

Scotus on Action

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The category of action

Action is one of the ten categories. Scotus holds that the division of contingent being into the categories is both *sufficient* and *immediate*: sufficient in the sense that there are no other categories, and immediate in the sense that no two or more of the categories fall under some still more generic category.¹ In arguing for the distinctness and irreducibility of action as a category, Scotus focuses on why action (along with its correlative category, passion) is not to be subsumed under the category of relation. One might suppose that there is nothing more to the action of, say, heating than the relation between the active power that causes heat and the passive recipient of that heat, but that would be a mistake. For one thing, even in the case of heating more is required for there to be an action than merely the relation between the agent and patient; there must also be something that actualizes the active power. More crucially, there are some actions that do not involve any relation. When an action remains within the agent, there is no relation to any passion, because the agent does not *cause* any passion.²

An action that remains within the agent is called an *immanent* action; one that “passes through” or “goes out from” the agent is called a *transeunt* action. Transeunt actions produce something – some form – in a patient; this form is called the *terminus* of the action. The terminus of a transeunt action, by contrast, is not a form produced by the action, but the *object* with which the action is concerned. The paradigmatic cases of immanent actions are acts of intellect and will. Immanent actions are said to be “elicited” by the powers that perform them.

Self-motion and the metaphysics of freedom

The centerpiece of Scotus’s theory of active causal powers is laid out in two closely

¹See Peter King, “Scotus on Metaphysics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, ed. Thomas Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 15-28, at 28.

²In *Metaph.* V.5-6.97.

connected questions in Book IX of the *Questions on the Metaphysics*. Critical attention has focused on q. 15, in which Scotus draws his crucial distinction between nature and will, but a full understanding of this distinction requires that we begin with q. 14, in which Scotus argues for the possibility of self-motion.

There was formidable authority in favor of the proposition that nothing can move itself. Aristotle was generally read as denying the possibility of self-motion, most explicitly in *Physics* 7: “It is manifest that everything that is moved is moved by another.” Thomas Aquinas had adopted the slogan *omne quod movetur ab alio movetur* and put it to use in his metaphysics and natural theology, and both Godfrey of Fontaines and Siger of Brabant had denied the possibility of self-motion. Scotus rejects this widespread consensus, however, and argues that something can act upon, and thereby move, itself. In essence, his argument is that the primary object of an active power is not some particular passive thing, but any passive thing that falls under some relevant general description. The primary object of the active power to heat, for example, is not some particular heatable thing, but whatever can be heated. And it is possible for something to fall under the general description that marks off the primary object of an active power of that thing itself. In such a case, the thing will be an object of its own active power; in other words, it will be able to move itself.³ This argument, Scotus notes, does not show that just anything can act upon itself in just any way. A thing can act upon itself only by way of an *equivocal* action – an action whose product is not the same in kind as the active power that produced it – and only if the thing has the capacity to receive the product of that kind of action.

The examples of self-motion that Scotus considers in q. 14 are all of transeunt actions (broadly construed: when a thing acts on itself, the action does not “go out from” the agent in the most obvious sense, but Scotus has in mind cases in which the action produces some form as its terminus). Nonetheless, the general possibility of self-motion that he establishes there is clearly meant to apply in q. 15, which is primarily concerned with immanent actions. In q. 15 Scotus asks whether Aristotle’s distinction between between rational powers, which are powers for opposites, and irrational powers, which are for only one of a pair of opposites, was drawn

³*In Metaph.* 9, q. 14, n. 24.

correctly (*bene assignata*). He answer that it was and goes on to explain, first, how it ought to be understood and, second, what its cause is.

