

**SYNCHRONIC CONTINGENCY, INSTANTS OF
NATURE, AND LIBERTARIAN FREEDOM:
COMMENTS ON “THE BACKGROUND TO
SCOTUS’S THEORY OF WILL”**

STEPHEN Dumont introduces us to Scotus’s theory of will and its background by appealing to Simo Knuuttila’s thesis that Scotus’s account of freedom of the will brings with it something new and big in the theory of modality. According to Knuuttila (as Dumont reports it) Scotus forged a new notion of contingency — a synchronic view of contingency — that radically changed the way philosophers think about modality. We can think of Knuuttila’s thesis (as reported by Dumont) as having two parts: one about the originality of Scotus’s understanding of contingency, the other about the originality and importance of this particular view of contingency regardless of whose it is. Dumont wants to separate these two claims, and we can think of him as rejecting the former claim while defending the latter.

Dumont thinks that the idea of contingency that Knuuttila focuses our attention on is not new with Scotus: “[This] new idea . . . of contingency cannot be [Scotus’s] most important philosophical contribution for the simple reason that it was not his contribution at all” (Dumont, sec. I). As Dumont shows convincingly, Scotus knew and used ideas developed in the previous generation by Olivi. But in pointing us beyond Scotus to Olivi, Dumont disavows any interest in ferreting out the originator of the synchronic view of contingency: he tells us that we don’t know who first held the view and that that isn’t even particularly relevant. What Dumont does find relevant is the historical and philosophical context Olivi’s discussion provides for these issues. In Olivi we can see the connection between the development of a synchronic view of contingency and, on the one hand, a long-standing debate about the sin of the angels and, on the other, what Dumont (following Knuuttila) thinks of as the “older” view of contingency that seems to have been a key player in that debate. So the big new idea of synchronic contingency doesn’t originate with Scotus and, when we view Scotus’s position against its background in Olivi, we can see (among other things) why synchronicity in particular, which Scotus illustrates with his example of the created will that exists only for an instant, should have seemed important to Scotus. Dumont’s discovery of this connection between Scotus and Olivi is fascinating and important both because it helps us understand the background to Scotus’s remarkable philosophical achievement and because it adds one more substantial piece of evidence to the growing case for

the significance of Olivi. Because I find Dumont's argument for the link between Olivi and Scotus compelling, I'm not going to have anything more to say about it in these comments.

Dumont accepts and, I think, thinks of his paper as providing additional evidence in support of the other part of Knuuttila's thesis — the claim that the synchronic view of contingency found in Scotus (and now in Olivi) is a big new development in the history of thinking about modality. This is the claim I'm less clear about and less convinced of, so I'll focus my remarks on this part of Dumont's paper. Moreover, I'm going to leave Knuuttila out of it from now on and focus strictly on what Dumont says by way of explanation and defense of this claim.

So what's new and what's important about the view of contingency found in Scotus and Olivi? What's *new*, Dumont tells us, is the statement of a *synchronic* view of contingency according to which, as he puts it, "something is contingent if, at the very moment it occurs, its opposite is possible" (sec. I). What's old — what's being supplemented or replaced by the synchronic view — is a *diachronic* analysis of contingency according to which "something [is] contingent if its opposite could occur at some other time" (sec. I). For clarity's sake we can represent these two views as follows:

Synchronic view: X is contingent (at t) if (and only if) X occurs at t and it is possible (at t) that the opposite of X occurs at t .

Diachronic view: X is contingent (at t_1) if (and only if) X occurs at t_1 and it is possible (at t_1) that the opposite of X occurs at t_2 (where t_1 and t_2 are different).

So what's *important* about the development of a synchronic view of contingency? The idea seems to be that thinking of contingency synchronically forces us to think in terms of other possible *worlds* — that is, in terms of alternative states of affairs that do not (and perhaps will not) obtain in the actual world. By contrast, the notion of diachronic contingency does not send us off to other worlds but only to other *times* in the actual world. The suggestion, then, seems to be that until people such as Olivi and Scotus develop a synchronic view of contingency there's no need for, and in fact we don't find expressed, modal notions of the sort that give rise to talk about possible worlds.

Now, just this much of the story has got to seem dubious for at least two reasons. The first is that the great majority of medieval Christian theologians held that God did not create a world necessarily and that, given that he did create, God was not bound by necessity to create just the world he in fact created. God's act of creation is, therefore, contingent in these two respects. But it's hard to see how claims of this sort don't require us to talk in terms of other possible worlds — namely, worlds in which God alone exists or in which God exists together with some different set of creatures. These cannot be past or future states of the actual world. So modal concepts underlying talk about

possible worlds is built into the foundations of the Christian understanding of God as a free creator.

