

A HUMEAN RESPONSE TO SCOTUS'S CONCEPTION OF "INFINITE BEING"

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Resumen

Scotus piensa que la concepción compuesta de "ser infinito" es la mejor descripción de Dios como el fin de la metafísica. El atributo disyuntivo "infinito", cuando es aplicado al concepto unívocamente vacío «ser», representa una conexión intrínseca y esencialmente racional entre ambos. Nuestra capacidad mental ha de ser extremadamente poderosa, según Scotus, si ha de captar lo infinito. Me parece que semejante concepción es realmente un trabajo de Sísifo que lleva a la contradicción y a la frustración, más que a la satisfacción y al reposo, como sostiene Scotus. Para formular mi posición en este artículo, procedo con dos estrategias: primero, ofrezco una crítica externa de Scotus a través de la epistemología de Hume; en segundo lugar, ofrezco una crítica interna, mostrando los resultados paradójicos de su metafísica. Al final sostengo que el infinito existe, pero como el fin de una teología emotiva o sentida, más que de una metafísica natural.

Palabras clave: Scotus, Dios, Hume, epistemología, teología, metafísica natural.

Abstract

Scotus thinks that the composite conception of "infinite being" best describes God as the end or goal of metaphysics. The disjunctive attribute "infinite," when applied to the univocally empty concept "being," represents an intrinsic and essentially rational connection between the two. Our mental capacity must be extremely powerful, on Scotus's terms, if it is to grasp the infinite. It seems to me that such a goal is really a sisyphusian task leading to contradiction and frustration rather than, as Scotus maintains, to comfort and rest. To proffer my view in this paper, I proceed in two ways: first, I offer an external criticism of Scotus through Hume's epistemology; secondly, I offer an internal criticism of Scotus showing the paradoxical result of his metaphysics. In the end I maintain that the infinite exists more realistically as the goal of an emotivist or "heartfelt" theology rather than a natural metaphysics.

Key words: Scotus, God, Hume, epistemology, theology, natural metaphysics.

I

Any faculty naturally perceives any lack of harmony in its object, and it will not naturally put up with it or be content with it. If then "infinite" were something that contradicted "being", our mind would be naturally repelled by "infinite being" as something which includes a contradiction. But this is false, for our mind rather than finding any contradiction discovers its rest therein.¹

This is the way Scotus ends his arguments for the infinite nature of God in his

¹ John Duns Scotus, *Lectura in librum I Sententiarum*, in: *A Treatise on God as First Principle*. trans. and ed. Allan B. Wolter, O.F.M. (Chicago: Forum Books, 1966), para. 86, p. 184.

Lectura in librum I Sententiarum, Question Two. If, as Scotus and any Scholastic mind would believe, a teleology is the guiding force in an activity, then it seems apparent from this conclusion that the mind seeks a certain resting place in something having the power to expel all anxiety and further need for searching. Scotus's conclusion is that God is the infinite being who fulfills such a mental requirement and his findings are reminiscent of St. Augustine's dictum in Book One, Chapter One of his *Confessions*: "Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they rest in thee". Further, for Scotus, our mind finds no contradiction in the idea of an infinite being. Since such an infinite being would be the Anselmian "that than which no greater can be conceived," it follows "that there is in reality such a greatest conceivable object" which exists as the firm foundation for our mental quiescence.²

Finally, the joining of the concept "infinite" with the concept "being" is itself a transcendental move located within the context of a metaphysics that investigates being as such. If Scotus is correct in assuming a "need" for metaphysics as "the greatest science" that will quench the desire to know, then the study of the infinite as the greatest of all metaphysical realities must be included in such an endeavor.³ And, presumably, such a quenching or resting will be in the end quite enjoyable. As Efreem Bettoni, O.F.M. puts it:

Hence it is not without meaning that my intellect can think without any difficulty of an infinite being. Far from experiencing any difficulty, it enjoys a certain delight in this, as though it were confronted with the most perfect metaphysical agreement in which the plenitude of intelligibility corresponds with the plenitude of being.⁴

Scotus thinks that the composite conception of "infinite being" best describes God as the end or goal of metaphysics.⁵ Consider what William A. Frank and Allan B. Wolter have to say about the concept of infinity:

For philosophers, infinity is one of the most attractive and elusive concepts. It resolutely resists the human mind's attempt to possess it, yet it invariably invites us to make the effort. Our minds can be capable of the most beautiful and powerful of constructions, but like Icarus's wings, they fail us as we approach the infinite.⁶

² John Duns Scotus, *Tractatus de primo principio*, in: *A Treatise on God as First Principle*, para. 4.65, p. 122.

³ John Duns Scotus, *The Nature of Metaphysics*, in: *Duns Scotus: Metaphysician*, trans. and ed. William A. Frank and Allan B. Wolter, O.F.M. (West Lafayette: Purdue Univ. Pr., 1995), p. 21.

⁴ Efreem Bettoni, O.F.M., *Duns Scotus: The Basic Principles of His Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Bernardine Bonansea, O.F.M. (Washington: The Catholic Univ. Of America Pr., 1961), p. 133.

⁵ *The Nature of Metaphysics*, p. 23.

⁶ John Duns Scotus, *Parisian Proof for the Existence of God*, in *Duns Scotus: Metaphysician*, Commentary, p. 91.

Frank and Wolter's comment here hints at a problem associated with trying to conjoin the concept "infinite" with the concept "being." Mention is made of the mind's attempt to grasp something that seems to be much beyond the mind's capacities. It is as if Frank and Wolter are spelling out the reality of the mind's limitations as contrasted with Scotus's more idealistic vision of an unlimited mental capacity. Our mental capacity must be extremely powerful, on Scotus's terms, if it is to grasp the infinite.

