Reading 6 Duns Scotus' treatment of contingency and divine foreknowledge.

John Duns Scotus (1265-1308) was known as the 'Subtle Doctor'.

Scotus' Discussion of the problem of reconciling foreknowledge and freedom is found in his discussion of Distinctions 38 and 39 of the First Book of the Sentences written by Peter Lombard in the 12th century. Lombard's work consisted of four books in which a large number of claims relevant to Christian doctrine were stated with arguments for and against them. In order to graduate as a Doctor of Theology in the middle ages students, after a long period of study — and in their late thirties — had to produce a commentary on Lombard's Sentences.

Scotus' discussion is complicated, technical, and difficult to follow in places. I have numbered the text of Reading 7 in the margin so that it is easier to follow the handout.

How God can know Future Contingents by knowing His own Will?

The heading for the text is provided by the translator and is not in the Latin. Scotus begins his discussion of Book 1, Distinctions 38 and 39 by noting that the first has to do with the infallibility of divine knowledge and the second with its immutability,

We need to distinguish various properties of God and divine knowledge.

(1) God is **OMNISCIENT**: for any claim 'A' about the world, 'A' is true if and only if God knows that A.

(2) God is **INFALLIBLE**: it is not possible for God to believe that 'A' is true when 'A' is false.

(3) Divine knowledge is **IMMUTABLE**: it is not possible for God to know that 'A' is true at some time and not to know that 'A' is true at some other time.

Taken together these properties of God and divine knowledge seem to imply that God knows the entire history of the world, past present and future, and that that history could not be otherwise.

Scotus begins by raising five questions:

[**1.1**] Does God have DETERMINATE, or DEFINITE, knowledge of every aspect of everything - that is does he know definitely everything about everything? — Scotus will eventually answer YES but he starts off here by arguing NO.

[**1.2**] Does God have INFALLIBLE knowledge of everything? — Scotus will eventually answer YES but he starts off here by arguing NO.

[**1.3**] Does God have IMMUTABLE knowledge of everything? — Scotus will eventually answer YES but he starts off here by arguing NO.

[**1.4**] Does God know everything about everything in such a way that what he knows is NECESSARY? — Scotus will eventually answer NO but he starts off here by arguing YES.

[**1.5**] Is the CONTINGENCY of things compatible with the certainty and determinateness of divine knowledge — Scotus will eventually answer YES but he starts off here by arguing NO..

Scotus follows the usual procedure in commentaries on the Sentences. He first sets out arguments against the answer which he wants to give. The translation is a bit misleading here. When Scotus says 'I argue' in section 2, he is not arguing for a claim that he supports but rather giving the argument for the claim that he will later refute.

[**2.1**] Arguments to show that God does not have determinate knowledge of everything:

[**2.1.1**] The authority of Aristotle in *de Interpretatione*, 9, and Aristotle's argument that if there were determinate truth about the future there would be no point in deliberating.

[**2.1.2**] Important little argument: we know that God is omnipotent and so He cannot be constrained to do one thing rather than another therefore by analogy, He cannot be bound, i.e. determined, to know one thing rather than another.

[**2.2**] Arguments to show that God does not have infallible knowledge of everything:

[**2.2.1**] [**What is now known as the Consequence Argument**] The argument 'God knows that x will occur, but x not occur; therefore God is deceived' is valid; therefore the argument 'God knows that x will occur, it is possible that x will not occur; therefore it is possible that God is deceived' is valid.

So since, say, I am going to sit tomorrow but it is possible that I will not sit, it is possible for God to be deceived, and so God is not infallible. Note that a proposition is '*de inesse*' if it is of the form 'A is B', it is '*de possibili*' if it is of the form 'A is possibly B'.

[**2.2.2**] The same argument in another form: nothing impossible can follow from assuming what is possible to be actual. It is true, say, that I will sit tomorrow and so God knows this. But is possible that I will not sit tomorrow, so suppose I that I will not sit tomorrow. In that case God is deceived. This latter follows from the assumption of something possible so it must itself be possible.