The second reason for thinking that Scotus and his ilk can't have been the discoverers of these modal concepts has to do with non-theological issues associated with free will, issues of the sort Dumont focuses on in his paper. The ordinary, garden-variety libertarian conception of free will requires one to think in terms of trans-world and not just trans-temporal possibility. When Augustine, for example, claims that Adam could have done otherwise than sin, that he could have resisted temptation and not sinned, he surely means not that there are (or even could have been) other times in the actual world at which Adam does resist temptation and not sin but that there is, if you like, another, non-actual world in which Adam does not sin on the very occasion on which he does sin in the actual world. The *retrospective*, counterfactual "could have done otherwise" that the libertarian insists on is mirrored, of course, in a perfectly common *prospective* view of human free choice. According to this view, deliberation and forethought would be in vain if the future were not open in relevant respects. When I deliberate tonight about whether or not in the morning I will fire a shot that will likely precipitate a sea battle, I am supposing that there are two possible tomorrows — not of course two successive tomorrows in the history of the actual world but two possible worlds whose histories are just alike up through tonight but whose histories beyond tonight are different. Since I don't think that Scotus and Olivi invented the libertarian conception of free will, I'm inclined to think that they can't be the inventors of modal notions presupposed by that sort of account. So there seem to me good reasons for thinking that people were construing contingency "in terms of a state and the possibility of its opposite at the same time" long before Olivi and Scotus. But construing contingency in that way is precisely what's supposed to be new and important about their views.

What's distinctive about Scotus's position, it seems to me, is not well expressed by saying that he commits himself to the synchronic view of contingency that Dumont identifies at the beginning of his paper. Scotus is actually arguing for something stronger. As Dumont puts it later in the paper, "Scotus's new 'synchronic' theory of contingency is seen to consist in . . . two potencies, according to which something is contingent . . . if its opposite is *really and logically possible* at the same time" (sec. II, my emphasis).

Scotus's strong claim: X is contingent (at t) if (and only if) X occurs at t and it is both really and logically possible (at t) that the opposite of X occurs at t .

It's not the notion of a *logically* possible alternative to an actual state or

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occurrence that makes Scotus's view interesting but the notion of an alternative to an actual state or occurrence being *really* possible at the same time as the actual state or occurrence. As Dumont points out, Scotus makes it clear that his view is that, at the very time at which the will wills *X*, it has a real power for not willing *X*. Hence, if we want to understand and assess the importance of this particular view of contingency we'll need to look closely at Scotus's explanation of how, at the very time the will is willing one thing, it is *really* and not merely logically possible that it will the opposite. (For the details of Scotus's view I'll follow Dumont in relying on the "apograph" version of d. 39 of *Ordinatio* I.)

There are two main parts to Scotus's account; we might think of them as the metaphysical and logical sides of the account of the sort of contingency required for free will. The metaphysical component consists in his analysis of the will's contingency in terms of prior and posterior instants of nature that are not temporally successive. His analysis of propositions ascribing to the will a power for opposites at the same time constitutes the logical side of the story. I'll take up the logical side of the story first.

The proposition Scotus is interested in is:

P: A will that is not willing *X* at *t* can will *X* at *t* (*voluntas non volens aliquid pro a, potest velle illud pro a*).

Parsing *P* into its compounded and divided senses in order to remove the ambiguity caused by the embedded modal term yields the usual false compounded sense:

Compounded sense of P: It is possible that (at *t*, a will-that-is-not-willing-*X* is willing *X*).

Scotus expresses the divided sense of this proposition as a pair of propositions

Divided sense of P: (At *t*, the will is not willing *X*) and (It is possible that [at *t*, the will is willing *X*]).

Scotus claims that this divided sense "is indeed true, for at the same instant, not willing *X* belongs to this will together with the possibility for the opposite" (Apograph, p. 420). The point, as Dumont has explained, seems to be that the *actuality* of the will's not willing *X* at a time is perfectly compatible with the *possibility* of its willing *X* at that time.

Scotus's point seems right enough — at least if the possibility in the relevant analysis is merely logical possibility. But notice that if we read the possibility in this analysis as logical possibility, then Scotus's having found a true sense for the ambiguous proposition *P* does nothing at all to support his strong claim about the nature of the will's contingency. In order to support that claim he needs to show us that *P* can be given a true sense when the possibility involved is read as *real* possibility. Is Scotus's divided sense of *P* true when read in this way?