I must agree with Frank and Wolter that infinity is the most elusive of concepts. Further, I find a less optimistic contention that the mind is minimal and limited in its capacities to be a more accurate depiction. Unaided by the activity of faith, the mind can never grasp the concept of infinity fully or adequately. To this end, I disagree with Scotus that the mind, via its natural capacities, can find a quiescence or resting place in the conjoined concepts of "infinite" and "being."⁷ Scotus sets up the composite conception of "infinite being" or God as the goal of his metaphysics. However, it seems to me that such a goal is really no more than a sisyphusian task leading to contradiction and frustration rather than, as Scotus maintains, to comfort and rest.

To proffer my view in this paper, I will first examine Scotus's arguments and ideas concerning the composite conception of "infinite being" as found primarily in his *Parisian Proof for the Existence of God* and his *Three Questions About Knowledge*. Next, I will show how Scotus's metaphysical endeavor does not achieve what Scotus thinks it achieves via a presentation of Hume's epistemology which is more pessimistic concerning the mind's capacities. Finally, I will offer an internal criticism of Scotus showing the paradoxical result of his metaphysics. When all is said and done, I believe that a sense of the infinite can be grasped in a limited fashion by reason. But this sense of the infinite exists more realistically as the goal of an emotivist or "heartfelt" theology rather than a natural metaphysics.⁸

⁷ It may be that we get a glimpse of the infinite in this lifetime via observation of the finite effects of the infinite Creator. See Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Anton C. Pegis. (New York: The Modern Library, 1948), I, Q. 2, Art. 2, Obj. 3 and Reply Obj. 3, pp. 23-4. Aquinas utilizes analogical predication and proportionality to describe how the mind comes to know God qua infinite being in a limited fashion. This is a very different and less ambitious project than that of Scotus's univocal predication of being which purports to include infinite being and finite beings alike. God is univocally included *in* being for Scotus (e.g., see *Three Questions About Knowledge*, in: *Duns Scotus: Metaphysician*, p. 109); God is Neoplatonically and analogically *before* being for Aquinas (e.g., see *STI*, Q. 12, Art. 13, Answer, p. 94). For a clear and concise description of the difference between the Scotistic and Thomistic accounts of being in relation to God, see John P. Doyle, "Heidegger and Scholastic Metaphysics," in: *The Modern Schoolman* (March 1972), vol. XLIX, pp. 201-20, specifically pp. 210-19.

⁸ When Kant said that he limited reason to make room for faith he was taking a cue from Hume who makes similar claims at the end of Chapter XII of his first *Enquiry*. Hume would have no problem with theologians making certain claims regarding the infinity of God; these claims are not specifically

II

Scotus thinks that God is an ultimate cause who exists as a conclusion to the entire metaphysical scheme.⁹ The proposition “God exists” is neither self-evidently known nor known as a reasoned fact because God’s essence (i.e., the characteristics or absolute properties of God) cannot be known to exist as definitive. Frank and Wolter put it in this way: “the initial meaning of “God” available to the metaphysician precisely in his capacity as a philosopher does not contain the basis for the unmediated attribution of God’s proper characteristics.”¹⁰ Scotus makes it clear that there is no way for us to arrive at a demonstrative definition of God’s essence in this lifetime. Following Aristotle’s directives in the *Posterior Analytics*, Scotus agrees that the middle term of the syllogism answers the question “why,” gives the reason for and consequently proffers the definition of a thing.¹¹ Because God’s essence cannot be known, this cancels out the possibility of both self-evidence and demonstration via the reasoned fact (i.e., a *demonstratio propter quid*). However, Scotus tells us that by “a demonstration of the simple fact, where the middle term of the demonstration is taken from what God effects” (i.e., a *demonstratio quia*), it is possible to arrive at a first being who “relates to every effect in virtue of the relational properties of causality and producibility.”¹² So, in this way, God is the goal or end of metaphysics existing as the “Simply First Being” presupposed

rational. In fact, the infinity of God is not wholly discarded from a philosophical perspective if it is understood that this infinite God is merely assented to as a buffer to pyrrhonian skepticism. See David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Stanley Tweyman. (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 161. Philo the skeptic (a.k.a. David Hume) does concede that if he was forced to give an account of the cause behind the workings of the Universe, he would “esteem none more plausible, than that which ascribes an eternal, inherent principle of order to the world; though attended with great and continued revolutions and alterations.” Also see Hume’s *Natural History of Religion*, ed. Richard Wollheim. (London: Collins Clear-Type Pr., 1963), p. 31 (Cf. also pp. 34, 37, 51, 58, 70, 96). Hume claims that the “whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion.” See James Collins, *God in Modern Philosophy* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1959), p. 120. With respect to Hume’s natural theology, Collins formulates that our “emotions and practical drives force us to adhere strongly to the existence of God, even though philosophical analysis assures us that we lack the means to ascend to a knowledge of Him with demonstrative certainty.” For an account of Hume’s rational theism, see Peter S. Fosl, “Doubt and Divinity: Cicero’s Influence on Hume’s Religious Skepticism,” in *Hume Studies* (April 1994), vol. 20, pp. 103-20. See also Robert ARP, “Hume’s Mitigated Skepticism and the Design Argument,” forthcoming in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* (Fall 1998).

⁹ John Duns Scotus, *Questions on the Metaphysics*, in: *Duns Scotus: Metaphysician*, p. 37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Commentary, p. 36.

¹¹ *The Nature of Metaphysics*, p. 19.

