

Time and Contingency in Duns Scotus

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Scotus' teaching on time presents two difficulties: one concerns the elucidation of the intricate texts in which the issue is raised, the other concerns the evolution of Scotus, who seems to have held different views at different stages of his career. The goals of this paper are to locate Scotus' views on time within the inquiry into the relation of time and eternity which itself stands at the core of the foreknowledge and future contingents debate and to demonstrate that the question concerning the ontological status of time is related to Scotus' teaching on contingency and possibility. Taking a departure from recent interpretations, the author argues that Scotus' discussion is not properly understood if we project upon it the twentieth-century debate between an indexical conception of time and a presentist one.

What reality, if any, can we attribute to time? What is the status of the past and the future? Is the flow of time objective? In one of the most recently published essays on the question of time in Scotus, Neil Lewis writes that: "Earlier philosophers grappled with these issues but often did so in ways that made it unclear just how to interpret their remarks. Scotus is no exception. He has many things to say that suggest a stance on these issues, but it is often unclear exactly what his view is."¹ I share Lewis' concern; indeed, the exact nature of Scotus' teaching on time is obstructed by two main difficulties: one concerns the elucidation of Scotus' highly intricate texts in which the issue is raised, the other concerns the evolution of Scotus' thought, for he seems to have held different views at different stages of his brief career, often leaving scholars to discuss not what Scotus said, but rather, what he could have said.²

Obviously, the following pages cannot pretend to resolve all the difficulties. Yet, it is at least possible to (a) locate Scotus' views on the nature of time within his inquiry into the relation of time and eternity which itself stands at the core of the foreknowledge and future contingents debate. Furthermore, it is possible to (b) demonstrate that the question concerning the ontological status of time must be related to Scotus' teaching on contingency and possibility. These two points are particularly important for the contemporary debate that tends to set the medieval discussion of time in general and the Scotist teaching in particular within the framework of a contemporary alternative between indexical vs. flux-conception of time.³ The goal of this paper is to demonstrate the unity of Scotus' inquiry by casting it in this new perspective.

¹ Neil Lewis, "Space and Time" in *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, ed. Thomas Williams, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 83.

² On the question of the evolution of Scotus' views on time, see Lewis (*op. cit.*) and Richard Cross' *The Physics of Duns Scotus*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), Chapter 13 in particular. Cross argues that Scotus' doctrine evolved to the point of ultimately rejecting the flow of time. Lewis' account is more nuanced and convincing. From the fact that Scotus rejects the idea of a "flowing now," it does not follow that he denies the reality of time flow. In this paper, I will leave aside the issue of Scotus' evolution.

³ The first view is explicitly credited to J. M. E. McTaggart, the second one is less often referred to a particular author, but one can think here of McTaggart's contemporary, Henri Bergson.

I Time and Motion

Since the pioneering work of Pierre Duhem in his monumental *Medieval Cosmology (Le système du monde, 1909–1916)*,⁴ it appears to most scholars that Scotus brought about a very significant departure from prior accounts of time by not only separating time from the consideration of motion, but also by suggesting that there can be time without motion. This is not to say that Scotus embraces an absolute time conception however, for he does not dispute a basic assumption of Aristotle's physics; namely, motion exhibits continuity and an anterior-posterior ordering that is logically prior to that of time. This claim is not simply epistemic (i.e., we *know* time from the consideration of motion), it also entails that *actual* time does depend on celestial motion. Yet, this is not sufficient simply to identify time with the circular motion of the outermost sphere. Rather, it seems preferable to say that time is an *attribute* of motion for two interrelated reasons: (a) other motions may occur without the first motion, as the biblical account in Joshua 10:13 of the heaven standing still suggests. However, if, according to this account, some other motion occurred, then time must also have occurred in some sense. In this case, time remains dependent on motion, but the latter need not be identified with celestial motion. (b) What about a total absence of motion? Scotus suggests that such could be the state of the bodies of the blessed. However, if something is in a genuine state of rest, there still must be a sense in which there is time, since we measure rest no less than motion by time.

In order to resolve the difficulties raised by these two scenarios, Scotus affirms the existence of a potential time. With respect to the second state of affairs, the bodies of the blessed, while at rest, still retain their natural capacity for motion. This capacity, however, entails a *potential* time since we measure rest by reference to the time a motion would have taken had it occurred. With respect to the first case, Scotus argues that: "When the heaven stands still, Peter will be able to walk after the resurrection, and yet that motion is not considered to be in any time other than our common continuous time. Yet it exists, while the first motion of the heaven does not" (*Ord.* II, d. 2 p. 2, q. 7 n. 502). This does not mean that Peter's walking occurs in our time, since our time is an attribute of the actual motion of the first heaven, but that potential time is the time that would occur if this motion were actual. It seems that this potential time would have a flow and a duration, yet, without movement, thus, at least as long as we are within the framework of an Aristotelian physics, it would have to be without number.⁵ The introduction of the actual/potential distinction within the question of time is crucial for it leads to a dynamic, rather than a static, conception of time and grants a peculiar status to time that will help restate the paradoxes of the continuum and the divisible.

