

Notes on Reading 6

William of Ockham (1287?-1347)

In his treatment of Distinction 38 of Book I of his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* Ockham is mainly concerned to refute Scotus' account of reconciliation of divine foreknowledge with human freedom.

The problem

Arguments to show that God does not have determinate and necessary knowledge of all future contingents - Ockham rejects these arguments and so has to show why they fail.

1. God does not have determinate and necessary knowledge of all future contingents.

(a) Not determinate. Since future contingents are not determinately true and what is not determinately true is not determinately known by anyone.

(b) Not necessary. Since if God has necessary knowledge that A, then A is necessary. But if A is necessary it cannot be future contingent. (The 'Consequence Argument' again.)

Arguments to show that God does not have determinate and necessary knowledge of all future contingents - the claims that Ockham accepts.

2. There is scriptural authority for the opposite. God knows everything with determinate knowledge. Plus all of God's knowledge has the same character and the same character as God, it is necessary.

Ockham's Account of Scotus' Theory

3. Ockham summarises, fairly, Scotus' theory - see previous handout.

Scotus' argument according to Ockham:

3.1. We cannot prove that there are future contingents.

(According to Scotus it is a basic observational fact that we must accept that there is contingency in the world.)

3.2. So accept that there are future contingents:

3.3. The source of contingency must lie in God.

3.4. So either in the divine intellect or the divine will.

3.5. Not in the divine intellect since understanding is a natural operation.'

3.6. So the source of contingency must be the divine will.

3.7. To understand the contingency of the divine will we must understand **(A)** how the human will is free and **(B)** how contingency follows from this.

(A) How the human will is free:

3.8. Human will is free in that it can (a) in opposed acts will or not will for (b) opposed objects of willing and (c) these acts may produce opposed effects.

3.9. But (a) is not complete, or perfect, freedom since different acts willing are required and this requires change and nothing which can change is perfect.

3.10. Freedom in respect (b) is complete, or perfect, since there is no limitation on what can be an object of will.

(B) How contingency follows from the freedom of the will.

3.11 Freedom of type (a) involves an **evident** capacity for opposite acts - the capacity that is actualised in willing something at one time and not willing it at a later time.

3.12 In addition there must be an **non-evident** capacity of the will for opposites. That is, a capacity which is not actualised in time - it does not involve the temporal succession of willing something at one time and then not willing it at a later time.

3.13 The proof of this is that it is possible for God to create a free will which exists only for an instant of time.

3.14 So there must be a power in the will for opposites which does not involve any (temporal) succession.

3.15 This non-evident potentiality is naturally prior to its actualisation as a particular act of will. **But the potentiality and the actuality exist simultaneously at the same instant of time.**

3.16 Alternatively we may say that the potentiality as cause is naturally prior to the act of will as effect but **they exist together at the same instant of time.**

3.17 Apply all this to the divine will. The divine will does not change in time and is only a single act of will. But it may will or not will without any temporal succession.

3.18 The divine will is free with respect to everything which is not part of the divine nature. The divine will is naturally prior to all of the effects which it freely causes. In terms of **instants of nature**, the divine will at a prior instant of nature may freely will each of two opposed objects of will, whichever it does will is actual at the posterior instant of nature.

3.19 **Divine knowledge is certain because it sees the contingent determination of the divine will to will one state-of-affairs rather than another, to will one history for the world rather than another.**

3.20 Putting it another way the divine understanding possesses concepts of everything. Certain combinations of concepts produce necessary truths and these are known independently of the action of the divine will in a prior instant of nature. The divine will then chooses all the other combinations of simple concepts which will be true propositions and these are known to be true in a posterior instant of nature.

3.21 This guarantees that the divine will has infallible knowledge of future contingents.

Ockham's Arguments Against Scotus

4.1 Ockham argues against Scotus' account of contingency and the reconciliation of contingency with divine certainty.

(a) Against the claim that there is a 'non-evident capacity for opposites'. A capacity which cannot be actualised is not a capacity at all. But this supposed non-evident capacity cannot be actualised since if it were contradictory propositions - 'x wills A at t' and 'x does not will A at t' - would be true at the same time, which is impossible. Ockham's then claims that we cannot argue in the following way. Suppose it is true at t that x wills A at t, it is also possible at t for x not to will A at t, but if x did not will A at t, it would not be true at t that x wills A at t.

