

1-1-1991

Duns Scotus: A Brief Introduction to his Life and Thought

Jeremiah Hackett

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hackett, Jeremiah (1991) "Duns Scotus: A Brief Introduction to his Life and Thought," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1.
Available at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol26/iss1/37>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu.

Jeremiah Hackett

Duns Scotus: A Brief Introduction to his Life and Thought

In his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce presents the aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas in the following manner:

Look at the basket, he said . . . In order to see that basket, said Stephen, your mind first of all separates the basket from the rest of the visible universe which is not the basket. The first phase of apprehension is a bounding line drawn about the object to be apprehended. An esthetic image is presented to us either in space or in time. What is audible is presented in space. But, temporal or spatial, the esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as selfbounded and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space and time which is not it. You apprehend it as *one* thing. You see it as one whole. You apprehend its wholeness. That is *integritas*.¹

Taken with simple apprehension, and the act of judgment which grasps the concrete individual existence of objects, Joyce's account presents in road outline elements of a Thomistic aesthetic. Yet, a problem arises for the Thomistic aesthetic: if real scientific demonstrative knowledge in the Aristotelian sense is about universals, how can there be any genuine knowledge of the individual?

Duns Scotus, from his early years as a philosopher and theologian was confronted with this problem from within Aristotelian philosophy. And he

¹James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Text, Criticism, and Notes, ed. Chester G. Anderson (New York, 1968), p. 212.

gave a novel answer to it, one which differed from the Thomistic account. What does Scotus say about *integritas*?

He says:

Beauty is not some kind of absolute quality in the beautiful object. It is rather an aggregate (*aggregatio*) of all the properties of such objects—for example, magnitude, shape, and color, and the sum of all the connections among themselves and between themselves and the object.²

For Aquinas, the unity of the *substantial form* (and there was only one substantial form for any living being), guaranteed both the unity of knowledge and the unity of the object of aesthetic experience. For Scotus, on the contrary, the unity of a composite living being does not require the unity of a single form, but only the subordination of the forms of the parts, none of which is abolished, to an ultimate form.

And this is where the famous Scotist *Haecceitas* comes in. *Haecceitas* "This-ness" is not the perfecting of form—which of its nature is universal. Rather, it gives to the whole composite living being a concrete particularity. It is quite different from Aquinas's *quidditas*, or "whatness": the latter names the essential, the typical. *Haecceitas* is a principle which completes a thing to the point where it is irreducibly concrete. "The ultimate specific difference," says Duns Scotus, "is simply to be different from everything else (*ultima differentia specifica est primo diversa ab alia*)."³ Individuals, therefore, are superior to essences.

Both Aquinas and Scotus placed great importance on the individual as distinct from the universal. Yet, both did come up with a doctrine of the knowledge of the individual. For Aquinas, the individual was more perfect than the universal because it had (shared in) participated in what he called "esse" (act of existence). For Duns Scotus, the individual is more perfect because it is a unique thing which is defined by its own uniqueness. For him, something is included in the very nature of the individual (*ratio individui*) which is lacking in the shared nature (*natura communi*—for example, humanity as such).

Thus, for Duns Scotus each single person in this room by virtue of their proper name (John Jones) has a specific individual nature—he or she is as we would say "a character." But apart from writing about *Haecceitas*, what can

²Cited in Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), p. 206.

³Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 206.

we say in real historical-scientific terms about Duns Scotus, and about his place in the History of Philosophy?

First, who was he? Where was he born? The German philosopher Heidegger once began a course, I think, on Aristotle: "He was born, he lived, he died. Now let's get on with the Philosophy." That is all well and good. But a little prosopography and local history may shed light on the *weltanschauung* of a philosopher.

What do we know about the life of Duns Scotus? Very little. But enough to recognize his "cultural mentality." He was a born Scot and a medieval Franciscan friar, an enthusiastic devotee of St. Francis. Both were, I maintain, essential to his "character." In both, he would have lived in a world where Nature mattered. A mysticism of nature and the natural cosmos (Is there another cosmos?) is clearly in the foreground. Jeremy Catto in the *History of Oxford University* says:

His life is encrusted with legend; though there is no reason to doubt his connection with Duns in Berwickshire and his Scotch origin, all other details of his early life have been shown to depend on eighteenth-century forgeries. Equally legendary is his fellowship at Merton. In fact nothing is known of him before his ordination at Northampton in 1291, when he was evidently studying in Oxford. He was still there in 1300 when he was licensed to hear confessions. On the evidence of his mention in Worcester Cathedral Manuscript Q.99 he was a *baccalaureus responsalis* in 1300-1, having presumably read the Sentences in 1298-09, and would have studied theology at Oxford since 1288 if he had kept rigorously to the statutes.⁴

He read the Sentences a third time in Paris after 1302. He spent most of his remaining years in Paris, where he became Regent Master in Theology. He may have returned from Paris to Oxford for a short time during the debacle between Philip the Fair and Pope Boniface VIII. He spent the last months of his life at the Franciscan *studium* in Cologne at what was the nascent University of Cologne. There, he was the *lector* or reader.

