Duns Scotus:

THE BASIC PRINCIPLES
OF HIS PHILOSOPHY

by Efrem Bettoni, O.F.M., Ph.D.
SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY
UNIVERSITY OF THE SACRED HEART,
MILAN

Translated and Edited

by Bernardine Bonansea, O.F.M., Ph.D.
SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY
THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA PRESS
Washington 17, D. C.
1961
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## PART ONE

### THE MAN AND HIS WORKS

1. **Life** .......................................................... 1
2. **Works** ........................................................... 8
3. **The Genesis and Spirit of the Scotistic Synthesis** .......... 15

## PART TWO

### DUNS SCOTUS' THOUGHT

1. **The Proper Object of the Human Intellect** ................. 25
   - Two Different Approaches to Philosophy .................... 25
   - Duns Scotus' Concept of the Proper Object of the Human Intellect .................................................. 27
   - Criticism of Opposing Views ................................ 29
   - The Univocity of the Concept of Being ..................... 33
   - The Object of Our Intellect in Its Present State ........ 39
   - Implications of the Scotistic Theory of the Proper Object of the Human Intellect .................................. 41
2. **Finite Being** .................................................. 47
   - Matter and Form .............................................. 48
   - The Problem of Universals ................................... 53
is much easier and much more perfect. Is not this fact enough to support the opinion of those who claim that the essence of material things is the proper object of the human intellect?

Duns Scotus concedes that the intuitive knowledge of being belongs to man by right. Hence the more perfect a thing is, the easier, the more pleasant, and the more perfect should be its union with our intellect. However, this is not the case, because of the conditions in which the human intellect finds itself at present. "In his wisdom, God has decreed that in its present state our intellect should understand only those things whose image is reflected in the phantasm. This is either in punishment for original sin or because of the natural harmony existing among the soul's powers in their operations. Thus we see that the superior power concerns itself with the same object as the inferior power, provided both powers act in a perfect manner. In fact, it so happens to us that the act by which the mind thinks the universal is always accompanied by an act of our imagination. However, this present harmony of our faculties does not arise from the nature of the human intellect, either because it is an intellect or because it is a human intellect, that is, an intellect united to the body. If this were so, then such a harmony should exist even in the glorified body, which is false."  

Two things are certain: first, that, for the reasons just stated, man's intellect is not by its very nature enclosed within the limited horizon of material beings; secondly, that in our present state all human knowledge begins necessarily with sensible things, for they alone are such that they can move and interest directly our intellective power. Yet it is an undeniable fact of experience that we can also rise to a certain knowledge of God and immaterial beings, just as it is undeniable that the natural way of knowing is by abstraction, that is, a process whereby we form our concepts in cooperation with sensible

---

philosophy. For Plato the only realities in the full meaning of the term were ideal essences. The multiplicity of individuals was for him a degradation and devaluation from which, quite inconsistently, man alone could redeem himself. Aristotle, too, did not depart on this point from the logical course of Platonic metaphysics. He taught, in fact, that only the form or essence is intelligible, while the individual is the result of a somewhat mysterious contamination of being (form) and nonbeing (matter). Furthermore, through his doctrine of a separate agent intellect, Aristotle, more consistently than Plato, even reduced the individual man to a feeble incarnation of the species. In so doing, he ended up by betraying the metaphysical insight which had marked the starting point of his thought, namely, that things exist only as individuals, and therefore “the individual (and not the species) is being and one in the most true sense.”

It is hard to understand how statements of this kind can have a real meaning, unless an entitative perfection superior to the perfection of the specific essence is recognized in the individual. The admission of this further perfection in the individual seems also to be the necessary requirement for salvaging the value of human personality, which is one of the postulates of Christianity. Here is where the true meaning of the Scotistic doctrine of haecceity is to be found. This doctrine aims precisely at pointing out the individual’s greater richness of perfection in contrast to the species, and at explaining how things cannot exist except as individuals. Individuality, in Scotus’ system, is the ultimate perfection of things: it enables them to receive in themselves the act of existence. Only thus they become real in the full sense of the term.

If the individual is a more perfect being than the specific essence, it will not only have a greater unity, but also a greater degree of truth and goodness. The individual will be cognizable in itself. If our intellect does not succeed in penetrating the whole richness of reality enclosed in it, that is exclusively
because of its weakness. But God knows it, and to each individual He has assigned a definite place in the harmonious complexity of reality. Each individual is like a note in the grand symphony of creation and furnishes new evidence of God's magnificence and bounty. As Duns Scotus puts it, "Individuals as such are also willed by the first cause, not as ends—for God alone is the end—but as something ordered to the end. Hence God multiplied the individuals within the species in order to communicate His goodness and His beatitude." 25

Finally, let us not forget that Scotus' doctrine of the principle of individuation is a transcendental doctrine. As such, it embraces all beings and is not limited as is the Thomistic doctrine, to material beings.* Once again the Subtle Doctor appears to be in harmony with the exigencies of the Augustinian school. His theory of haecceity is an attempt to bring forth and give more concrete shape to some of the thoughts underlying Augustinian doctrines concerning the specific as well as individual multiplicity of the angels and the possibility of knowing the singulars.

ESSENCE AND EXISTENCE

In order to understand the metaphysical structure of finite being, one more step must be taken: we must consider the act of existence. Duns Scotus rejects explicitly the idea that the act of existing may be thought of as the principle of individuation. Haecceity is still on the plane of essence; it constitutes the ultimate perfection of the individual essence. What participates in the notion of essence is not included in the notion of existence. Existence makes a mere possible being to be an actual being; it actualizes essence, but it does not modify it. Its relation to essence is far from being a predicamental relation, for existence is neither substance nor accident, neither nature nor individuality. Existence is related to essence in an entirely different manner.