It's not at all clear that it is. One might well suppose that if the first of the pair of propositions expressing the divided sense is true — namely, “At *t*, the will is not willing *X*” — then it can't really be *in the will's power* at that same time to will the opposite, and this despite the fact that it surely is *logically possible* that the will will the opposite at that time. The point here is that there is a sort of necessity in the neighborhood that is weaker than logical necessity, namely, the necessity of the past and present (which we might call inevitability or fixity, so as to avoid the term ‘necessity’ altogether). Things that have occurred or are now occurring are no longer in our power; their occurrence is now fixed in the history of the actual world and they are irretrievably beyond our causal reach. Something's being inevitable or fixed in this way does not, of course, entail that it is logically necessary, so its opposite might still be logically possible. The opposites of such things are, nevertheless, not *real* possibilities for us — we have no power to bring them about. So the divided sense of *P* is not true when the possibility at stake is read as real, and not merely logical, possibility. Scotus's fancy logical work, then, doesn't really support his strong view of contingency at all.

There are two interesting connections to be made here before we turn to the metaphysical side of Scotus's account. First, I've suggested that there is a natural and telling objection to Scotus's analysis of the relevant modal proposition that appeals to the notion of a sort of non-logical necessity of the present and, interestingly, Scotus himself turns immediately from the discussion we've been following to take up three objections, the first of which appeals to an Aristotelian dictum that can be read as expressing just that notion, namely, “everything that exists, when it exists, is a necessary existent” (*omne quod est, quando est, necesse est esse*). Scotus, however, doesn't take this proposition in the way I suggest would be natural given the dialectic of the argument. Instead he reads the necessity in it as logical necessity and, having parsed the proposition so as to remove its ambiguity, claims that there is no true reading on which the proposition can be construed as supporting the view that what is present is thereby (logically) necessary. (The compounded sense is true but doesn't support an inference to the claim that what is present is necessary; the divided sense is false.)

The second connection I want to make is between the specter of the necessity of the present that haunts this discussion of Scotus's and Olivi's targets in the texts Dumont has shown us. I think it's plausible to think of them not as endorsing a diachronic analysis of contingency, as Dumont suggests, but as articulating just the difficulty that I've claimed Scotus hasn't faced up to. This, I think, is how we ought to read passages such as the one from Lombard (sec. III).

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Lombard is not there offering a *definition* of contingency (diachronic or otherwise) or free choice as Dumont supposes. Rather he's making a claim about the *scope* of free choice, specifying the range of things free choice extends to. Free choice does not extend to things past and present but only to future contingents. Why? Because of the necessity of the past and present — once something exists, it's nailed down and unavoidable. It's not thereby logically necessary, of course, but it is fixed or inevitable and, therefore, inaccessible to acts of free choice.

So, given that the logical side of Scotus's account fails to offer any positive support for Scotus's strong claim about the will's contingency, the whole weight of that claim will have to rest on the metaphysical side of his account. How can it be that the will both actually wills X at t and, nevertheless, has a real power to will the opposite of X at t ? The answer is that, although the real power and the actual occurrence of its act do not require two different instants of time, they do require two different instants of nature, a prior instant of nature to accommodate the real power for opposite acts and a posterior instant of nature to accommodate the one of the two opposites that is actual. It's worth pointing out, then, that strictly speaking Scotus's account does not provide for what Dumont calls a *non-successive* power for opposites or for what Scotus himself calls a power for opposites *without succession*. It provides only for a *temporally* non-successive power for opposites, though it in fact *requires* successiveness of another sort — successiveness in instants of nature.

Now, if metaphysical exotica like instants of nature more than one of which can reside within an instant of time seem worrisome, we needn't worry because Scotus gives us what I think is a straightforward, no-nonsense rendering of what this claim comes to. All it means, he suggests, is that whenever the will wills something, we can distinguish the will as a first actuality — that is, as a power for opposites — and as a second actuality — that is, as an act of willing. The instants of nature talk is supposed to describe or help us see the *two* actualities present in the will's act — the *act* and the *power* presupposed by (and so naturally prior to) it.

There's nothing particularly exotic about thinking of the will in terms of first and second actuality, but there's nothing particularly explanatory about it either. If we want to know what this real power is that grounds Scotus's view of radical contingency, the answer, I think, is that it is the will as a first actuality that is a real power for causing contingently in such a way that it could equally cause the opposite of what it does cause. Put more briefly, but without loss, the will just is the sort of power that can do that.

I'm inclined to think, then, Scotus's view of contingency promises more than it delivers, and that the subtleties of his account provide neither justification for nor any real explanation of it.