[**2.3**] Arguments to show that God's knowledge is not immutable.

[**2.3.1**] If God knows A but might not know A, then divine knowledge is mutable since the only way to support contrary properties — and having knowledge and not having knowledge are contrary — is by changing.

[**2.3.2**] Again, the general principle is that if something is not F (e.g. it is black rather than white) but can be F, then it can BEGIN to be F, and so change (i.e. from being white to being black). So if God does not know$A$ and can know A, he can change. That is, He can change from not having the property of *knowing A* to having the property of *knowing A*

[**2.3.3**] To say that God can know A is to say that God has a power of knowing A. Scotus then asks what kind of power this is. If it is a passive power, then it is like the power that Socrates has when he is pale to become dark by acquiring a suntan. In Scotus' technical Aristotelian language, it is the power to take on the form of darkness. But taking on a form in this way requires change. Alternatively the power is active — the power to bring about a change in something else. Since what is at stake is knowledge, according to Scotus' theory of the mind, the power is thus the power of the active intellect to actualise knowledge in the

passive intellect. But this power is natural — the passive intellect has no free choice when it comes to knowing an object of knowledge presented to it. So if there can be knowledge of a different object, then there must be a change with respect to the power.

[**2.4**] Arguments for the claim that God knows everything in such a way that what he knows he knows necessarily:

[**2.4.1**] Since God is immutable, he immutably knows what he knows, therefore necessarily in the sense of immutably.

[Note that here Scotus assumes that God, and divine knowledge is immutable, he is going to reject the arguments in 2.3 which purport to show that God is not immutable]

[**2.4.2**] The possibility of existing after not existing implies mutability; therefore what is not mutable does not have this possibility and so is necessary. The argument relies on the principle that if 'if P, then Q' is true, then so is 'if not Q, then not P' and the identification of the necessary as what what is not possible. So if something is possible, then it is mutable; therefore if not:mutable, then not:possible but if not:possible, then necessary; therefore if not:mutable, then necessary.

[**2.4.3**] What God knows is in God, whatever is in God is the same as God, but God is a necessary being, so whatever God knows is God and so is necessary.

[**2.4.4**] To know that A, if 'A' is true, is a perfection, but God necessarily has all perfections; therefore if 'A' is true, God necessarily knows that A.

[**2.5**] Arguments for the claim that the contingency of things is not compatible with divine knowledge.

[**2.5.1**] [**The Consequence Argument again:**] If God knows that A, then it is necessary that A.

[Note that Scotus is claiming here that this argument holds when 'A' is about something contingent. E.g. If God knows that Socrates will contingently sit tomorrow, then necessarily Socrates will contingently sit tomorrow.' — He says that the 'contingently', that is the 'matter' of the claim as distinct from its 'form' (it is a categorical claim), does not affect the application of 'knows'.]

[**2.5.2**] Another version of the same argument. Note, a proposition is '*de necessario*' if it is of the form 'A is necessarily B'.

Next Scotus gives, briefly, arguments for the opposites of each of 2.1-5. Arguments, that is, in favour of the positions that he supports.

[**3.1**] - Argument that God has determinate, infallible, and immutable knowledge of everything - from the authority of Holy Scripture.

[**3.2**] Argument that God does not know necessarily what he knows.

[Note that in the discussion of this claim the proper placing of 'necessarily' in the sentence is crucial: If God necessarily knew that A, then that A would necessarily be known, i.e. it would be necessarily true of the claim that A, that it is known, but if that A is necessarily known, then 'A' is necessarily true. But in general, 'A' may be contingently true, so God

does not necessarily know what he knows.]

[**3.3**] Argument that God's knowledge is compatible with contingency — God knows the necessary as necessary and the contingent as contingent.