¹² Parisian Proof for the Existence of God, p. 41. Also see Aquinas, STI, Q.2, Art. 2, Reply Obj.2, p. 24. Aquinas and Scotus are on the same page concerning the *demonstratio quia* of God’s existence.

behind all beings in the universe.¹³ And, given the infinite myriad of possible cause/effect relationships in the universe, it is appropriate that this simply first being possess the kind of infinite nature capable of producing an infinite number of causes and effects.¹⁴

In the *Parisian Proof for the Existence of God*, Scotus's intent is to show 1) that there is a simply first being who exists behind all causal and productive relationships and 2) that this simply first being is infinite. It is important to note that Scotus (b. 1266 a.d.) was living during an age when the relationship between faith and reason was constantly being clarified. As Ludger Honnefelder has pointed out, Scotus was dealing with "soteriological considerations central to the Franciscan theological tradition" on one hand, and "the scientific rationality defined by Aristotle" on the other.¹⁵ This being the case, Scotus needed to show the validity and integrity of both approaches. An argument that proved God's existence and then his infinity needed to be somehow couched between these approaches without subordinating one to the other.

To assure the possibility of not collapsing into either Aristotelian rationalism or Christian fideism, Scotus offers the concept "univocity" and applies this concept to being. Scotus defines a univocal concept as that which "has sufficient unity in itself that to affirm and deny it of the same subject suffices as a contradiction."¹⁶ According to Scotus, being is univocal because it is trans-categorical, thereby being applicable to a substance and its accidental features. The substance "exists" or can be and its qualities "exist" or can be in some way as well. But there is more to this. As a univocal term "being" exists as transcendent (with a capital "T") because it is applicable to God as well. Scotus thinks it appropriate to state that God "exists" or can be in the same way that

¹³ See note xii of this paper. Again, it should be noted that, for Scotus, God is *the* exemplary "being." For Aquinas, however, God is *before* all being as ontological progenitor.

¹⁴ See *Parisian Proof for the Existence of God*, pp. 45-7, commentary, p. 81. There, in the midst of his argument for a first efficient cause, Scotus lays out his distinction between essentially and accidentally subordinated causes in relation to a first efficient cause. The whole series of infinite, subordinated causes depends upon God as their principal cause in much the same way that a son's life and activity is ultimately dependent upon his father's procreativity. In their commentary, Frank and Wolter use the image of a link of chains dependent upon a ceiling beam for their support. One can constantly add new links to a chain (i.e., there can be any number of essentially or accidentally subordinated causes). But the links themselves need to be anchored to something wholly other than the links themselves like a ceiling beam (i.e., God as the principal, efficient cause), "otherwise there would be no actual effect."

¹⁵ Ludger Honnefelder, "How is Metaphysics Possible: The Metaphysical Approach and Method of John Duns Scotus," an unpublished article, p. 1.

¹⁶ *Three Questions About Knowledge*, p. 109.

the rest of reality exists or can be.¹⁷ There is nothing that can escape the univocal predication of being as Scotus tells us simply: “For just as in every category we end with some one nature that is the measure of all other in that category, so in the category of the whole of being, it is necessary to end with some nature that is first in an unqualified sense and is the measure of all beings.”¹⁸

With the help of the univocal predication of being Scotus thinks he is able to harmonize faith and reason. The transcendental concept of being can be applied to philosophical and theological matters alike. Seen from the philosophical/metaphysical standpoint, being is “empty” enough to transcendently apply to all finite, categorical modes *as well as* the infinite. Seen from the religious/theological standpoint, the finite is understood to be created being, while the infinite is understood to be the Creator. The only difference is that God, qua infinite being, is the *object* of Scotistic theology, while remaining the *goal* of Scotistic metaphysics.¹⁹

Univocal being is transcendent as applicable to God as *ens infinitum* and God’s creatures *in quale* and *in quid*. But Scotus identifies other transcendental realities associated with or “belonging to” being. According to Scotus, “anything not contained under any genus” is a transcendental.²⁰ Being is the first or

¹⁷ The specific argument Scotus uses to proffer univocal predication can be found in *Three Questions About Knowledge*, p. 111 and runs thus: “Every intellect that is certain about one concept and dubious about others has the concept about which it is certain as other than the dubious concepts. The subject [of this proposition] includes the predicate. But the intellect of a person in this life can be certain that God is a being while doubting whether this being is finite or infinite, created or uncreated; therefore the concept of God as a being is other than this or that concept; and although included in each of these, it is none of them itself, and therefore it is univocal.”

¹⁸ *Parisian Proof for the Existence of God*, p. 57.

¹⁹ See *The Nature of Metaphysics*, in: *Duns Scotus: Metaphysician*, pp. 19, 23-5. Scotus sees the goal of science as the establishing of the most common and certain truths. The method that achieves this most effectively is the science of being qua being. Scotus, in agreement with Avicenna, envisions being as the primary subject/object of metaphysics and argues contrary to the Averroistic view that places God as the subject/object of metaphysics. In further arguing against Averroes, Scotus claims that metaphysics is a philosophical science rooted in demonstrative evidence given to the mind naturally. But God is to be characteristically understood as a “first being” and is the proper object of theology rather than metaphysics. And this kind of knowledge of God’s essence has been granted to the individual in the realm of theology by virtue of something supernatural, faith. Scotus is concerned here to justify the power and integrity of natural reasoning since he is ratifying the science of metaphysics as a demonstrative endeavor. Although God is not the proper object of metaphysics, He does exist as its goal. In his *Parisian Proof for the Existence of God*, p. 41, Scotus tells us that metaphysicians “need not despair” if God is not the proper object of rational science since God will be shown to exist as First Cause, Final Cause, Preeminent Being, Infinite Being and Creator of the universe. Also see *Parisian Proof for the Existence of God*, Commentary, p. 149. As Frank and Wolter state: “Every metaphysical inquiry of God begins with a univocal affirmation of something that God has in common with his creatures. Through negation and eminence, it fashions from this core concept one that is unique and proper to God.”

