

10-1-2007

Book Review: Duns Scotus On God

John Kronen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Kronen, John (2007) "Book Review: Duns Scotus On God," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 4 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol24/iss4/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

Perhaps somewhat less surprising, given the skill of our editors, the two essays touching most directly on the ontological argument fit well together and into the volume as a whole, and they provide a substantive discussion of Anselm's most famous proof. Brian Leftow in "Anselm's perfect-being theology" summarizes Anselm's project: "Roughly speaking, Anselm is trying to find descriptions that apply to God and would still have described Him even if only He existed" (p. 134), in contrast, for example, with the notion of God as Creator. Leftow provides an important clarification about why Anselm approaches questions of God in the way that he does and thus prepares us to engage rightly in the ontological argument. Brian Davies's essay on that argument ("Anselm and the ontological argument") is, as one would expect, a model of clarity.

After complimenting the editors for great success at what is surely a difficult task—bringing together a coherent but broad and varied volume on a thinker such as Anselm—it may seem a bit nit-picky to complain about a single infelicitous phrase in the Introduction. But perhaps the emphasis will highlight what the editors have accomplished. Davies and Leftow write in the Introduction that Anselm can be taken as a philosopher insofar as we understand a philosopher as "someone concerned to argue for conclusions in a cogent way" (p. 2). Surely Anselm was concerned to argue and do so cogently, but, as numerous essays in the volume show well, such thin ideals do not capture the depth and richness of Anselm's own vision of what theoretical and philosophical activity is about. The volume makes clear that Anselm is a passionate thinker, convinced that truth is transformative and that reflection on fundamental issues, especially God and the soul, is part of piety to God. To focus on the cogency of the arguments without also attending to the quality and attitude of the soul making the arguments and the transformative nature of the topics studied, is to construe what it means to be a rational, reasoning human being in a way quite different from how Anselm would. Theoretical reflection is about seeking truth, but truth for Anselm is not something that can be divided into parts. There are not many truths, but one truth. Thus the pursuit of truth does not involve a limited aspect of oneself (e.g., certain cognitive faculties) but includes the full transformation of the person. It is a vision foreign to modern ears but rich with resources—which makes this volume all the more welcome.

Duns Scotus on God, by Richard Cross. Ashgate Studies in the History of Philosophical Theology, Ashgate Publishing Limited: Aldershot, 2005. 289 pages.

JOHN KRONEN, The University of St. Thomas, St. Paul

This is a well researched, well written, and well argued book on an important topic. Cross has succeeded admirably in a difficult task—explaining enough of Scotus's complex philosophy to allow those unfamiliar with either Scotus's thought or medieval philosophy in general to follow, reasonably well, the arguments Scotus offers on a range of difficult questions in natural and philosophical theology.

Leaving aside the introduction, which gives a biographical sketch of Scotus and describes the intellectual context in which he wrote, as well as the appendix, which deals with Scotus's theory of the conditions for the possibility of the theological discourse, the book is divided into two parts. Part I, consisting of eight chapters, deals with Scotus's natural theology; Part II, consisting of ten chapters, deals with that part of Scotus's philosophical theology which defends and explicates the doctrine of the Trinity.

The first chapter of the book explicates Scotus's causal theory. In it Cross helpfully notes that medieval causal theories, unlike contemporary ones, focus on the intuitive idea that a cause is somehow the *source* of its effect—it gives being to its effect in some way. Cross notes that many medieval thinkers, such as Thomas Aquinas, tried to account for this aspect of causality with respect to efficient causes by insisting that such causes somehow *pre-contain* their effects. After noting this aspect of medieval theories of causation, Cross does not spend too much time explicating it, focusing instead on the scholastic notion that causality can be understood in terms of potency and act. The idea here is that a cause C must have active powers that are able to produce a certain effect in something E by actualizing E's *capacity to receive such an effect*. In this place Cross (who had already identified form with "essential structure") says that medieval talk "of substantial forms is at root a way of taking about the essential properties, powers, and capacities of a thing; talk of accidental forms is a root way of talking about contingent properties, powers, and capacities of a thing" (p. 18). Though this adds important content to Cross's earlier identification of form with "essential structure," it is misleading. For most of the medievals, a form was not a *set* of necessary properties, but the *root* of such properties. Indeed, the essential properties of things were taken by the medievals to be necessary accidents of them which, by a "natural emanation," resulted from their forms.