By a “power for opposites,” Scotus clarifies, we mean a power for opposite *actions*, not merely for opposite *effects* or *products*. The sun can soften wax and harden mud, but that is not the kind of “opposite” Scotus has in mind. At issue is a power that is sufficient for eliciting both an act and its negation (as would be the case if the sun had the power either to soften wax or not soften it) or for eliciting opposite acts (as would be the case if the sun had the power either to soften wax or to harden it). Aristotle, according to Scotus, had explained this difference by appealing to the difference between a natural form and an understood form. A natural form can act in only one determinate way: the form of fire heats and can only heat. But on the basis of an understood form one can act in opposite ways: by having the form of fire in my understanding I can know both fire and non-fire. Scotus argues, on several grounds, that this difference is an inadequate basis for the distinction between rational and irrational powers. Instead, the fundamental distinction in the domain of active powers has to do with the differing ways in which these powers elicit their acts. There are only two possible ways of eliciting acts:

Either a power is by its very nature (*ex se*) determined to acting in such a way that, as far as it is up to that power, it cannot not act when it is not impeded by something extrinsic to it; or else it is not by its very nature determined, but can do this act or the opposite act and can also act or not act. The first power is commonly called ‘nature’ and the second is called ‘will’. (n. 22)

The division into nature and will is the most basic division of active powers. And what is the cause of this division? Scotus says that there is no cause: it is a brute fact that will is a power for opposites and nature is not. Just as that which is hot heats, and there is no further explanation for why it heats, so too there is no further explanation for why it heats *determinately*; nor is there any further explanation for the fact that a will does not will determinately. Moreover, the will’s mode of acting is so distinct from the mode of acting proper to every other active power that “it appears altogether ridiculous to apply universal propositions concerning active principles to the will, simply because they have no exception in any active principle other than will” (n. 44).

One would expect, given general Aristotelian metaphysical principles, that what is in itself indeterminate would require some extrinsic cause to determine it. Scotus argues, however,

that this is not so. There are two kinds of indeterminacy:

There is a certain indeterminacy of insufficiency, in other words, an indeterminacy of potentiality and deficient actuality, as matter that does not have a form is indeterminate with respect to doing the action of that form; and there is another indeterminacy of superabundant sufficiency, which derives from an unlimitedness of actuality, whether altogether or in some particular respect. (n. 31).

Something that is indeterminate in the first way does not act unless it is determined to some form by something else, but something that is indeterminate in the second way can determine itself. If there were no such thing as the indetermination of superabundant sufficiency, Scotus argues, it would be impossible for God to act, since God is “supremely undetermined to any action whatsoever” (n. 32).

Scotus seems at this point to have wandered rather far from the Aristotelian distinction he had allegedly set out to defend. How does the distinction between nature and will map on to the original distinction between a rational power – which in Aristotle appeared to mean the intellect, not the will – and irrational powers? Scotus says that we can speak of intellect and will either in terms of their own proper acts or in terms of the acts of inferior powers on which they exercise some causality: “the intellect by presenting [objects] and directing, the will by inclining and commanding” (n. 36). The first way of considering intellect and will is more fundamental (and obviously so, says Scotus); and intellect, so considered, gets classified as nature. It is beside the point that the intellect is capable of cognizing opposites, since in a given case of intellectual cognition, the intellect necessarily elicits whatever cognition it in fact elicits.⁴ The second way of considering intellect and will appears “quasi-accidental” (n. 37), but it is nonetheless the way in which Aristotle considers the intellect in drawing his distinction between rational and irrational powers. For although the intellect’s own act is not undetermined in itself, that act is required for the act of the will, which *is* undetermined. So Aristotle can call the intellect a rational power in this derivative sense.

⁴Here we see clearly how Scotus’s distinction between rational and irrational powers depends on his notion of synchronic contingency: a rational power has, and an irrational power lacks, the ability to act otherwise *at the very moment of acting*. See Scott MacDonald, “Synchronic Contingency, Instants of Nature, and Libertarian Freedom: Comments on ‘The Background to Scotus’s Theory of Will’,” *Modern Schoolman* 72 (1995): 169-74.

The relationship between intellect and will

Scotus is emphatic in the *Questions on the Metaphysics* that the will's mode of acting is irreducible and basic; the will is by its very nature (*ex se*) such as to be able to act or not act, and to do this or that. In particular, Scotus emphasizes that the will's freedom does not derive from its relation to the intellect. This emphasis puts Scotus squarely in the broad voluntarist tradition. But our reading of Scotus's account of the will as a rational power leaves us with two further questions. First, exactly how does Scotus understand the relationship between intellect and will? The general voluntarist stance leaves room for different views, and it appears that Scotus adopted different views at different points in his career. The second question is why, if indeed the will's mode of acting admits of no more basic explanation, Scotus appears to offer an explanation for it in terms of the two "affections" of the will. I will take up these two questions in turn.