⁴ For a partial English translation of this monument, see Pierre Duhem, *Medieval Cosmology: Theories of Infinity, Place, Void, and the Plurality of Worlds*, edited and translated by Roger Ariew, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

⁵ Scotus does not elaborate and leaves us with a puzzle here. In particular, I would assume that such a time without numbers would still have to exhibit some prior/posterior order if it is to count as a potential *time*. But in what sense could there be such an order without movement?

II The Now

Since Scotus extends the consideration of time to potentiality, we must ask what of time is properly “actual.” In order to address this question, however, we must contrast time and eternity. One could understand these terms by conceiving time as constituted by the flow of past, present, and future, and divine eternity as an “eternal now” in which there is no succession. The relation between these two levels could then be expressed in terms of “being present to.” Following Boethius, we could say that with respect to time, what is actual is only that which is “present to *us*.” With respect to God, however, all three dimensions of time are “present to him” and, as such, they all would be actual for him. What is present to God cannot be successively present since his presence does not stand in the flow of time (like a stick floating along a river); rather, God’s eternity stands, at it were, over the flow of time. Just like the distance from the circumference to the center of a circle is of equal length for all points on the circumference, so every point in the flow of time (including future ones) would be equally present and actual to God’s glance. Scotus rejects this account. He breaks the circle of time understood as a circumference that orbits around eternity. This entails a radically different conception of time.

Let’s envision again the image of the circle, its periphery and its center. Just as “immensity” can co-exist only with actual places, God can only co-exist with what actually exists. With respect to spatial immensity there is no room for *potential* places. In a similar fashion, eternity is understood as what co-exists with what actually exists. What passes into the past is no more, otherwise, as Aristotle argued: “if both what is before and what is after were in the same now, what happened ten thousand years ago would be simultaneous with what is happening today, hence, nothing would be before or after anything else” (*Phy.* 4, 218 a 28-30). Yet, this is what would occur if everything that belongs to time were given in the way that all instants are simultaneously covered by immensity. “I grant that immensity is present to every place [*praesens omni loco*], but not every actual and potential place... Thus, eternity will not, by reason of its infinity, be present to any non-existent time” (d. 38, n. 34). The crucial expression here is “actual *and* potential.” If two items co-exist, both of them must be actual. In a sense, for Scotus possibilities always coincide with actuality (at the very moment I sit, I retain my ability not to sit). However, the situation is different with respect to future possibilities. If eternity is to time what immensity is to space, then a difference remains that prevents us from simply treating the temporal order as if it were a sub-species of the spatial one or from explaining the properties of time by reducing time to a line and the now to a point. In both cases, co-existence occurs only if both relata are already in existence.⁶ Immensity, since it is a purely spatial concept, coincides simultaneously with all actual places. But this, however, cannot be the case for time. By definition, the parts of time cannot coexist. The presence of temporal reality to eternity is thus of a different nature:

⁶ This follows from the principle according to which the knowledge of a relation presupposes the knowledge of the relata.

‘God begot [his Son]’ cosignifies the now of eternity, such that the sense is: ‘God has the act of generation in the now of eternity insofar as that now coexisted with the past;’ and ‘God begets’ means: ‘has the act of generation in the now of eternity insofar as it coexists with the present.’ Thus, since the now of eternity truly coexists with any difference of time, we can truly predicate of God the difference of all times (*Ord.* 1, 9, un., n. 17).

Richard Cross, who quotes and comments on this passage, suggests that for Scotus, tensed propositions applied to God “should be parsed in terms of tenseless ones.”⁷ This is certainly the case insofar as the proposition “God exists” is true at all times by contrast with other propositions that change their truth-values with time. The important point, however, is that Scotus’ remark allows for the converse as well. We can fittingly predicate of God the difference of past and present (begot/begets), not because a change occurs within the divine essence, but because the moment of eternity, from the standpoint of temporal entities, was (coexisted with the past) and is (coexists with the present). To make sense of this insight, we must seek a sense in which the presence of the “moment of eternity” to all temporal nows does not entail that these temporal nows are all actually present to eternity. This is not to say that for Scotus the Boethian image of the circle is erroneous and should simply be abandoned; rather, it is a matter of rethinking the circle.

If a straight line is drawn, an extreme point of which being the center, and the other extremity turning around [*circumvolvatur*]*—according to the imagination of the geometrician – so that nothing remains still, but rather it causes the circumference to flow, then that center does not coexist with the circumference as a whole, because the circumference does not exist at one time (idem, n. 85).*

A remarkable difference between Scotus’ and Boethius’ definitions of the circle is that with Scotus, the circle of time is not a fixed and already constituted figure, it is not given as a whole, *totum simul*, but is thought “according to the imagination of the geometrician,” that is, according to the rule of its construction whereby it is the motion of the line around a fixed center that comprises the circle. The circle of time is, so to speak, in process.

