

DUNS SCOTUS ON THE WILL: A SUMMARY OF TWO KEY DISTINCTIONS

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Duns Scotus' position on human volition is that the will is a free rational faculty. It is a position based upon important understandings and distinctions regarding potency and appetite. To encapsulate Scotus' take on volition; the human will is a self actualizing rational potency that is both free in elicitation but naturally determined towards the good whenever an act is manifest. This essay will explain this characterization by summarizing these distinctions and the rationale behind them.

Rational vs. Irrational Potencies

Since choice involves an actualization of some potency, we must first see what Scotus means by potency. An *active potency* is a thing's ability to produce something while maintaining its nature, that is, doing only what it can do of itself. Cold produces cold and not heat, as long as it retains the nature of being cold. But something like a cold thing although it is active (because it cools) is nonetheless incapable of acting otherwise. The potency here is *irrational* or *natural* in the sense that it is oriented only towards one result, that of cold.

There can however be another type of active potency, a potency that can produce opposites, and Scotus calls such potency a *rational* potency. Rational potencies are capable of contrary effects. A human being for example, has the power to produce contrary states, say a black object or white object, with no change in its nature. This type of potency also includes the ability to *refrain* from an action, that is the ability to deliberately not act when all conditions for acting are present.¹ Thus we have two important elements with rational potencies:

1. Rational potencies are potencies towards contraries
2. Rational potencies retain the ability to act or not act

The justification for the distinction into irrational and rational potencies is the simple recognition that natural forms like cold or heat are principles for only one of pair of opposites, while intellectual forms are capable of representing opposites. In other words, these two types of active potency are distinguished according to the radically different ways in which they bring about their operations. To enumerate for the sake of clarity, there are two ways that an act may be elicited:

1. Given an irrational potency, the potency is itself determined to act and thus cannot fail to act unless impeded. Natural form only tends towards one of a pair of opposites. Ice cools and never heats, and the converse, of course, is true for fire. These types of potencies are not capable of producing both contraries.
2. Given a rational potency, this potency is not of itself determined. The potency can both perform either this act or its contrary and it can act or not act at all.

Scotus also calls these potencies natural (for the irrational sort) and will (for the rational sort), and hence the primary division of active potencies is into the irrational (nature) and rational (will).

¹ Allan B. Wolter, trans. & ed., *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), p. 147. Wolter has taken these texts from the Wadding reprint edition of Scotus' *Opera Omnia* tom. VII, *Quaestiones subtilissimae super libros Metaphysicae Aristotelis*. Further references will refer to Wolter's text.

If someone were to ask *why* is it the case that nature has this sort of potency and the will another, Scotus responds simply that it is their nature to do so and there is no other reason. Just as ‘fire is hot’ because that is the nature of fire, so too “the will wills” because that is what it is and the mode in which it causes. The will is entirely free in this sense, a “self-mover” and an “uncaused cause” at least in its acts of willing. Not even God can *make* the will *freely* choose something, for that would entail a contradiction.

But no sooner does Scotus make this distinction than one is left to wonder about the *omne quod movetur* principle (“Whatever is moved is moved by another”). Scotus’ answer is that he *denies* the principle. Scotus does not think the principle is not necessarily true – and he cites a list of exceptions. The will is such an exception, and can determine itself, that is, *the will can actualize its own potency*. When the will decides to act or not-act, it alone makes such a determination. In this sense, the will moves itself from a state of indeterminacy to action or not-action and Scotus has no qualms about denying what thinkers like Aquinas took to be self-evident.²

To elaborate on this point, Scotus makes a distinction (no surprise here) and says there are two types of indeterminacy. One, which he calls “indeterminacy of insufficiency” (*indeterminatio insufficientiae*) is insufficiency in the way which matter is insufficient because it contains an insufficiency of actualization by form. The needed satisfaction is simply not there at all. This sort of insufficiency is not actualized until an *extrinsic* form determines it, and it is this sort of indeterminacy that is meant by the *omne quod movetur* principle.

