Franciscan Spirit and Aristotelian Rationality: John Duns Scotus’s New Approach to Theology and Philosophy

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What do we know about John Duns Scotus and the central motives of his thought and life? Why do we study his writings? Why do we invest so much time in a critical edition? Indeed, few details of his life are known. We have no autobiography, no personal notes or letters. There are even questions about his name. What we know definitely is that he was a Franciscan and a scholar. Though he died in his early forties, he was a scholar who left a magnificent body of work that deeply affected medieval thinking, both in theology and in philosophy. No other medieval philosophers had such a profound effect on the development of Western thought.

What we know are Scotus’s writings. Increasingly the critical edition of this huge oeuvre provides information about his works and their deep influence on his contemporaries and his successors. Might these critical texts also answer our questions about Duns Scotus’s identity and his principal motivations? If so, what evidence can we get from the sources? I have been asked to give a short answer to these questions in my lecture. Let me try to approach this topic by sketching out the replies to four questions with which Scotus was confronted. All four questions are deeply rooted in his Franciscan background: Why do we do theology? How can we think about God? What does it mean to be a person? Why are we free?

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1 Lecture given following the reception of the 2007 Franciscan Institute Medal, during Conference I of the Quadruple Congress John Duns Scotus 1308-2008 at Saint Bonaventure University, October 18-21, 2007.
I. Why theology?

Scotus teaches that:

Theology was not invented to expel ignorance, because much more of what it would have been desirable to know could have been disclosed in the (revealed) doctrine than actually has been delivered. Quite the contrary, the same things are often repeated so the listener will do what is asked.3

The Franciscan spirit is the spirit of the imitatio Christi. Franciscans seek to follow the path of Jesus Christ in their lives, to prefer practice (praxis) above all and to appreciate love as the aim of human beings. Why should one do theology if even revelation aims at nothing other than the practice of imitating Christ?

Did not St. Paul (1 Cor. 2:6ff.) contrast the “wisdom of God in his mystery” (sophia tou theou en mysterio) with the “wisdom of the world” (sophia tou kosmou)? Didn’t Tertullian ask “what has Jerusalem to do with Athens, what has the Church to with the Academy?”4 Scotus, like St. Francis, acknowledges the profound difference between Christian faith and secular knowledge, between theology as intellectus fidei and philosophy, and he never hesitates to emphasize it. He is too convinced of this difference to follow St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure when they identify Christian theology with the “true philosophy (vera philosophia).”5 If theology were really what philosophy attempts to be, it would have to assume the full burden of philosophy and make expelling ignorance its essential aim. Scotus does not follow this view, but neither does he go to the opposite extreme and deny that theology is a science. He does not despise philosophy; rather, he acknowledges it as an independent source of knowledge.

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In Scotus’s view there are powerful reasons that make it necessary for Christian faith to establish theology as an independent science and to treat philosophy as a special cognitive faculty. Two reasons for this are intrinsic to Christian theology and one is extrinsic: The first intrinsic reason is rooted in the essence of divine revelation: Revealed doctrine understands itself as the disclosure of important truths. But truth belongs to sentences that express propositions which employ concepts. As Scotus says, concepts must be known naturally, otherwise we could not understand sentences. But understanding the meaning of concepts and how they can be connected to build well formed sentences is the task of philosophy. Philosophy also teaches us how to connect sentences in order to make valid inferences. Hence Scotus concludes that theology needs the support of philosophy in order to explain those sentences in revealed theology that seem to include an obvious contradiction, such as “God is three and one” (Deus est trinus et unus).6

At this point the extrinsic reason comes into play: Scotus believed it was not enough to defend revealed doctrine in a more general way. Its credibility has to be defended against a hitherto unknown competitor: Aristotelian Philosophy rediscovered in its mature form, buttressed by commentaries and systematic expositions by the Jewish and Islamic philosophers. Some parts of Greek and Roman philosophy, particularly what was contained in the corpus of the seven liberal arts and a number of more logical works, had been known by the Latin West since late antiquity. This body of learning had already been used by the patristic and early medieval Theologians to develop theology as the doctrine of Christian faith. But prior to the twelfth/thirteenth centuries, the Western Latin Church had never been confronted with the complete and mature formulation of pagan philosophy. This was especially the case with “First Philosophy” (later called Metaphysics), established by Aristotle and commented upon and further developed by the philosophers in the Islam-

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ic and Jewish context, such as Avicenna, Maimonides and Averroes. When Aristotle’s *First Philosophy* became known in its complete version in the thirteenth century the Latin theologians were not just faced with a well developed logic and philosophy of science with high standards of intelligibility and consistency. They confronted a philosophical world view that appealed only to natural premises upon which one could achieve an all embracing, comprehensive scientific account of the world.