In recent commentaries by William Lane Craig, Richard Cross, or Neil Lewis, one finds an attempt to account for the Scotist position by comparing it with the contemporary debate between those who consider that temporal terms have only indexical meaning and those who are sometimes dubbed “presentists.” To briefly recall the debate, philosophers who favor the first approach argue that the distinction between past, present, and future has no ontological weight because these terms (just as the words “here” and “there,” “I” and “you”) only have an indexical function; that is to say, they are “token-reflexive.” Using these terms meaningfully involves taking into account the speaker’s temporal location. To say that “x is present” is then simply to say that “x occurs when the statement is made.” It is equally true when Plato noticed Socrates in

⁷ Richard Cross, *op. cit.* 243. From this the author concludes: “Of course, none of this amounts to any sort of A-theory; that is, to any sort of account which could provide a theoretical understanding of A-series time.”

the market place or when I write this sentence, but it is true only *when* these statements are made. The same can be said of “past” and “future.” Since McTaggart’s famous essay, terms of this kind are said to belong to the A-series and express the view of a flowing time.⁸ By contrast, B-series terms are related to each other changelessly and, as such, they form a static order. Terms such as “earlier,” “later,” “simultaneously,” or “March 7, 1277,” express relations or positions between events that are independent of the particular temporal location of the speaker. If one says that Socrates died before Plato or that a condemnation occurred in Paris in 1277, the truth value of these statements (even though their subject-matter and even their utterance are temporal) cannot change with time. It follows that for the indexical conception, all times are on an equal ontological footing and there is nothing special about the present. The point, however, is not simply to contrast A- and B-series terms but to suggest that a perspicuous metaphysical language would have to be, like the language of mathematics, tenseless.

Against this view, Presentism argues that only that which is present is real and that we cannot intelligently speak of what is not present (the past and the future) as being real. Reality is thus either equivalent to actual presence, or at least past or future cannot have an ontological status identical to that of the present. As for the B-series, it is merely a spatial representation of time, a calendar ordering which, as such, ignores time’s specific nature. Now we are faced with two problems: (a) which of these views would best apply to Scotus and (b) is Scotus’ thought truly captured by this contemporary alternative?

Let’s start with the first issue. Apparently, Scotus’ attack of Aquinas’ account of divine foreknowledge would commit him to Presentism. Scotus rejects the idea that future things are present to God in the same way as those already caused. It is so because for something to be “actually existing before God” something must “have been caused by God.” Yet, by definition, a future thing is a thing still to be caused. “If a future contingent thing is related to God according to its actual existence, He will not cause a future contingent thing, unless he causes the same thing twice” (*Lec. d. 39, n. 28*). In other words, if a future thing stands in act in front of God, it is in act *simpliciter*. But if it is in act *simpliciter* it is impossible that it be brought into existence at some other time.

Co-existence that entails a relation to something else [*quae dicit relationem ad alterum*] does not agree with [*non sequitur*] the immensity of eternity - unless there is something in the other extreme that could be the term of the relation of co-existence of which eternity is the foundation. And non-being cannot be the term of such a relation, and no other time, except the present, is such (*Ord. d. 38, n. 34*).

The “now of eternity” certainly exceeds the “now of time” since the former is infinite; but precisely for this reason it can never coincide with the latter (for how could everlastingness and immutability ever coincide with what is always elapsing?). The “instant of eternity”

⁸ J. M. E. McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” *Mind*, NS 17 (1908): 457–474.

encompasses the whole of time, otherwise foreknowledge would be impossible; but this does not entail that it co-exists with all temporal “nows.” Eternity co-exists only with the present now.

A stick [*baculus*: i.e., a spatial measure] is not ‘immense’ unless it coexists with *all* the places that *exist* [*toto loco existente*]. Yet, we do not deny immensity to that which is not co-present to a place that does *not* exist, but could be; for then, God would not be immense if we posit other places where he could be, but where he is not (*idem*, n. 84).

Just as immensity, with respect to space, must coexist with what actually occupies space, eternity can only coexist with what has actual temporal existence. It is no objection or diminution of eternity to claim that it is not present to times that are not. This is so precisely because the “now [*nunc*]” is a purely temporal concept that, as such, must be distinguished from the “moments of nature [*instans naturae*]” as well as from the “now of eternity [*nunc æternitatis*].” As Craig puts it: “Space-time is not for him [Scotus] a timelessly existing ‘block,’—future space-time positions not only do not now exist; they do not exist, period.”⁹ In no sense of the term can the future be said to actually exist, and what does not exist cannot *a fortiori* co-exist. “For to co-exist entails a real relation [*dicit relationem realem*], but no relation is real whose terms are not real” (d. 38, n. 9).

Yet many difficulties arise if we simply identify Scotus’ position, along the line of twentieth-century philosophy, as an proponent of Presentism vs. Indexicalism. Scotus is not Arthur Prior. To say that time has not only an actual but also a potential sense is not to claim that whatever is not actually present is non-being *simpliciter*. The potential, particularly in its futural sense, cannot be merely nothing for Scotus, since the transcendental disjunctives “actuality-and-potentiality” are convertible with being. Furthermore, if indeed Scotus claims that nothing is present to eternity but the now of time, this leaves open the possibility that past and future are, although they are not present, and that their inclusion in being makes them a fit object for God’s eternal vision. Finally, when Scotus famously claims that “there is nothing of time but an instant,” this has to be made compatible with his view concerning time flow. Time flows continuously and this claim must be compatible with the idea that only the now is real. This is possible only if the reality that Scotus exclusively grants to the now in *Lectura* I d. 39 does not entail that time is composed of discreet indivisible instants and this is exactly what Scotus attempts to demonstrate.