Are essence and existence in a finite being really distinct from one another? Before giving Scotus' opinion on this point, let us make it clear that the essence in question is not a possible essence, but a real one, and by real essence we mean an essence which is outside of its cause (extra causam suam). Hence the problem may be stated this way: can an essence be real without its act of existence? Duns Scotus does not treat this question specifically; however, certain statements in his works leave no doubt as to his opinion on the matter. "That an essence be outside of its cause and have no reality to make it that part-

---

25 Ibid., q. 7, n. 10.

* St. Thomas applies his doctrine of the principle of individuation also to the soul, but only insofar as the soul is related to the body: "anima non individualitur per materiam ex qua sit, sed secundum habitudinem ad materiam in qua est." De Anima, art. 6, ad 13. Concerning the Thomistic and Scotistic doctrines on the principle of individuation, Hans Meyer writes: "The Thomistic principle of individuation has evoked much criticism, not only because St. Thomas was uncertain about it or because it was improperly understood, but especially because of the inherent weakness of the Thomistic position." The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, trans. Rev. Frederic Eckhoff (St. Louis: Herder Book Co., 1948), p. 76. "When St. Thomas placed the principle of individuation for immaterial things in the form, and for material things in matter, establishing a double explanation, he made known his inability to find a uniform basis for the solution. Scotus was disturbed by this deficiency, and, later on, it led the youthful Leibnitz to reject the Thomistic solution." Ibid., p. 77. "Scotus halted the trend of thought fostered by the teachings of Aristotle and St. Thomas which tended to degrade the individual in favor of the universal." Ibid., p. 79. (Tr.)
Duns Scotus

ticular essence (non habeat aliquod esse quo sit essentia) is for me a contradiction.”

Duns Scotus has often been criticized for not having understood the Aristotelian-Thomistic concept of potency as something deprived of any kind of actuality. To a certain extent this is true. In fact, he was never able to understand how a potency could be said to be real, i.e., outside its cause, and at the same time have no act of its own to constitute it as a real potency, be it primary matter or essence. This apparent lack of understanding is common to the whole Augustinian school. No critic of Scotus, however, has ever thought of asking himself whether such a lack of understanding might not be attributed to the difficulties inherent in the very notion of the Aristotelian potency, especially when such a notion is viewed from the standpoint of the creationist theory. May not Duns Scotus perhaps be right when he says that such a notion involves a contradiction? Whatever the case may be, one thing must be borne in mind: it is precisely in this contrast of views that lies the root of all the differences that distinguish Duns Scotus’ metaphysics from the metaphysics of Aristotle.

---

26 Op. Oxon., II, d. 12, q. 1, n. 16. [That Duns Scotus is opposed to the real distinction between essence and existence in real things is also manifest from the following texts: “Nescio enim istam fictionem, quod esse est quid superveniens essentiae.” Op. Oxon., IV, d. 11, q. 3, n. 46.
   “Simpliciter falsum est, quod esse sit alius ab essentia.” Ibid., d. 13, q. 1, n. 38. “... propositio est falsa: sicut se habet esse ad essentiam, ita operari ad potentiam, quia esse est idem realiter cum essentia.” Ibid., II, d. 16, quaest. unica, n. 10. Hans Meyer seems to agree with Duns Scotus when he states: “The theory of the real distinction maintains that the existing essence of a thing is really distinct from its existence, which is contradictory.” The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, p. 96. (Tr.)]
originality consists rather in the parallel argument that he derives from the consideration of the acts of our will. The essential characteristic of our volitional acts is their freedom, that is, the power to choose between two opposite things, and to revoke the choice once it has been made. Volitional acts must therefore be rooted in a different form that transcends all sensible forms. Hence the soul, an inextended and immaterial form, reveals itself to us as the principle of intellectual and volitional acts. It is intellect and will.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SOUL AND ITS FACULTIES

How must the relationship between the soul and its two faculties and between the two faculties themselves be conceived? Duns Scotus is of course acquainted with the Aristotelian and Augustinian doctrines. St. Thomas teaches that intellect and will are two properties of the soul, and hence that the soul belongs to the category of substance, while its two faculties belong to the category of accidents. This is tantamount to saying that there is a real distinction between the soul and its faculties. St. Thomas’ fundamental argument for his thesis is this: potency and act are in the same genus or category. But to know and to will are accidental acts that cannot be identified with the soul, which exists even when it does not think or will. Therefore, the power to know and the power to will are also in the category of accidents.

Duns Scotus takes exception to the major of the syllogism. The term potentia, he observes, has two entirely different meanings. There is a potency or power in the order of act or operation, and there is a potency in the order of being. The first is divided into active and passive potency, depending on whether it is an efficient principle or a receiving principle of operation. In this case—namely, when potentia is considered in the order of act or operation—the major of the syllogism is false, “be-
Tellect and will are identical with the soul's essence. They are merely different ways by means of which the soul establishes its contact with things. Tellect is the soul insofar as it knows; will is the soul insofar as it wills. Duns Scotus believes that this is no solution of the problem. The problem at issue is not the diversity of the acts, but the intrinsic basis of this diversity as well as the immediate principle of the acts themselves. The immediate principle of different acts cannot be formally identical. There would be no reason or explanation for such a diversity.

