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What is metaphysics?

***Duns Scotus, the Scotists, and the Reconstruction of Scholastic
Metaphysics***

Doctoral thesis summary

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Keywords

Metaphysics; ontology; ontotheology; ousiology; theology; Duns Scotus; The Scotists School; history of metaphysics; philosophical maintenance; *scientia transcendens*; *philosophia ad mentem scoti*; *compendium*; the reconstruction of metaphysics; medieval metaphysics; scholastic metaphysics; history of scholastic metaphysics;

Summary

John Duns Scotus is one of the few figures of medieval philosophy who enjoy a well-merited notoriety. In theology, he is known as Beatus, Defender of the Virgin Mary. In philosophy, the theory of univocity of being and the concept of ‘*hecceitas*’ made him famous. To many, he is known especially as *Duns Scotus, Metaphysician*. In the textbooks on metaphysics, one reads that his metaphysics is second – if it is second at all – only to that of Thomas Aquinas. If Thomas Aquinas is still seen as the apex of Medieval Scholastic thought, then Duns Scotus is the one who revolutionised the concept of metaphysics in such a manner that the modern concept of metaphysics could be later conceived.

It is said that, according to Duns Scotus, metaphysics is the science of being as being, in which the metaphysician investigates the disjunctive and coextensive properties of being, conceived as univocally common to both God and creature. Thus conceived, the subject of metaphysics, transcending Aristotelian categories and the division of being into its fundamental finite and infinite modes, is itself transcendental, validating thus the affirmation that metaphysics, as the science of being, is the transcendental science, that is to say, the science of the transcendent. This is also evident from its name, which comes from the particle ‘meta’, which means ‘trans’, thus: *scientia transcendens*. Having, in this manner, cleared the – seemingly unproblematic – issue of the subject of metaphysics, it only remains to add that the focal point of metaphysical reflection and the general aim of this science is the demonstration and description of God’s being. There is, however, a caveat: metaphysics is not to be mistaken for theology, because in the revealed theology of the Catholic Church God is seen as God the Saviour, the Triune God, etc., while in metaphysics, which can also be called natural theology, God is seen precisely as being, as a metaphysical principle accessible via natural human understanding. Thus, finally, the construction of metaphysics is essentially ontotheological. This essentialized, synoptic overview of Duns Scotus’s

concept of metaphysics has only one weakness: the primary texts offer little to no support to maintain it.

The text of the present dissertation, which is centred around the subject exposed above, is the culmination of a constant academic preoccupation, with a fair share of scientific frustration. A brief recollection of the experiences that inspired it will explain its aims and structure.

On the one hand, contemporary philosophical texts, both continental and analytical, claimed either that metaphysics had already died and that the present era of philosophy is post-metaphysical, or that it should disappear from current preoccupations, because it is counterproductive and contributes nothing to scientific advancement. On the other hand, these authors employed a very loose understanding of metaphysics, which wasn't even shared among them. Thus, our preoccupation with the history of metaphysics crystallised into the B. A. dissertation "*The problem of being as act and potency in the context of the first philosophy understood as the science of being as being*". That paper introduced the very basis of the research presented in the third chapter of the present dissertation, namely, our view on the fourfold Aristotelian root of the problem of metaphysics. Further, our preoccupation focused on what we have identified as one of the least studied episodes of the history of metaphysics, with which the most incoherent and incorrect theses were associated – the Middle Ages, precisely, the High Scholastics. Thus, the title of our M. A. dissertation was "*De subiecto, natura, et methodo metaphysicae: introduction to the debate concerning the epistemic status of metaphysics in medieval philosophy*". There we familiarised ourselves with the medieval dynamics of the said problem and discovered another source of our scientific frustration: the Duns Scotus of the secondary literature, so often portrayed as a revolutionary of the said history, was nowhere to be found in his own writings. Each time we found a quote that confirmed the above-sketched presentation, we also found above and below it sentences that contradicted it. Matters needed to be clarified, for it was a problem of crucial importance: if we had had a correct understanding of Duns Scotus's metaphysics, we could have had a proper understanding of its importance in history; if we had had that, we could have constructed a dynamic of the concept of metaphysics, and ultimately propose a history of its evolution, and thus, better understand what needs to be overcome and whether it is true that the current era of thought is post-metaphysical. This general interest needed to be disciplined and contained within the requirements of academic writing. Thus, at the beginning of the doctoral journey that culminates in this dissertation, we proposed to investigate,

with all the scientific, historical, philological and philosophical rigour, the articulation of metaphysics in Duns Scotus's thought, having also in mind to place it in the correct philosophical and historical context of medieval scholastic metaphysics. The thorny road led us from the secondary literature to the primary Latin critical editions, and even further: to the necessity of acquiring palaeographical skills. Discoveries which we made along this way led us to include in our research something we could hardly envision at the beginning of our journey – the Scotistic School. Finally, we found ourselves in the position of being the editors of a yet unpublished work authored by a member of the said school.