We must, therefore, see Duns Scotus as a Scotsman, who in his day was a true European. And as is usual in these matters, everyone wants a piece of the successful person. Hence, the medieval slogan about Scotus: Well, maybe it is not medieval, but it is the inscription on his tomb since 1870, which to a modern person is about as distant from us as the middle ages:

⁴The *History of the University of Oxford*, ed. T. H. Ashton: *The Early Oxford Schools*. ed. J. I. Catto (Oxford, 1984), J. I. Catto, "Theology and Theologians 1220-1320," I, 505-6.

Scotia me genuit Anglia me suscepit; Gallia me docuit, Colonia me tenet.

Scotland gave birth to me; England received me (welcomed me as a scholar),
France educated me, and Cologne now possesses me.

Before proceeding further to examine the manner in which Scotland, England, France and Germany claim the great Scotus, just a brief word about his Scottish origins.

When was he born? Scholars place his birth about 1265/66. We do know that between 1278/79 a Father Elias Duns, the Subtle Doctor's uncle, brought his nephew to the friary of Dumfries. Other than that, we have no information before the reference to his ordination in Northampton in 1291. Father Brockies' 10 volume *Registrum*, a sixteenth century work contains the name John Duns, but scholars have denied the claim to Littledean as the place of origin. The family may have lived in Maxton, but in any event, the consensus is that the family came from Duns in Berwickshire.

What kind of works in Philosophy did Scotus leave us? What monument? Again let Catto speak:

The essential vehicle of his ideas was the commentary on the Sentences, which he and his contemporaries transformed into a literary form for speculation; and his major literary task was the revision of his numerous lecture-courses to produce a definitive commentary, the *Ordinatio*. Assisi manuscript 137, which derives directly from his autograph, witnesses to a late stage in the process, which in a sense continued after his death with the *additiones magnae* of his pupils. His other authentic work was the result, it seems, of his teaching: several commentaries on Aristotle's logic and metaphysics, concurrent with the *Ordinatio*; *collationes* or private disputations, held in the *studia* at Oxford or Paris; and two theological treatises, *De primo principio* and *Theoremata*. They are all ancillary to the *Ordinatio*, and the successive series of lectures, followed by the process of revision and correction, suggest that Scotus conceived of his theology as a unity, of which a definitive version could ultimately be given. Had he lived longer a more mature and magisterial version might have been published.⁵

What is the current status of his works? The *Opera omnia* was first edited by my countryman of origin, Luke Wadding, who in the terrible seventeenth century departed Ireland and labored in Italy to edit Scotus and other Franciscan writers. Another Irishman, Maurice O'Fehily, living in Padua, Italy, had edited Scotus's *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle* in 1497, and published the work in Venice. But then, these and some Englishmen were continuing a tradition of scholars who, like Scotus, had gone

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 506-7.

to Paris in the early fourteenth century, scholars who *with* John Duns Scotus refused to obey Philip the Fair, and with Scotus, had to leave Paris and go back to Oxford in the early fourteenth century, namely Ricardus Hibernensis, Odo Hibernensis and Thomas Anglicus.

What about modern editions and translations? In the heyday of the Neo-Scholastic revival, attention was given to the critical Edition of Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure, Alexander of Hales and others. In 1927, under Ephrem Longpré, a Scotistic Commission was set up to prepare editions and translations of the works of Scotus. Since 1938, this Commission has yielded good results: the authentic works have been separated from the spurious. Thirteen of the published authentic works from Wadding-Vives edition and four from other Renaissance editions have been critically edited. Others remain to be done. And presently, the Scotist Commission has gotten down to work again to complete the full edition. About five years ago, the works of Scotus's main opponent and critic, William of Ockham, *Anglicanus*, were finally edited in a fine critical edition. And now, the scholars are at work to complete the Scotus critical edition.