The other sort of indeterminacy however is a “superabundant sufficiency” (*superabundantis sufficientiae*) and is based upon an unlimited actuality (in a qualified or unqualified sense). Something indeterminate in this sense can determine itself. It is indeterminate only in the sense of a sort of perfection or power that makes it unrestricted to a particular act. To put it simply, far from being indeterminate because of a *lack*, this sort is indeterminate because of an *abundance*, and because of this abundance “it is the indeterminacy of surpassing perfection and power, not restricted to some specific act.”³

Scotus’ position on the will then is that it is an active potency, which is rational and capable of contraries, and is indeterminate in the sense of superabundant sufficiency, viz., it has the power to determine itself.

Natural vs. Free Appetites

All grant that desire or appetite is involved with volition, but precisely *how* appetite is incorporated into volition is another matter. Generally speaking, an appetite is an inclination towards something. Taken in a proper sense, Scotus thinks the will is more than just an appetite, rather it is a free appetite combined with reason. Yet, even for Scotus one could say there is a *twofold appetite of the will*; a *natural appetite* and a *free appetite*.

The Will’s Natural Appetite

A stone has a natural appetite to fall to the earth when dropped. It is necessitated to do so, and similarly the will has its own form of natural inclination similar to the stone. This natural appetite of the will is defined as “simply the inclination the will has to its own perfection”⁴ in other words; this natural appetite *seeks happiness necessarily*. This inclination to the good is always present in it, and so it is not elicited.

² Wolter, 37, cf., Roy Effler, O.F.M., *John Duns Scotus and the Principle "Omne quod movetur ab alio movetur"* (St. Bonaventure, 1962).

³ *Quaestiones in Metaphysicam* IX q. 15 a.2 ad. 2, Wolter, 155

⁴ *Ordinatio* IV, suppl. dist. 49, qq. 9-10 a.1; Wolter, pp. 185.

This is an important point for Scotus. The will considered as a nature seeks happiness necessarily, and it is a seeking that does not follow upon knowledge. The will considered as nature is *determined* to happiness both in general and towards particular occasions of happiness. It is simply that the nature of the will is oriented towards the good in the same way the nature of the stone's "heaviness" is oriented towards the earth when dropped. The necessary inclination to happiness is always present in the will and if this inclination were gone, the nature of the will would be destroyed.

The Will's Free Appetite

This does not mean that Scotus thinks the *whole* of the volitional power is necessarily inclined towards the good. We must not confuse Scotus' position with that of Aquinas. Aquinas thought ultimately the will was necessitated towards the good as an end, but any object of our experience does not exhaust the totality of goodness. Given any particular of our experience, there is always some "non-good" left over. Take any two choices; say cake or vegetables. The cake is good because perhaps you like the taste of sweets and that's why you want it. However this goodness is mixed with a down side - you do not want to become unhealthy by eating too much cake. The vegetables come in here. They are good because they provide nutrition, but they do not completely exhaust goodness because the down side is their flavor is not as pleasant as cake. So in this choice, you are choosing between two goods - taste vs. health. *Insofar as either choice lacks being a complete good, to that degree you can opt to not choose it.* The non-goodness of any choice leaves "wobble room" for free will. If something were completely and totally good, you would be forced to take it. Aquinas argued that nothing, at least in this world, can be completely good, so therefore nothing in this world will completely compel your will.

Scotus rejects Aquinas' position:

...it seems to me the following involves a contradiction: "All necessarily desire happiness in general when they apprehend it, but this is not the case when they know of happiness in the particular... Also the universal does not contain any greater perfection than does the particular. Indeed, the particular seems rather to add perfection beyond that of the universal; therefore happiness in general bespeaks no greater perfection than beatitude in particular... Also how can both these statements be true "The will necessarily desires happiness known in general" and "The intellect, without a shadow of a doubt, dictates that happiness is only to be found in this particular end, and nevertheless, the will need not necessarily will this particular end."? This is saying nothing less than that the will seeks the same thing necessarily and not necessarily.⁵

Scotus resists any attempt to make the freedom of the will dependent on anything other than itself. The ground for freedom is the very nature of the will, not in ignorance of the intellect. Because the will is free, any object proposed by the intellect can influence the will but the proposed object cannot determine the will to act towards it. It seems Scotus rejects Aquinas' position because he thinks either it reduces to the Socratic position whereby moral error is due to intellectual error, or that denying this, it reduces to contradiction (given a case where one is determined ultimately by the good, and one knows a particular choice is good and yet still does not choose it). To base freedom like Aquinas does, on the indetermination of the intellect with respect to two choices, is to do nothing else than base freedom on a *defect*, a lack of certainty or ignorance, making freedom of the will a wretched thing and not a perfection.⁶

