

History of Philosophy

27 Duns Scotus and William of Ockham

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Abstract:

Dr. Arthur Holmes explores the shift in late medieval philosophy led by **Duns Scotus** and **William of Ockham**, who both reacted against the **Greek determinism** they perceived in Thomas Aquinas's work. To preserve the concepts of **divine sovereignty** and **human freedom**, Scotus introduced **voluntarism**, emphasizing the primacy of the will over the intellect. He argued for the **unicity of being** and the principle of **haecceity**, or "this-ness," which grants every individual a unique, non-determined identity. Ockham took these ideas further by rejecting the existence of universal forms entirely, a position known as **nominalism** or terminism. By focusing on **direct awareness** of particulars rather than hierarchical archetypes, Ockham's thought signaled the disintegration of the medieval synthesis. Ultimately, this movement toward an empirical, **mechanistic worldview** helped pave the way for the scientific revolution.

Briefing Document:

Philosophical Shifts in Late Medieval Thought: Duns Scotus and William of Ockham

Executive Summary

The late medieval period, as represented by the works of John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, marks a significant philosophical reaction against "Greek determinism"—specifically the Aristotelian and Thomistic influences that permeated Christian thought. These figures moved away from **Intellectualism** (the primacy of the intellect) toward **Voluntarism** (the primacy of the will).

Key takeaways include:

- **The Rejection of Ontological Necessity:** Both thinkers sought to preserve the sovereignty of God and human freedom by arguing that the universe is contingent upon God's will, rather than being a necessary, unchangeable hierarchy.

- **Duns Scotus's Innovations:** He introduced the **Unicity of Being**, the principle of *Haecceitas* (this-ness) to explain individuality, and the concept of **Intentionality** to justify direct knowledge of particulars.
- **William of Ockham's Radicalism:** Ockham's **Nominalism** (or Terminism) rejected real universals entirely, effectively dismantling the medieval hierarchical synthesis and paving the way for a mechanistic, empirical worldview that anticipated the scientific revolution.
- **Ethical Shift:** A transition from natural law based on the "nature of things" toward **Divine Command Theory**, where moral obligations are grounded in the will of God.

The Reaction Against Greek Determinism

The primary motivation for Scotus and Ockham was the perceived threat of Greek determinism to Christian theology. They viewed the "Christianized Aristotelianism" of Thomas Aquinas as an intellectualist system that compromised both divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Concept	Intellectualism (Aquinas)	Voluntarism (Scotus/Ockham)
Primacy	Intellect governs action.	Will is the determining factor.
Divine Action	God acts in accordance with eternal forms and architectures.	God's act of creation is a free choice, not a necessity.
Human Nature	Moral action is governed by what the intellect perceives as good.	Humans possess freedom of choice independent of intellectual demand.
Cosmology	A hierarchy of being that represents ontological necessity.	A contingent creation that could have been arranged differently.

Duns Scotus: Modifying the Medieval Worldview

Duns Scotus, known as the "Subtle Doctor," did not entirely reject the medieval hierarchy but modified its underlying metaphysics to ensure freedom and contingency.

The Unicity of Being

Scotus proposed that the word "being" should be used **univocally** rather than analogically.

- **One Sense of "Is":** Being refers to simple "isness" rather than degrees of being. While there may be degrees of goodness or order, there are no degrees of existence.
- **Breaking Necessity:** By affirming the unicity of being, Scotus argued that things are arranged by an order of goodness chosen by God, not by a necessary degree of being. This renders the creation contingent.

Haecceitas (This-ness)

To account for individuality without relying on matter as the sole principle of individuation, Scotus introduced **Haecceitas**.

- **Definition:** A "third principle" alongside matter and form that provides the "this-ness" of a particular thing or person.
- **Function:** It allows for individualized identity that is not a byproduct of material processes, thereby reinforcing the freedom of the individual's will.
- **Divine Implications:** This principle explains how immaterial spirits (like God or the rational soul) can be individual.

Intentionality and Direct Knowledge

Scotus argued against the idea that God or humans know things only through intermediate archetypes or "intellectual species."

- **Direct Awareness:** God has a direct awareness of all particular beings he has made.
- **Intentionality:** Defined as a "mental act of external reference," intentionality is the mind's ability to transcend its own consciousness and reach out to apprehend things external to itself. This provided a foundation for realism in epistemology.

Epistemological and Ethical Consequences

The shift toward voluntarism had immediate impacts on logic and moral philosophy.

Logic and Probability

Scotus noted that if individuals are defined by *Haecceitas* and the creation is contingent, the distinctions between species are not always clear.

- **Syllogistic Limitation:** Logical arguments yield varying degrees of probability rather than absolute certainty.

- **Act of Will:** Consequently, the acts of believing, judging truth, or making moral assessments are seen as acts of the will rather than inevitable conclusions of the intellect.

Divine Command Theory

Scotus modified natural law ethics by arguing that the "nature of things" is not necessary but depends on God's choice.