Rather than answering these questions directly Scotus first sets out certain other accounts of the reconciliation of divine foreknowledge and freedom - accounts which he rejects.

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[**4.1**] **Theory 1** [The author of this theory is not known.] This theory claims that God knows everything in virtue of having ideas of all things in his understanding. Against this Scotus argues

(a) Knowledge of the terms 'A' and 'B' guarantees knowledge of the truth of 'A is B' only if being B is part of the meaning of 'A', but this is never so if 'A is B' is contingent. So possessing perfectly the ideas of A and B - knowing A and B - cannot guarantee knowledge of the truth of 'A is B'.

(b) A similar argument. The relationship between ideas and what they represent is natural rather than conventional. Ideas are in the divine understanding prior to any act of will. Scotus then argues that the ideas representing human and white, of themselves, either represent neither the composition of the corresponding things in the world nor their division (i.e. neither the state-of-affairs corresponding to affirmation nor that corresponding to negation) or both the composition and division. But they cannot represent both since then God would know contradictories at the same time, which is impossible.

(c) God has ideas of things which will not exist but might exist - so the mere possession of the idea does not represent it as going to exist.

(d) The idea of something as future does not represent it as existing at one future time rather than at another.

[**4.2**] **Theory 2** [Aquinas' Theory of the Relation of Time and Eternity] — Scotus' first summarises Aquinas' theory -

There is an analogy between the way in which God as a spatially unlimited being is at once at every place, and God as eternal is present at once to every time. But unlike the way all the water in a river flows successively past a fixed stick, the 'now of eternity' is present all at once to every successive now of time. Another analogy is with the relation of the centre of a circle to its circumference. The whole of the circumference (the succession of time) is present all at once to the centre (eternity).

Against this theory Scotus argues:

(a) The analogy with space and the spatially unlimited is wrong. God's spatial unlimitedness is only grounds for his coexistence with presently existing places. The crucial point is that coexistence is a real relation, a relation between really existing things. But future and past things do not exist and so do not coexist with anything.

(b) If, as Aquinas holds (Scotus mentions no names), future things are actual for God in just the same way that present things are actual, then if something is already actual, as future things now are for God, it cannot later become actual. Alternatively the same thing will be

actualised twice, which Scotus apparently takes to be impossible.

(c) The theory does not help to explain how God can be certain of what is future. Future things are those which are going to be produced by God. If God knows future things as future, then he does not know them as present and as produced but as something going to be produced. Thus he does not know future things in the same way as he knows present things.

(d) God's knowledge of things is not caused by those things so God's knowledge of temporal things must be through something other than those things.

(e) This theory does not distinguish God's relation to temporal things from an angels relation to them.

[**4.3**] **Theory 3:** [Aquinas' Theory of the Reconciliation of Divine Necessity and the Contingency found in Creatures]

Scotus first summarises the theory. It is in effect that if C_1 is the ultimate cause of an effect E and C_2 is an intermediate cause, so that C_2 causes E directly while both C_2 and E are ultimately caused by C_1, then even though C_1 causes necessarily, effect E is contingent in relation to cause C_2. The idea is that if an event E is a sin, it is the effect of a free choice of a human will C_2 while at the same time being necessary with respect to the ultimate cause, God (C_1)

$$C_1 \rightarrow C_2 \rightarrow E$$

Scotus thinks that this analysis fails, since the only way for E to be contingent is if C_1 causes contingently — on his account C_1 is the divine will. Thus the only way for a created will C_2 to contingently cause its effect E is if its causation depends contingently upon its ultimate cause.

As part of his discussion, Scotus introduces the important idea of an 'INSTANT OF NATURE'. God's will and intellect are in a sense identical and outside of time but nevertheless Scotus argues, since willing, in some contexts is prior to understanding, we need to impose an ordering on them. So we say that *the act of will occurs at an instant of nature prior to that of the act understanding.* Likewise God causes all secondary causes and their effects to exist in an instant of nature prior to that in which the secondary cause causes its effect. He then claims that if the first cause necessitates its effects in the first instant of nature, secondary causes cannot introduce contingency in the second instant of nature.

