

DUNS SCOTUS ON THE PRIORITY OF INTENTION*

ACTION THEORY as we know it today is concerned with questions such as: “What’s the difference between a reflex movement of my arm, and my raising my arm?” The answer generally given, though philosophers don’t agree on its utility, is: “In the latter case an intention is present, in the former not.” Intentions as they show up in this answer—at least, getting straight about them, explaining their origins and efficacy—are prior to action theory. What it is to be an action depends on the account of intentions that you give. Let’s call this claim the “Priority-of-Intention Thesis.”

Nowadays we typically analyze intentions as complexes made up of beliefs and desires. This insight is also common to the Middle Ages, where rather than speaking of the distinct mental acts—the particular beliefs and particular desires that are involved when you raise your hand—mediæval philosophers referred to speak of the interaction of the two distinct faculties from which the particular acts are elicited. I’m referring, of course, to the notorious discussions of the relation between intellect and will.

What I want to do here today is to see where Duns Scotus stands on Priority-of-Intention Thesis. I picked Scotus because he is usually held to be the most radical “voluntarist” in the mediæval tradition, as well as having the most subtle and sophisticated theory of the will. What I found out was surprising, and I want to share that surprise with you. On the one hand, Scotus seems to qualify his voluntarism to a greater and greater extent as time went by. On the other hand, I don’t he think that strictly speaking he has a *theory* at all. Let me explain.

I’ve already mentioned two of the principal actors in this drama, namely intellect and will, the faculties that underlie all action. But it’s time to import a third feature. Human action, if they are to be genuine actions and not just mere events, are free. That’s part of what we’re getting at when we refer to the presence of an intention. Hard as it is to make sense of it, the clear intuition is that the intention brings about a result that would not otherwise have taken place. (Of course this is hopelessly sloppy, but it’ll do for a starting-point.) So we have to ask ourselves not merely how intellect and will interact, but, to investigate the Priority-of-Intention Thesis properly, how they interact freely.

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Scotus seems to think that intellect and will differ from each other in three important ways:

- (a) The intellect is what I'll call an 'automatic' faculty: given fixed circumstances, the intellect must act (or react) in a fixed way. The will, on the other hand, is non-automatic.¹

Note: Scotus uses the term 'natural' here, rather than 'automatic', but that really just confuses the issue, since the will does have a nature and even has natural tendencies. Hence the neologism.

- (b) The intellect is an irrational potency, the will is a rational potency (see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 8.2). That is to say, the intellect has only one course of action open to it, whereas the will has a "potency for opposites."

It's not clear whether Scotus thinks (b) sharply differs from (a).

- (c) The intellect is moved by its surroundings—the sensible and intelligible species, the memory—whereas the will is a self-mover.

The interconnections among (a)–(c) should be clear. The intellect is, at best, an unfree (*i. e.* causally determined) automatic faculty. It can do only one thing. It's the truthseeker: it recognizes truths and tries to draw conclusions. There are no options in its activities. On the other hand, the will is just the opposite. It has the power to do *A* or to do not-*A* (and hence is a rational power). Furthermore, the will is free—or at least it is in no way causally determined by anything external to itself. That's the very point, after all, of calling something a self-mover. And since the will freely moves itself to any one of its options it pleases, regardless of the causal force of the surrounding circumstances, it's non-automatic.

Things are never quite as simple as all that. Given the depth of the contrast between the intellect and the will, one feels compelled to ask: how could two such radically different faculties interact at all?

You might say, well, who cares if they do? But that would be a mistake. We're trying to investigate the Priority-of-Intention Thesis, after all, which requires interaction. Besides, it's hard to conceive of either functioning without the other. Intellect on its own seems impotent, will on its own seems blind.

To address this point, Scotus seems to have held the following "connection theses":

- (CT1) The will directs the (automatic) action of the intellect.

¹ To get straight on the automatic, we need to draw a distinction between merely obeying rules (proceeding through a fixed sequence) and following rules (acting in conformity with them).

Analogy: the muscles turn the head so as to put different things before our eyes.

(CT2) The intellect, or more strictly an intellection, is a *sine qua non* condition for the action of the will (cfr. II d. 25 q. unica).

The limited automatic activity of the intellect is way too circumscribed to account for common features of our thinking. Extreme cases: logical closure (no!), finite length (no!). Thinking about problems, devising means toward ends, and so on. Likewise, *nihil volitum quin praecognitum*—yet this can't be a cause, since the will is a self-mover.

So far as I can tell, this is more or less what Scotus had in mind when he was working on his *Ordinatio*. It's also fairly common 'scotism'. But—Scotus gives up both of the connection theses, and furthermore comes to see that the distinction between intellect and will is inadequate. Let's see how this goes.

First, the connection theses. The *Collationes* offer clear evidence that Scotus gave up CT1, remarkable as it may seem. In *Collationes* q. 2 (could the will move the intellect that is habituated to one dictate to another?), Scotus argues at length that the total cause of intellection is sufficient apart from any action of the will. Proof: the object, the agent intellect, and the possible intellect are jointly sufficient to produce the result.

The case of CT2 is more complicated. First, a *sine qua non* condition can only make sense as a cause if CT2 is to do the work it's supposed to. But, as Scotus argues in the *Additiones magna*e and the *Additiones secunda*e, it is none of the traditional four causes. The conclusion Scotus draws is that an intellection is not a mere condition, but instead a subordinate partial co-cause of the volition. (The subordination and partiality are meant to insure freedom.) Thus in each CT1 and CT2, Scotus restricts the scope of the will.

The distinctions separating will and intellect, described above, also have to be modified. These are more troublesome, because they seem to involve conceptual confusions.

First, with regard to (a), the following claim holds:

If a faculty is automatic then it's irrational, but not conversely.

An automatic faculty must react in one (fixed) way; an irrational faculty is one that only has the power to respond in one way. Hence the consequence holds by definition. The failure of the converse is established by irrational powers that only work sometimes, or for the most part.

Second, with regard to (b), it's clear that the 'self-mover' dodge doesn't work. For it is possible to have self-moving irrational powers. A rock naturally moves itself downwards, for example. Likewise, Scotus explicitly

countenances the possible intellect, which is an automatic faculty, to be a self-mover. What these examples show us is that self-motion is a necessary but not sufficient condition of freedom. So the ‘causal independence’ that comes with self-motion isn’t sufficient. Scotus recognizes this point by the time he gets to QSM IX q.15, and adds the feature of ‘self-determination’ to explain free action.

All that’s left, then, is (*b*): the claim that the will differs from the intellect because the will is a rational potency. Yet there is no explanation of this claim, and indeed Scotus says that to search for an explanation is to demand “a reason for that if which there is no reason.” But then Scotus does go on to try to spell out just what is involved (after pointing out that the will is unlike all other active potencies):

Secondly, a doubt is raised as regards the aforementioned [question]: how would such a potency be reduced to act, if it is of itself indeterminate with respect to acting and not acting?

Reply... There is another [potency] of superabundant sufficiency which is based on an unlimited actuality (either simply or in a respect)... [something] indeterminate in this way can determine itself.

Scotus then offers the unilluminating example of fire.² I think his first response was better: this isn’t any kind of explanation. The will just does it, and that’s all there is to say.³ Thus Scotus winds up being antitheoretical about the Priority-of-Intention Thesis—he takes it as a given but not explicable fact, and does so only after severely reducing the scope of the will.

² Sorry.

³ Marilyn Adams says that this is the wrong way to read the passage: Scotus drags in ‘superabundant sufficiency’ to explain the fact that the will really does have the oomph to get to actualization.