The lack of translations of Scotus has meant that young modern scholars, who generally may not read Latin, cannot gain access to Scotus. This is being remedied in part by the fine work of Fr. Allan Bernard Wolter. His Library of Liberal Arts: The Writings of Scotus, his newly published translations of Scotus's Moral Philosophy, and his recently published critical account of Scotus's Philosophical Theology (Cornell University Press) has set out the groundwork. But we still lack a major critical study akin to Marilyn McCord Adams' comprehensive two volumes on William of Ockham entitled *William Ockham*. Still a reading of the latter points up the crucial differences of "mentalité" between the Scotsman and his English contemporary, Ockham. Despite differences, major differences in philosophy, William of Ockham admired Scotus "on account of his great knowledge of logic."

The Philosophy of Duns Scotus. First, to clear the air of some legendary ideas. Normally, Scotus suffers in the modern neo-scholastic revival by being contrasted unfavorably with St. Thomas Aquinas. Scotus did not get elevated to Sainthood. But he was a holy person. In real terms, Scotus was not answering Aquinas. He knew some works by Aquinas, and in some respects, both Aquinas and Scotus shared a common concern: the interpretation for the Christian World of the philosophy of Aristotle. And despite evident differences of rhetoric, position, doctrine, in some major respects, they are not as different as some modern authors have argued.

The medieval world, no less than the modern, had intellectual fads. Scotus belongs to that generation, the second generation after the Parisian

Condemnations of Aristotelian Philosophy in 1270 and 1277. In those condemnations, the Augustinian theologians led by Bishop Stephen Tempier severely criticized the Aristotelianism of the Arts-Faculty, led by Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia (Denmark). Nevertheless, the fallout affected even Aquinas, whose philosophy and theology came under suspicion. Among Oxford theologians, especially, including John Pecham and Robert Kilwardby, Aquinas was anathema. One of the leaders of the neo-Augustinians was Henry of Ghent. A truly great and comprehensive scholar and theologian, Henry defended the Augustinian doctrine of Divine Illumination. That is, our actual empirical-rational knowledge is ultimately based on a Divine Illumination, thus raising serious questions about the "autonomy" of human knowledge. Thus, God as illuminator is the ground and condition of possibility of natural human knowledge. There seemed little room then for an authentic naturalism of human knowledge. Aquinas, while holding to a notion of Divine Illumination, curtailed the neo-Augustinian view, and argued for a proper "lumen naturale," a proper authentic mode of human knowledge, which he explained by means of the doctrine of *abstraccio* and *conversio ad phantasmata*. But it was left to Scotus and to his radical doctrine of the univocity of Being to completely change the whole metaphysics and epistemology of the middle ages and the early modern period. He simply rejected Henry of Ghent's views.

For Scotus, it is not God, but rather Being, which is the proper object of human knowledge. In Aquinas, the sensible material object was the object of knowledge. But in Scotus, it was something called Being. This entails a complete separation between theology and philosophy. No harmonious synthesis such as Thomism will do. Philosophy is philosophy and is concerned with Being. Theology is concerned with the understanding of faith as St. Anselm, following Augustine, had set out. *Fides quaerens intellectum*. And while *fides* would need the aid of philosophical *intellectum* to clarify its ideas as human ideas, the basis of *fides* was in *fides* itself. This, however, did not make Scotus a fideist, since as we shall see, his philosophy is open to the divine, even if, as philosophy, it is truly autonomous and free.

In what remains of this paper, I will outline the modern judgments on Scotus's philosophy, and I will end by speaking about Scotus's influence on later philosophy.

Charles S. Pierce, the nineteenth century American Philosopher, was the one who clearly acknowledged the importance of Duns Scotus as one of the greatest metaphysicians.⁶ He analyzed Duns Scotus's view on individuality and universality. He also developed a theory of meaning and signs which argues for a form of realism. Duns Scotus had made realism the basis of his

⁶See J. F. Boler, *Charles Pierce and Scholastic Realism* (Seattle, 1963).

system. When the *via moderna* of nominalism was instituted in the later middle ages, it stood against the realism of the *via antiqua*, that of Duns Scotus and Aquinas.