III The Flux of Time

We can start by stating that Scotus proposes a dynamic rather than a successive conception of time. What’s wrong with the idea that there can be time only when there is indivisibility is that in such a case time would have the being of an indivisible, and this conflicts with the experience of its flow. If it is true that only the now is real, we must immediately add—

⁹ William, Lane Craig, “Scotus on God’s Foreknowledge and Future Contingents,” in *Franciscan Studies*, Vol. 47 (1987): 102.

and to this reality essentially belongs the property of “immediately passing away” (*raptim transit*). This is an *essential* property of time, for otherwise there would be no substantial difference between the continuity of a spatial quantity and the temporal continuity of a period. The reality of the now is the reality of passing away. But does this entail that we should subscribe to the idea of a flowing now? William of La Mare suggests this view. Scotus, in his *Questions on the Metaphysics* 5, q. 10, spends some time discussing and eventually rejecting it. The flowing now view assumes an analogy between a line and time, a point and the now. We can then imagine that if the point were put in motion, it would generate a line and its position at any given time would render it present. The now in itself would be unchanging and still, yet its flow would cause time. One of the main reasons why Scotus does not subscribe to this view, I believe, is that it ultimately fails to account for the flow of time. La Mare argues for a position which understands the flow of time in terms of motion of indivisible. But “how,” asks Scotus, “could an indivisible now itself flow according to different beings which would necessarily be indivisible without its whole flow being composed of indivisible? An indivisible could not move, for then its motion would be composed of indivisible” (*Ord.* 2, 2 q. 2, n. 99). Each now is thus radically new.

So far, we have seen that the distinction between time and motion, the introduction of the concept of potential time and the compatibility of the claim that grants actual existence to the now with the objective flux of time form a coherent whole. We need now to show that the question of the relation of time to eternity is at the core of Scotus’ teaching on time.

IV Time and Eternity

How can we conceive the relation of time to eternity? John of Saint-Thomas warns us that we are approaching a “*maximum et obscurissimus mysterium*.”¹⁰ We would be well advised to take the warning seriously, for it points to what Leibniz will later call a “labyrinth,” where thinking risks erring endlessly without finding a way out. If John of Saint-Thomas deemed it necessary to place such a warning sign at the threshold of the question about time and eternity, it would seem that this constitutes a sufficient reason to refuse to move on any further along this path. Isn’t it obvious, after all, that an obscure question cannot receive a clear answer? Is this not the sign that it is not even worth being asked? Unless it is the case that to seek the light is not to turn away from an “obscure mystery,” but, quite the contrary, to enter anew into its darkness.

Let’s consider two simple alternatives: a) On the one hand, we could entertain the idea that things become successively present to God, that God discovers what occurs in time at the moment it occurs. By doing so, however, we would have to introduce temporal succession into his essence, which is absurd, since God is an eternal being. b) Or we could say that God actually reaches the whole of time “all at once.” But this position (defended, among others, by Aquinas) seems equally impossible, for divine eternity, as *nunc stans*, is indivisible and if eternity were to

¹⁰ Quoted by Michael Sylwanowicz, *Contingent Causality and the Foundations of Duns Scotus’ Metaphysics*, (Leiden – New York – Köln: E. J. Brill, 1996): 183.

spread out along time, it would be divided by time. How could the indivisible comprehend the divisible without dividing itself?

This situation is properly aporetic: it compels us to choose one alternative when either one leads to an impossibility. A way out of this dilemma, it seems, would be to simply reject both alternatives and seek another option. But this can only mean that (a) we give up one of the two terms (either we renounce the concept of eternity or we claim that time is illusory) or (b) we maintain both terms while denying any kind of relation between them (time and eternity would simply be unrelated). Once again, however, (b) is inconsistent, since two terms that exclude each other are at least related to each other by the principle of their mutual exclusion and we cannot posit such an exclusion unless we know both terms. And (a)—the rejection of either time or eternity—is insufficient to ground the positive affirmation of its opposite.

Here again we are confronted with the impossible, although in a different way. For the first alternative asks us to decide between two impossible accounts, whereas the second demonstrates that we cannot not decide. Thus, we cannot choose and we cannot not choose. At this point we have crossed the first circle of John's "*maximum et obscurissimum mysterium*": it is not even possible *not* to enter the labyrinth, we have already stepped into it.