Hence intellect and will are not really distinct from the essence of the soul, but at the same time they cannot be identified with it. The first solution, that of St. Thomas, is not based on arguments of metaphysical necessity; the second solution, that of Henry of Ghent, does not solve the problem. Between these two solutions another is possible which holds a middle place and avoids the two extremes: intellect and will are distinct from the essence of the soul, but only formally. This is the Scotistic solution.

It is not easy to grasp the meaning and value of the formal distinction met so often in the works of Duns Scotus. Formal distinction stands between real distinction and distinction of pure reason or logical distinction. There is a real distinction between two things, when the one is not contained in the other either as a fruit is contained in the germ, an effect in the cause, or something distinct is contained in something confused: one thing is perfect in itself apart from the other, so that they are two really different things. The logical distinction, on the other hand, is nothing but a distinction of concepts as regards a thing that is really and formally identical. On the contrary, two entities are formally distinct from one another when, although one is not contained in the other in any of the three ways mentioned in connection with the real distinction, i.e., potentially, virtually, or confusedly, they nevertheless lack that ultimate perfection which would make them really different. It is only because they are united together that they constitute a real thing. However, they are not parts or constituent principles of the thing, but only different formalities of it.

A typical example of Scotus' formal distinction is found in being and its transcendentals, the one, the true, and the good. Unity, truth, and goodness are not only concepts, but real aspects different from the entity. They are in a concrete being, but are not contained in that entity, as act is in its potency, or as an effect is in its cause, or as something distinct is in something confused. They are attributes that affect the complete entity, but each in its own way, in virtue, as it were, of an innate right. They are different formalities, without being at the same time either substantial or accidental forms of the entity. Being is consequent upon their union; yet they cannot be called either parts of being or its principles, just as their union cannot be called composition. They are mutually related, and one is absolutely nothing without the others; yet none of them receives anything from the others. In the union each one keeps intact its own formality. However, the entity enjoys a primacy that is not only logical but also metaphysical in regard to unity, truth, and goodness which flow from the entity without being accidents of it. The technical term naming this characteristic relationship between being and its transcendentals is passio: unity, truth, and goodness are passiones entis. "Just as being," says Duns Scotus, "sums up in itself the reasons for its own unity, truth, and goodness, and yet does not thereby confuse them, so the soul unites within itself these powers [intellect and will], even though they are formally distinct."

Formally, the human soul is neither intellect nor will. In turn, intellect is entirely different from will. Yet, without intellect and will a rational soul can neither have a concrete
existence nor can it be conceived. Similarly, intellect without will, or will without intellect, is inconceivable. The relation between the soul and its faculties is the same as the relation existing between being and its transcendental attributes. Just as being may be considered in a first moment—the metaphysical moment, not the psychological moment—without its attributes, so the soul may be considered in itself, apart from intellect and will. But as soon as the necessary operations of the soul are adverted to, the soul reveals itself to us as the synthesis of intellect and will.\textsuperscript{37}

There are definite advantages, remarks Duns Scotus, in conceiving the relationship between the soul and its faculties in this fashion. The first of these advantages is an easier and more simple explanation of man's rational activity. The upholders of a real distinction between the soul and its faculties introduce into psychological life an unnecessary multiplicity that impairs the nobility and perfection of the soul. A nature's perfection is in fact measured by the acts that it is able to perform by itself. Now if intellect and will are merely accidents of the soul, it follows that the soul is unable of itself to think and to will. And since man's happiness consists in knowledge and love, intellect and will would, in such a case, find their happiness in themselves, whereas the soul would attain its happiness only through its faculties and \textit{per accidens}.\textsuperscript{38}

Another advantage to be drawn from the acceptance of a formal distinction between the soul and its faculties is the

\textsuperscript{37} "It must therefore be thought that the soul in the first moment, as it were, of its essence is simply that particular nature, whereas in the second moment it is operative, that is, capable of performing this or that operation, and that the powers, which are precisely the principles of these operations, are contained 'unitive' in the essence." \textit{Ibid.}, n. 18. The term "unitive" is reserved by Scotus to indicate the manner in which two or more formalities are contained in one thing. The thing is in relation to the formalities as the \textit{tertium idem realiter}.

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Ibid.}, n. 15.
opportunity it offers of emphasizing the directive lines of Scotistic thought, is the question of the relationship of dependence and superiority between intellect and will. It cannot be denied that the will does not move itself, that is to say, it does not determine itself to act, unless the intellect presents its object to it. The truth of the old scholastic saying, *Nihil volitum quin praecognitum*, is acknowledged by the Subtle Doctor. An act of the will is always preceded by an act of the intellect. However, some scholastics are inclined to see in this law of psychological dependence also a law of metaphysical dependence of the will on the intellect. The intellectual act would not only *precede* the volitional act, it would also be its cause. The volitional act is in the will, but not from the will: the efficient cause determining the act is the object present in the phantasm (Godfrey of Fontaines), or in the intellect (St. Thomas, Henry of Ghent).

“These two opinions,” Duns Scotus points out, “agree in admitting that the will is moved by an extrinsic agent, but are at variance, as is evident, in specifying it.”

Duns Scotus thinks it necessary to depart from these points of view for two reasons. The first is this. The object influences the will in one way only: it either attracts or repels it. On the contrary, the proper characteristic of the will is its ability to determine itself either positively or negatively in regard to any object. This essential indetermination can be explained only by admitting that it is the will that actually determines itself to will or not to will. Secondly, an act that is received only passively must be called an act of the agent or of the cause that determines it, rather than an act of the recipient. Hence, if it were the object that determines the will to act, the whole effective causality of the volitional act should be attributed to the object. The act itself would become an act of the object rather than an act of the will.