In passing Scotus appeals to an important principle. Anything caused by both a secondary cause and a primary cause could be immediately produced by the primary cause without the secondary cause while still retaining it status as contingent or necessary. So if an effect is contingent, it is contingent in relation to the primary cause and not just in relation to the secondary cause.

[**5**] Scotus' Own Theory Presented as Answers to the Original Questions Scotus first investigates the two fundamental questions:

[**A**] How does contingency exist in things?

[B] How is the certainty and immutablity of divine knowledge compatible with contingency? (Answer below p. 9.)

[[A] How Contingency Exists in Things?]

[5.1] A bit of Scotus' metaphysics: Everything is either necessary or else possible, and beings have this disjunctive property immediately - that is the possession of the property is not explained by the possession of some other property. Scotus argues that if we have a disjunctive property of the form 'A or B' and we can show that the less perfect disjunct belongs to something, we can infer that the more perfect belongs to something else. We cannot argue, however, that if something has the more perfect property, then something has the less perfect property. So we cannot prove the proposition 'some being is contingent'. This is why Aristotle in *de Interpretatione*, 9, treats it as evidently true. Therefore *that some being is contingent* is a first principle of metaphysics and any one who denies it should, as the Arab philosopher Avicenna says, be tortured until they agree that it is possible for them not to be tortured.

[5.2] Scotus insists that the only way to preserve contingency in created things is by locating contingency in their first cause, God.

[5.3] But contingency in God can lie only in the divine intellect or the divine will. It cannot lie in the divine intellect since understanding is a natural operation — presented with an object of understanding the understanding has 'no choice' but to understand.

[5.4] So the source of contingency must be the divine will.

The discussion that follows is quite complicated. In order to understand the contingency of the divine will Scotus considers first the contingency that lies in the human will - and which has its source in the divine will.

Three questions:
(1) what is our freedom a freedom with respect to;
(2) how does contingency follow from this freedom;
(3) how are we to explicate and distinguish between propositions making claims about the will.

[(a) Human will and the contingency of things]

(1) Scotus offers us a very condensed outline of a theory of action. Distinguish between an action, the aim, or object, of that action, and the effect of that action. Perhaps Scotus would accept as an example: action — willing to obtain an apple; object – obtaining an apple; effect — reaching up and obtaining the apple (In another version of this discussion he says that the third kind of freedom has to do with whether the will brings about its effect immediately or employs other powers to do this. In fact the only other power available seems to be the understanding so the idea is that once I've decided that I want to have the apple my will can immediately bring about a bodily action, reaching up to grab it, or the it can 'command' the understanding to think about how to get the apple, the understanding will eventually arrive at a conclusion which the will can act on.). Scotus claims that we are free with respect to act, object, and effect. But we are only perfectly free with respect to the choice of objects. We are free with respect to acts since we can will to do X or not will

to do X, our acts of will are not necessitated; we are free with respect to objects since we can will to do Y or will to do not Y; we are free with respect to effects since the effect of our willing may be Z or not Z. Our first freedom is imperfect in that unlike God we cannot will everything in a single act of will. Rather we will one thing at one time and not at another.

(2) Contingency lies in our will with respect to the objects of will since we can will one object after the other. We are not restricted to willing always only for a single object.

Scotus now makes a crucial claim. Earlier philosophers seem to have associated the possibility for willing opposites with the possibility of a change in the will and this with willing for different things at different times. Scotus makes a radical, and apparently original, claim:

'Nevertheless there is another and not so obvious potential that involves no temporal series.'