The current work, the result of the above-summerised endeavor, comprises 3 chapters, 38 consecutive paragraphs, and 3 appendices. In the following lines, we will describe its structure and its principal findings, starting from its main character.

“Duns Scotus, Metaphysician” is the title of a work, edited and translated by William A. Frank and Allan B. Wolter. We used this title as a concept, namely, a particular portrait that we referred to in our work as a ‘monument’ to underline its rigidity and static nature: the image of Duns Scotus as it is constructed in the secondary literature. Thus, the first chapter of our work is dedicated to understanding and describing Duns Scotus, the Metaphysician. In particular, in the first part of this chapter, we explain, in as much detail as we could, how the synoptic picture presented at the beginning of this summary has become widely known and accepted. This portrait was constructed in two distinct but related phases. The first was established especially through the works of E. Gilson and A. Wolter, reaching its definitive form in the monograph from which this particular portrait takes its name: *Duns Scotus, Metaphysician*. These works characterised Duns Scotus as a metaphysician above all else, if not obscuring other domains of his intellectual activity, then at the very least making them secondary to his metaphysics. This phase labelled Duns Scotus as *a* metaphysician. The second phase marked the transformation of ‘*a*’ metaphysician into ‘*the*’ metaphysician. It was accomplished through the studies concerning Scotus's concept of metaphysics. In this context, we refer to the works of L. Honnefelder, O. Boulnois, and again A. Wolter. These authors, with different degree, contributed to the crystallization of the main features of Duns Scotus's concept of metaphysics, namely that ‘being’ is a univocal concept; metaphysics is the science of being, distinct and separated from the science of the Divine; that metaphysics is the transcendental science, or at the very least that with Duns Scotus starts the process of its ‘transcendentalization’; that this concept of metaphysics marks a rift with the tradition before, thus

sketching the prerequisites of the modern metaphysics; and, finally that the philosophy of Duns Scotus inaugurates the ‘second beginning of metaphysics’. The last part of the chapter is dedicated to the most rigorous analysis of the primary text. We demonstrate that this ‘monument’ is a constructed interpretation, a synthesis of carefully selected passages from different works of Scotus, and not a rigorous description of the thinker’s activity. The main theses of this chapter advocate that Duns Scotus’s *Questions on Metaphysics* is not a solution-oriented work, but a ‘philosophical laboratory’ for testing and thoroughly investigating various philosophical positions. Scotus’s text is indeed an interesting case of a *quaestio*, where *prima facie* nothing at all is achieved: the question has been raised whether one should consider God or being to be the subject of metaphysics, and almost one hundred and forty paragraphs later, after a complex structure of argumentation, the question remains open; it has no answer, for it ends with ‘Six doubts. Duns Scotus formulates the question regarding the subject of metaphysics as an open question with alternatives: whether the proper subject of this science is being as being or God and Intelligences. The first answer traditionally takes the shape of *quod non*, in this case ‘neither’, to which arguments are provided for both parts of the answer: neither being as being, nor God and the Intelligences can be taken as proper subject in this science. The *sed contra*-part of the question reinstates the validity of both, answering the previous arguments *quod non*. Next, both theses are, again, refuted with arguments. Further, another thesis is considered: whether substance can be the subject of this science. The following step of this argumentation asks again, but from another point of view, how God can be the subject of metaphysics. As stated above, the question ends with yet further doubts. Two important notes conclude the chapter. First, we are not seeking to deconstruct a narrative for the sole purpose of deconstructing it; we are not trying to unmask a lie or denounce a fraud. This is better explained through the second note. Namely, the ‘monument’ of Duns Scotus, the Metaphysician, is not a contemporary invention. Rather, it is a product of a very special historical phenomenon that only emphasises the necessity of rigorous, philologically based critical editions. The deepest aspiration of this entire work is to contribute to the specialisation and higher professionalisation of the history of metaphysics. By surveying the history of Duns Scotus-related primary literature, we show that his works were edited and published without proper critical distinction between the authentic and apocryphal works, that is to say, the works of his followers. Thus, for a long period of time, Duns Scotus was not distinguished from the Scotist school.