---

89 *Op. Oxon.*, II, d. 25, q. unica, n. 5.
efficient cause as regards the volitional acts. But the equivocal efficient cause—a cause is called equivocal when it produces effects of a different nature from its own—is more perfect than its effects. Therefore, the intellect is more perfect than the will.

While internal experience, remarks Duns Scotus, tells us that every act of the will is preceded by knowledge, it also tells us that the will rules over all man’s interior powers. It rules over memory by forcing it to recall things, and it rules over the intellect by forcing it to concentrate on one object rather than on another. Shall we not be authorized, then, to say that the will is the equivocal efficient cause, and therefore a more perfect cause, of the intellective acts? Actually, neither is the intellect the efficient and total, i.e., adequate, cause of the act of willing, nor is the will the efficient and total cause of the act of knowing. Both the act of the will and the act of the intellect are primarily acts of the faculty on whose causal efficiency they mainly depend. The truth is that both intellect and will exercise a certain causal influence on each other.

Yet intellect and will are not on the same plane. While the intellective act is subordinate to the volitive activity, insofar as it prepares it and thus becomes a subservient cause to the will (causa subserviens voluntati), the will commands the intellect as a superior commands an inferior. It is thus a superior cause in respect to the act of the intellect (hoc modo voluntas imperans intellectui est causa superior respectu actus eius). 43

Intellectualists may object to this argument and say: we concede that the will can command the intellect. This fact, however, will never destroy the natural dependence that the volitive activity has on knowledge—a dependence that even the voluntarists are willing to admit. Now what depends on another is necessarily inferior to it in perfection. Hence the will is inferior to the intellect.

Duns Scotus’ answer to this objection is that there are different kinds of dependence. Dependence in order of generation, for example, does not imply by any means a greater perfection in what precedes in relation to what comes afterwards. Again, the end comes last, and yet it is more perfect than what leads up to it. The form of material things depends on matter, yet it is superior to matter in perfection. The dependence of the will on the intellect is precisely a dependence of this kind: the volitional act comes after the intellective act because the latter is naturally ordered to the former, as means are ordered to end and matter to form. “In a generative succession things that come later depend on the preceding ones, and yet they are more perfect.” 44 If the will existed as will in virtue of the intellect, its dependence would of course mean an inferiority of perfection. This is exactly what the position of the intellectualists amounts to. In fact, they observe, if by a pure hypothesis man were endowed with intellect alone, he would still be defined as a rational animal; but if he had will without intellect, he would ipso facto lose his dignity of rational being. Left to itself, will is nothing but an inclination similar to the tendency whereby heavy bodies fall towards their center of gravity.

To this Duns Scotus answers: “Even if love alone remained, it would not be merely a necessary tendency like gravitation, but an operation worthy of intellectual nature. In fact, to be an operation, and to be such an operation, [is something that] love does not derive from the intellect; rather it is so in conjunction with the intellect.” 45

From the foregoing discussion it seems clear that the basis of the whole controversy lies in different conceptions of will.

— 43 Ibid., n. 16.
— 44 Ibid., n. 18.
For Duns Scotus, man's will is rational by nature and does not derive such an essential characteristic from the intellect. Just as a thing cannot be separated from its own nature, so will and rationality are inseparable. Since no true rationality is possible without freedom, and since freedom is the proper characteristic of the volitive activity—knowledge in itself is not free, for it is necessarily determined by the object—it logically follows that the highest degree of human perfection lies in the will rather than in the intellect.

THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

Is the human soul immortal? Duns Scotus has no doubt that it is. However, he believes that a rigorous and apodictic demonstration of this doctrine is impossible. There are many persuasive arguments, of course, but none of them is so evident as to force our assent.\[46\]

Duns Scotus is fully aware of the gravity of such a position, which represents a break with the traditional teaching that had been painfully developed during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. On the other hand, he does not seem to share our fear in denying to human reason the possibility of establishing by its own power such an important truth. Rather he finds in this deficiency a new motive for raising his mind to God and magnifying His mercy. "From this it appears how thankful we should be to God's bounty, who gave us through faith the greatest assurance about those things that concern our eternal destiny, and about which even the greatest minds can tell us almost nothing."\[47\]

In the middle ages, whenever a thinker wished to learn whether a certain truth could be attained by the light of reason or only by faith, he would consult, first of all, the works of Aristotle and see if the philosopher had known and taught it.

\[46\] Op. Oxon., IV, d. 43, q. 2, n. 16.

\[47\] Ibid., n. 33.
The phantasm, like the thing from which it is produced, is singular; but for Duns Scotus the structure of the singular is certainly not such as to be in perfect agreement with the Aristotelian teaching. In fact, as we have already proved in the course of this study, the individual is for Duns Scotus the synthesis of a common nature and haecceity. It may be objected: if in the concrete thing there actually is a nature distinct from the individuating element, will not that action by which the intellect strips a nature of its individuating notes be useless? Will not the nature be grasped directly in the phantasm?

To this objection Duns Scotus answers by recalling his own theory of common nature. This nature, he says, is common, but not universal; it is the real foundation for universality but not universality itself. The action of the agent intellect is required precisely for the transformation of the physical universal into a metaphysical universal. The cause by which an object obtains that positive indetermination in the intellect that makes it truly universal—an indetermination which is greater than the negative indetermination proper to common nature—cannot be the object itself, but the agent intellect in virtue of its universalizing power.