²⁰ John Duns Scotus, *Opus Oxoniense*, lib. 1, dist. 8, quaest. 3nn. 18-19. Taken from a translated quotation in Allen B. Wolter, O.F.M., *The Transcendentals and Their Function in the Metaphysics of Duns Scotus* (Washington: The Catholic Univ. of America Pr., 1946), p. 5.

primary transcendental followed by: 1) the coextensive properties of being such as one, true and good; 2) the disjunctive attributes such as possible/necessary, potency/act and finite/infinite; 3) the pure perfections which include being and its coextensive properties as well as the perfect member of each disjunction such as wisdom, knowledge, life and will. The pure perfections are subdivided into those which can be said of God alone and those which can be said of God and some creature.²¹ These transcendentals are the appropriate objects of a metaphysical science. Because of this fact Wolter states that the transcendentals are "very real concepts" that refer to the "metaphysical order of reality... the transcendentals are predicated of real things and signify some formal aspect or perfection characteristic of existing objects."²² The disjunctive attribute "infinite" will be applied to God alone.

The novelty of Scotus's approach to the question of God's existence and attributes can be seen here. By clarifying the disjunctive attribute of infinite as transcendently connected to the univocal concept of being, Scotus thinks he is able to give metaphysics the necessary equipment needed to speak about God without appealing to divine revelation or some other kind of supernatural aid. This, presumably, will provide metaphysics with its own footing and domain. As Etienne Gilson notes:

The being that is thought common to God and creatures is, by definition, the being neither of God nor creatures. And *that, by the way, is why the Scotist proofs of God's existence are really proofs*; the very fact that they start from being supposes that this concept is not the concept of God; for were it so there would be nothing to prove, we should have no need to look further. Univocity no more provides a starting point for the beatific vision than analogy, for the dividing line between man and God is situated on another plane; it results from the fact of creation.²³

The uniqueness of Scotus's move lies in the rejection of equivocal and analogical predication of being in favor of univocal predication.²⁴ From the

²¹ *The Transcendentals and Their Function in the Metaphysics of Duns Scotus*, pp. 5, 10-11.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

²³ Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*. This passage is footnoted in *Duns Scotus: The Basic Principles of His Philosophy*, pp. 132-3.

²⁴ Scotus rejects Aquinas's analogical predication for the simple fact that, according to Aquinas, God outside of being as its cause. Scotus also rejects Henry of Ghent's brand of analogical predication probably because it sounds almost like equivocal predication. See Henry of Ghent, *Summa quaestionum ordinarium*, (New York: Franciscan Institute, 1953), 2 vols., I, d. 3, no. 300: "Nec per speciem propriam cognoscitur, quia nihil est eo simplicius, sed ad modum aestimativae, per speciem aliquam alienam ex creaturis..." Also see *Three Questions About Knowledge*, commentary, p. 145. Frank and Wolter state that the "simple concepts we form of God, Henry (of Ghent) claims, are radically different from anything we conceive of or find exemplified in creatures. Yet the two sets of concepts resemble each other analogically."

metaphysical perspective, the cordon of being has been loosened to include God as well as creation. As Gilson puts it, the fact that the metaphysician begins with this now loosened notion of being and moves to the *discovery* of God as First Cause, Final Cause, Exemplary Cause, Infinite Being and finally, Creator, this shows the Scotistic proof to be a genuine and valid one.

How specifically does the proof work? In the *Parisian Proof* Scotus purports to: 1) establish the existence of an entity which is first in the orders of efficient causality, final causality and preeminence known as a “simply first being;” 2) demonstrate that this “simply first being” is essentially infinite in an unqualified sense; 3) show that there can only be one, unique, “simply first being” who is essentially infinite in an unqualified sense. In step 2) Scotus offers four arguments for an infinite being.²⁵ The third argument is of importance to us and rests upon the idea that the mind is not satisfied with the concept “finite being.” Scotus tells us that “to be infinite is not repugnant to being.”²⁶ This relates to what Scotus says about the nature of science in his *The Nature of Metaphysics*. The highest and most important science will search for those first things which are most commonly and most certainly known.²⁷ The metaphysical science of being and its attributes does this work. Scotus is reiterating in the *Parisian Proof* that the transcendental disjunctive attribute of infinity is compatible with the search for being. Since the intellect “never rests with finite being,”²⁸ the entire proof will move toward that infinite being which is the end or goal of such a metaphysical endeavor.

Concerned further to show that such an infinite being does in fact exist in extra-mental reality, Scotus invokes the Anselmian “that than which no greater can be conceived” and adds to this the Avicennan insight of possible being.²⁹ Now, “what can be thought of (i.e., what is possible) is what can be understood without contradiction.” The joining of the concepts “infinite” and “being” (with all of their quidditative relevances) can be possible and therefore, actual. Such a coupling is unlike that of joining the concepts “gold” and “mountain” or “square”

²⁵ *Parisian Proof for the Existence of God*, pp. 43-67.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²⁷ *The Nature of Metaphysics*, p. 19.

²⁸ *Parisian Proof for the Existence of God*, p. 65.