In 1916, a young German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, wrote a habilitationsschrift on Duns Scotus. It was entitled *The Doctrine of the Categories and the Teaching of Meaning in Duns Scotus*.⁷ However, only the first part of this thesis was based on the texts of Duns Scotus. The sections which dealt with unity and truth showed a clear understanding of the texts of Duns Scotus. The second part of the thesis on the nature of meaning was based on the Pseudo-Duns Scotus (=Thomas of Erfurt) whose work *The Grammatica Speculativa* had been edited with the authentic works of Duns Scotus in Luke Waddings' edition. Nevertheless, it is evident that Heidegger, like Pierce, had a clear affinity for the thought of Duns Scotus. One may not be far wrong in seeing some connection between the doctrine of *Haecceitas* (the irreducibly concrete nature of individuality) and the doctrine of *da-sein* and *Sein* in Heidegger.

Duns Scotus's doctrine on Being and the Transcendentals, the heart of his metaphysics, is set forth clearly in Allan Wolter's *The Transcendentals and their Function in the Metaphysics of Duns Scotus* (Washington, DC, 1946). In 1952 Etienne Gilson presented his major study of Duns Scotus: *Jean Duns Scot: Introduction à ses positions fondamentales* (Paris). And in her work *William Ockham* (Notre Dame, 1987), Marilyn McCord Adams outlines the nature of the metaphysics of Duns Scotus in so far as it relates to his polemic with William of Ockham.

The greatest need which a modern reader has in regard to Duns Scotus is the existence of readable and reliable translations. This need has now been answered by a series of translations by Allan Wolter. His translations stand with his Latin text on facing pages. Three groups of translations should be noted. i) *Philosophical Writings: A Selection* (Edinburgh, 1962); the English text was published separately in 1962, and was reprinted as *Philosophical Writings: A Selection* (Indianapolis, 1987); ii) *A Treatise on God as First Principle* (Chicago, 1966); iii) *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, Selected and Translated with an Introduction (Washington, DC, 1986).

The most recent publication of Allan Wolter on Duns Scotus is Marilyn McCord Adams, ed., *The Philosophical Theology of John Duns Scotus* (Ithaca and London, 1990). This latter work contains Wolter's important philosophical analysis of the work of Duns Scotus, and it includes not only work on the philosophical theology but also work on the metaphysics and epistemology as well as papers on action theory and ethics. This work is a

⁷See Martin Heidegger, *Frühe Schriften*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, (*Die Kategorien-und Bedeutungslehre des Duns Scotus*) (Frankfurt am Main, 1978), I, 189-412.

requirement for anyone who aspires to seriously understand the teaching of Duns Scotus.

Duns Scotus had a very rich theory of action and he had a very rich ethics. His doctrine of the will is very important. Indeed, traditional historians of philosophy have done a grave injustice to the richness of this theory in Duns Scotus. For an accurate and true account of Duns Scotus's theory of the will, one must turn to the texts in Wolter's *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*.

That Duns Scotus's doctrine of the will ranks amongst the forefront of philosophical thinking on the topic of the will can be seen from the lively discussion of the Will in Duns Scotus which is presented in the Gifford Lectures given by Hannah Arendt in 1978. In volume two of *The Life of the Mind*, entitled *Will*, Duns Scotus stands with Augustine, Nietzsche and Heidegger as an interpreter of the doctrine of the will.

In a recent study *Relations: Medieval Theories 1250-1325* (Oxford, 1989), Mark Henninger devotes a chapter to Duns Scotus's ideas on Relations. He concludes that Duns Scotus's realist doctrine of relations set the context for future debate on the issue. This was due to the rigor and thoroughness of his analysis of diverse viewpoints.

It is clear then that Duns Scotus has had admirers among modern philosophers. Yet, the production of critical editions of the works of Duns Scotus, especially of the critical text by the *Commissio Scotista*, has been a very slow process. The critical texts come to nine volumes, and the all-important *Oxford Commentary on the Sentences* has not yet been completed.

Thankfully, effort has taken place to expedite this work. And researchers in the study of Duns Scotus such as Professor Dumont at Toronto have promised critical studies of themes in Duns Scotus in the near future. One hopes that the future of Duns Scotus studies will be a bright one.

I began with a reference to James Joyce, the student of old Aquinas. He was a member of my alma mater before my time. But his memory was there in UCD in my time. Like Joyce, we worshipped books. But for Joyce to be possible, there had to be teachers, and these teachers, including those with strange English names, like Darlington and Hopkins, and in my times names like Bliss and Bethel, have to be honored too. And talking about Hopkins, how can one forget Scotus and *Haecceitas*. The whole poetic vision of Hopkins exhibits the doctrine of Scotus. And not just the bare thread, but the whole cloth, the whole intense concentration of the parts which make up Scotus's thought and aesthetic-religious experience.