How is this universalizing action of the agent intellect to be understood? For one who maintains that everything that exists in concrete reality is individual, and only individual, the action of the agent intellect cannot be understood otherwise than as a process by which the thing is stripped of its individuating notes. This is done by the active intellect in the act by which it sheds its own light upon the sensible phantasm.

Against this way of conceiving abstraction Duns Scotus proposes two fundamental objections. If the thing is individual, and only individual, he observes, I do not see how it can become universal as the result of pure illumination. When I illumine a thing, I see better what the thing is in all its particular details; no light, however, can bring forth what is not in the thing itself. In order that the illuminating action of the agent intellect may be able to universalize, one must admit that there already exists in the thing the universal as such. The fact that the universal is there in a more or less hidden state, so that it can be brought to light only by the revealing action of the intellect, by no means modifies its nature as a universal. Hence one of two things follows. Either the first alternative is true, namely, that the thing is only individual and in no way contains the universal, and then we head toward nominalism, which makes the universal a fiction of the intellect. In this case the intellect is fully credited with the formation of the concept. Or the second alternative is admitted, namely, that the universal exists as such in the thing, and then we fall into the theory of Platonic ideas. The only difference is that the universal essences, instead of being placed in a transcendental world, are to be found in the very heart of sensible reality.

The theory of common nature is, in Scotus’ opinion, the only theory that can save us from the two extremes of nominalism and exaggerated realism. The nature is a potential universal which receives its ultimate actuality as a universal from the intellect. In this case, however, abstraction must be conceived in a somewhat different manner. It will no longer be a question of an illuminating action of the agent intellect upon the phantasm, from which the intelligible species or universal in act would, as it were, come forth; instead, there will be an effective collaboration between the object present in the phantasm and the intellect in the production of the idea. Through the phantasm, the object draws the attention of the intellect upon the nature, which of itself is indifferent to singularity or universality. This nature, upon entering the intentional order, acquires the modality proper to this order, namely, universality, and thus becomes intelligible. The universalizing action of the agent intellect consists precisely in
Duns Scotus

a perfection that is necessary for a thing’s concrete existence. Only the individual exists in the complete sense of the term. Hence if being is synonymous with intelligibility, the individual secundum se must be more intelligible than the species. Yet it must be recognized that in his present condition man is unable to grasp a thing’s “haecceity,” even though he knows things in their concrete existence, and therefore as individuals. This amounts to saying that man knows the individual but not singularity, understood as the precise reason that makes the individual characteristics inhere in a thing. More specifically, he does not know the reason why these characteristics are the individuating notes of this particular thing rather than of another. Knowledge of the haecceity of all things would constitute full knowledge of all reality: an impossible task for our intellect in its present condition.

The thing existing here and now in its concreteness is known directly not only by the senses but also by the intellect, which grasps it by an intuitive knowledge. Intuitive knowledge is distinct from abstractive knowledge, which always prescinds from the existence of the object known. When considered in its phenomenological origin, human knowledge always starts from the intuition of the concrete thing. The product of this first meeting of intellect and thing is the species specialissima, or the idea of the individual thing. This idea is quite proper to the object that stands before me; it is through it that the intellect has the first grasp of what it wants to know. However, as soon as my intellect tries to find out exactly what the thing is and looks for its definition, it has recourse to universal concepts, precisely because it is incapable of grasping the haecceity. Through the species specialissima I know the object only in a confused manner (“a thing is known confusedly when only the meaning of its term is known”). Once

I have grasped by means of the concepts of genus and species its exact place and meaning in the manifold of reality, then I know it distinctly, at least to the extent that my intellect can know it. “A thing is known distinctly,” says Duns Scotus, “when I can give its definition.”

Thus Duns Scotus attributes to man intuitive knowledge along with abstractive and conceptual knowledge. It is by no means a perfect intuition, for it is only an initial and confused kind of knowledge; yet it is not thereby less important. For the human intellect it is the necessary starting point, its first way of getting in touch with reality. It is like a spiritual sense by which we intellectually perceive the reality that affects our senses and the modifications that take place in them.

THE NATURE OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

In Duns Scotus’ system not only sensations, but all the acts that constitute our interior life are grasped intuitively. The intuition of our interior acts is particularly important to him because it helps solve the problem of scientific knowledge, which is above all a problem of certitude and evidence.

According to Aristotle, four things are required for scientific knowledge: “It must be certain, that is, without error and doubt, of a necessary object, based on evidence, and attained by syllogistic reasoning. The definition of science given in the first book of the Posterior Analytics may be referred to.” To a superficial reader it may appear that Duns Scotus accepts the Aristotelian notion of science without question; but that is not the case. In fact, he calls our attention to the conse-

83 Ibid., I, d. 3, q. 2, n. 21.

84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., IV, d. 45, q. 3, n. 17: “The intellect knows not only the universals, but it knows also intuitively the objects known by the senses, for a superior and more perfect power knows all that an inferior power knows. It knows also the sensations.”
86 Ibid., I, Prologus; qq. 3 and 4 lateralis, n. 26.
to their reason. It is necessary insofar as it is the indispensable explanation of reality, but not in the sense that it necessarily produces its effects; it is necessary in ascendendo, but not in descendendo. The metaphysical necessity or lack of necessity of the object, remarks Duns Scotus, is a perfection that is in the object, not in the knowledge I have of it. My knowledge is necessary only when I cannot help having it and cannot lose it; it is not necessary merely because it is concerned with a necessary object. Hence science, whether necessary or not in the sense that has just been explained, is always science. What distinguishes it from mere opinion or simple knowledge is its certitude and evidence, not its necessity. 