The idea of a co-presence of time as a whole to eternity would destroy time for, as Durand of Saint-Pourçain (rejoining Scotus on this issue) will later add, it would amount to the coexistence of past, present, and future; and in such a case, there wouldn't even be co-presence but simply the suppression of time.¹¹ Durand elaborates on this point by showing that, when we consider the "totality of time," two senses of "totality" must be distinguished. If totality means "without internal division," then to coexist with eternity means to coexist with eternity as a whole. But if totality means "the negation of all limits," the expression cannot truly apply to time. Therefore, temporal beings can only coexist with eternity when they are and as long as they are. Time cannot coexist with eternity as a whole, however, since eternity has neither beginning nor end. If we were to admit the so-called "realist thesis," then besides the knowledge that, according to Aquinas, God has of events inasmuch as they are present to his eternity, we would also have to posit another one that reaches them with certainty in their future. But this second knowledge would render the first one superfluous. Thus, even from the standpoint of eternity, the future remains *to come*; otherwise we would know something God could not know.

Even with respect to eternity, a future entity can in no way be present to God before entering history. Scotus' position is here in total contrast with Aquinas who understands the decrees as identical with (and not formally distinct from) the divine essence. For Aquinas, the decrees are completed acts that already contain the *ad extra* creature in eternity; in this sense, Aquinas can admit that the future individual is present to God's eternity before its historical existence (*Summa contra Gentiles* 1.67.39). This position, however, leads to some conflicts. For,

¹¹ As quoted by de Joseph de Finance, "La Présence des choses à l'éternité d'après les Scholastiques," in *Archives de Philosophie*, Vol. 19 (1956): 38.

on the one hand, Aquinas cannot support an emanationist account of coming into being and must, therefore, maintain that there is something radically new in creation, namely, the act of existence. On the other hand, however, this act is construed as a receiving of what is already contained *eminenter* in eternity.¹² The donation of being entails a reception; but to receive a gift, to be granted existence, one must, in some sense, already be. What will exist in time *already* is in the superior measure of eternity that contains the entity, and it comes to be by entering (or rather falling) into its temporal measure. The birth into being (the point at which a divine decree gives rise to existence) is a fall from being *eminenter*. Aquinas, then, is bound to an ambiguous position with regard to the idea of an eternally created world (a world that could be co-extensive with divine eternity), for on the one hand, Aquinas is quite willing to entertain this thought (to the dismay of his followers); yet on the other, he must finally deny it, but can do so on the sole ground of its disagreement with revealed faith.¹³

For Scotus, on the contrary, only what is temporally present co-exists with and responds to eternity. Now, and only now, is bestowed to eternity. God can know adequately a future event only if he knows it as future, that is, as what is not yet actual. God knows the future inasmuch as he knows his own free decrees, but to know them adequately is to know that they could be otherwise and to know them as futural is to know them as not having yet occurred. In becoming present, the future passes through the causal sphere of God's eternal decrees. This "now of time" is neither absolute nor reducible to a "temporal indicator" of the form "tⁿ" that can occupy indifferently any position along the axis of time. "Now" is not an "instant" in the sense of an indivisible, for "if it were the case, time would never be but the being of an indivisible. Its being, however, is in flowing" (*Lect.* 2, d2, pars 2, qq. 5–6. n. 377). The now has being as occurring/passing away. The unicity of the now beats the tempo of our time, the time to which we belong. To this now responds, in its own and distinct order, eternity and its always. In a sense, we could say that for us eternity occurs now, but it occurs as the *other* of this now and as such, in itself, it does not occur. For while the now has to occur in order to be, correspondingly, eternity indicates what *is* and need not "occur."

Temporal things can only appear to eternity in an order of temporal succession rather than "all at once" or "at the same time." By the very fact that it is temporal, what comes to be is eventually exposed to eternity. This means that the intrinsic being of temporal entities is their *actuality* (in the sense of their activity of being). Such a now excludes all the other possibilities that *cannot* co-exist with it. To this temporal now responds the otherness of eternity, the otherness of an unchanging presence. God's decrees are in eternity and, as such, they are distinct from their effects in actual creation, since these effects occur only in their appointed time. Conversely, we can say that what temporally exists, by the very fact of its existence, faces eternity. In existing, the existent encounters its own decree.

¹² See Sylwanowicz, *op. cit.* p. 183.

¹³ This position, as is well known, will be censured by the Condemnation of March 7, 1277.

In this sense, what contingently exists meets in existence its destiny. What has temporal existence exists once, and once only, but, as such, it will forever be what it once was. One's destiny is nothing else than an individual and haphazard existence, but it is an existence performed before eternity. Only in this respect can the existent understand itself as contingent, that is to say, not in spite of eternity, but rather, because of it.

V Contingency and Foreknowledge

It is clear that *Lectura* I d. 39 is not simply an exposition; rather, it immediately sends us in the midst of a controversy. Scotus' resolution of the question concerning God's foreknowledge and future contingents entails an engagement with some other views. This is already clear from the form of this distinction; since the questions are immediately followed (n. 18–30) by a very detailed exposition of the “opinions of others [*opiniones aliorum*]” so that Scotus' own answer is inseparable from his dialogue with these other opinions. The solution springs from the polemic. In order to understand it, we must first consider the opinions against which the “*responsio propria*” is set. Who are these “others”? Although Scotus does not mention any name, Hoenen has suggested that the most probable candidates are Bonaventure and Aquinas.¹⁴ Yet, the question “who are the others?” is not raised merely for the sake of supplying names. The others are constituted in their alterity by the very thesis Scotus will impart. The signification of the refutation of the *opiniones aliorum* must be clarified on the basis of the controversy itself. In this respect, we need to consider the fundamental theses defended by the “opponents” (as constructed by Scotus).