²⁹ Scotus uses the common concept of being as a middle term in the demonstration of God's existence as the most actual being. Borrowing the notion of possible being from Avicenna, Scotus formulates a proof for God's existence that begins with universal, necessary possibles and moves through the empty and common concept of being to the most actual being, God. See *Parisian Proof for the Existence of God*, pp. 49-51 as well as Frank and Wolter's commentary, pp. 80-2. For further explication of the argument, see “Heidegger and Scholastic Metaphysics,” pp. 213-14 and “John Duns Scotus,” in: *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards. (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1967), vol. 2, pp. 429-30.

and "circle." For the latter concepts are contradictory, whereas the former are not. The mind experiences no repugnance, but actually attraction when "infinite" and "being" are conjoined. And a correlation is set up between the non-contradictory unity present in the formation of concepts and the non-contradictory unity experienced in the extra-mental world:

Just as in the real order nothing is one unless it be simple or composed of potency and act, so, too, with concepts. But contradictories do not form any unity, neither simple nor composite. Therefore, they will not form one conceivable concept. I return then to my original proposal and argue that the highest thing that one can think of exists, because the highest thing that one can think of is conceivable without contradiction: but it is possible for such to exist in actuality, and therefore it can be thought to exist in actuality.³⁰

In his *Three Questions About Knowledge* Scotus seeks to answer the question: "What are the conceptual requirements necessary when considering the proof for the existence of an infinite being?" Another way to phrase this question is simply, "By what qualification of the common concept of being is the most adequate concept of God from the metaphysical standpoint to be attained?" Scotus answers these questions by viewing the concept of infinity as having, not merely an accidental, but an essential connection to being. As in his *Parisian Proof*, Scotus argues that, through a quia demonstration that begins with creatures, the mind can come to a quidditative understanding of God as an infinite being. This quidditative understanding is rooted in a composite conception of God that essentially links the concept of infinity to the concept of being when considering the transcendental superlative qualities that make themselves manifest in creation.³¹ All pure perfections each in their highest degree such as "good" or "true" exist as merely "quasi-attributes" or properties of being. These attributes are quasi because they are accidentally attributed to being since the concepts of "good" and "truth" can stand separately on their own. However, the concept of infinity, when applied to being, is so closely related to being as to exist as an inner modality. In fact, infinity is the simplest and most perfect modality including the perfections of goodness and truth. Scotus maintains that

³⁰ *Parisian Proof for the Existence of God*, p. 65. Also see commentary, p. 81. Frank and Wolter note that in shifting the premise upon which his proof for the existence of God is based from the mode of actuality to the mode of possibility, Scotus is making an "important philosophical move." They claim that Scotus "brings out the weight of the possibilities inherent in contingent realities. They belong to the essence of things; they are part of the quiddity of an entity. Such possibilities are not "merely logical," but have existential significance because they tell us something of the way the world has to be."

³¹ *Three Questions About Knowledge*, p. 117.

“all pure perfections” exist “under the aspect of infinity.”³² Frank and Wolter comment that Scotus “speaks of “infinite” as an intrinsic mode, inseparable either conceptually or in reality from the subject (being) that it modifies.”³³

Scotus wants to show that the empty and common concept of “being” exists as the basis for a much richer composite conception of “infinite being.” The modal concept of infinity, when applied to being, manifests itself in an essential and intrinsic manner such that there is a deeper ontological connection that is made between the two. This is what Frank and Wolter mean when they speak of the two concepts being inseparable “in reality” from one another. Ontologically, a mode cannot be separated from a reality anymore than intensity can be separated from that which is white, to use Scotus’s example.³⁴ The inner mode of infinity cannot be ontologically separated from the reality of being provided that the being to which infinity refers is God. At the conceptual level, infinity can be made distinct from being. But when applied to being, the concept of infinity shows that this “Being” is essentially most perfect and unique among all other “beings.”

III

If Hume and Scotus could converse, Hume’s attack of Scotus’s metaphysics and epistemology would take two forms: The first would deal with concept formation within the mind itself; the second would deal with the relatedness of the concepts formed in the mind to that which they refer to in the extra-mental world. In his first *Enquiry* Hume makes the claim that all conceptions or “events” in the mind “seem entirely loose and separate” and that even though one concept seems to follow or be conjoined to another, they are never really “connected.” Hume continues:

And as we can have no idea of any thing, which never appeared to our outward sense or inward sentiment, the necessary conclusion *seems* to be, that we have no idea of connexion or power at all, and that these words are absolutely without any meaning, when employed either in philosophical reasonings, or common life.³⁵

There is no way for any two concepts in the mind to be essentially joined in the way Scotus would have us believe because, as Hume rightly points out,

³² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³³ *Ibid.*, Commentary, p. 151.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³⁵ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg. (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1977), p. 49.

there is no necessary connection that can be made between or among concepts. There is no way to prove or demonstrably show that event B will be the result of event A just because we have witnessed or have known B to be associated with A. It is always possible that B will not result from A, even if the concepts we have formed seem to indicate otherwise. So, too, there is no way of showing that concept B should be conjoined with concept A in an intrinsic or essential manner. There is no privileged analyticity to be found in joining "infinite" with "being" since I can, without contradiction, conceive of a non-infinite being. This is why Hume says, in a somewhat *ad hominem* manner, that "according to the scholastic way of talking, rather than thinking... a mode, not being any distinct or separate existence, must be the very same with substance..."³⁶

Scotus places emphasis upon the idea that the concept of infinity exists as an inner mode essentially related to being. Coupling this notion of inner modality with the Anselmian proof, Scotus purports to show that the composite conception of infinite being has an ontological status of existence and he bases his argument on the claim that a mode cannot be separated from a reality. Recall that "infinite" is related to "being" as "intensity" is related to "whiteness." Intensity must exist in the whiteness regardless of any perception or conception of it. So, too, infinite must exist in being regardless of the *ratio entis*. Yet, if we deny the existence of inner modality then we can view the existence of an infinite being as no more than a composite conception existing in the mind of the conceiver. We could take an atomistic view of our conceptions like that of Hume and maintain that there really is no necessary connection among them. Or, we could maintain that there is no necessary connection between conceptions and what takes place in the outside world. In both cases the damage to Scotus's argument is done.