EVIDENCE AS THE ULTIMATE MOTIVE OF CERTITUDE AND CRITERION OF TRUTH

Can man attain an absolutely certain and evident knowledge? It is a fact that man adheres to certain propositions with a firmness that defies any doubt. This is the case, first of all, with propositions or principles that are self-evident and with all the conclusions that can be drawn from them by syllogistic reasoning. The evidence of such propositions is sufficiently grounded in the terms that make them up. I cannot understand these terms without understanding at the same time the logical nexus binding them together. Thus, as soon as I formulate the concepts of the whole and the part, I see immediately that the whole is greater than the part. I cannot admit the possibility of being deceived, for it is impossible for me to think otherwise. Even if the senses, which furnish

89 *Op. Oxon.*, Prologus; qq. 3 and 4 lateralis, n. 28: "I say here that it is of the perfection of science to be evident and certain. To be science of a necessary object is a circumstance that has to do with the object, not with science as such. For even though science may be concerned with a necessary object, it can in itself be contingent and be destroyed by oblivion."
scientific conclusions rests on their evidence, whether immediate or mediate. Evidence is therefore for him the norm of certitude as well as the criterion of truth. Will the value of human knowledge be thereby guaranteed from all points of view? The sceptic may raise a further objection.

It is a fact that certain truths force themselves upon man because of their intrinsic evidence, so that it is impossible to reject them. However, if we take a closer look at the question, we will see that this does not as yet solve in an absolute, definite way the problem of the objective value of my knowledge. Who can assure me that at a particular moment I am reasoning correctly, that I truly see the truth, and that I am not dreaming? What proof do I have of the objective validity of my reasoning? May it not be that my reasoning is merely the product of a sick mind or the conclusions of a sleepwalker?

There is no other guarantee or assurance, answers Duns Scotus, than that of consciousness, which is simply the intuition of my own acts. Granted that during my dreams I can make the same acts of reason as when awake, I can nevertheless clearly distinguish between what I thought during my dreams and what I am thinking when awake. Briefly, my acts and the normal functioning of my intellective power are known to me intuitively, and no objection whatsoever can be raised against this intuitive evidence and certitude. To one who still insists and asks for an extrinsic criterion in order to judge whether in my act of thinking and reasoning I am really awake, the only answer that can be given is this: "You are not convinced because you are stubborn." That is to say, your doubt has no foundation except in your obstinacy in doubt. When my intellective faculty "is functioning properly and when it is not, is something self-evident; otherwise nothing could be known for certain. When confronted with an evident proposition, I could always ask myself whether it is in a state

95 *Op. Oxon.*, I, d. 3, q. 4, n. 15.
me with the terms of comparison, were constantly deceiving me, the truth of such propositions would not change. The evidence of the nexus between subject and predicate does not have sensible experience as its cause, but springs out of the terms inasmuch as they are present to my mind. Sense experience does not cause my understanding; it simply offers to my mind an occasion of seeing the necessary tie binding the two terms together. Hence, the validity of such propositions rests entirely on the activity of my mind which compares the two concepts.

The same must be said of the evident validity of syllogistic reasoning. This, too, is due entirely to the light of my intellect. Once the premises and the inference are evident, the conclusion also is evident. 90

On this premise, the strictly scientific character of the so-called deductive sciences is assured. Indeed, their principles and conclusions are endowed with the two constitutive properties of scientific knowledge, namely, evidence and certitude.

Let us examine the case of the inductive sciences, or those sciences which rest on sense experience. The procedure of these sciences is well known. From the observation of a certain number of similar facts, such as water boiling at 100 degrees centigrade, a general law is formulated that is valid for all cases of the same kind. On what precisely rests the certitude and evidence of scientific laws? What is their basis? There is no doubt that it cannot be experience alone. Experience assures me only that in all the observed cases, when a particular factor or circumstance is present (heating to 100°), a certain effect follows (the boiling of the water), but it can in no way assure me that this will always be so. There is no absolute necessity that water will boil exactly at 100°. Consequently, the bond that the general law establishes between the two terms is far from being evident. Empirical evidence is only valid for the cases experienced. The evidence needed for the scientific value of the laws representing the conclusions drawn from experimental premises must therefore have its foundation outside experience.

For Duns Scotus the foundation of induction rests on this general principle: “Every phenomenon which has been repeatedly experienced, and which depends on a cause that is not free, is a natural effect of that cause.” 91 That a cause which is not free always produces the effect to which it is naturally ordained is a self-evident proposition. Hence the constancy of the bond existing between two phenomena, as observed by experience, can be explained only by admitting that the first phenomenon produces the second, not by chance or arbitrarily, but because it is ordained to produce it by its very nature. Thus, legitimate use of the inductive method rests both on the evidence of an analytical proposition and on the evidence of my experience. Its scientific value is fully justified by the concurrence of this twofold evidence. 92

As will be readily seen, Duns Scotus has clear and precise ideas on induction; he knows its meaning and acknowledges its value. Furthermore, in one of his Quaestiones subtilissimae in Metaphysicam Aristotelis, 93 where he discusses at length the legitimate use and value of scientific induction, he describes a concrete, particular way of proceeding in scientific research from which the two essential methods of induction can be derived, namely, the method of agreement and the method of difference. 94

For Duns Scotus the objectivity of our concepts is thus assured by the fact that the thing concurs to produce them as a partial efficient cause, while the value of the proofs and