Having briefly discussed the general theory of causality adopted by the scholastics, Cross devotes a great deal of space in chapter 1 to a discussion of Scotus's account of the distinction between essentially ordered causal series and accidentally ordered ones. The basic difference between these two kinds of series is that, in the first kind, but not the second, the later members of the series depend, *in their very causing*, on the *causality* of the earlier members. Scotus emphasizes three other differences between these kinds of causal series. The first of these is that in an essentially ordered causal series the earlier members of the series cause in a *different* and *higher* way than the later members do, the second of these is that in an essentially ordered causal series the earlier members act *simultaneously* to cause the effects of the later members of the series, and the third is that in an essentially ordered causal series there can be no infinite causal regress. Cross discusses Scotus's arguments for each of these differences, finding the first two lacking in empirical support and questionable in light of modern science. But, as he notes, the most important of the secondary differences between essentially ordered and accidentally ordered causal series is that in an essentially ordered causal series there can be no infinite regress. Scotus gives several arguments for this claim and Cross finds some of them considerably more powerful than others. He notes here that Scotus anticipated Leibniz by insisting that, even if there *could* be essentially ordered

causal series which have an infinite number of members, there would have to be some cause of the entire series which lies "outside" of it. This type of argument is often accused of committing the fallacy of composition but Cross, like William Rowe, thinks it does not, *if* one assumes a robust version of the principle of sufficient reason.

After discussing the nature of essentially ordered causal series as applied to efficient causes, Cross goes on to note that Scotus held that there are essentially ordered causal series other than efficient ones since, following Aristotle, he recognized material, formal, and final causes as well as efficient ones. Of these, the most important are final causes, where a final cause is that on account of which something is done. Scotus, following Aristotle, held that every efficient cause acts for the sake of an end, and also that the end for the sake of which it acts must be more perfect than the effect it produces. The last of these claims is an important one for Scotus since it is especially by reference to final causality that he tries to establish the perfection and value of the first cause of all caused things and, in so doing, tries to further establish that the first cause is divine.

In the second chapter of the book, Cross explains several of Scotus's proofs for God's existence, spending the most time on what he calls Scotus's "modal proof." That proof begins with the assumption that it is possible that something produced exist, or, to put it another way, it is possible that there be a produced thing. After putting forth the proposition that it is possible that there be a produced thing, Scotus goes on to assert that, if that is the case, it is possible that there be something productive of such a thing. The claim is obviously non-analytic, but I take it that Scotus would hold that it is self-evident (even if not analytic in the contemporary sense) that if it is possible that some *contingent* thing exist then it is possible that something exist that could *produce* it. This is so because any contingent thing (anything that does not have being from itself) must have being from another. Continuing on with the argument, Scotus holds that, if it is possible that some producible thing exist, then it is possible that a series of essentially ordered efficient causes exist. This is so because every causally ordered series is either essentially or accidentally ordered and every accidentally ordered series is dependent, in some way, on an essentially ordered causal series. As already noted, Scotus gave several arguments for the conclusion that a regression to infinity is impossible in essentially ordered causal series. Since this is so, Scotus reasons that any possible essentially ordered causal series must terminate in a first uncaused cause, with the result that the very possibility of an essentially ordered causal series entails the possibility of an uncaused first cause of such a series. However, the very possibility of an uncaused first cause of an essentially ordered causal series entails the actuality of such a cause. If it is possible that an *uncaused cause exists* it is possible that *something exists which is independent and necessary in its being* and nothing, either intrinsic to the nature of such a being, or extrinsic to it, could block the possibility of its being actual from being realized.