We can understand this challenge if we read some of the 217 articles condemned as non-Christian by the Parisian bishop Stephen Tempier in 1277. Consider the following: “Beatitude can only be possessed in this life” (art. 176). “Only philosophers are wise” (art. 154). “There are no rationally solvable questions that cannot be treated and solved by philosophers” (art. 145). It was particularly the *Great Commentary* to the Aristotelian writings by Averroes which began to circulate around 1225 and which demonstrated not only how scientifically convincing the new world view’s claim had to be considered, but what dangers for Christian faith it seemed to imply.

Confronted with this challenge, what should theologians like Scotus do? Because he considered the traditional answers unsatisfactory, Scotus devotes more space to them than any previous medieval author. In the prologue to his lectures on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, Scotus rejects two possibilities: Theology cannot give up its claim to be a science. Yet theology cannot be an Aristotelian science based only on necessary truths.

– Theology must be a science, since the Christian faith is a comprehensive doctrine that claims to state universal truths and demands free and reasoned obedience to the *sacra doctrina*. Since Christian faith cannot give up its claim

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to explain its truth to all as well as to demonstrate that its mysteries are not contradictory, theology must be a kind of science.

– On the other hand, theology cannot restrict itself to necessary truth regarding God’s immutable essence; it must also explain contingent truths about God’s action in the world, about creation and salvation. Sacred doctrine, therefore, cannot be science in the strict sense, a science that contains only necessary deductive truths. Theology must be an independent science that explains contingent truths, but is no less obliged to logical consistency and argumentative vigor than sciences that deal only with necessary truths.

To ask what sort of rationality pertains to Christian theology opens our eyes to the question regarding the knowledge that is accessible to human reason in its present state. Scotus shows that science in the strict sense – that is, “deductive science (scientia propter quid)” as Aristotle describes it in his Posterior Analytics is only accessible to an ideal intellect, such as God’s intellect or an unrestricted human intellect. In our present state (status iste), which takes sense cognition as its point of departure, even metaphysics, the science which Aristotle conceived as the “First Philosophy,” is not possible as a deductive science (scientia propter quid), but only as a science that reasons from effects to causes (scientia quia).10

For Scotus, a second intrinsic reason to conceive Christian doctrine as a special science is its practical aim. If free will is a rational power, and no act of the will is possible without a preceding act of the intellect, Christian faith aims at right practice. Christian doctrine must explain how we can achieve “right practice.” What sort of knowledge of the object of our practice do we need? Hence, Scotus believed theology had to be conceived as a “practical science.”11

There is nothing new about conceiving theology as science in the broader sense Aristotle describes in Nicomachean Ethics VI, and distinguishing between the strictly rational world-view of the philosophers (philosophi) and the more

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10 Cf. Metaphysica I q.1 nn.1-163, Opera Philosophica 3:15-72; L. Honnefelder, Ens inquantum ens (see above note 5), 99-112.

comprehensive doctrine of Christian faith. That is the answer Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and others developed in response to the Aristotelian challenge. Scotus accepts this solution in principle, but he is not satisfied.

He is dissatisfied because as a Franciscan he is convinced of three things: 1. the importance of the status iste, the present state of human reason, 2. the possibility of a science which deals not only with necessary, but also with contingent truths, 3. the possibility of a practical science that has its own rationality and consistency.

All three points required Scotus, the theologian, not only cogently to criticize Aristotelian philosophy in its own terms, but also to develop radical new philosophical innovations. These were: 1. a new critique of the potential and the limits of human intellect,\(^\text{12}\) 2. a new approach to a theory of contingency and contingent truths\(^\text{13}\) and 3. the development of a concept of practical science consistent both with Christian theology and ethics.\(^\text{14}\)

The importance of these innovations will become clearer in connection with the second question we must take up now:

**II. How can we think of God?**

"Do not conceive God in the manner of Averroes (\textit{noli mensurare deum secundum Averroem})\(^\text{15}\) is Scotus’s urgent warning. God is an unknown who is not part of our world, but somehow irreducibly transcendent. Yet because the Christian God acts towards our world in a free, non-necessary manner, it is not possible to recognize such a God within the framework of \textit{Physics}. Averroes is wrong, therefore, to think that we can identify God as the first unmoved mover necessary

\(^{12}\) Cf. \textit{Ordinatio} I d.3 p.1 q.3 nn.108-201, ed. Vat.3: 68-123; \textit{Lectura} I d.3 p.1 q.1-2 n.1-143, ed. Vat.16: 223-281; L. Honnefelder, \textit{Ens inquantum ens} (see above note 6), 55-98.

