

Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, Prologue, part 1, *quaestio unica* (extracts)

Question: whether it is necessary for man in this state <i.e. of earthly life> to be inspired supernaturally by any special teaching, which the intellect could not attain by the natural light.

<1> Arguments that not. <4> Brief statements for the opposite view.)

Controversy between the Philosophers and the Theologians

<5> In this question there seems to be a controversy between philosophers and theologians. The philosophers hold the perfection of nature and they deny supernatural perfection. By contrast, the theologians recognize the deficiency of nature and the necessity of grace and supernatural perfection.

The Opinion of the Philosophers

Suppose then a philosopher says that no supernatural cognition is necessary to man in this state, but he can acquire all the cognition necessary to him from the action of natural causes. Both the authority and the reasonings of Aristotle in many places support this view. [*Cites and discusses De anima 430a14-15*]

<7> It is confirmed by reason. (P1.1) To every natural passive potency there corresponds something active in nature, otherwise it would seem that the passive power is superfluous in nature if it cannot be brought into act by anything in nature. (P1.2) But the possible intellect is a passive potency with regard to any sort of intelligibles. Therefore there is some active natural power which corresponds to it. The conclusion *<i.e. a person can acquire all the cognition necessary to him from the action of natural causes>* therefore follows. The minor premise [*i.e. (P1.2)*] is obvious, because the possible intellect naturally desires the cognition of whatever sort of knowable thing: therefore it is naturally receptive of any sort of intellection.

[There follow two further arguments for the philosophers' view]

Disproof of the Philosophers' Opinion

<12> There are three arguments against this position.

<But, first,> note the following: - Nothing supernatural can be shown by reason to be in a person in this life (*viator*), nor to be necessarily required for his or her perfection. Nor can someone who has it know that it is in him or her. Therefore it is impossible here to use natural reason against Aristotle. If the argument is based on premises that are matters of *<religious>* belief, it is not an argument against a philosopher, because he does not accept

the premise based on belief. For this reason, the arguments made here against him <i.e. the philosopher> have as one of their two premises something believed or demonstrated from something believed. Therefore they are merely theological persuasions, leading from things that are believed to something that is believed.

<13> <Main Argument 1> First, this. (P2.1) For every agent which acts through cognition, a distinct cognition of its end is necessary. I show this, because everything which acts in view of an end acts out of desire for the end; everything which acts in itself acts for an end; therefore everything which acts for itself desires in its way its end. Therefore, just as for something that acts naturally the desire for the end on account of which it must act is necessary, so for something that acts through cognition – which, as Aristotle says in *Physics* II, is also something that acts for itself – the desire for the end on account of which it should act is necessary. So the major premise (P2.1) is obvious.

(P2.2) But man cannot know his end distinctly from natural things. (P2.3) Therefore some supernatural cognition is necessary for him.

<14> The minor premise (P2.2) is clear. First, because Aristotle, following natural reason, either places perfect happiness in the cognition of the separate substances, as he seems to want to do in Books I and X of the *Ethics*, or, if he does not in this way definitely assert that this is the supreme perfection possible for us, he does not conclude, using natural reason, that there is another, so that, in relying solely on natural reason, either he is mistaken about what exactly the end is, or he will remain in doubt – for which reason, in *Ethics* I, he says, doubting: ‘If anything is a gift of the gods, it is reasonable that it is happiness.’

<15> [*Another argument for the minor premise (P2.2)*]

<17> <Main Argument 2> Secondly, as follows: - (P3.1) For every cognizing thing which acts for an end, it is necessary (a) that it cognizes how and in what sort of way such an end is acquired, and (b) that it has cognition of all the things which are necessary to that end; and thirdly, (c) that it has cognition of all that are sufficient for such an end. The first <i.e. (a)> is obvious, because if he does not know how and in what sort of way the end may be acquired, he will not know how to set about seeking it. The second <i.e. (b)> is shown, because were he not to know all the things necessary for it, he could fall short of the end due to ignorance of some act necessary for it. If also, with regard to the third <i.e. (c)>, those necessary things are not known to be sufficient, he will not go about seeking what is necessary in an efficacious way, because he will be in doubt that he does not know something which is necessary.