- **The Decalogue:** Scotus divided the Ten Commandments. The first three (regarding God) are unchanging because God is unchanging. The last seven (regarding human relationships) are contingent and could conceivably be changed by divine command.
- **Right Reason:** In cases where divine command or natural law is silent, Scotus appealed to "right reason," which involves prudential weighing of consequences.

William of Ockham: The Disintegration of the Synthesis

William of Ockham extended the critique of realism into a complete rejection of real universals, a position known as **Terminism** or **Nominalism**.

Rejection of Universals

Ockham maintained that only particulars exist; "universals" exist only as terms or mental acts.

- **The Term as Mental Act:** Ockham's refined view was that a universal term (e.g., "human being") does not refer to a vague mental image, but to the **mental act of referring** to a variety of individuals.
- **Empiricism:** Without real universals to abstract, knowledge must be derived from the empirical study of particulars.

The Mechanistic Worldview

By rejecting universals and formal causes, Ockham eliminated the "built-in" final causes (teleology) of the medieval world.

- **Shift in Causality:** The world was no longer seen as an integral, purposeful whole representing divine goodness. Instead, it was reduced to:
 - **Material Causes:** Physical bodies.

- **Efficient Causes:** Forces.
- **Scientific Impact:** This rejection of the teleological world opened the door for the mechanistic science of the scientific revolution.

Historical Significance: The Modern Transition

The transition from the 13th-century synthesis of Aquinas to the 14th-century critiques of Scotus and Ockham represents the "disintegration of the medieval synthesis."

- **Scotus** attempted to save the system by modifying its metaphysical foundations to include freedom and direct intentionality.
- **Ockham** fundamentally broke the system, replacing the hierarchical, purposeful universe with a collection of particulars governed by divine will and physical force.

This shift not only influenced later theologians like Martin Luther and John Calvin (regarding natural law and divine command) but also set the stage for modern empirical science and the philosophical realism/anti-realism debates of the 18th through 20th centuries.

Study Guide:

A Study Guide on Late Medieval Philosophy: Duns Scotus and William of Ockham

This study guide examines the philosophical shift during the late Middle Ages, specifically focusing on the transition from the intellectualism of Thomas Aquinas to the voluntarism and nominalism represented by Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. These thinkers reacted against what they perceived as "Greek determinism"—the influence of Greek philosophy on Christian thought—which they felt compromised both divine sovereignty and human freedom.

Core Philosophical Themes

1. Voluntarism vs. Intellectualism

The primary dispute between these late medieval figures and Thomas Aquinas centers on the primacy of the will versus the primacy of the intellect.

- **Intellectualism (Aquinas):** Suggests that God and humans act according to what the intellect perceives as good. This implies that God acts in accordance with eternal forms or architectures, and human moral action is governed by intellectual perception, which some viewed as a form of "necessity" or determinism.
- **Voluntarism (Scotus and Ockham):** Asserts the primacy of the will. Choice and action are seen as free from intellectual requirement or necessity. This view emphasizes the sovereignty of God's will in creation and the responsibility of humans through freedom of choice.

2. Duns Scotus: The Subtle Doctor

Scotus modified the Thomistic worldview to break the perceived "ontological necessity" of the hierarchical chain of being.

- **Unicity of Being:** Scotus argued that the word "being" (isness) should be used univocally (having one meaning) for all things, rather than analogically. He rejected the idea of degrees of being, asserting that something either is or is not.
- **Contingency of Creation:** Because being is univocal, the specific arrangement of the world is not necessary but contingent on God's choice. God could have created a different order.
- **Direct Knowledge and Intentionality:** Scotus proposed that God knows particulars directly rather than through archetypal forms. This requires "intentionality"—a mental act of external reference where the mind refers to something outside itself.
- **Heikeitas (This-ness):** To account for individuality, Scotus added a third principle to matter and form called *heikeitas*. This "this-ness" provides a thing its individual identity, allowing for an individualized will that is not a byproduct of material processes or generic species.
- **Divine Command Theory:** Scotus argued that moral law depends on divine will. While the first three commandments (regarding God) are unchanging because God is unchanging, the last seven (regarding humans) are contingent and could conceivably be changed by divine command to suit different historical contexts.

3. William of Ockham: Nominalism and the New Science

Ockham took the critique of the medieval synthesis further by rejecting the hierarchical picture altogether.

- **Terminism (Nominalism):** Ockham rejected real universals. He argued that only individuals exist and that universal terms (like "human") are merely words or mental acts of reference.
- **Mental Acts vs. Images:** Ockham eventually concluded that universal terms do not refer to vague mental images but to the "mental act" of referring to a class of individuals.
- **Mechanistic Worldview:** By rejecting universals and formal causes, Ockham moved away from a teleological (purpose-driven) view of nature toward a mechanistic one. He focused on material causes (bodies) and efficient causes (forces), which laid the groundwork for the scientific revolution.
- **Disintegration of Synthesis:** Ockham's philosophy contributed to the breakdown of the medieval synthesis, which had previously sought to integrate faith and reason into a single, cohesive hierarchical structure.

Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the provided text.