\(^{13}\) Cf. L. Honnefelder, \textit{Scientia transcendens} (see above note 2), 56-108.


\(^{15}\) \textit{Metaphysica} V, q. 2, n. 42, \textit{Opera Philosophica} 3: 425.
to move all other beings, without further preamble. On the other hand, Christian revelation offers only God’s name and describes divine activities _ad extra_. It provides no concept of God that can be used as the subject of propositions about God required for theology as science. But how can we conceive something which transcends all our categories and is the cause of all other things as a “free willing object (obiectum voluntarium),”\(^{16}\) given that the human intellect attains distinct concepts only on the basis of sense perception?

The answer requires a detailed analysis of how we know. Scotus shows that all the distinct concepts by which we conceive our world imply one concept that goes beyond all categories, predicing nothing but “being (ens).”\(^{17}\) As an irreducibly simple concept, “being” can be predicated univocally of all beings either as an analytically last, ultimately undetermined “what (quid)” or as a pure qualifying or an ultimately determining element – that is, as a qualifying determination that inheres in a “quid.”\(^{18}\)

This is a very short explanation of the famous Scotistic doctrine of “being as being,” i.e. “being” as the first transcendental concept of human intellection. At the core of this doctrine are three convictions:

- Only from the perspective of this concept can we conceive our heterogeneous world as a unity.
- Only on the basis of this concept we can built an adequate concept of God.
- Only by employing this concept we can achieve our original purpose, even in the present state – namely, to recognize God.

If these three convictions can be justified we can combine the transcendental concept of being with the concept of “infinity” that determines the inner intensive mode of being


\(^{17}\) Cf. _Ordinatio I_ d.3 p.1 q.1-2 nn.80-91, ed.Vat. 3: 54-60; L. Honnefelder, _Ens inquantum ens_ (see above note 6), 144-68.

to attain the concept of “infinite being (ens infinitum).” We cannot know God in his transcendent essence. However, the concept of “infinite being” gives us the highest mode of knowledge of God that can reached by a finite intellect in the present human condition. That is because, as Scotus points out, an infinite being is a being that “exceeds a finite entity beyond any relative measure or proportion that could be designed.”

Such an infinite being includes all perfections in an infinite mode. It is irreducibly simple, but can be conceived by our intellect in a composite concept. It exists necessarily, but its necessity must be thought of as radical freedom. It transcends all limits, but it can be thought of as pure love. It is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of St. Francis. However, as a philosophically precise concept, it can be subject of a theology that deals not only with the necessary properties of God, but even with the contingent truths of God’s salvation.

This is why Scotus became a philosopher who rethought Aristotelian metaphysics as a new type of “first philosophy,” a type that he called a “transcendent(al) science (scientia transcendens).” Scotus sharply contrasted this science with Averroes’ metaphysics. For Scotus, first science is not an extension of Physics that aims at the concept of a necessary being in an eternal world, a necessary being that can be loved, but is not loving. And on the other hand, this science does not rely on the sort of special divine illumination assumed by St. Augustine and his successors. Such illumination is difficult to demonstrate, and if we accept that it is necessary, there is a danger that it will make revelation and faith superfluous.

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21 Cf. L. Honnefelder, *Ens inquantum ens* (see above note 6), 11-19.
23 L. Honnefelder, *Ens inquantum ens* (see above note 6), 55-98.
By contrast, “transcendental science,” as Scotus understood it, allows us to offer new answers to urgent questions like the following:

**III. What does it mean to be a person?**

“To be a person is to exist in ultimate solitude (ultima solitudo), completely independent from any other person.”

In a Christian context, we must speak of persons. For God created human beings in the image of God, listening and answering, able to attain knowledge and to perform free acts. Moreover, Jesus Christ must be understood as a person, as well as in the Trinitarian modes by which the transcendent God appears to us.

In Aristotle’s metaphysics Scotus found only natures and individuals, not persons. And even regarding individuals Aristotelian metaphysics has an ontological preference for the universal as opposed to the individual. But as St. Francis emphasized, a human being is more than an incidentally individualized nature. Every person is God’s unrepeatable idea with an unrepeatable destiny. Particularly God’s human image, but also more generally all individuality must be conceived as the positive terminus of God’s creating act. Individuality – Scotus tells us – cannot be understood as something negative.