Scotus's ultimate point will be that the concept of the disjunctive attribute "infinity," when applied to the univocally empty concept "being," represents an intrinsic and essentially rational connection between the two. Further, this modal conception of "infinite being" has an ontologically real status of existence outside of the mind as the Christian God Who has created the universe. By contrast, Hume takes an atomistic view of conceptions and finds no essentially rational or intrinsic connection between the conjoining of two concepts. At best, in Hume's view, there is what would be termed by Aristotle or Scotus an "accidental" association between concepts. "Ideas" or concepts in Hume's system are "entirely loose and unconnected, chance alone wou'd join them."³⁷

³⁶ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge. (Oxford: Clarendon Pr., 1978) p.243.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

When concepts are joined and appear to be connected in some way, this connection is envisioned as no more than an emotivistic “gentle force” which is the result of the resemblance, contiguity or cause/effect of previously experienced sense impressions.³⁸

Hume argues that the mind is really not capable of making essential connections between perceptions or of extending these perceptions outward as accurate isomorphic depictions of the external world. Actually, a kind of mental habit, feeling or “sentiment” will cause us to make the conclusion that a concept we have formed via perception should have some external reference.³⁹ This sentiment is based upon an “experience” or impression we have of these perceptions which gives us no more than a probabilistic account when considering whether any two perceptions should be conjoined or foisted upon reality.⁴⁰ Further, the relationship between mental and extra-mental reality becomes attenuated because of the fact that our perceptions can lead us no further than our own mind. This kind of idealism is what leads Hume to claim that Scotistic/Scholastic notions such “matter/form” or “substance/accidents” are no more than mere “fictions” of the mind.⁴¹ So, from Hume’s perspective, when Scotus makes the realist connection between epistemology and ontology, he is really attempting something which cannot be accomplished.

Let us recall what Frank and Wolter have stated about the status of “infinity” as being one of the “most attractive and elusive” concepts.⁴² Hume would agree with Frank and Wolter that the mind fails when attempting to grasp the concept of infinity. Hume is also not so idealistic about the mind’s capacities. Consider this statement from the *Treatise of Human Nature*:

In all demonstrative sciences the rules are certain and infallible; but when we apply them, our fallible and uncertain faculties are very apt to depart from them, and fall into error. We must, therefore, in every reasoning form a new judgment, as a check and controul on our first judgment and belief.⁴³

Hume’s point here is that the mind is not so powerful and adept as previous Scholastic and Ancient philosophies would have us believe. The mind is very limited in what it can and cannot conceive, and Hume’s whole project in his

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

³⁹ *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, pp. 50-1.

⁴⁰ *A Treatise of Human Nature*, pp. 180-2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 220-2, 254.

⁴² See above, p. 2.

⁴³ *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 180.

Treatise and two *Enquiries* centers around an elucidation and explanation of the parameters of our mental capacities. In fact, Hume states quite clearly in the *Treatise* that "'Tis universally allow'd, that the capacity of the mind is limited, and can never attain a full and adequate conception of infinity." Further on in the same passage he emphatically rejects the infinite, maximal capacity of the mind proclaiming simply: "'Tis therefore certain, that the imagination reaches a *minimum*" concerning those "ideas" reproduced in the mind.⁴⁴

For Hume, there is no necessary connection between concepts in the mind and what these concepts represent in extra-mental reality. Scotus ratifies and modifies Anselm's proof for the existence of God by showing the ontological connection between mental and extra-mental realities. Hume rejects talk of essences and reduces pronouncements made by the mind upon extra-mental reality to mere probabilistic sentiment. The concepts formed in the mind via a rational principle are utilized to discern relations of ideas in the mind and matters of fact in the world. But there is no guarantee that these ideas represent the world, or that these facts in the world can be proved to be so by the mind. Hume states simply:

Thus not only our reason fails us in the discovery of the *ultimate connection* of causes and effects, but even after experience has inform'd us of their *constant conjunction*, 'tis impossible for us to satisfy ourselves by our reason, why we shou'd extend that experience beyond those particular instances, which have fallen under our observation.⁴⁵

In other words, there is going to be no reason to extend these concepts formed in the mind to anything falling outside of "experience and observation," which are, for Hume, the bedrock upon which he constructs his probabilistic epistemology.⁴⁶

IV

Bertrand Russell, an avid follower of Hume, has accused Thomas Aquinas of having little "philosophical spirit" because, as Russell sees it, "Before he (Aquinas) begins to philosophize he already knows the truth; it is declared in the Catholic faith."⁴⁷ In other words, Aquinas, with his famous *quinque viae*, purports to demonstrate the existence of God to unbelievers via purely rational means. However, as Russell so aptly points out, Aquinas's own theological

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 26-7.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 91.

⁴⁶ See Ibid., p. xvi.

⁴⁷ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 463.

biases come into the picture pre-determining the outcome of his demonstrations and begging the question of God's existence. Scotus attempts to assume nothing supernatural in his quest to find the supernatural -he wants the natural work of metaphysics to discover this supernatural.⁴⁸ The broadening of being to include the other metaphysical attributes and perfections supposedly does this work by being a purely rational endeavor lacking the suppositions of the faith.