<18> But (P3.2) the person in this life cannot know these three things through natural reason. Proof with regard to the first (a). Happiness (*beatitudo*) is conferred as a reward for merits which God accepts as being worthy of such a reward, and as a result it does not follow our acts, whatever they are, by natural necessity but is given contingently by God,

who accepts some acts ordered to Him as meritorious. This point, it seems, is not naturally knowable, because here too the philosophers erred, holding that all things that are from God are immediately necessary from him. The other two divisions <i.e. a and b> are, at least, very clear: for the acceptance by God's will, as something which contingently accepts some such things or other such things as worthy of eternal life, cannot be known by natural reason – it depends just on the divine will about them, and its relation to them is contingent.

[*There follow instantiae against the Main Arguments 1 and 2 and then counter-arguments against these instantiae*]

<40> <Main Argument 3> The third main argument against the opinion of the philosophers is this: - According to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* VI, the cognition of separate substances is the most noble <sort of cognition>, because it is about the most noble genus. Therefore the cognition of their *propria* is the most noble and necessary, because the things proper to them are more perfect objects of cognition than the things which they share with sensible things. But we cannot know those *propria* through natural things alone. First, because were such *propria* to be passed down in any branch of knowledge which it is possible now to be investigated, it would be in metaphysics. But it is not possible for us to have metaphysical knowledge about the proper properties of these separate substances, as is obvious (*because these are not included virtually in the first subject of metaphysics, namely, that which is (ens)*).¹ And this is what Aristotle says in *Metaphysics* I, when he says that the wise person should know all things in some way, and not in particular; and he adds: 'Whoever knows universal things, in some ways knows all the things subject to them.' Here he means by 'wise person' the metaphysician, just as in the same place he calls metaphysics 'wisdom'.

<41> Second, I show the same thing, because these *propria* <i.e. of separate substances> are not cognized *propter quid* unless their proper subjects are cognized, which have these and only these *propria propter quid*. But these proper subjects are not naturally knowable by us; therefore, etc.

Nor do we know these *propria* by a demonstration *quia* from their effects. This is shown as follows. For the effects either leave the intellect in doubt as to these *propria*, or they lead it into error. This is apparent with regard to the properties of the first immaterial substance in itself. For its property is that it is communicable to three, but the effects do not show this property, because they do not derive from it in so far as it is triune. And if from the effects it is argued to the cause, then they lead rather to the opposite conclusion and into error, because in no effect is there one nature but in a single *suppositum*. Moreover, the property of this nature with regard to things outside itself is to cause contingently, and the effects lead rather to the opposite conclusion, and into error, as is clear from the opinion of the philosophers, who hold that the first cause causes whatever it does necessarily. The same is

¹ The italicized comment was crossed out by Scotus, but it helps explain what he has in mind.

clear about the properties of the other substances, because the effects, according to them <i.e. the philosophers>, lead rather to their being <judged> everlasting and necessary than contingent and having a beginning. Similarly, the philosophers seem also to conclude from their motions that the number of the separate substances is the same as the number of the celestial motions. Similarly, <from the effects they conclude> that these substances are naturally happy and free from sin. All these things are absurd.

(After considering and rejecting an objection to this argument, Scotus give two more main arguments, but he says <54> that the first three Main Arguments seem more probable.)

<57> Solution to the Question

I therefore respond to the question by, first, distinguishing how something may be called supernatural. A receptive potency is considered in relation to the act which it receives, or to the agent from which it receives it. With regard to the former, it is either a natural or a violent or a neutral potency. It is called natural if it is naturally inclined, violent if it is acted upon contrary to its natural inclination, neutral if it is naturally inclined neither to the form which it receives nor to the opposite. In looking at these relations, there is nothing supernatural. But, in considering the receptive potency to the agent from which it receives the form, then it is a natural matter when the receptive potency is considered in relation to an agent which is naturally such as to imprint such a form in such a receiver, but it is a supernatural matter when it is considered in relation to an agent which is not naturally of a sort to impress this form in such a receiver.