First, I shall look at the development of Scotus's views of the relationship between intellect and will.⁵ In his earliest engagement with the issue, the Oxford *Lectura*, Book 2, d. 25, Scotus attempts to steer a middle position between, on the one hand, the intellectualism of Thomas Aquinas and Godfrey of Fontaines, and, on the other hand, the voluntarism of Henry of Ghent. He understands Aquinas and Godfrey as having held that the object is the sole efficient cause of volition: Aquinas meaning the object as it exists in the intellect and Godfrey the object as it exists in the imagination. Scotus argues against both the general view that the object is the sole cause of volition and against the particular versions of that thesis defended by Aquinas and Godfrey. He then turns to the view of Henry of Ghent, calling it "extreme." Henry held that the will is the sole efficient cause of its own action and the cognized object is only a *sine qua non* condition. Scotus deploys several arguments against Henry's view, drawing some of them from Godfrey. Scotus then sets out his own middle view, according to which the will and the object together make up the total efficient cause of the act of will. The will and intellect concur in the way that male and female concur in the production of offspring (according to the biology of the day): neither depends on the other for its causal power, but both are required for the production

⁵My remarks on Scotus's account of the relationship between will and intellect accepts the chronology defended by Stephen D. Dumont in "Did Scotus Change His Mind on the Will?", *After the Condemnation of 1277: Philosophy and Theology at the University of Paris in the Last Quarter of the Thirteenth Century*, ed. Jan A. Aertsen, Kent Emery, Jr., and Andreas Speer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 719-794.

of the effect: one as “the more principal and perfect agent” and the other as a less perfect agent. The will is the more principal agent because it is responsible for the freedom and contingency of the volition, but the intellect is nonetheless required. As Scotus realizes, it might seem that this position is not so different from Henry’s view that the intellect is merely a *sine qua non* condition. But Scotus argues that if the intellect is merely a *sine qua non* condition, *liberum arbitrium* (generally translated as “free choice” or “free judgment”) does not include both intellect and will, and so it would be blind. One must therefore ascribe some efficient-causal role to the intellect in producing the act of willing.

In the later *Reportatio* of Scotus’s lectures in Paris, however, Scotus adopts the very view that he had earlier described as “extreme”: the view that the will is the total cause of its act and the intellect’s presentation of an object merely a *sine qua non* condition. The *Reportatio* largely recapitulates the arguments from the *Lectura* against the position of Aquinas and Godfrey, but it does not present Henry of Ghent’s position and argue against it, as the *Lectura* had – after all, now Scotus is adopting that very position as his own. Recent scholarship has wondered how Scotus came to adopt a position that he had regarded as “extreme” only a few years before. Stephen Dumont has suggested a historical factor at work: it is all but certain that at Paris Scotus began his lectures under the regency of Gonsalvus of Spain, who “was actually in the process of mounting a defense of Henry’s voluntarism against Godfrey and his followers. . . . At Paris Scotus took up the defense of his master’s position, a position against which he had previously argued at Oxford.”⁶ For my part, I should hesitate to appeal to such purely external factors in accounting for the development in Scotus’s views, and I do wonder how we are to square Dumont’s explanation with the undoubted fact that at Oxford Scotus had taught a view contrary to that of his supposed teacher, William of Ware. Fortunately, philosophical explanations present themselves.

First of all, we should not lean too heavily on the word “extreme.” As Scotus uses the word here, an “extreme” view need not be one that is crazy or “way out there”; it is merely a view that lies at either end of a spectrum of possible views. (It would be very odd indeed for

⁶Dumont, “Did Scotus Change His Mind,” 776-777.

