

Notes on John Duns Scotus

Duns Scotus: “The Subtle Doctor,” “of realty the rarest-veined unraveller”)

I. Argument for the Existence of God.

This is a very complicated argument, with several main and subsidiary steps. The first step is to show that “something among beings is in act which is unqualifiedly first according to efficiency; and something is unqualifiedly first as an end; and something is unqualifiedly first according to eminence” (p. 607). In other words, there is some being that is the first efficient cause of all things, that is the end for which all things are ordered, and that is the most perfect being. This is what he will call the “triple primacy” of the divine nature. The second step is aimed at showing that “the same which is first according to one primacy, is also first according to the other primacies” (ibid). And, finally, third, Scotus argues that “this three-fold primacy belongs to one nature alone” (ibid).

The following is a reconstruction of the first part of the first step as given in Thomas Williams’ entry on Scotus in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

- (1) No effect can produce itself.
- (2) No effect can be produced by just nothing at all.
- (3) A circle of causes is impossible.
- (4) Therefore, an effect must be produced by something else. (from 1, 2, and 3)
- (5) There is no infinite regress in an essentially ordered series of causes.
- (5a) It is not necessarily the case that a being possessing a causal power C possesses C in an imperfect way.
- (5b) Therefore, it is possible that C is possessed without imperfection by some item.
- (5c) If it is not possible for any item to possess C without dependence on some prior item, then it is not possible that there is any item that possesses C without imperfection (since dependence is a kind of imperfection).
- (5d) Therefore, it is possible that some item possesses C without dependence on some prior item. (from 5b and 5c by modus tollens)
- (5e) Any item possessing C without dependence on some prior item is a first agent (i.e., an agent that is not subsequent to any prior causes in an essentially ordered series).
- (5f) Therefore, it is possible that something is a first agent. (from 5d and 5e)
- (5g) If it is possible that something is a first agent, something is a first agent. (For, by definition, if there were no first agent, there would be no cause that could bring it about, so it would not in fact be possible for there to be a first agent.)
- (5h) Therefore, something is a first agent (i.e., an agent that is not subsequent to any prior causes in an essentially ordered series -- Scotus still has to prove that there is an agent that is not

subsequent to any prior causes in an accidentally ordered series either. That's what he does in step (6) below). (from 5f and 5g)

- (6) It is not possible for there to be an accidentally ordered series of causes unless there is an essentially ordered series.
- (6a) In an accidentally ordered series, each member of the series (except the first, if there is a first) comes into existence as a result of the causal activity of a prior member of the series.
- (6b) That causal activity is exercised in virtue of a certain form.
- (6c) Therefore, each member of the series depends on that form for its causal activity.
- (6d) The form is not itself a member of the series.
- (6e) Therefore, the accidentally ordered series is essentially dependent on a higher-order cause.
- (7) Therefore, there is a first agent. (from 4, 5, and 6)

II. Scotus on Universals and Individuation: Nominalism vs. Realism I

In the second reading (pp. 624-31), Scotus is primarily interested in the question *What makes a thing an individual? Or what individuates things?* Recall that for Aristotle things are composites of matter and form, and that it is *matter* that individuates things. That is, you and I both have the form *humanity*, but this form is conjoined with different glumps of matter in our cases and, so, we are different individuals. Plato, of course, held that forms are ontologically primary and capable of existing apart from matter. Aristotle rejected the ontological priority of forms, but he did believe that there were universals (like the form of humanity) that did really exist, albeit *in* things. Scotus considers and rejects the possibility (which Ockham will affirm) that beings simply are individuals from the get-go. Individuation is not necessary because all things that are truly individuals. Insofar as he rejects this view, he is also committed to some form of realism: the thesis that universals exist in reality. According to Scotus, beings have some “common nature” (i.e. a universal) that makes them what they are (e.g., my humanity, Fido’s dogginess). But, as he argues in Book II, Dist. III, Question 6 (pp. 630-31), beings also have “some positive entity intrinsically determining a nature to singularity.” This entity is what “contracts” a form in order to make an individual, a “this.” Scotus will later call this the “individual difference,” and this in turn will come to be known as a Scotistic “haecceity” (in ugly Latin “haecceitas,” which means “thisness”).