Introduction

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Since their first formulation, many of John Duns Scotus's views have attracted the attention of philosophers and theologians alike. Responses have ranged from admiration to opprobrium, including (perhaps most memorably) ridicule: in the sixteenth century, Duns Scotus gained the dubious distinction of entering the English language as a common noun—through the word 'dunce'. In the relatively tolerant and sedate environment of contemporary academia, a mention of his name might still be met with a smirk, often on account of his alleged obscurity, or even provoke an occasional outburst of hostility, especially from those who are partial to interpreting the history of philosophy as a fight between abstractions (realism *versus* nominalism, voluntarism *versus* intellectualism, transcendence *versus* immanence, the Secular *versus* the Sacred, and so forth). For mysterious reasons—probably connected to the alleged opposition between two of those abstractions, Thomism and Scotism—it is not rare to see the name of Duns Scotus associated with some vague and ghastly philosophical catastrophe.[1] It is high time for Duns Scotus to be considered *sine ira et studio*. It is also high time for his thought to be better known, and not just among the specialists of medieval philosophy.

The originality of Duns Scotus's views is beyond question and his influence was pervasive well into the modern era.[2] It is equally undeniable, however, that Duns Scotus *is* a difficult thinker, and easy to misunderstand, as the French historian of philosophy, Étienne Gilson, dismally remarked.[3] In particular, three factors seem to have acted as stumbling blocks for even the most well-intentioned among his interpreters. First, Duns Scotus had a tendency to consider any given topic from different

[1] On the use of Duns Scotus as a villain in some recent philosophical narratives, see Horan 2014: 15–58; O'Regan 2015. On previous views on the place of Duns Scotus in the history of philosophy, see Pomplun 2016.

[2] Ariew 2000; Honnefelder 2005; Leader 1984; Schmutz 2002; Schmutz 2008.

[3] Gilson 1952: 8.

points of view—to proceed *collative*, by way of contrasting opposite positions, as one of his first followers put it.[4] As a result of this way of doing, he changed his mind over time about several significant issues. But even when no change of mind occurred, a proclivity to approach an issue from many perspectives and a certain reluctance to simplify what is complex make it difficult, and probably inadvisable, to identify a "Scotistic" system—an aspect that was again stressed by Gilson[5] but has been curiously and repeatedly missed by many of Duns Scotus's friendly and less friendly interpreters, often eager to reduce his thought to a string of few bold claims.

Second, Duns Scotus's language and arguments are technical and at times idiosyncratic. These technicalities and idiosyncrasies are not an accidental feature of his thought. Rather, they must be taken fully into account if one wants to grasp the exact nature of the claims Duns Scotus is making. Clearly, this requires much time and effort.

Third, Duns Scotus kept crossing the boundaries between philosophy and theology in a way that might strike some of his readers as excessively nonchalant. As a result, any attempt to separate a philosophical core from a theological background might lead to frustration: more often than not, Duns Scotus's most original philosophical insights occur when he is dealing with strictly theological issues. In the past, this aspect of his thought has led to a charge of "theologism," namely the claim that Duns Scotus reduced philosophy to a part of theology. Although some interpreters have tried to defend him, this suspicion lingers.

This collection of essays intends neither to present Duns Scotus's thought in a simplified way nor to guide the reader through all the niceties of Duns Scotus's many and varied positions. Nor does it provide a comprehensive introduction to all his main views. Other books have already done so, some of them in an excellent way.[6] Rather, each of the following chapters offers a specific example of how a scholar who has devoted much time and effort to interpreting Duns Scotus engages with key aspects of his work and thought—some of them still little explored by scholars, other ones more familiar but approached from a fresh perspective.

The result is a snapshot of some of the best research that is now being done on this extremely original thinker. It is also a concrete illustration of how some of the best scholars working on Duns Scotus now deal with the

[4] The expression is by Peter Thomae. See Petrus Thomae, *Quaest. de ente* (Smith, 398); Dumont 1988: 200–201.
[5] Gilson 1952: 7–8. [6] See notably Williams 2003a.

three difficulties I have mentioned above. Although each author treats his or her subject in the way he or she thinks most appropriate, it is perhaps possible to identify a common trait in the following essays: they all positively *embrace* the challenging nature of Duns Scotus's views and style of thinking. Specifically, with regard to the first difficulty, the following essays refrain from any attempt to reduce Duns Scotus's thought to a few formulas. Rather, they offer a nuanced understanding of his positions and arguments by paying attention to the precise wording of his arguments, the most recent acquisitions of textual scholarship, the historical context in which he developed his views, and the way some of his positions evolved over time. In other words, the multifaceted nature of Duns Scotus's thought is emphasized rather than disguised. Similarly, with regard to the second difficulty, the authors of these essays make no attempt to conceal the technical character of Duns Scotus's claims. But this technicality—an unavoidable consequence of the difficulty of the issues Duns Scotus was dealing with—is explained as clearly as possible, and, if some interpretive difficulties remain, this is stressed and accepted as a characteristic aspect of serious scholarship. Finally, with regard to the third difficulty, the authors of the following essays take a more relaxed attitude towards the thorny issue of the relationship between philosophy and theology than much of the scholarship pursued by previous generations of Duns Scotus's interpreters did. It must now be acknowledged that theological concerns are everywhere, and not just in Duns Scotus but in most medieval thinkers, and not just in medieval thinkers but also in many modern ones. An exaggerated preoccupation with drawing a clear-cut separation between philosophical and theological issues risks to have a distorting effect when applied to much of the history of Western thought, and it leaves too many interesting things out of the picture. It also distracts from what really matters, namely the presence of good arguments and of original solutions to deep problems—and there is no dearth of either in Duns Scotus, as the readers of this collection will find out.