The main aim of the second chapter of our work is to illustrate that Duns Scotus, willingly or not, has created the Scotistic School, and the Scotistic School, in turn, very much willingly, has created the image of Duns Scotus the Metaphysician. One of the main responsibilities that the members of the Scotistic School – the Scotists – undertook was to ‘edit’ the unpolished works of their master, to draw conclusions not drawn by their master, and to harmonise what was contradictory or conflicting in the original works. In this way, the synthetic image from the beginning of this work has found its textual evidence, not, however, in Duns Scotus’s, but in Antonius Andreas’s *Questions on Metaphysics*, which were much more famous than the former. The first appendix illustrates this argumentation by providing the pragmatic edition of the latter work. Unlike the open question in Duns Scotus’s formulation, which was an open one, Andreas raises an yes/no question with an obvious ‘yes’ answer: the subject of metaphysics is indeed being understood in its most common sense, that is to say, inasmuch as it contains under itself, and under its proper and formal notion of beingness, every being, finite and infinite; of such adequacy that nothing may escape the consideration of this science as long as it participates in the notion of being. Or, in a more compact formulation, being considered generally, that is common to God and the creature, is the subject of the science of metaphysics by the primacy of adequacy. Further, we show the continuity and the transmission of this particular image through the critical edition (Appendix 3) and explanation of Nicolaus de Orbelis’s *Compendium Metaphysice*. This XVth-century work was intended to be written ‘*ad mentem Scoti*’: a compendium of philosophical problems (the *Compendium* covers all three theoretical sciences) explained for the theologians through the lenses of one of the most important Franciscan thinkers. In our critical apparatus and in the correlated chapter, we make explicit that this work is a reworking of Antonius Andreas’s *Questions*, and not of Duns Scotus. Likewise, we show that the process of ‘transcendentalisation’ of metaphysics is a much more complex phenomenon, to which more authors have contributed. In particular, we mention Francis de Marchia and Nicolaus Bonetus. They both contributed to the separation of the ontological understanding of metaphysics from the theological one, thus contributing also to the strengthening and autonomisation of the science about the univocal, transcendent being. The second chapter concludes that there is much more continuity in medieval history of metaphysics, much less revolution, and much more scrupulous, active philosophising. This called for a reconstruction and reconsideration of metaphysics in medieval scholastic thought. This is the aim of the last chapter of our work.

This chapter has a particular polemical aim: to demonstrate that the concept of ‘ontotheology’ cannot explain the diversity of metaphysics in the Middle Ages and that there is nothing essential to that history. For this reconstruction of the history of metaphysics, we use the concept of philosophical maintenance.

The history of metaphysics starts, expectedly, from Aristotle, not, however, from him as a founding figure, but as the first philosopher that we know of to discover the following situation: if a philosophical net of sciences is projected upon the theoretically separated domains of nature to be known, there is – or rather there must be – one more, third theoretical science, along with physics and mathematics. Accordingly, the treatise *Metaphysics* is about the search for this yet unclear science. Aristotle’s approach to solving this problem is simultaneously practical and theoretical: he both undertakes various yet related types of research, and tries to describe their proper nature. He investigates different, contemporary and not so contemporary, theses about the *archai* and speaks about the science of causes and principles. He distinguishes four meanings of being and pronounces that there is a science of being as being and its proper attributes. He investigates at length what the substance is, and speaks about the science of substance. Lastly, by the end of the treatise, he treats the being of the Unmoved Mover and theorises about the science of the divine. Thus, Aristotle distinguishes between four understandings of the science he is searching for, and not only two, as the theory of ontotheology stipulates. But the work does not stop there, for the problem concerning the nature of this science – a science that must be one sole, unitary science, having one sole subject-genus – is a matter of a careful and sophisticated maintenance of these four understandings, namely careful and sophisticated harmonisation, merging and distinction between the fundamental sentences that advocate for a certain understanding. Thus, Aristotle is the first to discover the need for a science, and first to offer a preliminary, chronically incomplete maintenance of this problem. The subsequent history of metaphysics is a careful play – analogous to that with Rubik’s cube – of finding and articulating a configuration that fits the convictions of a certain philosopher. To illustrate this complex dynamic, the final part of the chapter refers to two authors who included a ‘review of the existing literature’ in their questions on *Metaphysics*: Albert the Great and Francisco Suarez. They both describe the plurality of metaphysics in the Middle Ages. Having concluded this chapter, we also conclude the summary of our doctoral dissertation.

In conclusion, the ‘Scotistic metaphysics’ is not identical to the ‘metaphysics of Duns Scotus’, and the adjective ‘Scotistic’ needs to be redefined: from ‘of Duns Scotus’ to ‘of the Scotistic School’. The Scotistic metaphysics is the metaphysics ‘*ad mentem Scoti*’, which is a distinct historical and cultural phenomenon. Accordingly, the significance of the Scotist School for the history of metaphysics is crucial for multiple reasons, the main of which is the most straightforward: the Scotists have created both Scotism and the standard portrayal of Duns Scotus as he is described in the majority of the secondary literature. As to Duns Scotus himself, his principal merit in the field of metaphysics lies neither in his authorship of a formal system of metaphysics, nor in his doctrine of univocity of being, nor in his presupposed answers to crucial problems of philosophy. These are all significant achievements whose greatness needs no further stressing. However, for the development of the history of metaphysics, the greatest merit of Duns Scotus is having authored a philosophical laboratory, where the philosophical maintenance of the perennial problems of metaphysics is far more fascinating than the rarely given answers.

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