Unfortunately, we must reiterate Russell's accusations first made against Aquinas here against Scotus. The very first line of Scotus's *De primo principio*, containing the supposed rational proof, is an appeal to the already existing God for help to demonstrate through natural reason the existence of that same God. Note the words of Scotus: "May the First Principle of things grant me to believe, to understand and to reveal what may please his majesty and may raise our minds to contemplate him."⁴⁹ Further, in his *Parisian Proof for the Existence of God* Scotus claims that no concept of God is self-evident or can be attained via demonstration of the reasoned fact. But he does state that God's existence can be demonstrated by the simple fact "taken from what God effects."⁵⁰ Notice the way that this has been worded: "taken from what *God* effects." The presupposition of this supposed rational proof is the theological notion that the world exists as an effect of God. Both of these examples are reminiscent of the way in which Anselm begins his Proslogion: "I believe that I may understand." Anselm is already a believer and admits his presuppositions. Scotus is a believer as well, but purports a metaphysical methodology culminating in God as the *ens infinitum* that is merely *supposedly* devoid of any theological presuppositions.

I think Scotus's move here is philosophically illicit, but shows two important things: First, the presupposition of God's existence gives credence to the claim that the infinite is grasped through an activity of faith. In pre-supposing God's existence, Scotus shows us that he is really a faith-filled person trying to seek an understanding of this faith. Secondly, this pre-supposition shows the limitation of the mind's capacities. The mind is limited and cannot really come to a full and adequate concept of God as the "infinite being" in this lifetime. It is as if Scotus knows the limitations of the mind in this lifetime, but attempts to argue that the mind can grasp what can be had in the *next* lifetime in *this* lifetime anyway.

Russell works out of the Humean philosophical tradition which denies the possibility of real substances and essences like those supposed to exist by Scholastics and Ancients. Consider his account of substance:

⁴⁸ Recall the words of Gilson on p. 6 of this paper.

⁴⁹ *De primo principio*, para. 1.1, p. 2.

⁵⁰ *Parisian Proof for the Existence of God*, p. 41.

"Substance," in fact, is merely a convenient way of collecting events into bundles. What can we know about Mr. Smith? When we look at him, we see a pattern of colours; when we listen to him talking, we hear a series of sounds. We believe that, like us, he has thoughts and feelings. But what is Mr. Smith apart from all these occurrences? A mere imaginary hook, from which the occurrences are supposed to hang. They have in fact no need of a hook, any more than the earth needs an elephant to rest upon.⁵¹

For Russell, God is just such a hook, an "imaginary elephant" that is useless as an explanatory tool. All that has meaning for Russell and his school of thought is the random and perpetual series of perceptions that can offer no more than a "probable" account of the extra-mental world.⁵² From Scotus's perspective, we must be willing to grant first that our conceptions are correlative to the real extra-mental world and, further, that there is more to a thing in the extra-mental world than merely what "I perceive" to be the case. There must be some kind of unity or essence which can be relied upon behind this "bundle of perceptions" that appears to me. Russell and Hume would obviously deny this. It is interesting to note that, in their commentary, Frank and Wolter make mention of the fact that Scotus is sometimes accused of making an "illicit inference from the conceptual to the actual order of extra-mental existence."⁵³ This is what thinkers such as Russell or Hume are picking up on. The value of their scrutiny is the questioning of whether it is appropriate to draw the possible out of the actual. So much weight is placed upon this "simple fact" that, if it is true that Scotus makes an illicit move from the actual to the possible, then his proof for the existence of God fails.

There is the converse question as to whether Scotus can make the move from the possible to the actual as he has done in re-asserting Anselm's ontological proof. According to Scotus, the possibility of God as an infinite being means that he must exist in actuality "because the highest thing one can think of is

⁵¹ *A History of Western Philosophy*, pp. 201-2. Russell is thought of as a kind of realist because he thinks that universals and axioms exist apart from our perception of them and can be known descriptively. For an account of his brand of realism, see Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1964). However, as can be seen in this quotation, he has no use for the naïve realism of Scholasticism or Aristotelianism.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁵³ *Parisian Proof for the Existence of God*, commentary, p. 81. This is also Aquinas's point in his refutation of Anselm's ontological argument. See *ST I*, Q. 2, Art. 1, Reply Obj. 2, p. 22. Also see David Hume, *A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh*, in: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 120. Hume also has no use for the ontological argument as he states: "I do indeed believe, that, when we assert the Existence of a Deity, we do not form a general abstract Idea of Existence, which we unite with the Idea of God, and which is capable of forming a compound Idea by Union..."

conceivable without contradiction.”⁵⁴ Supposedly, this is based upon the fact that there is no contradiction in placing “infinite” with “being.” The intellect, in its metaphysical pursuit of being and its attributes will find a certain “resting place” in the infinite. Scotus tells us simply:

Just as the intellect can understand the maximal truth and will not rest in any truth short of this, so also the will can seek the maximal and ultimate good. But anything short of this is not the maximal good but rather finite. Therefore, the ultimate satisfaction of the will lies in a good that is infinite.⁵⁵

But Scotus has made it clear that even attempting to exhaust the plenitude of God’s infiniteness cannot be accomplished in this life from a purely natural and metaphysical perspective since we have no direct intuition into God’s essential nature. If God is understood to be an infinite being, and we cannot know God’s essential characteristics in this life, then how is the intellect (or the will for that matter) going to find a resting place in such a knowledge from the natural, rational perspective? Is this some sort of sisyphusian goal which Scotus has laid out for us? It seems to be the case then that the intellect will not find rest but only unrest and frustration in this life. The claim that it is possible to unite infinite with being turns out to be paradoxical on Scotus’s own terms. Either the intellect finds a resting place in the infinite in the next life and we get merely a finite glimpse of such a being in this one. Or, the claim that the intellect finds a resting place in this life turns out to be false and we constantly seek the infinite, never quite reaching our goal.