He argues that this potential must exist since — in a famous thought-experiment — it is possible that a creature with free will exists for just a single instant. There is no temporal succession in which it might first will A and then not-A, so it must have the potential at a single instant of willing A and willing not-A. Note the reference to first and second actuality. Aristotle distinguishes, for example, the first potentiality that a child has when born for speaking an English sentence, the second potentiality, or first actuality, that it has for speaking an English sentence after it has learnt the language but is not in fact uttering any words, finally there is the second actuality that it realises in uttering words in English. For the instantaneous will, Scotus argues, we must distinguish between first and second actuality at a single indivisible moment of time. The first actuality is naturally prior to the second actuality.

(3) The next part of the discussion is rather hard to follow. Scotus wants to associate the non-evident power for opposites with a 'logical power' for opposites. He seems in effect simply to reiterate that we have a power to will opposites A and not-A both in succession and at a single instant. In the latter case, there is no logical repugnance (translation has 'repellancy') between being able to will A at t and being able to will not-A at t. We do not, however, have the power to will at t both A and not A. This discussion provides Scotus with his answer to the question about how claims about possibility are to be understood. Consider the proposition 'a will that is willing A is able to will not-A'. This may be construed in two ways. Read in the composite, or *de dicto*, sense as 'it is possible that (a will that is willing A is willing not-A) which is false both as a claim about what is possible in time, and about what is possible at an instant. Read in the divided, or *de re*, sense as 'a will that is willing A at t has the power at t to will not-A' This is true both of the power at t to will not-A at some later time t' and of the 'less evident' power at t to will not-A at t. Scotus goes on to explain this distinction in some detail. Unfortunately the example that he gives is less than helpful. Suppose that some men are white and some are not and that all the white ones are running. In that situation 'every man who is white is running' may be read in the composite sense as 'every white-man is running' which is true, in the divided sense as '(every man is white) and (every man is running)' which is false.

Scotus now considers some objections to his proposed analysis. Criticisms of the claim that there is a power for willing opposites at an instant.

(Obj. 1) The claim that although 'A' is true at t, it is nevertheless possible at t that 'not-A is true at t is incompatible with Aristotle's claim in *de Interpretatione*, 9, that all that is,

when it is, is necessarily.

(Obj. 2) The claim is inconsistent with an acceptable principle of hypothetical reasoning. The mediaevals formulated such rules in what they called 'the art of the kind of disputation known as obligations'. The rule has it that if 'A' is in fact false at the present moment, t, and it is possible at t that 'A' is true, then if one makes the hypothesis that 'A' is true, one must deny, on this hypothesis, that the present moment is t.

(Obj. 3) The objection seems to be that something has a potential prior to that potential being actualised but on Scotus' account the potential to be F at t is claimed to exist at the same time as the actuality of not being F at t, and so not as prior to it.

Replies:

(Reply to 1) There are different ways of reading the sentence 'all that is, when it is, is necessarily' from *de Interpretatione*, 9 . The sentence may be understood as a conditional claim in two different ways:

(a) as claiming the necessity of consequent (necessity of the concomitant) 'If something is, then necessarily it is'

or

(b) as claiming the necessity of the consequence (concomitance): 'necessarily (if something is, then it is).
The sentence is false in sense (a) and true, but uninteresting, in sense (b). Scotus also discusses an alternative analysis in terms of categorical claims.

(Reply to 2) Scotus simply, but radically, rejects the given principle of hypothetical reasoning. It is a survival of a theory of potentiality and possibility that he rejects. The rule is required only if one supposes that any possibility must be realised in time.

(Reply to 3) Scotus' new theory of possibility allows him to find a priority of potential to actuality at an instant. The potential naturally precedes the act at time t.

Scotus now raises another objection

(4). If it is possible to will A at t and possible to not will A at t, then it is possible to will A and not to will A at t. Scotus' replies (to 4) that I have at t the potential to will A and the potential to not will A but not the potential to both will A and not will A. Compare the case of place. Distinct bodies A and B each at the same time have the potential to be in place x, but they cannot both be in x at the same time.