Scotus's modal proof shares some similarities with St. Anselm's ontological proof, particularly in its argument that the very possibility that a necessary and independent being exist entails the existence of such a being. However, as Cross notes, the proof is different from Anselm's in

that it does not begin with the possibility of there being a “being than which none greater can be conceived” but rather with the possibility of their being a produced being. Cross does not think that “much can be done to salvage Scotus’s [modal] argument” (p. 38) since he thinks it rests, ultimately, on a claim that is empirical in nature. We could not know that it is possible that there be producible beings absent our experience of beings that are produced. But, even if that is true, it does not seem to me to affect the modal nature of the claim that it is possible that some producible thing exist. To suppose it does would seem to conflate the epistemic with the ontic.

Scotus not only gave a modal argument for God’s existence; he also gave a more traditional cosmological argument that seems to me more powerful than any of Aquinas’s. Cross briefly discusses this argument before rounding off this chapter by considering Scotus’s arguments for the conclusions that (1) some nature able to be a simply first goal of activity exists, (2) some simply most perfect nature exists, and (3) no more than one nature has necessary existence of itself. Cross argues that Scotus’s attempted proof of (2) does not work since, even if every premise of it is true, it does *not* entail (2) but the much weaker claim that “some nature more perfect any other existing nature exists.”

Having explicated Scotus’s proofs for God’s existence in chapter 2 of Part I, Cross devotes the remaining chapters of Part I to Scotus’s discussion of the divine attributes. In chapter 3 he outlines Scotus’s general approach to the divine attributes—an approach which, at least in certain of Scotus’s works, departs fairly radically from the method of several of his predecessors. It was common, as Cross points out, for many medieval thinkers to follow the method of St. Anselm in discussing the divine attributes. Having proven (in some way) that a single, most perfect being exists, they attempted to flesh out the attributes of such a being by predicating of it formally, but in the highest degree, all those attributes found in creatures which do not, *intrinsically*, involve any imperfection (e.g. wisdom, power) even if they involve imperfection as existing in creatures. Scotus expressed grave misgivings about this method of treating the divine attributes since he thought that, in order to know whether or not a certain attribute intrinsically involves an imperfection, one would first have to know whether or not such an attribute *in fact* belongs to the most perfect being! Hence, in treating the divine attributes, Scotus followed another method which was also used, at least in part, by other scholastics and thinkers of later periods. That method is to determine what attributes the first being must have in order to be the ultimate efficient and final cause of the world. For Scotus these seem to consist essentially in volition and knowledge. Of course, the first cause will be *infinitely* free, *infinitely* knowing etc., as well as being simply, eternally, immutably, and so on, such things. But Scotus holds that such attributes as *infinite* are *modes* of God that are not on the same footing as such attributes as *knowledge*. Knowing that God is infinite, simple, eternal, and so on does not enable us to know anything about *what God is* so much as it enables us to know that, *whatever he is*, he is infinitely, simply, eternally and so on.

Scotus’s theory of the non-modal attributes of God (viz. volition and knowledge) are discussed in great detail by Cross in chapter 4. This is

one of the most difficult chapters in the book and I think Cross does an excellent job of illuminating some of Scotus's most subtle arguments in it. The most extensive section of the chapter deals with God's knowledge. As explicated by Cross it would appear that Scotus wished to put forward an account of the divine ideas (i.e. God's ideas of the kinds of created things) that was mid-way, as it were, between Aquinas' theory, according to which such ideas are reducible to God's knowledge of the various ways he is able to be imitated, and Malbranche's theory of the divine ideas, which appears to put forward the notion that God, in some way, *thinks* the eternal essence of things *into existence*. I can't say that Cross has convinced me that Scotus succeeded in this project—at the end of the day his doctrine (at least with respect to God's knowledge of kinds of created things if not with respect to God's knowledge of individual created things) does not seem all that different from Aquinas'. Scotus's account of the non-modal attributes of God appears to me to be impoverished in comparison with that of certain other theologians since, if what Cross says is representative of Scotus's treatment of them, he did not devote much attention to God's *moral* attributes (e.g. justice, holiness, love, mercy, truthfulness, etc.). Perhaps this is due to Scotus's voluntarism which lead him to embrace the divine command theory, at least with respect to the second tablet of the law. Cross does briefly discuss this aspect of Scotus's thought, but does not spend much time on it except to note that, for Scotus, it is a corollary of God's perfection and transcendence.