Scotus to stigmatize as crazy a view that had been defended by such Franciscan luminaries as William de la Mare, Roger Marston, Peter Falco, and William of Ware.) As Dumont himself has shown, Scotus structures his *Lectura* discussion in such a way that his view will be the moderate alternative that is left after the two views at either end of the spectrum – one attributing all causality to the intellect, the other attributing all causality to the will – are rejected. We already see in the *Lectura* discussion that Scotus has his suspicions that his *via media* is going to collapse into Henry’s view, and it requires no great effort of philosophical imagination to suppose that as he reflected on his position, he found that it did in fact so collapse. His *Lectura* argument against Henry’s position – that without some causal role for the intellect, *liberum arbitrium* would be blind – is already an odd one for Scotus to make, since the shift in philosophical discussion from talking about *liberum arbitrium* to talking about the freedom of the will was already well underway. Scotus does not ordinarily talk in terms of *liberum arbitrium*, and he may well have come to realize that his invocation of it was not only philosophically retrograde but question-begging, since the requirement that there be some causal role for the intellect is built into the notion of *liberum arbitrium*. Furthermore, even in the *Lectura* it is not clear what the efficient-causal role of the intellect could come to. Unlike in the case of the production of offspring, in which the mother does exercise a non-derived efficient-causal role, though a subordinate one, the intellect’s causal contribution seems to be determined entirely by the will. It’s not that the intellect does not exercise a non-derived causality in *presenting* the object; the intellect does not derive its power to cognize potential objects of will from the will. But it *is* up to the will whether the intellect’s presentation of an object results in an act of will: the intellect’s presentation of an object is an efficient-causal dead end if the will does not will the object presented. This line of thought very quickly leads to the *Reportatio* position that the intellect’s presentation of the object is merely a *sine qua non* condition for an act of will whose total efficient cause is the will itself.

The two affections of the will

I turn now to the second question: why, if the will’s mode of acting admits of no more basic explanation, Scotus appears to offer an explanation for it in terms of the two “affections” of the will. Scotus gets the idea of two affections or fundamental inclinations in the will from

Anselm, who had identified an affection for the advantageous (*affectio commodi*) and affection for justice (*affectio iustitiae*) in the course of explaining the primal sin of the angels in *On the Fall of the Devil*. It is clear that Anselm intends the two affections as an *explanation* of the will's freedom, and readers of Scotus have assumed that he too means to explain the will's freedom by appeal to the two affections. Interpretations have differed, however, about how that explanation is supposed to work. According to the most common interpretation, the affection for the advantageous is an inclination to pursue what is beneficial for oneself and the affection for justice is an inclination to love things (including other people) in accordance with their intrinsic worth. Now Scotus is quite emphatic that the will cannot have (or be) only an affection for the advantageous, because if it were, it would operate deterministically and would therefore be a natural, not a rational power. But the standard interpretation leaves it wholly mysterious how the affection for justice helps matters, because it is not at all clear why a disposition to love things in accordance with their intrinsic worth would operate any less deterministically than the affection for the advantageous; and a will with two deterministic inclinations is no freer than a will with only one.

An alternative interpretation emphasizes that Scotus identifies the affection for the advantageous with intellectual appetite: the will's disposition to choose what the intellect presents to it as perfective. On this interpretation, Scotus thinks of the affection for the advantageous as being exactly what Thomas Aquinas had claimed the will is, and he rejects Aquinas's account of the will because it does not provide for genuine freedom in the will. The affection for justice, then, is the will's capacity to choose in accordance with what is morally right. Such choices must be free if they are to be genuinely morally praiseworthy, and the affection for justice is what provides such freedom. But as the proponent of this interpretation has acknowledged, this account of the affection for justice would seem to provide for freedom only on those occasions on which the will is faced with a choice between happiness and morality; it does not offer the untrammelled or ubiquitous freedom that Scotus consistently ascribes to the will.⁷

⁷Thomas Williams, "From Metaethics to Action Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, 332-351, at 348-349.

What both interpretations miss is that Scotus's use of the two affections is not intended as an explanation of the will's mode of acting. For Scotus the two affections are not (as they were for Anselm) two mutually exclusive dispositions that *belong to* the will; the two affections are not really distinct from each other or from the will itself. The affection for the advantageous is not an aspect or part of the will; it *is* the will *qua* intellectual appetite. And the affection for justice is not an aspect or part of the will; it *is* the will *qua* free rational power. So the will's possessing an affection for justice does not *explain* the will's freedom. The will's mode of acting – its being a will as opposed to a nature, a rational power as opposed to an irrational power – remains unexplained.