Aware of its theological implications, Boethius defined “person” in Aristotelian terms as “the individual substance of a rational nature (individualis substantia rationalis naturae).” Scotus considers that definition correct, but insufficient. It does not contain the property of unrepeatable uniqueness. Human beings are not simply something, but

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24 Cf. Ordinatio III d.1 q.1 n.17, ed. Viv.14: 45.
26 Cf. Ordinatio II d.3 p.1 q.2 nn.47-58, ed. Vat.7: 412-417; L. Honnefelder, Scientia transcendens (see above note 2), 129-40.
27 A.M.S. Boethius, Die theologischen Traktate, eingel.u .m. Anm. versehen v. M. Elsässer, (Hamburg, 1988), 74s.
Also someone. But how can we express the uniqueness and unrepeatability of a person? Richard of St. Victor answered by speaking of “incommunicable existence.” He defined the divine person as the “incommunicable existence of a divine nature.” But what does “existence” mean? If it means extramental reality, then a theological difficulty arises from the Chalcedean formula of two natures and one person: To which of Christ’s two natures does incommunicable existence pertain? A similar difficulty arises for the solution Thomas Aquinas proposed. For if the principle that unifies the human and the divine nature in Christ is the “act of being (actus essendi),” and there is only one such act according to Aquinas, then only the divine Person may have esse.

According to Scotus, this difficulty can be avoided if we understand “being (ens)” as the irreducibly simple something or ratio that every thing “which is able to exist actually (cui non repugnant esse)” has. For the content of this ratio is not formally identical with substantiality, individuality or existence. Here Scotus employs his famous formal distinction, or more exactly “formal non-identity (non identitas formalis).” One thing is only formally distinct from another, if its definition is different from and independent of the definition of another, although they exist inseparably in one and the same actual being.

Richard’s “incommunicability” can itself be understood as formal ratio, a ratio or property that qualifies a being as a “person.” If incommunicability is not only understood in a negative sense as in the case of human persons, but in a positive sense then Christ can be understood as the final goal of creation as the famous scotistic doctrine of Christ’s predes-


29 Cf. in more detail L. Honnefelder, Philosophische Reflexion als Medium theologischer Einsicht (see above note 25).

30 Ordinatio IV d.8 q.1 n.2, ed. Viv. 17: 7; cf. in more detail L. Honnefelder, Scientia transcendent (see above note 2), 1-56.

31 Cf. Ordinatio I d.2 p.2 q.1-4 nn.399-407, ed. Vat. 2: 355-358; Metaphysica VII q.19 n.7; L. Honnefelder, Ens inquantum ens (see above note 6), 376-82.
tination states. Incommunicability is the mode of a thing’s being that makes it incomparable with any other being and lets it exist in a “ultimate solitude.” Once again, Scotus’s ingenious transformation of Aristotelian ontology, in response to theological exigencies, allows him to propose solutions that express more precisely what Christian faith believes and St. Francis accentuates. With such transformations Scotus crafted an ontology that combines the transcendental approach with a very modern theory of formal contents. It is this theory that Scotus uses to respond to the last of our four questions.

IV. Why are we free?

Even if man as a creature is bound by God to do what he can do, God not only demands something from him, but also delivers him to freedom; what he demands from him is to keep the ten commands.

For Scotus, freedom is deeply rooted in the essence of God and also in the essence of the human being as God’s image. For we live in a contingent world and contingent events and contingent beings can only be explained in a rationally convincing way if the first cause is understood as an intelligent and free cause. But a will is free only if it is understood as a faculty of self-determination. And from our own experience we know that the will is free in its highest form when it determines itself to will the good for its own sake. In the case of God as infinite Good the will must be understood as the faculty by which God loves the divine essence as infinite Good according to a free and, at the same time, necessary way. Even the motivation for willing creatures is love, but it is love of finite beings and, therefore, love in an non-necessitated but contingent way. God in his goodness and freedom

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33 Cf. note 23.
wills others – as Scotus states – who are “companions in loving (condiligentes).”  