And what of *Anglia me suscepit*. It did. And to quote Catto:

With Scotus the Oxford school of theology reached its zenith, for the first time it was the equal of Paris as a centre of original thought. He was the first of the Oxford Masters strongly to influence thought in the older university, and the critical,

independent spirit of fourteenth-century Oxford begins with him. That the thought of Scotus was a product of Oxford is still not generally agreed. . . . His Oxford lectures therefore reflect the quality of the Oxford schools, and since they already contain the essentials of his ideas, it is fair to see his career at the starting point of a new and independent phase in Oxford theology.⁸

Catto's argument could be given great impact were one to point out that in the Oxford of the 1280s and 1290s, Scotus would have lived in the same house of study as the aging but vigorous Roger Bacon.

And what of Scotland? Did England, France and Germany steal Scotus? (Not to mention the USA with C. S. Pierce and modern semiotics.)

No. When we look to the eve of the Reformation and to that brave group of Scottish educators and clerics who labored in Scotland and in Paris, we see the fruit of Scotus's work. We see the work of *John Major and his Circle* (to use the title of the study by A. Broadie): James Liddell, Hector Boece, John Mair, David Cranston, Robert Caubraith, George Lokert, William Manderston, Gilbert Crab, William Cranston.⁹ Take John Mair as an example.

Born in Glengornie in East Lothian, he forms the real link between the "critical realism" of John Duns Scotus and the so-called "common sense" philosophy in the old Scottish universities. The author of the *Historia Majoris Britanniae tam Angliae quam Scotiae*, he is rightly to be celebrated in the history of thought primarily for his work in logic and epistemology and in providing a bridge between medieval and modern philosophy. Teacher at the Colleges of Montaigu and Navarre in Paris, he was influenced by William of Ockham, but he retained that Scottish tradition of critical realism: it ain't proved until it is proved. And a man is not guilty unless proven so.

John Mair, apart from being a founder of a great University tradition, was at a crucial time the teacher of John Calvin. And it is the considered argument of Thomas F. Torrance that (to use the author's title) *The*

⁸Catto, pp. 505-6.

⁹Alexander Broadie, *The Circle of John Mair: Logic and Logicians in Pre-Reformation Scotland* (Oxford, 1985). For a critical assessment of the status and influence of Scottish Philosophers in the renaissance, see the recently published essay by Alexander Broadie, "Philosophy in Renaissance Scotland: Loss and Gain," in John MacQueen, ed., *Humanism in Renaissance Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 75-96. See especially his summary judgment: "A history of sixteenth-century Scottish culture that failed to take into account the contribution of the philosophers, would give a seriously misleading picture, as would a history of Scottish philosophy that did not place considerable emphasis on the achievements of that century. The Scots, a nation of philosophers, did themselves justice in the Scottish renaissance" (p. 93).

Hermeneutics of John Calvin were learned at the feet of John Mair in Paris.¹⁰

Brief account: 1524 Calvin entered the College de Montaigu, came under the influence of Antonio Coronel, pupil of John Mair. Mair had left Paris for Scotland in 1518 where he taught in Glasgow and St. Andrews, but returned to Paris and Montaigu in 1525 during Calvin's second year at the College, and resumed lecturing in biblical exposition and theology as well as in philosophy and physics. While Calvin was there Major published works on Aristotle including a commentary on his *Ethics*, a new work of his own on Logic *Quaestiones Logicales*, eight books on the physics and natural philosophy, new editions of his Commentaries on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, and by 1529 completed his Expositions on the Four Gospels which Calvin must have heard as lectures. Thus it was in the heyday of Major's work and influence at Montaigu as "Professor of Sacred Letters" that Calvin received his training in Medieval Philosophy and logic and his first instruction in biblical and patristic theology.

Calvin's natural philosophy, his philosophical and theological language, his interpretation of scripture is indebted to Major and through Major to Duns Scotus and his doppelganger William of Ockham. And did Calvin acknowledge the debt? No. Not explicitly. And let us not forget that a fellow-student with Calvin for one year was none other than Ignatius of Loyola. Further, let us not forget that Major influenced not only Calvin but students from all over Europe. In Paris, the Scottish voice reached a whole continent.

University of South Carolina

¹⁰Thomas F. Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (Edinburgh, 1988). Monograph Supplements to the *Scottish Journal of Theology*.