The volume begins with a presentation of Duns Scotus's life. Stephen Dumont reconsiders the biographical data known to scholars in light of recent advancements in textual criticism and the considerable amount of information about the medieval educational system that has become available in the last couple of decades. As a result, Dumont sheds new light on several aspects that had so far perplexed interpreters, including Duns Scotus's possible stay in Cambridge, the way he commented on the *Sentences* in Oxford and Paris, and the precise dates of his Paris regency. It was long customary to start a treatment of Duns Scotus's life by stressing

how little was known about him. After Dumont's careful analysis, we can conclude that much more can be known than we used to think.

The following seven chapters are devoted to key themes in two areas to which Duns Scotus made some of his most original contributions, namely metaphysics and philosophical theology, starting with God and then moving to a consideration of a few key aspects of the created world.

In his contribution, Richard Cross examines Duns Scotus's celebrated modal argument for the existence of a first cause in the light of the most extensive *ex professo* discussion of modality that he offers: namely, the account of the senses of 'potency' in his questions on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, book IX, qq. 1–2. Cross holds that it is possible to give two alternative reconstructions of Duns Scotus's argument for the existence of a first cause depending on which of two alternative interpretations is given to the term 'potency'. First, 'potency' can be taken as what is metaphysically possible. In this interpretation, the potential is co-extensive with 'being'. Second, 'potency' can be taken to mean what is opposed to the actual. In this second interpretation, being in potency is a kind of non-being. Cross concludes that, contrary to what might first appear, it is the second interpretation of 'potency' that should be preferred if we want Duns Scotus's argument for the existence of a first cause to work.

In Chapter 3, Thomas Ward focuses on a concept that plays a central role in Duns Scotus's metaphysics—essential order. Ward starts with Duns Scotus's presentation of essential order in the *De primo principio*, where essential order is said to obtain between two beings, x and y, where x is essentially prior to y and y is essentially posterior to x. But, as Ward observes, Duns Scotus makes use of essential order in several other contexts as well, including his hylomorphism, chemistry, action theory, metaethics, and even ecclesiology. In these other contexts, the notion of essential order is not clearly defined, and it is not always obvious how its deployment is supposed to map onto the canonical definition of essential order offered in the *De primo principio*. Ward takes a step toward this systematization by analyzing Duns Scotus's use of essential orders outside of the *De primo principio*, letting the *De primo principio* discussion both inform and be informed by these other contexts.

In the next chapter, Gloria Frost moves to considering the way the first cause's action relates to the action of created causes, with a particular focus on the action of created wills. As Frost notes, since medieval thinkers considered God an active causal source of all existents, they believed that God must in some way actively cause the actions of created causes, including the acts of the will. Duns Scotus's thought on this matter is

particularly interesting because, as is widely recognized, he was committed to a robust understanding of the created will's freedom. Frost argues that Duns Scotus struggled to figure out how God could be involved in causing the operation of such a spontaneously and autonomously operating cause. He wrestled with two different theories, and ultimately could not make up his mind. This chapter reconstructs Duns Scotus's analysis of competing positions while tracking the developments in his thought.

The next chapter focuses on the notion of the created agents' will not in relation to God's causality but in order to refine our understanding of what Duns Scotus meant by 'freedom'. As Martin Pickavé observes, John Duns Scotus's teaching on freedom and the will has been the object of much attention and has rightly been praised as a radically new approach to human agency. Unlike most of his predecessors, Duns Scotus considered a "synchronic" power for opposites as fundamental to human free will and set out to give a detailed account of the metaphysical makeup of the power through which we possess free will. Pickavé, however, argues that this cannot be the full story, because Duns Scotus also maintained that freedom is compatible with necessity. To get a clearer picture of Duns Scotus's overall understanding of freedom, Pickavé begins by focusing on how Scotus engaged with Anselm of Canterbury's definition of freedom. Although Duns Scotus did not seem to accept Anselm's account, he followed Anselm in the quest for an understanding of freedom that applies to both God and creatures. After addressing the exact nature of the power for opposites that Duns Scotus frequently associated with freedom, Pickavé turns to the "formal concept" (*ratio formalis*) of freedom and how it is common to God and creatures. Pickavé concludes that freedom is for Duns Scotus fundamentally a power for self-determination rather than a power for opposites.