For St. Francis, this is the God who is love, the God whom we encounter in Jesus Christ’s death and life. This God invites us to follow Christ’s life. But why does the faculty of will by which we decide to follow this invitation include freedom? For Aristotle, a free action need not only be guided by causes, but by reasons and therefore be understood as a rational act. Scotus agrees with Aristotle that a rational potency has to be defined by the ability to perform opposite acts. But the intellect always acts by its nature in a necessary way – in the same way that we necessarily see what is in front of us when we open our eyes. Our intellect relates to opposites only as regards its object. Its mode of operation is necessarily one: Given an adequate object the intellect cannot as such reject it; it must recognize it. The freedom for opposites is possible only in virtue of another faculty, one that is not impelled to recognize any object. This is what Scotus calls the will as a faculty of its own. Its relation to opposite modes of operation consists not only in willing (velle) or not willing (nolle) something, but in willing in one mode or another or not willing at all (non velle). To be related to opposites in such a comprehensive way makes the will (rather than the intellect) the rational faculty strictly speaking.  

But if for Scotus the will’s mode of operation is irreducible self-determination, is not that old prejudice against Scotus’s excessive voluntarism justified? Anyone who thinks so has failed to understand Scotus’s formal analysis of our faculties. As a faculty that is directed towards the good by its nature and is also by its nature rational, the will must combine two elements: to follow the objective good as manifested by the intellect and to determine itself to follow this cognition and to perform the good. Just as in God’s creative act, two orders must function: the order of will and the order of

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36 Cf. Metaphysica IX q.15, Opera Philosophica 4: 675-99; L. Honnefelder, Johannes Duns Scotus (see above note 14), 113ff.
reasons. In the order of will, the answer to the question “why the will is willing” must ultimately be “because the will is the will (quia voluntas est voluntas).” In the order of reason, the answer to the question “what” (that is, the objectively binding content of reasons) has to be “because this is this and that is that (quia hoc est hoc et illud illud).” The indeterminacy of the will as a rational faculty directed toward the good assumes a strict determination thanks to the reasons presented by the intellect.

Freedom for good is the opposite of arbitrariness. Even in God whose free will is strictly bound only by the infinite good of his own essence, the contingent decision regarding the use of his power in creating a world follows an “ordinatio” i.e. an act of self-binding to a contingent, but reasonable order. The cause of this good order lies in the contingent decision of God. But no order can be contingently willed by God that does not have its own reasonableness. Therefore, Scotus can say that the good that has to be respected by human subjects is good because God willed it and that God willed it because it has its inner objective goodness. The core of the solution here is the inner connectedness of the two orders. And this connectedness allows Scotus to emphasize freedom without arbitrariness and to explain the moral law as something which binds human freedom by its (God-given) inner goodness.

V. Conclusion

St. Francis’s uncompromising interpretation of Christian faith led Scotus to the conclusion that the radical core of Christian doctrine could not be adequately expressed simply by recognizing the claims of the pagan philosophy. It could only be reached by rethinking philosophy in the face of the challenges to theology. To interpret Christian doctrine at a time deeply influenced by philosophy required a new approach to theology and a critical transformation of philoso-

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38 *Ordinatio* I d.8 p.2 q.un. n. 209, ed. Vat.4: 234s.; L. Honnefelder, *Scientia transcendens* (see above note 2) 94-108.
40 Cf. in more detail L. Honnefelder, *Johannes Duns Scotus* (see above note 14), 120-26.
phy. This is because theology makes us aware of dimensions of human existence that are central to faith, but hidden from philosophers: freedom and contingency, individuality as personality, metaphysics as ontology, and ethics as a practical science.

According to Scotus, Christian doctrine cannot be made intellectually convincing and theology cannot be reconciled with philosophy by introducing “theologisms” into the secular philosophy as Henry of Ghent tried to do. Equally unsatisfactory was the opposite medieval approach that proposed an existential dualism between orthodox Christian faith on the one hand and unrevised secular philosophy on the other.

For Scotus, the only solution was to free philosophy from its prejudices and open it to unknown dimensions. And that made it necessary to transform the methods of philosophy. Key to the transformation of philosophy Scotus proposed was a transcendental rather than a cosmological metaphysics. Scotus substituted a new modal perspective for eternalism and necessitarianism of the Greek philosophers. For Scotus the world of formal contents rather than the world of substances was primary.

Equally important was a transformation of ethics. Scotus translated the Gospel as St. Francis understood it into the language of a new scientific area. His attempt to do this without short-changing the claims of Christian faith and without departing from the rigorous standards of Aristotelian philosophy made Scotus both a great theologian and a great philosopher. That – I think – is the answer to our question: who was Duns Scotus.

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