1. What was the primary concern Duns Scotus had regarding "Greek determinism"?
2. How does "voluntarism" differ from "intellectualism" in the context of moral action?
3. What is the "unicity of being," and why did Scotus propose it?
4. In Scotus's metaphysics, what is *heikeitas*?
5. Why does Scotus believe that logical arguments yield only probability rather than certainty?
6. According to Scotus, why are the first three commandments of the Decalogue unchanging while the last seven are potentially contingent?
7. What is the "terminism" of William of Ockham?
8. How did Ockham's view of the "universal" change from his first view to his second view?
9. Why is Ockham's rejection of formal causes significant for the development of modern science?
10. What does the text mean by the "disintegration of the medieval synthesis"?

Answer Key

1. **Scotus's Concern:** Scotus feared that Greek influence led to a deterministic view where God's acts were governed by necessity rather than freedom. He believed this compromised God's sovereignty in creation and human responsibility in moral choice.
2. **Voluntarism vs. Intellectualism:** Intellectualism suggests that the will is governed by what the intellect perceives as good, implying a degree of necessity. Voluntarism stresses the primacy of the will, asserting that decisions and actions are free from intellectual requirements or demands.
3. **Unicity of Being:** This is the idea that "being" has one univocal meaning—"isness"—rather than representing a range of analogies or degrees. Scotus proposed this to break the "ontological necessity" of the hierarchical chain of being, making the order of creation contingent on God's choice.
4. **Heikeitas:** *Heikeitas* is a Latin term for "this-ness," representing the principle of individuality that distinguishes a particular thing from its generic species. It is a third principle added to matter and form that allows for individualized identity and a free, non-generic will.
5. **Logic and Probability:** Scotus argued that because individuals are defined by *heikeitas*, the distinctions between species are not always clear. Therefore, abstracting first principles from species results in only varying degrees of probability rather than logical certainty.
6. **The Decalogue:** The first three commandments concern the relationship with an unchanging God and are therefore necessary and unchanging. The last seven concern relationships between created beings in changing situations, making them contingent on the divine will or command.
7. **Terminism:** This is Ockham's version of nominalism, which denies the existence of real universals. It maintains that only particular individuals exist and that "universals" are merely terms or words used for reference.
8. **Ockham's Shift:** Initially, Ockham thought universal terms referred to a vague mental image shared by a class of things. He later argued that universals refer to the "mental act" of intentional reference, directly pointing to individuals without the need for an intermediate image.

9. **Scientific Significance:** By rejecting formal and final causes (universals/teleology), Ockham left only material and efficient causes as explanations for the physical world. This mechanistic approach provided the framework for the emerging empirical sciences and the scientific revolution.
10. **Disintegration of Synthesis:** This refers to the collapse of the medieval effort to harmonize Greek philosophy, Christian theology, and hierarchical metaphysics. Ockham's rejection of universals and his move toward empiricism effectively broke the unified structure that thinkers like Aquinas had established.

Essay Questions

1. Compare and contrast the views of Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus regarding the relationship between the intellect and the will. How does this distinction impact their respective views on human freedom?
2. Analyze Duns Scotus's concept of "intentionality." How does this concept address the problem of realism in epistemology and the way God knows the world?
3. Discuss the role of *heikeitas* in Scotus's philosophy. Why was it necessary for him to move beyond the traditional Aristotelian and Thomistic explanations of individuality?
4. Examine William of Ockham's transition from a teleological to a mechanistic worldview. What were the theological motivations for this shift, and what were its long-term philosophical consequences?
5. Evaluate the "Divine Command Theory" as presented by Scotus. How does his view of the contingency of the natural law reflect his broader metaphysical commitments to the sovereignty of God?

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Analogical Being	The Thomistic view that "being" has a range of meanings corresponding to different degrees of existence and goodness in a hierarchy.

Divine Command Theory	The ethical theory that the grounds of morality are found in the will and commands of God rather than in the inherent nature of things.
Efficient Cause	The force or agent that brings a thing into being or produces a change; a primary focus of Ockham's mechanistic view.
Formal Distinction	A distinction made in thought (as between matter, form, and <i>heikeitas</i>) rather than a physical separation of three different things.
Heikeitas	Translated as "this-ness"; the principle of individuality proposed by Scotus that gives a thing its particular identity.
Intellectualism	The philosophical position that the intellect has primacy over the will and that actions are governed by what is perceived as good.
Intentionality	A mental act of external reference; the mind's ability to refer to or point toward something external to itself.
Nominalism	The doctrine that universals or general ideas are mere names or terms without any corresponding reality (also called Terminism).
Ontological Necessity	The idea that the structure and hierarchy of being is necessary and could not be otherwise.
Quiditas	Translated as "what-ness"; the generic nature or species of a thing provided by its form.
Teleological	A worldview that sees nature as being directed toward specific ends or final purposes.
Unicity of Being	The doctrine that the concept of "being" is univocal and applies to God and creatures in exactly the same sense.
Voluntarism	The philosophical position that the will has primacy over the intellect, emphasizing freedom and choice over intellectual necessity.