90 Ibid., I, d. 3, q. 4, nn. 7-8.
91 Ibid., n. 9.
92 Ibid.
93 Metaph., I, q. 4.
94 Ibid., n. 17.
causa efficiens sui ipsius,” and second, “infinitas est impossibilis in ascendendo”;¹¹⁴ and a conclusion. But while Scotus’ two principles are substantially the same as those of St. Thomas, the starting point, the consequence, and the conclusion are different. St. Thomas starts with a fact and arrives at a fact; Duns Scotus starts with a possibility and arrives at a possibility. The transition from possibility to existence is made by a process unknown to the Aristotelian mentality. This process, as we pointed out when dealing with the Scotistic coloration, reminds us of the logical process of the Anselmian argument. Herein to a great extent lies the originality of the Scotistic demonstration, namely, in being a synthesis of St. Thomas and St. Anselm.

The weak point in St. Anselm’s argument is his insufficient demonstration of the minor: God is possible. The most one can do by an a priori inquiry is to show that the existence of a most perfect being is neither impossible nor absurd. Perhaps one can go a little further and show that it is fitting that such a being exist. However, this will never suffice to give to the minor the kind of necessity an apodictic syllogism demands. What is not possible a priori, Duns Scotus makes possible a posteriori. By using the logical process of St. Thomas’ ways based on the principle of causality, and by taking as his starting point the essence of things which reveals itself as necessarily possible, rather than their existence, he is able to demonstrate that the possibility of things also necessarily involves the possibility of the first and most perfect cause, God. When the minor premise has been thus strengthened and substantiated, the Anselmian argumentation attains in Duns Scotus its full demonstrative value.

It is not our purpose to discuss here the efficacy of Scotus’ rescue of the famous ontological argument. Yet it will not be

¹¹⁴ Ibid., n. 11.
of course be admitted in the divine will: it is free, but at the same time it is perfectly actual, and therefore immutable. To save these two necessary prerogatives of the divine will, one must say that God embraces by a single act all things that can be willed, even those that are opposed among themselves and can be willed by man only by two distinct acts. If the divine will were inclined only toward certain possible things, it would not be infinite but limited in its act of willing. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that many possible things exclude one another. For example, it is possible for me to be writing at this moment, just as it is possible for me not to be writing; yet, my act of writing excludes its opposite. By one act of the will I can determine myself to write, and by another act I can decide not to write, but I cannot be simultaneously in act in regard to both things together. The human will is thus indeterminded in regard to two things only before it is in act, before it wills. Once I determine myself to one thing, I can no longer be in act in regard to the other. My will is completely possessed, as it were, by the object actually willed.

With regard to God’s will, things are different. By excluding from it, as we must, any succession of acts, and by admitting that its object is everything that somehow or other can be willed, one must say that God’s will, considered both as a power and as an act, does not tend of necessity toward any particular thing, and it is therefore always possible for it to will the opposite of the thing willed. The reason is evident. No other object, apart from the divine essence, can so bind and tie the will of God to itself as to absolutely exclude the willing of its opposite.\footnote{\textit{"I affirm that the divine will does not tend by necessity to any object that is not its own essence. It acts contingently in regard to any other object, so that it could will its opposite. This is true not only when the will is considered in itself before it tends toward that object, or simply as a will, which is naturally anterior to its act, but also when it is considered in the act itself of willing." Ibid., n. 22.}}
I

DUNS SCOTUS' POSITION IN THE PAST

Perhaps it is no exaggeration to call Duns Scotus unfortunate because of adverse circumstances that affected both his life and thought. He died before the final revision of his principal work, and left behind him a confused literary legacy which gave rise to very difficult and almost insoluble problems in the systematic study of his teaching. The high prestige reached by St. Thomas in the history of Christian thought is another factor that has contributed to the Subtle Doctor's misfortune. The comparison which becomes so natural, if not necessary, between the Dominican Master and the Franciscan ends up most of the time to Scotus' discredit. Both were profound and systematic thinkers, but St. Thomas has an easy victory because of the clarity of his style, the simplicity of his exposition, and the convincing tone of his argumentation.

These advantages of form and style are far from being negligible. They have done much to make the works of the Angelic Doctor highly readable and quite adaptable as an official textbook in Catholic schools. This fact in turn has led Catholic scholars to focus their attention on the thought of St. Thomas and make it the object of numberless studies and inquiries from the historical, exegetical, and philosophical points of view. The richness, harmony, and fecundity of St.
Thomas' speculation have thus been acknowledged by everyone. All other medieval thinkers, including the gigantic St. Augustine, more often named than really known, and the seraphic St. Bonaventure, have been left in the shadow. Duns Scotus has suffered even more. Not only has his personality been left in the shadow, but of his philosophical and theological works—never studied with that minimum of sympathy which alone makes possible the understanding of a thinker, and never evaluated in a well-balanced and profound vision of the whole system—only those theses have been consistently emphasized which make him appear a systematic opponent of St. Thomas and seem to jar with that harmonious Thomistic synthesis which is the object of universal admiration and is believed to represent the acme and most mature fruit of Christian thought.

Duns Scotus has been reckoned and dismissed as a stubborn and extravagant critic, rather than as a constructive and systematic thinker and a faithful servant of truth from whom one may dissent only after he has been given the credit of a hearing. Thus a new Duns Scotus has been born, the kind of Duns Scotus we know from the manuals of the history of philosophy, especially those written by Catholics, which give little credit to the Subtle Doctor and dismiss him with the usual appellation of an hypercritical mind.