1) The first one starts from the infallibility of God's knowledge as depending on the ideas in the divine mind.

They say that God's knowledge is infallible because of the ideas in the divine mind, which show not only the contingent things themselves to the divine intellect, but also all the connections of adjacent and remote causes with such effects and all the conditions of the existence of such things; and an intellect that holds these ideas, knows infallibly (*idem*, n. 18).

These divine ideas represent beings in a three-fold way: (a) they display individual contingent things; (b) simultaneously, they represent the structure of cause and effect, in such a way that the knowledge of the entire world-history is included in them; (c) they represent the mode of existence of things (whether mutable or immutable, necessary or contingent, past, present, or future, and so forth.) In other words, to say that God is infallible is to say that he has adequate ideas that contain all essential and accidental properties of beings. The first thesis consists, then,

¹⁴ M. J. Hoenen, “A propos de *Lectura* I 39: un passage dissimulé de Thomas d'Aquin chez Duns Scot?” in *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Âge*, Vol 52 (1985): 231–236. The fact that Scotus does not provide names is somewhat unusual. It was customary in the XIIIth and XIVth century to name the authors with whom one is at dispute, unless they were still alive or recently deceased. This, of course, does not apply to Aquinas or Bonaventure who both died in 1272 (at this date, Scotus was probably 6 or 7 years old).

in attempting to resolve the *aporia* of God's foreknowledge of future contingents by showing that a so-constructed infallible knowledge does not eliminate contingency in things, for "knowledge of an object does not remove an aspect of that object" (*idem*).

This thesis, rooted in the Neo-Platonic-Augustinian thought of Late Antiquity, is met with various objections. First of all, Scotus remarks that the cognition of an idea –since it is an intellection of the archetypal idea of a particular; thus, of an essence – cannot furnish any knowledge of contingency as such. As Scotus demonstrates (*Ord.* I, d. 38 q. 9, n. 7), a proposition such as "Peter will receive eternal blessedness" cannot be understood through the exemplar ideas of "Peter" and "blessedness," for if it were the case, such proposition would become analytically necessary and cease to be contingent. "Ideas which represent simple terms [*terminos simplices*] do not represent 'propositions' [*complexiones*, compositions of terms] unless these terms include the truth of the propositions" (d. 39, n. 20).

No matter how adequate or complete an idea might be, inasmuch as it is an idea, it remains blind to contingency. This leads Scotus to a fundamental remark: the problem with this way of thinking obliterates the distinction between "pure possibility" on the one hand and future existence on the other; for the idea of a thing, inasmuch as it expresses a pure possibility, tells us nothing concerning the temporal existence of the being to which it corresponds. "[The ideas] are supposed to be in him in a uniform way, both with respect to possible things which will never be, and with respect to future contingents" (n. 22). This last remark already contains a fundamental allusion to the consideration of time; it is, however, in the "second opinion" that temporality comes explicitly to the fore.¹⁵

(2) The second opinion defends God's certain knowledge of future contingents as follows:

All things are present to God in eternity according to their actual existence. For they say that we should not imagine that time and what is flowing in time are present in eternity as a stick is present to the whole river if it is fixed in the middle of the river; for the stick is *successively* present to the entire river because it is present to its parts; but eternity is simultaneous with the totality of time and with all things flowing in time, so that time as a whole and whatever is successively in time is present to eternity (*idem*, n. 23).

Scotus' main target here is chiefly Aquinas. The now of eternity [*instans aeternitatis*] both coexists with and exceeds the now of time, that is to say, while the "now of time," the now of our actual existence, coexists with eternity, the now of eternity simultaneously coexists with any

¹⁵ This already cast some doubts on Knuuttila's, and Vos' thesis according to which the question is not related to the consideration of time but is a matter of logical structural moments. See S. Knuuttila, "Time and Modality in Scholasticism," in S. Knuuttila (ed.) *Reforging the Great Chain of Being, Studies of the History of Modal Theories* (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer, 1981): 163–257. A. Vos Jaczn. (et al.) *John Duns Scotus Contingency and Freedom, Lectura I 39* (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer, 1994).

other temporal now. In such a case, the future, though not actual for us, is known by God. Similarly, what is immense (*im-mensus*, not limited to one place) is simultaneously co-present to all places.

Scotus insists that God's knowledge of the future does not depend on the eternal presence to Him of the whole of time. In this sense, we must admit the very inference that Boethius' fatalist put forward: from "God knows A will exist" to "A will exist," the inference follows: "The whole order of causes, down to the last effect [*usque ad ultimum effectum*], will necessarily result if the relation of the first to the proximate cause is necessary" (*idem*, d. 38 n. 12). What does not follow, however, is that the first cause acts with necessity. The fundamental intuition on the basis of which Scotus distinguishes himself from the "others" is that contingency is not a privation or a defect.¹⁶ Just like necessity, contingency of itself indicates a positive mode of being. Contingency is not to be explained by the intervention of some secondary causes, such as matter for instance, that would passively resist the imposition of a form. Rather, it stems from the primary cause itself. It is a sign of God's perfection that he acts contingently, for unless the first cause produces the effect contingently and freely, the effect itself could not have been contingent.