[Objections to this distinction are raised and rejected]

<60> Applying this distinction to the matter under discussion, I say that, when the possible intellect is considered in relation to its actual knowledge there is no supernatural cognition in it, because the possible intellect is naturally perfected by any cognition whatsoever and is naturally inclined to every sort of cognition. But, speaking in the second way <i.e. looking at the intellect in relation to the *agent*>, any cognition is supernatural which is generated by an agent which is not such as naturally to move the possible intellect to such a cognition.

<61> In this state <of earthly life>, according to Aristotle, the possible intellect is naturally moved to cognition by the active intellect and a *phantasma* <a memory image>. Therefore only a cognition imprinted by these agents is natural.

By virtue of these agents <i.e. the active intellect and *phantasmata*> it can have every cognition of a term which a person in this life can have according to the ordinary way of things (*secundum legem communem*²) (*this is shown by one of the answers to an instantia* –

² The contrast here is between the order established by God through nature and by his covenant, and what God can in fact do.

<not translated here>). And so, although God could cause the cognition of some term through special revelation, as in an ecstasy, such supernatural cognition is not necessary in the ordinary way of things.

<62> But it is otherwise with regard to propositional truths, because, as has been shown by the first three Main Arguments against the first view <i.e. that of the philosophers>, given the entire action of the active intellect and the *phantasmata*, many propositions, the cognition of which is necessary for us, will remain unknown to us or neutral to us. Therefore it is that knowledge of these is given to us supernaturally, since no one has been able to gain knowledge of them naturally and pass it to others by teaching them, since no one is better able than another to decide on the truth of them relying on natural powers. (I shall discuss in Book III, d. 23 whether, once the teaching about such things has been handed down, someone can assent through natural powers to what has been handed down.) This first handing down of such teaching is called revelation, which is supernatural because it comes from an agent which does not naturally move the intellect in this present life.

<63> An action or piece of knowledge can also be called supernatural in another way: because it come from agent which takes the place of a supernatural object. For the object which is fitted by nature to cause the knowledge of this proposition 'God is triune', and other such propositions, is the divine essence grasped under its proper definition (*sub propria ratione*). As a knowable thing under such a definition it is a supernatural object. Therefore, whatever agent causes knowledge of the truths, which are naturally fitted to be evident through such an object cognized in such a way, is in this way taking the place of this object. If this agent caused the perfect knowledge of the truths which the object would cause were it known in itself, then it would take the place of the object perfectly. In so far as the knowledge which is produces is imperfect, it is virtually contained in that perfect knowledge which the object known in itself would cause.

<64> So it is in the case in question. For that which reveals the proposition 'God is triune' produces in the mind some knowledge of this truth. But the knowledge is obscure because it is about an object not known under its proper definition which, were it known under its proper definition, would be naturally fitted to cause clear and perfect knowledge of this truth. In as much, therefore, as this obscure knowledge is also included eminently in this clear knowledge, as the imperfect in what is perfect, so in revealing or causing this obscure knowledge, it takes the place of the object which causes the clear knowledge of it. This is so especially <for the following reason>. It could not cause the knowledge of any truth except by taking the place of some object. And it could not cause knowledge of such truths about that object by taking the place of some inferior object which naturally moves our intellect, because no such object virtually includes any knowledge of these truths, whether clear or obscure. Therefore it is necessary that in causing even this obscure knowledge it in some way takes the place of a supernatural object.

<65> The difference between these two ways of saying that something is supernatural is made clear when we distinguish them <as follows>. Suppose that a supernatural agent were to cause knowledge of a natural object – if, for example, it infused knowledge of geometry into someone, this knowledge would be supernatural in the first way, but not in the second. (Were it supernatural in the second way, it would be supernatural in both ways, because when something is supernatural in the second, it is also supernatural in the first, but not vice versa.)

When something is supernatural in the first way alone, then it could also be had naturally as well as supernaturally. When it is supernatural in the second way, it is necessary that it be had supernaturally, because it cannot be had naturally.

[<66> Scotus gives various quotations from Augustine which support his view, and he quotes as obviously mistaken two comments from the Politics <67> - that the gods should be honoured and that there is no legal obligation to feed orphans. And he deals with a general argument against the three Main Arguments. Then <72> he answers the arguments attributed to the Philosophers, and then <90> he deals quite briefly with the arguments given at the beginning for a negative answer to the question.]