God is envisioned as the goal of Scotistic metaphysics. But can this goal ever truly be realized? The *quia* demonstration of the simple fact of God’s existence as an infinite being leaves us wanting to know more about this being. Honnefelder points out that Scotus’s proof for God’s existence is a “demonstration of the completeness of the disjunctive notion of being.” This is so because infinity is the appropriate attribute of the first entity. Honnefelder states further that the “subject of metaphysics is nothing but the concept being”; God is known only insofar as the complete disjunctive notion of “being” is known.⁵⁶ But again we must question whether a “complete” notion of being understood from the standpoint of infinity can be known in this life via the natural work of a purely metaphysical science. It does not seem plausible that the mind is capable of such an endeavor given the paradoxical position in which Scotus’s metaphysics places us. Even if the disjunctive notion of being is known, it will not be a

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 65.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 67.

⁵⁶ “How is Metaphysics Possible? The Metaphysical Approach and Method of John Duns Scotus,” p. 9.

demonstration *propter quid*; the essence of God remains mysterious. Therefore, God qua infinite remains mysterious. The simple fact of God existing as the "simply first infinite being" might perchance leave us with a minuscule taste of God's plenitude and nothing more.

Scotus's account of the composite conception of "infinite being" fails to convince when considered within the context of an atomistic, and consequently probabilistic epistemology such as the one advocated by Hume. From this perspective, there can be no talk of intrinsic modality which shows essential connections between or among concepts. And, there can be no talk of the isomorphic relation between concepts and the extra-mental world. Hume points out the limitations of natural reason and the consequent deficiency of a metaphysical inquiry such as the one advocated by Scotus. Further, besides this external criticism of Scotus's position made from the Humean standpoint, there is the internal criticism that shows the paradoxical results of Scotus's own metaphysics since the goal set up by such a science seems unattainable.

Yet, when all is said and done, there is still something philosophically enriching to be gleaned from Scotus's proof for an infinite being. The failure of metaphysics to prove an infinite being in the Scotistic manner emboldens a theological endeavor to grasp more clearly the God of faith. It would be the task of another paper to investigate the theological works of Scotus to see the way in which he views God's attributes and proffers arguments surrounding God's existence from that perspective. Ultimately, according to Christian philosophers such as Scotus, God, qua infinite, will be grasped fully and adequately by the mind in the next life. However, in this life, such a God may be grasped via faith alone. This is why, in the last lines of the first *Enquiry*, even the ever-skeptical Hume can maintain:

Divinity or Theology, as it proves the existence of a Deity, and the immortality of souls, is composed partly of reasonings concerning particular, partly concerning general facts. It has a foundation in *reason*, so far as it is supported by experience. But its best and most solid foundation is *faith* and divine revelation.⁵⁷



⁵⁷ *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 114.

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	LUNES	MARTES	MIERCOLES	JUEVES	VIERNES	SABADO	DOMINGO	
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0:30			JAZZ... LA HORA			ESTUDIO 98		0:30
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8:00			U.N. ANÁLISIS			SELECCIONES	RELIGIONES	8:00
8:30			LA U.N. EN VOZ ALTA			TORRE DE BABEL		8:30
9:00						DIAGNÓSTICO	PERSPECTIVAS	9:00
9:30						SELECCIONES	TODAS Y TODOS	9:30
10:00						LOS INSTRUMENTOS SU MÚSICA Y SUS INTERPRETES	SELECCIONES	10:00
10:30			PROTAGONISTAS DE LA MÚSICA			IMAGINARIOS DEL ROCK	DEBATES ECONÓMICOS	10:30
11:00						VIAJEROS DEL MUNDO	QUE SUEÑE LA RADIO	11:00
11:30							A 24 CUADROS	11:30
12:00							SELECCIONES	12:00
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1:30			JAZZ... LA HORA				TORRE DE BABEL	1:30
2:00							BRASIL MUSICAL	2:00
2:30			BEATLES, 98.5 POR SIEMPRE				MÚSICA COLOMBIANA	2:30
3:00						EL TREN LATINO		3:00
3:30					BLUES EN NEGRO Y BLANCO		TANGUEDIA	3:30
4:00			SIGLO XX				SELECCIONES	4:00
4:30					SU MAJESTAD EL ROCK			4:30
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5:30			MÚSICAS COLOMBIANAS				LA HORA DEL BLUES	5:30
6:00					13 CAÑONAZOS			6:00
6:30	CINCO DÉCADAS DE ROCK	LA HORA DE LA RESISTENCIA	PSICOSIS	IMAGINARIOS DEL ROCK	ROCKOCÓ		CONFERENCIA DE LA SEMANA	6:30
7:00	U.N. SATÉLITE	LA U EN F.M.	U.N. SATÉLITE	U.N. SATÉLITE		SOUL TO SOUL	INTERACCIÓN EN EL CORAZÓN DEL PATIO	7:00
7:30			ESCENARIO MUNDIAL					7:30
8:00					DIFUSIÓN DESCONOCIDA			8:00
8:30			U.N. SATÉLITE					8:30
9:00								9:00
9:30	HIPÓTESIS	PERFILES	RADIO DE ACCIÓN	ENCUENTROS URBANOS			TEATRO EN LA MÚSICA	9:30
10:00			U.N. SATÉLITE			UNIVERSIDAD DE LA SALSA		10:00
10:30	SELECCIONES	OIR Y ENTENDER	LOS INSTRUMENTOS SU MÚSICA Y SUS INTERPRETES	TANGUEDIA	INDUSTRIA DIGITAL			10:30
11:00							PIEZAS CLÁSICAS	11:00
11:30			U.N. SATÉLITE					11:30
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