Scotus now turns to the character of the divine will, he has to deal with two questions on the divine will and the contingency of things. The question of the disambiguation of claims about possibility is dealt with in just the same way as for the human will.

[(b) Divine will and the contingency of things]

[5.5.1] (1) In respect of what is the divine will free: Scotus distinguishes between the human and divine will. The divine will may will different objects with the same act of will. It is the imperfection of the human will which requires different acts.

[**5.5.2**] (2) The contingency of things: The divine will is contingently related to everything other than the divine essence.

[**(B) How is the contingency of things compatible with divine certainty?**]

[**5.6**] Scotus gives his account of the relation of divine understanding and will. Divine certainty arises from the divine understanding 'seeing' the determination of the divine will. There is a natural ordering of the operations of divine will and understanding which may be connected to distinct instants of nature. In the first instant the divine understanding understands simple things. In the second instant of nature the divine will wills the combination of these simples into states-of-affairs and so the whole of world-history. In the third instant of nature, the divine understanding sees the determination of the divine will and knows what the history of the world will be.

This guarantees the determinateness and certainty of divine knowledge. It is immutable because the divine will, although it might be other than it in fact is, cannot change - there is no time for it to change in. Scotus has thus answered arguments [1.1-[1.3]

The answer to [1.4] is a bit hard to follow. Scotus proposes that we can distinguish a divided from a composite reading of 'God knows that A'. He seems to have in mind the distinction between 'necessarily (if God knows that A, then A) - the composite reading, which is true - and 'if God knows that A, then necessarily A', the divided reading, which is false.

Scotus' theory provides an answer to [1.5] divine knowledge is compatible with the contingency of things in the way shown.

[**6**] **Scotus Replies to the Arguments for the Other Side.**

[**6.1.1**] [To 2.1.1] Truth in claims about the future is different to truth in claims about the past and present.

[**6.1.2**] [To 2.1.2] For God to know one of a pair of contradictory opposites is not an imperfection.

[**6.2.1**] [To 2.2.1] The argument form is not valid. The argument 'God believes that E will occur, E will not occur; therefore God is deceived is valid' but this does not imply that 'God believes that E will occur, that E will not occur is possible; therefore it is possible that God is deceived' is valid. If it were the case that E will not occur , then the first premiss would be false since God would then know that E will not occur and so the conclusion would also be false.

[**6.2.2**] [To 2.2.2] [Hard to follow] If I assume that I sit tomorrow, then no impossibility follows from this alone but only from this and the further supposition that God knows that I will not sit tomorrow.

[**6.3.1**] [To 2.3.1] There is no transition and no change in divine understanding since there is no temporal series.

[**6.3.2**] [To 2.3.2] 'can be' does not imply 'can begin to be'.

[**6.3.3**] [To 2.3.3] Divine power is active but this does not imply that it changes from not acting to acting. The divine will is not changed in choosing. Contingency of the divine will

exists without change of the divine will.

[**6.4.1**] [To 2.4.1] The necessity of immutability excludes only temporal succession.

[**6.4.2**] [To 2.4.2] Things that are known are not in God in such a way as to guarantee their absolute necessity.

[**6.4.3**] [To 2.4.3] No unqualified perfection depends on a creature, but knowledge of a creature depends on a creature; therefore knowledge of a creature is not an unqualified perfection.

[**6.5**] [To 2.5.1] 'God knows that A' is not necessary without qualification, but rather only on the condition that A.

[**6.6**] [To 2.5.2] We need to distinguish the different senses of necessity.

[**7**] [**To the arguments for the second opinion**]: Eternity is not present to some non-existent time. Only the present instant of time is now present to eternity.

[**8**] [**To the arguments for the third opinion.**] Scotus notes again that we need to disambiguate claims for necessity and repeats his position that the source of all contingency is the contingency of the first cause - the divine will.