All the charges leveled against Duns Scotus may be summed up in the historical statement that with him scholasticism goes sharply and swiftly into decline. With him, it is said, criticism prevails over constructive thought; the scholastic method, hitherto simple and orderly, becomes confused, subtle, tortuous, and extremely verbose; dialectics supersedes depth of thought, and desire for novelty takes the place of the search for truth.

Following the strong defense of some Franciscan scholars, who called the attention of impartial medievalists to the true meaning of Scotistic speculation, tributes paid to Duns Scotus' deeply constructive genius are increasing every day. Even in Catholic manuals of the history of philosophy, such as Thonnard's and Copleston's,¹ Scotus' philosophical synthesis is now placed among the great systems, in line with those of St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure.

I feel confident that the pages of this brief outline of Duns Scotus' philosophical thought will in some measure help the reader to catch a glimpse of the passion for constructive thinking that pervades all of Scotus' genuine works, a passion that, by universal acknowledgment, animates his theological speculation and produces its most stupendous fruits in the great theses of the Immaculate Conception of Mary and the absolute primacy of Christ.

Real difficulties concerning equally real problems can always be found at the root of all the divergencies between Duns Scotus and the other great scholastic masters. Subtlety of reasoning is but an attempt to embrace the entire complex of a particular problem so as to get a deeper insight into reality. A thinker like Duns Scotus who elaborates such doctrines as the doctrine of the univocity of being, who gives so ingenious and challenging a solution to the problem of knowledge, who places on a new basis the problem of God's existence by exploiting and fusing together all the elements offered to him by tradition, who throws such penetrating light on the problems of ethics, who leaves his mark of originality in all doctrines, who attempts to reconcile in a new synthesis the twofold philosophical tradition that under different names pervades the whole history of human thought, certainly should not be deemed the harbinger of scholasticism's decline.

The reader who has the courage to persevere in the study of his works, which are truly difficult on account of their abstract style and the textual confusion in which they have reached us, will find in Duns Scotus a tenacious researcher, not easily satisfied, but always full of deference toward others, even when new solutions are suggested that follow a new and somewhat different path. The reader will also gain impressions like those one has on entering an unfinished cathedral. The main architectural lines have been almost completely carried out, but while in one place he meets with a spire rising high into the sky, a few steps further he will notice an architectonic motif which has scarcely been hinted at. Wherever he goes, his eyes fall upon scaffolding, beams, materials, and tools that are ready to be used but meanwhile lie without order on the ground or on the scaffolding. The first impression is unavoidably one of disorder. The result is that, while a hasty or unqualified visitor immediately leaves the place dissatisfied, another, who has the time and will to complete mentally the unfinished design on the traces of what has been done, will be able to admire the harmony of the edifice and the architect's creative power. In my opinion, the widely different judgments passed on Duns Scotus' philosophy find their explanation in this fact: Duns Scotus is a thinker who needs, as it were, to be discovered and helped by our attention and understanding.

With regard to the historical meaning of Duns Scotus' speculation, I believe I have made myself sufficiently clear in Part One, Chapter III, of this work. It is always difficult to determine precisely to what extent an original thinker belongs to this or that philosophical trend of thought. However, I am convinced there is good reason for saying that Duns Scotus, in keeping with the speculative tradition of the Franciscan Order, remains substantially an Augustinian. This refers particularly to his way of understanding and stating the various philosophical problems. As occasion has arisen, I have pointed
nevertheless can be traced here and there in his system.* For me Duns Scotus remains an Augustinian who profited to the utmost degree by the Aristotelian method in the exposition of the thoughts and doctrines that form his metaphysical vision of reality. Thus, even from this viewpoint, Duns Scotus appears to be a serious and constructive thinker, deeply penetrated with a sense of tradition, which at the time was not merely Franciscan but rather Catholic. At the same time, he keeps his mind open to progress and cultural development and profits by them, convinced that he will thus be a faithful servant of the truth.

Duns Scotus’ influence upon modern nonscholastic philosophers is almost nil. This is due to the fact that very few among them have had a direct knowledge of scholasticism. Father Scaramuzzi has pointed out certain important parallels between the thought of Duns Scotus and that of Giambattista Vico.* It is also an undeniable fact that some modern historians, like Windelband, have noticed a certain speculative affinity between Scotistic doctrines and various doctrines of Leibniz.** It would be of great historical interest to study the extent to which Rosmini was inspired by Duns Scotus, whom he knows and quotes with great respect in working out his doctrine of the idea of being.

Some historians have considerably exaggerated Duns Scotus’ influence upon the nominalistic movement. They have gone so far as to affirm that Ockham merely draws natural conclusions from Scotistic doctrines. This historical thesis has met with some favor. However, the best medieval historians of today, when they do not reject this thesis entirely, raise at least some doubt as to its foundation. It is beyond question that some Scotistic doctrines taken out of context, such as the doctrine of “haecceity” and the doctrine concerning the knowability of the singular, which is closely related to it, could have been exploited by the nominalists. But it is one thing to admit this,


** Cf. Wilhelm Windelband, A History of Philosophy, trans. by James H. Tufts (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), II, 420-25. Concerning the relationship between Leibniz and Duns Scotus, whom he calls “the most important thinker of the Christian Middle Ages” (ibid., I, 314), Windelband observes: “The relations of Leibniz to the greatest of the Scholastics are to be recognized not only in this point [the hypothetical necessity or contingency of the world], but also in many others; though as yet they have unfortunately not found the consideration or treatment that they deserve.” Ibid., II, 425, n. 1. (Tr.)