His objection seems to miss the point. He claims that if it is true at t that x wills A at t, then it will ever after be true that x wills A at t and since the past cannot be changed.

(b) Ockham grants that a will which wills A at t may cease to will A but only at a later time. He insists, rightly, that it is not possible that a will at t wills A and does not will A.

(c) Ockham will allow that the will causes contingently only in the sense that it can cease to cause without any change in itself. That is to say it can cause at one time and not cause at a later time. It freely ceases from causing. It is this feature which makes it a free rather than a natural cause. A natural cause cannot cease from causing if nothing external prevents it from causing. For example fire cannot freely cease from heating but it may be prevented from heating something.

(d) Ockham replies to Scotus' arguments by insisting that the will is contingent but that there is no non-evident capacity for opposites without succession. The contingency, i.e. freedom, of the will is simply its power to act and then, later, cease from acting.

(e) Ockham insists that there are not distinct instants of nature at a given instant of time and thus there is no prior instant of nature at which the divine will is able to choose between effects which are actualised at a later instant of nature.

(f) So Ockham insists 'that in general there is never a capacity by means of which opposites are verified without succession.'

4.2 (a) Against Scotus' account of the divine will Ockham argues that it cannot guarantee certainty since it has the will determined in such a way that it could be otherwise.

(b) Either created wills follow God's will necessarily, in which case there is no contingency at all, or they do not, in which case determination by the divine will cannot guarantee certainty.

(c) Since our wills can freely cease from willing, the divine will cannot have determinate cognition of what we will.

(d) Scotus' account of the divine understanding presenting states-of-affairs to the divine will which then chooses which will be actual requires a succession in God. Which is impossible. Of course Scotus would reply that it does not require (temporal) succession but only distinct

instants of nature.

Ockham's own solution

5. Ockham maintains that God has determinate knowledge of all future contingents but it is impossible for us, in the present life, to understand how this is so.

5.1 Ockham reads Aristotle's in de Interpretation 9 as arguing that there is no determinate truth about the future in matters which concern the will. He concludes that Aristotle would hold that God cannot have determinate knowledge of our future choices.

5.2 Nevertheless we must accept that God knows past, present, and future in a single intuitive cognition, that is of facts present to him, through his essence. This cannot, however, be proved by natural reason.

Ockham goes on to indicate that God's knowledge of the future is contingent. It could be otherwise, though without any succession. He notes the distinction between the 'composite' (*de dicto*) and 'divided' (*de re*) readings of 'it is possible that God willing that A will be so wills that A will not be so'. This is false in the composite sense ('it is possible that God wills that A will be so and A will not be so') but true in the divided sense (God wills that A will be so and it is possible that God wills that A will not be so). If we suppose that God does not will that A will be so, as we are allowed to since it is claimed to be possible, there will be no impossibility, rather in that situation since we would not then be committed to God having willed that A will be so.

In terms of Scotus' argument Ockham is claiming that for God, unlike creatures, there is possibility for opposites without (temporal) succession which does not require us to invoke instants of nature. Rather we must say that if we were to chose to act otherwise than we will act, then God would know how we were then going to act. But this would not involve any succession in God's knowledge.

Ockham's answer to the original question.

6. Ockham answers that God has determinate knowledge of future contingents. There are two senses of necessary which need to be distinguished. Since God's knowledge is identical with God's essence and God's essence is necessary God's knowledge of future contingents is necessary. But in another sense God does not necessarily know this future contingent since he might, without any succession know the opposite, that is things might have been otherwise.

(a) Replying to the first argument [(1)] Ockham holds that one part of a contradictory pair of such claims about the future is determinately true but nevertheless contingent.

(b) Addressing Aristotle's argument to the past truth of claims about the future. [If it is true that Socrates will be sitting, it has always been true in the past that Socrates will be sitting]. Ockham claims that **the contingency of the future infects the past**. The claim 'it was true that it will be true that Socrates is sitting' appears to be about the past but it is really about the future. **This is Ockham's great innovation in the theory of the logic of claims about the future.**

(c) To the argument [(2)] from divine necessity to the necessity of the future. Ockham replies that the conclusion does not follow since the necessity of the divine nature is compatible with the contingency of the future according to the distinction made in 6.