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## The Realist Ontology of John Duns Scotus

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### The first object of knowledge according to Duns Scotus

"The problem from which a systematic reconstruction of Scotistic thought must take its start is the problem of the proper object of the human intellect. It is only thus that the natural logical order of the Scotistic system is properly emphasized.

The Subtle Doctor was confronted with two conflicting solutions. Henry of Ghent, who was at the time the most influential representative of the Augustinian school, taught that the first and proper object of the human intellect is God, or the supreme being. This thesis is implicitly contained in every theory of intellectual illumination, such as that prevalent, with very few exceptions, among the Augustinians of the thirteenth century. Henry of Ghent is to be credited with having stated explicitly what had been previously said in a confused manner. The advantages of this doctrine are evident. If God is the proper object of the human intellect, one can readily understand why man should not concentrate upon any created thing, for man is led by an interior logic to fix his attention upon what is eternal, infinite, absolute. This deep interior "drive" might well be called man's divine vocation.

In contrast with the Augustinian solution, stands the Aristotelian-Thomistic doctrine, according to which the proper object of the human intellect is the quiddity of a material thing. This is tantamount to saying that the natural object of our knowledge is the essence abstracted from matter. This opinion seems to be confirmed by our daily experience, which shows that all human knowledge has sensation as its necessary starting point.

Duns Scotus is not satisfied with either of the two solutions, and he makes this clear by pointing out their grave disadvantages. When the first object of the intellect is discussed, it is immediately necessary to define the meaning of the term "first." The question, "What is the first object of the human intellect?" can be understood in different ways. One way of stating it is, "What is the first thing that man knows in the order of time?" Another way is, "What is the most perfect thing (first in the order of perfection) that can be known by the human mind?" Still another way of stating it is, "What is the object to which the human intellect is directed by its very nature?" It is in this third sense that the question is taken here. To ask, therefore, what the first object of the human intellect is, is equivalent to asking, "What is the adequate object, that is, the object that fully corresponds to the natural power of the human intellect?"

Man is not born perfect. This means that man is not in possession from the first moment of his existence of all the acts of which he is capable. Like all other creatures, man is a complex of potentialities, to be developed gradually as he comes in contact with reality. To the law of this gradual development and becoming, not only his body is subject but also his soul. Thus man's intelligence and will have a natural tendency toward the possession of their objects. When this possession is completed, the perfection of these two faculties is attained, i.e., fully actuated.

The object specifies the faculty, i.e., the object is the measure of the perfection of the faculty. Moreover, any development of the faculty is only possible in virtue of its object, in the sense that it is necessarily a pursuit of its object, since it is only in view of its object that the faculty is determined to act.

By applying these general considerations to the particular case of human knowledge, it becomes evident: (1) that the human intellect can know nothing that does not somehow enter the sphere of the natural object for which it was made; (2) that the human intellect knows things in the light of its object, which thus becomes the necessary point of view from which it sees everything. This can be realized in a perfect way, as in the case of God, who knows all possible things in the unique object of His divine mind, or imperfectly, as in the case of man, who does not know all things in the idea of being, yet cannot know anything apart from the idea of being. In fact, "the adequacy of the object," writes Scotus, "can be considered from the point of view of its power (*secundum virtutem*) and from the point of view of its predication (*secundum praedicationem*). From the point of view of its power, that object is adequate to its faculty which, once it is known, makes all other possible objects knowable to the intellect. In this sense the divine essence is the adequate object of God's intellect. From the point of view of its predication, that object is adequate to its faculty which is per se and essentially the predicate of all things that can be known by the intellect.(1)" (pp. 27-29)

## Notes

(1) *De anima*, q. 21 n. 2.

From: Efreem Bettoni, *Duns Scotus. The Basic Principles of His Philosophy*, Washington: Catholic University of America Press 1961.

### The univocity of the concept of being

"The obvious consequences that follow from such a standpoint did not escape Duns Scotus. The first of such consequences is the univocity of the concept of being. The proper object of a faculty, in the sense that has just been explained, must be only one, just as the faculty is only one. Therefore, in order that being be the proper object of our intellect, and consequently the point of view from which and the reason why we know God and creatures, immaterial and material beings, it must be predicated univocally, i.e., in the same sense, of all things. It cannot be otherwise, for the simple fact that being is the means by which, and the light through which, all things are known.

