is the cause of volition, is a subservient cause to the will." "Man's free will enables him to free himself from the inclinations of his natural appetites so that he can choose to act in accord with right reason, and with *affection for justice*." An action shall be qualified as a right human action if it is free, objectively good, and conformable to right reason, done with a right reason and right intention and performed in the right way.

SUMMARY

"There is no medieval doctor more misunderstood than this Scottish Franciscan. The very title of Subtle Doctor by which he is honoured has an ironic ring. He was called an innovator, yet he followed the most ancient scholastic tradition, developing the intuitions of Augustine and incorporating compatible elements of Aristotelian doctrine. He was called a Franciscan who had lost the significance of love, yet his philosophy is founded on love. He was said to be a methodical saboteur, an insidious theologian, a precursor of voluntarism and immanentism, a 13th century Kant, yet his realism is scholastic to an extreme, carefully avoiding any pretended autonomy of nature of the individual ego." This quotation is a lucid evaluative summary of the opinions of others about Duns Scotus.

Scotus is the last of the great personalities of scholasticism. His may be regarded as the last of the great speculative syntheses of the Middle Ages. "The primacy of being constitutes the basis of his epistemology and metaphysics; the primacy of will

characterizes his ethics; and the notion of Infinite Being who is Love dominates his entire theology.”

Constant criticism of his immediate predecessors, particularly of Aquinas, is something very peculiar to Scotus. But we find in him much in common with Thomas Aquinas. He shared with him the desire to construct a speculative synthesis based on the commonly accepted principles of the thirteenth century metaphysical tradition. There would not have been a Duns Scotus, if a Thomas Aquinas had not lived before him.

In natural theology, even though Scotus disagreed with Anselm and Thomas, in many respects he follows the Anselmian and Thomistic traditions. He made use of the concept of infinite being of Anselm and his proof for the existence of God is very similar to the third way (cosmological argument) of Thomas.

In theory of man and ethics Scotus used all his energy to uphold the freedom of man in spite of his insistence on the freedom of divine will. Some may think of a contradiction here. But, in Christian thinking, the freedom of God in no way diminishes the freedom of man. Man, as co-creator, shares very specially in the freedom of God.

The Scotus’ love for subtlety has won for him many disciples. But the later thinkers would look at this philosophical subtlety as an attempt in vain-thinking. It is by way of Scotus that the term *scholasticism* came to suggest labyrinthine academic subtlety and became the butt of humour for the early moderns.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use space provided for you answer

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Explain real distinction, formal distinction and the principle of individuation.

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2. What is the basic stand of Scotus on God’s existence?

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4.3 WILLIAM OF OCKHAM

LIFE AND WORKS

William of Ockham is a thinker who may be regarded as a *philosophical Janus*. He is a thinker who looks in two opposite directions: *back to the Middle Age* and *forward to the Modern Age*. Looking back he began criticizing the overemphasis

on rational abstraction of the scholastic period and to free human reason from its subordination to divine will. Thus, inadvertently, he paved the way for the *via moderna* (modern way). “He was an original thinker in the sense that he thought out his problems for himself and developed his solutions thoroughly and systematically.”

William was born probably in the village of Ockham, near Guildford, Surrey, at the end of the 13th century. Of his early life nothing definite is known. We know for certain that he was ordained a sub-deacon in 1306. He was a student at the University of Oxford around 1309 and while a student he joined the Franciscan Order. He continued his studies at Oxford and later became a professor there.

In the 14th century there began the dissolution of the great medieval social structure. The conflict between the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor reappeared again. In 1324 William was investigated for heresy and the matter was referred to the Pope then in Avignon. William was summoned to Avignon and was asked to answer the accusations. He escaped from there and took refuge at the court of Emperor Ludwig of Bavaria. There he remained an active, intellectual force. The following verse is attributed to him: *Tu me defendas gladio, ego te defendam calamo* (Defend me with the sword, I shall defend you with the pen). As William sided with the Emperor, Pope John XXII excommunicated him. After the death of the Emperor, William made an effort to get reconciled with the Church. He died at Munich in 1349, probably as a victim of the prevalent Black Death. His most important work is his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. Other important works are: *Summa totius Logicae*, *De potestate papae*.

THE BIFURCATION OF FAITH AND REASON

William of Ockham is the speculative progeny of Duns Scotus. But, the child brought the path initiated by the originator to new lands of speculation and thus became the best critic of the master. He largely dismantled the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. A sharp distinction is found in Ockham’s thought between reason and faith. The truths of theology are based on revelation and are neither provable nor refutable by any process of natural cognition. Theology is thus pushed into a realm beyond the reach of reason. Theology is not a rational science. Thus, God is removed from the field of rational speculation and as a result natural theology is made impossible. God disappears from the intellectual horizon and ceases to be the proper object of the mind. We may qualify it as the *loss of God*.

THE QUESTION OF UNIVERSALS

In the discussion about the reality status of the universal concepts Ockham sided with the nominalist turn. Universals have reality neither in the things nor in the mind of God as eternal exemplars of the things. Universals are abstractions of the human mind (*conceptus mentis*).

Particular things participate in universal essences. Human intellect can discover these essences. These essences have ontological reality; they have extralingual reality. This is the core of the medieval realist tradition.