Chapters 5-8 are devoted to explicating Scotus's views and arguments concerning such modal attributes of God as infinity, simplicity, timelessness, omnipresence, unicity, and immutability. Cross emphasizes that Scotus gives pride of place, among these, to God's infinity, holding that it is the modal attribute of God's we first arrive at through reasoning and that it can be used to give arguments for God's other modal attributes. Another key feature of Scotus's doctrine of God's modal attributes is the use he makes of his original theory of the formal distinction in his discussion of God's simplicity. The basic idea of the formal distinction is that it is mid-way between a purely conceptual and a real distinction. We think, truly, according to Scotus, that Socrates is both a human and an animal, but we also truly think that some non-humans are animals. If both these beliefs are true, then that in virtue of which Socrates is a human must not be *formally* the same as that in virtue of which he is an animal, since if it were, then whatever is an animal would be a human. In short, if two attributes are not co-extensive, then one is not, formally, the same as the other—there is something more than a merely conceptual distinction between them. However, the humanity of Socrates cannot exist without his animality, and *vice versa*, so the two, while being more than merely conceptually distinct, are not *really* distinct *in* Socrates.

Though, according to Scotus, Socrates' animality is not really distinct from his humanity, his wisdom is, since Socrates might not have been wise and could lose his wisdom. In addition to the distinction between Socrates' animality and humanity, and between him and his accidents, Scotus, in some places at least, holds that Socrates' essence (like every created essence) exists in a *suppositum* (subject) that is somehow distinct from Socrates, though Cross thinks that Scotus's doctrine of what a *suppositum*

is to be much thinner than Aquinas'. Furthermore, he holds that, according to Scotus, God has no *suppositum* at all and that all of God's attributes are, at most, only formally distinct from each other and from God. It is in this way that Scotus sought to maintain the doctrine of the divine simplicity, while yet allowing that the divine attributes are more than merely conceptually distinct. Cross explains that Scotus felt he had to hold that the divine attributes are more than merely conceptually distinct since holding that they are merely conceptually distinct would make Theology impossible. It should be noted, though, that Scotus' denial of any *suppositum* in which the divine essence exists seems to undercut his own explanation of how the divine essence is common to the three persons of the Trinity, something that Cross discusses at length in chapter 13.

Part II of the book, running from chapter 9 through chapter 18, gives a marvelously detailed discussion of Scotus's complex theory of the Trinity, ranging from his highly original twists on an old argument for the doctrine the God is triune, through his account of what it is to be a divine person, his attempt to make coherent the view that the divine essence is an individual essence which exists, undividedly, in three distinct persons, his account of the personal properties, and his account of how the Son and Holy Spirit are produced in a way that gives due prominence to the real causality of Father and the Son without positing any undue subordination of the Son and the Holy Spirit to the Father or of the Holy Spirit to both. In this part of the book Cross well supports his claim that Scotus's treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity is very rich and offers many insights on how to expound the doctrine in a coherent way that is free from logical contradiction. Nevertheless, I do not think he has shown that Scotus offers a way out of the apparent inconsistency of holding (as Scotus and countless medieval theologians did) that 1) the divine essence is simple and exists, undivided, in the three persons of the Trinity, 2) each person of the Trinity is wholly constituted by the divine essence, and 3) each person of the Trinity is really distinct from every other person of the Trinity.

All in all this is an excellent book. Cross is liberal in providing the reader with well chosen passages from Scotus's works and his discussion of these passages is always illuminating even if, here and there, one might reasonably question certain of his interpretations. I would highly recommend it to anyone interested in medieval philosophy, or in natural and philosophical theology.

Aquinas's Summa: Background, Structure, & Reception, by Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., translated by Benedict M. Guevin, O.S.B. The Catholic University of America Press, 2005. Pp. x + 156. \$17.95 (paper).

TODD C. REAM AND THOMAS W. SEAT II, Indiana Wesleyan University

Jean-Pierre Torrell is a Dominican priest and professor of dogmatic theology at the University of Fribourg. Previous scholarly efforts on his part include a biographical study of Thomas Aquinas (*Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, The Catholic University of America Press, 1996)