In the Augustinian philosophy there remained the difficulty of explaining how, from the concept of God, man could descend to the concept of creatures without passing through the intuition of the divine essence. In the Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy the difficulty was reversed: a way had to be shown how one could ascend from the concept of creatures to the concept of God. Both Augustinians and Thomists solved the difficulty with the doctrine of analogy: an analogy that goes from God to creatures for the Augustinians, an analogy that goes from creatures to God for the Thomists. With his doctrine of the univocity of the concept of being, and consequently of the other transcendental concepts, Duns Scotus opens a new way to the solution of the problem. He does so very modestly, as the following passage indicates:

"In the second place, it can be said, although not definitely because it is not in accordance with the common opinion, that of God we possess not only concepts which are analogous to those of creatures, that is, entirely different from those had of created things, but also concepts which are univocal to God and creatures.(2)" (pp. 33-34)

## Notes

(2) *Opus Oxoniense*, I, d. 3, q. 2, n. 5. [Obviously, in this passage Duns Scotus does not use the term "analogous" in the sense it is used by modern Thomists. When he states that the concepts we possess of God are "entirely different" from the concepts we have of creatures, he simply means that the reality expressed by these concepts is in itself essentially different. God is an infinite, self-subsistent being; creatures are limited, participated beings. (*Translator: B. Bonansea*)]

From: Efreem Bettoni, *Duns Scotus. The Basic Principles of His Philosophy*, Washington: Catholic University of America Press 1961.

### Duns Scotus on the Problem of Universals

"In *Quaestiones in librum Metaphysicorum VII, quaestio 18* Scotus recognizes three meanings for the term 'universal'. In one sense it refers to universality, i.e. the property of being suitable to be predicated of many; in another sense it means what has that property. But, he says, something can be either the near (proximate) subject of that property or the remote subject; but it is not easy to see what this latter distinction amounts to. Scotus says that the near subject is of itself a numerically single entity with an indeterminateness which rejects its being identified with any particular case of the universal in question. If we are talking about the universal human in this sense, then it is numerically one, but it cannot be any one individual human; likewise, the universal animal is numerically one, but it cannot be any particular species of animal. The remote subject, on the other

hand, is not of itself numerically one and though it is not of itself determined to any one particular of the universal-in question, it does not reject such determination either.

It is clear that the remote subjects of universality are the natures that we have discussed earlier. Scotus takes over from Avicenna the doctrine that there are three ways of talking about natures: (1) where there is no assumption of either the existence or non-existence of the nature and all that is true of the nature concerns what that nature is and is not of itself; (2) where we say what is true of the nature on account of its actual existence in real things; (3) where we say what is true of the nature on account of its existence in the mind. When we say that a nature is universal we are talking about what holds of it in the third sort of discourse. Universality is a "thing of second intention" and hence can only belong to first intentions, which are natures existing as objects of thought. Things existing as objects of thought are said to have *esse objectivum* and to be *entia objectiva*. An *ens objectivum* is another one of Scotus's accidental beings; it comes into existence as soon as something becomes an object of thought. Since *esse objectivum* does not belong to a nature taken absolutely and in itself; it is accidental to that nature, just as is individuation, as we saw above. We may think of the *ens objectivum* as the nature-as-conceived-by-a-mind; it is a single, mind-dependent entity whose own numerical oneness derives ultimately from the numerical oneness of the mind doing the conceiving.

As Scotus and other scholastics view the matter, the *ens objectivum* is the immediate object of thought and represents the nature, which then becomes the remote object of thought. This theory is saved from the idealism that afflicts representational theories of thought in modern times only by this doctrine that the *ens objectivum* just is the nature-as-thought. It is not some real entity distinct from the nature itself, and from whose character we are somehow to infer the character of the nature; rather in apprehending it we are apprehending the nature directly but in a certain way. The near subject of universality, according to Scotus, is this *ens objectivum* through which we apprehend the nature. The nature itself is only a universal because this *ens objectivum* is the nature-as-thought. To be a universal something must be suitable to be predicated of many, and, on the sort of view Scotus and many other scholastics subscribed to, only something that is a single object of thought, yet intrinsically indeterminate in respect of its particular instances could have this suitability. The item which is predicated has to be some single thing which many can be said to be; otherwise, the singleness of meaning of the predicate over its many applications to different particulars would evaporate." (pp. 409-410)

From: Martin Tweedale, *Scotus vs. Ockham - A Medieval Dispute over Universals. Vol. II: Commentary*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press 1999.