If the first cause moves necessarily, then every other cause will be moved necessarily and everything will be caused necessarily. Consequently, if any secondary cause moves contingently, the first cause also moves contingently, since the secondary cause can cause only insofar as it is moved by the first (*Ord.* I, d. 2, n. 1).

Whereas Boethius appeals to the influence of secondary causes in order to account for the existence of contingency in our world, for Scotus no secondary causes could interfere with the necessity of the first one, for a secondary cause could not cancel the necessity wrought by the first one.

Let's notice the order of Scotus' answer. Although the problem concerns God's knowledge of future contingents, we must first take into consideration contingency itself. "Two issues must be considered: first about contingency in what is [*contingentia in entibus*], for if nothing were contingent in what is but all things were necessary, there would be no difficulty in the questions mentioned before" (d. 39, n. 31). Divine knowledge of future contingents is methodologically subordinate to the clarification of the ontological structure of contingency itself.¹⁷

There is contingency in things. This thesis posits an existence: "*contingentia est in rebus*." The thesis is not limited by any temporal qualification. In particular, it does not

¹⁶ For Boethius, being-in-time is being *fallen* from eternity: "it fails [*deficit*] from immobility into motion, it shrinks [*decrescit*] from the simplicity of that present into the infinite quantity of the future and the past... it cannot possess at once the whole fullness [*plenitudinem*] of its life." *The Consolation of Philosophy*, V, 6, 44–47.

¹⁷ This, of course, does not make God himself somehow ontologically subordinate to his creation. This is a question of method in the strict sense of the term, i.e., it indicates a path, a pursuit that allows grasping divine contingency from the consideration of entitative contingency.

specifically bear on the future. Rather, it is an absolute thesis concerning the mode of being of things: “It cannot be proved, I think, by anything more evident [*per notius*], nor *a priori*, for being is divided into ‘necessary’ and ‘possible’” (d. 39, n. 39). But if we cannot prove it, we can still ask why it is so. To do so, we need to consider the “transcendentals” as the proper object of metaphysics.¹⁸

By definition, a transcendental concept is convertible with being. Scotus’ insight, however, is that a transcendental is not to be defined simply as what is “common to all entities,” but rather as what has no predicate above itself except being. As such, the transcendentals transcend the divisions of being into individual, species, and genus. In other words, to understand the transcendentals we need to consider being before its division into the ten categories, i.e., before it is said, articulated, in many ways. Inasmuch as they are convertible with being, the transcendentals are not similar to attributes vis-à-vis a subject. Being is not “one, good, and true” in the sense that “white” is attributed to this wall; the wall itself, *qua* wall, is neither white nor beige. The same is true of the “disjunctive passions” inasmuch as they, too, are convertible with being. Thus, since nothing can be that would neither be contingent nor necessary, the disjunction “necessary-or-contingent” (taken as a whole) forms a disjunctive transcendental that is convertible with being.¹⁹ It is for this reason that ontologically convertible terms are called “transcendentals.” Being (*ens*) is not limited to the sphere of present actuality, but it encompasses the all-embracing realm of possible beings. Thereby it does include, but is *not* limited to, actuality.

Scotus is now in a position to put forward the following ontological axiom: If there is a being to which the weaker disjunct belongs, then there is a being to which the stronger disjunct also belongs. In other words, if something is contingent, then something else is necessary; if something is finite, then something else is infinite, and so forth. The converse, however, does not follow: if something is infinite, uncreated, and necessary, it does not follow that something else is finite, created, and contingent. The existence of an infinite being does not, by itself, imply the existence of a finite one. In other words, a necessary being could very well not have created; and if he created, it was not out of necessity but out of a free act. This axiom plays a fundamental role, for to say that contingency cannot be proved in any way is certainly not to say that it has no reason or cause. Although we cannot demonstrate contingency from something more known or by means of an *a priori* principle, we can state the *reason* of this contingency, namely, things are contingent by virtue of God’s contingent causation.

There is no room for a *per notius* proof of contingency because a transcendental convertible with being cannot be deduced from something that would be even more known and

¹⁸ “[Metaphysics] is, as it were, the transcendent science [*transcendens scientia*] because it bears on the transcendentals [*de transcendentibus*].” (*Quaestiones subtilissimae in Metaphysicam Aristotelis*, Prol., n. 5).