⁵ *Ordinatio* IV, suppl. dist. 49, qq. 9-10 a.2; Wolter, *pp.* 187 -9. This notion of the particular having a greater degree of perfection and happiness than the general is an interesting prelude to Newman's emphasis on having a real assent vs. a notional assent. The real assent is the firm conviction in a person or particular, while the notional assent is a weaker assent towards an abstract truth.

⁶ See Patrick Lee's "The Relation Between Intellect and Will in Free Choice According to Aquinas and Scotus," *The Thomist* 49 (1985) pp. 327-8

For Scotus, necessarily seeking happiness pertains only to the will's natural appetite; there is also the *free appetite*. Under this formality, the will is not necessitated towards anything. Any interference here would cripple the will's freedom. The will has the power of self-determination and it can actualize its own potency. This actualization is free in that any act is elicited contingently and this contingency rests solely within the will itself. Rather than necessitating an object for freedom, Scotus argues that the *will does not out of necessity will happiness* – neither in the general nor in the particular. The will only contingently wills happiness, and even usually does so in actual cases. Scotus thinks the free appetite usually follows the natural appetite and is indeed habituated and inclined to follow the natural appetite for the most part. In this regard, Scotus agrees with most who think misery is an unsuitable object for volition.

The reason an act of willing misery or nilling happiness is excluded from the will is that misery is not suited by nature to be an object of volition any more than happiness is naturally suited to be an object of nolation ... I admit, then, that the will is determined to will happiness and to nill misery to this extent that *if it should elicit some act with respect to these objects, it is limited and has to elicit an act of willing in regard to happiness and an act of nilling as to regards misery*. Nevertheless, it is not absolutely determined to elicit either the one act or the other.⁷

So via the free appetite, the will is not necessitated to *elicit* an action, but *if* it does decide to do so, it then must, by virtue of the natural appetite, choose the good and avoid misery. No object, no matter how good, necessitates the elicitation. Not even the blessed in Heaven are necessitated by the Beatific Vision, and are only prevented from sinning by God extrinsically preserving their impeccability.⁸ This is a key departure from a position like Aquinas'. Faced with the option of pure goodness, the will can still opt to not act, and in this sense, the will does not will happiness necessarily.

Summary

So in sum, the will as far as its natural appetite goes, wills happiness necessarily. Whenever the will seeks something, it is because of happiness. But it can suspend action and refrain from pursuing the good and is capable of doing this in regards to any object. The will is only determined to happiness if it decides to act. The elicitation of the act itself must remain free of any necessitation and Scotus thinks this is something that anyone can experience for himself when offered some good. If in fact the will does decide to elicit an action, this potency is actualized only by the will because of the kind of indeterminacy it is. It seems then that we can infer from Scotus that there are two logical stages in every human act of volition:

1. **Free Appetite Stage:** The decision to act/ not-act - This stage is entirely up to the will's free appetite because here is an instance of an indeterminacy of superabundant sufficiency. Each and every elicited act is absolutely free and the will actualizes its only indeterminate in the sense of "superabundant sufficiency" and can thus move itself.
2. **Natural Appetite Stage:** The action itself after consenting to an action in step 1. The natural appetite dominates this stage and each act, given its elicitation in step one, is necessitated towards happiness.

The following diagram may be helpful in pulling these distinctions together:

⁷ Wolter, 193 emphasis added

⁸ Lee, 328

Scotus' Distinctions of Potencies and Appetites in Regards to the Will

Active Potency

Rational

e.g., will

self-determined

indeterminacy - "superabundant sufficiency"
exception to the *omne quod movetur* principle

Free Appetite

Undetermined

alone determines elicitation of act
capable of choosing contrary actions

Natural Appetite

Determined

if action is elicited by the free appetite,
action is determined towards happiness

Irrational

e.g., stone

"indeterminacy of insufficiency"
always moved by another

Natural Appetite

Determined

determined to act by another
not capable of producing both contraries