The examination of human agency takes us naturally to the metaphysical makeup of human beings considered in light of their place in the order—both natural and providential—established by God. In her contribution, Marilyn McCord Adams shows that Duns Scotus firmly believed in the dignities (plural) of human nature—both the natural human dignity celebrated by Aristotle, who maintained that the material world was made for the sake of rational animals, and the supernatural dignities paid to humankind by God in the Incarnation and to particular human beings by predestining them to glory. When it comes to identifying more concretely the features in which such dignities consist, Duns Scotus's metaphysical views—about essential powers and about what is essential to powers—combine with his theological conviction that, when it

comes to patterns of Divine concurrence with or obstruction of natural powers, God has different policies for different states of human history—to complicate his method.

An essential characteristic of human beings is that they are composed of form and matter. Like any good Aristotelian, Duns Scotus held that human beings share this feature with a large section of the created world. In her chapter, Cecilia Trifogli provides an in-depth presentation and assessment of some crucial aspects of Duns Scotus's contribution to the later medieval debate on hylomorphism, including his views on the existence and nature of prime matter, the plurality of substantial forms in a material substance, and the nature of animate substances.

The following chapter shifts the focus to metaethics and, even more specifically, to some epistemic concerns characteristic of Duns Scotus's approach to metaethics. In his contribution, Thomas Williams turns again to the will, but from a perspective different from the one adopted in some of the previous essays. The will is the key component of Duns Scotus's moral theory, both because Duns Scotus held (quite uncontroversially) that we are morally responsible only for our free choices and their outcomes and because (more controversially) he thought that most principles detailing what is morally good and what is morally bad depends on God's free decisions. For Williams, then, the key question is how we know contingent practical principles. He offers an account of our knowledge of such principles that is (a) consistent with what Duns Scotus says about the relationship of the moral law to the divine will and to human nature, (b) consistent with what he says more generally about our knowledge of contingent truths, and (c) consistent with his actual argumentative practice in dealing with contingent practical principles. Williams's examination of Duns Scotus's argumentative practice uncovers a third, hitherto unnoticed, sense of 'natural law'. Williams suggests that the core unifying sense of 'natural law' for Duns Scotus is precisely the epistemic status of the precepts of natural law as non-inferentially evident.

The next three chapters keep an epistemic focus but move away from the will to examine the nature of the most basic concepts through which human beings grasp the way the world is structured. In his contribution, Wouter Goris focuses on the very notion of "object of the intellect." He argues that the distinction between "natural object of inclination" (*obiectum naturale inclinabile*) and "natural reachable object" (*obiectum naturale attingibile*) is at the basis of a fundamental reorientation in the doctrine of the first adequate object of the intellect in Duns Scotus's later works. In the absence of any direct intellectual intuition of the soul and its

potencies in this life, natural reason has no epistemic access to the first adequate object of the intellect except by way of abstraction of the *per se* objects it attains effectively. This insight induces Duns Scotus to revise his criticism of the position that he ascribes to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, namely that the "quiddity of material things" is the first adequate object of the intellect. Although Duns Scotus claims consistently that this position cannot be maintained by a theologian, he comes to accept it in his later works as correctly expressing the philosopher's view of the first adequate object of the intellect in this life.

In my chapter, I consider Duns Scotus's arguments against the so-called semantic analogy—the view according to which a term can signify two or more things according to relations of priority and posteriority. I argue that this view was commonly adopted in Paris but was rejected by a group of late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century English thinkers, which included Duns Scotus. Since supporters of semantic analogy held that 'being' was the foremost example of a term signifying according to priority and posteriority, the implications of this debate on metaphysics are profound. I argue that Duns Scotus's rejection of semantic analogy should be considered as preliminary to his famous claim that being is a univocal concept.

Duns Scotus's views sparked much discussion among both followers and opponents. The last essay in this collection considers the different attitudes that a number of Duns Scotus's followers took with regard to the analogy of being. Taking a position different from the one I defend in the previous chapter, Garrett Smith holds that there is room in Duns Scotus's thought not only for *things* related to one another by a relation of dependence but also for analogous *concepts*, namely concepts that capture those real relations in the way they represent things in the world. Smith, however, grants that Duns Scotus's statements on the analogy of being are fragmentary. They were reworked into a coherent theory by three Franciscans in Barcelona during the 1320s, namely, Aufredo Gonteri, Peter of Navarre, and Peter Thomae, who proposed three different ways to balance the analogy of being with the rival thesis of univocity and offered an early example of how Duns Scotus's thought could be developed in different directions.

The essays in this collection will hopefully provide an entryway to some key positions of one of the most daring and rigorous thinkers in the history of Western philosophy. Readers will find no shortcut through Duns Scotus's thought but will be able to rely on the assistance of expert guides, who will take them along a challenging but rewarding intellectual journey.