¹⁹ Other examples are: “finite-or-infinite,” “necessary-or-contingent,” “created-or-uncreated,” and so forth. Disjunctive transcendentals are now called (in a misleading translation) “disjunctive attributes.” Scotus speaks for his part of “disjuncted passions of being [*passiones disjunctae*].”

there is nothing more known than being, since being is presupposed by all knowledge.²⁰ The actual existence of contingent being cannot be demonstrated then, because no one can demonstrate being; or, and this amounts to the same thing, because being *qua* being can never be an object of ontological proof since such proof would have to presuppose it. Thus, it is absurd to oppose contingency in the sense of non self-contradictory possible beings (the so-called “logical sense” of the term) to contingency in the sense of the “factuality of contingent beings.”²¹ Both possibilities that have actually been or will be created and those that have never been nor will ever be created are implied by Scotus’ remark: “I do not see how a complete disjunctive passion could be proved *a priori* of its immediate subject” (*ibid*, n. 40). This immediate subject is “being.” This whole line of thought has to be understood at the transcendental level. Neither “*per notius*” nor *a priori* contingency is “*per se notum*,” i.e., it is not derived from anything else but is known by itself. What is “*per se notum*” is evident not by virtue of our epistemic constitution, but because it is how being is.

The certainty of divine knowledge is consistent with contingency. That contingency exists and that it exists *ex parte dei* is one thing; but how can such existence be compatible with the *certainty* of God’s knowledge? Whatever the divine intellect presents to the will is neither true nor false but somehow “neutral” (as Scotus puts it, it is “only as something theoretical” *ibid*, n. 62). Only that which has been actualized can be known as true. It is the will, then, that makes a proposition true or false, just as we can understand neutrally the proposition “I sit” but can only understand it as true when I do sit. Without such prior neutrality of the intellect, there could not be any freedom. Otherwise, the intellect would have to display certain possibilities to the will as “what has to be actualized” and others as “what must not be.” This primordial neutrality is not a problem of truth-value of propositions. Rather, inasmuch as an “idea” does not entail the existence of anything, it is an intrinsic property of ideas as such to be neutral.²² But how should we understand this? Here, argues Scotus, there are two ways.

First, we can assume that the divine intellect sees one term of a disjunction as true (Peter will sin/Peter will not sin) only when the will (*qua* principle of determination) chooses it.²³ In such a case, the intellect simultaneously understands that this will cannot be impeded and “so from this it knows with certainty [*certitudinaliter*] that the future thing will be for that very moment for which it will be” (*ibid*, n. 64). There is, however, something insufficient with this hypothesis, for “with this way of knowing, something discursive is made visible [*videtur esse aliquis discursus*] as if the divine intellect, seeing the will’s determination, would see a condition of the existence of contingent things” (*idem*). Wherever there is deduction, there is discursiveness (we always deduce from one term to another). But God’s knowledge need not

²⁰ The translation of “*per notius*” by “evident” or “more evident” (Vos, *op. cit.* p. 96) betrays more than the epistemological bias of Knuuttila. By identifying the ontological *presupposition* of all knowledge (which as such is not “knowledge” itself) with that which qualifies a mode of knowing (i.e., “evidence”), the whole ontological realm of the pre-predicative is obliterated.

²¹ As does Vos (*op. cit.*, p. 99). And it is even more absurd to conclude: “only the latter is the case” (*idem*).

²² One can see why Scotus is not particularly convinced by Anselm’s so-called “ontological” argument. It is not that the argument is “too ontological;” it is that by starting from an idea in our intellect (rather than from being) Anselm’s argument fails to be truly “ontological.”

²³ This is the solution suggested by Henry of Ghent in *Quod*. 8. 2. c.

conclude the existence of something from the consideration of the determination of the will. Such an inference would indeed be valid and even necessary for human beings: we cannot know an existence until it exists; we need to wait to be able to see whatever is given to our sight; we have to wait in order to see what will be. But the question bears on God's understanding, i.e., on an intellect that possesses infinity and intuitive immediacy rather than finitude and discursiveness. What Scotus contests here is, then, not the idea that future contingents depend on the will, but the idea that this dependence is the result of (or can be explained in terms of) a discursive ordering.

In God, the ordering of the will and the intellect should then be construed otherwise: "when the will has determined itself for one part, this part has the aspect [*habet rationem*] of being made and being produced. It is not, then, because it sees the determination of the will that the intellect sees the proposition [*complexionem*], but it is by its own essence which is the immediate ground of representing [*ratio repraesentandi*] the said proposition" (*idem*, n. 65). Knowledge is grounded in the nature of the intellect, and the fact that the proposition is known as *true* depends on an act of the will. Yet, the volitional act itself is not an object of the intellect, even though the result of this act is immediately known. This is not to be understood as if the divine intellect had first understanding of the terms and then understanding of the *complexiones* (the composition of terms that forms a proposition), as if God, for instance, had immediately the concept of "Socrates" and the concept of "sitting" but then had to wait for Socrates to sit down in order to understand the proposition "Socrates is sitting" as true. Rather, God knows immediately the terms, the necessary truths, *and* the contingent proposition: "Socrates is sitting." But in the last case, this proposition is understood as a member of a contradictory pairs ("Socrates is sitting/Socrates is not sitting"). Scotus does not contest the idea that the determinateness of the future depends on the will; rather, he contests the idea that this future is known as a consequence of some discursive deduction. There is no discursiveness because the intellect knows only its own order; which is to say that it never sees the act of the will.