The forward-looking aspect of Ockham’s philosophy resides in his rejection of realism and his alternative explanation of nominalism and empiricism. He was a radical empiricist who maintained that individual objects of sense were the only reality. The later British empiricism is heavily indebted to him. What he denies in his nominalism

is the belief that there is the need of positing ontologically distinct essences to speak about or understand individual things. He was an anti-realist who did not accept the existence of universals as such, and he refused to infer a multiplicity of strange objects (such as essences and universals) from the multiplicity of words in the language.

For Ockham, universality is a property primarily of thoughts, secondarily of language that gives expression to thoughts. But he has no convincing answer to the question – Why we apply the same universal name to many individuals? He said that in the case of the universals, nature works in a hidden manner.

OCKHAM'S RAZOR

Today Ockham is best known for a *principle of simplicity* called *Ockham's razor*. The principle is a simple one: All things being equal, we should always adopt the simpler explanation. He stated it a bit more formally: "Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity."

This principle is called explanatively as *principle of parsimony* or *principle of economy*. What can be explained by the assumption of fewer things is vainly explained by the assumption of more things. Ever since the Middle Ages, the notion that *simpler is better* (*less is more; more is less*) has been an integral part of science's progress and success. Unfortunately, outside of scientific circles, this principle has been a major casualty of modern times. It is tragic that the notion *more is better* has permeated our lives.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use space provided for you answer

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Bifurcate faith and reason from Ockham's perspective.

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2. Explain the reality status of the universal concepts according to Ockham.

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4.4 LET US SUM UP

The main feature of late scholasticism is its dialectical opposition to the foundational philosophical positions of the high scholasticism. The bifurcation of faith and reason will drastically change the whole speculative spectrum. "Alone, alienated from the world and from God, the human spirit begins to feel insecure in the universe." To

escape from this insecurity, rather than the search for truth, will become the preoccupation of the next generation of thinkers.

Ockham's critical and sceptical attitude towards the traditional metaphysical tenets and arguments will develop into a movement called **Ockhamism**. It will foster a new speculative attitude that will pave the way for the scientific empiricism of the seventeenth century.

After William of Ockham medieval philosophy began the slide towards decline rapidly. One reason is that it got unimaginably diversified into secondary questions and thus got alienated from the original primary questions.

4.5 KEY WORDS

Contingency	: Contingency is the status of <u>propositions</u> that are not necessarily true or necessarily false.
Essence	: Essence is the inner principle of determination of a thing.

4.6 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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4.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1) Healthy rivalry: The ideas of Scotus were improvement upon the ideas of Aquinas.

Scotus misinterprets Aquinas: For example, Scotus insisted on the intellectual intuition of the singular object in opposition to the Thomistic position that the immediate object of intellectual apprehension is the universal.

Philosophical differences: Scotus is a follower of the Augustinian- Franciscan tradition (the platonic stream), that is more voluntaristic, in contrast to Aquinas, who is a

Check Your Progress II

- 1) Every being has a unity. But, not every being is simple. Each concrete being has a multiplicity of metaphysical elements that are real, positive and distinct.

The real distinction is one that exists between two different things, for example, between a human and a tree. The Formal distinction is the result of a rational consideration about one thing in its various aspects, as for example, the distinction between man and his soul. In reality, they are identical or one is part of the other. This is *distinctio formalis a parte intellectus*.

There is another formal distinction, the *distinctio formalis a parte rei*. In this case it is not the mind that makes the distinction but the distinction is present in the thing itself. Thus, according to Scotus, a man has various forms; he has a common human form (*humanitas or natura communis*), but he also has a form that distinguishes him from all other men. This is a formal distinction *a parte rei*. This is Scotus' principle of individuation, which is not only material, but also formal.

- 2) We have no intuitive knowledge of God's existence. Hence, we need a rational proof and that must be *a posteriori*.

Scotus proved the possibility of a first efficient cause, starting from the intrinsic possibility of every created being. Since created beings exist, it is absolutely certain that the cause can exist (principle of non-contradiction). The reason for this possibility cannot be found in *nothing*, for *nothing* cannot be a cause. To say that a thing has nothing for its cause is to say that it has no cause. The cause of the intrinsic possibility of creatures must be found in a being that is distinct from all created beings. This being either exists by itself or by reason of another. If it exists by reason of another it will be contingent. Hence, it is necessary to postulate a transcendent necessary cause.

For Scotus the primary existential characteristic of the first being is *infinity*. It signifies the intrinsic mode of God's being. Infinity of God is more than merely an attribute of God. It is the most perfect concept, because infinite being includes virtually infinite truth, infinite goodness, and every perfection that is compatible with infinity.

Check Your Progress III

- 1) Ockham made a sharp distinction between reason and faith. The truths of theology are based on revelation and are neither provable nor refutable by any process of natural cognition. Thus, he pushed theology into a realm beyond the reach of reason. Theology is not a rational science. Thus, God is removed from the field of rational speculation and as a result natural theology is made impossible. God disappears from the intellectual horizon and ceases to be the proper object of the mind.
- 2) According to Ockham, universals have reality neither in the things nor in the mind of God. They are abstractions of the human mind. Particular things participate in universal essences. Human intellect can discover these essences. These essences have ontological reality; they have extralingual reality. This is the core of the medieval realist tradition. For Ockham, universality is a property primarily of thoughts, secondarily of language that gives expression to thoughts.