

11. The University of Oxford



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Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham: on being

S.Q. What does it mean for something to be something?

Background

Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 7 March 1274) was a Dominican friar who taught at the University of Paris. Duns Scotus (c. 1265/66 – 8 November 1308) was born in Scotland (Duns *the Scot*) and William of Ockham (c. 1287 – 10 April 1347) was born in Ockham, a small village in Surrey. Both were Franciscan Friars and professors at the University of Oxford. They all continued the discussions started by Parmenides and then Aristotle and Abelard (amongst others) about what it means *to be* something. Is all *being* the same? Think about these examples to start you off:

- This pen is blue
- God is all-powerful
- Love is blind
- Hugo is a student

Aquinas

Aquinas thought that the meaning of the verb *to be* was determined by the subject. So, the *being* of a pen is different from the *being* of a person or God or love. Aquinas didn't think that *to be* was *equivocal* (ambiguous) he thought that the different uses were *analogous*.

Duns Scotus

(John) Duns Scotus thought that *to be* was *univocal* - that it only had one meaning. He thought that it was a *disjunctive predicate*. This means that *to be* something is *to be* one of any of the possible things a thing might be. E.g. **either** blue, **or** all-powerful, **or** blind, **or** sitting at the front etc... So God is in exactly the same way that a pen is.

Scotus thought that all things which were described with a particular predicate had a common nature, but that they also had an *individuating* nature (a *this-ness*)

William Ockham

William of Ockham agreed with Duns Scotus, but he thought that there were basically only two kinds of predicate: substance and quality. (Aristotle seemed to think there were [about] ten; Duns Scotus seems to imply that there are loads and loads.)

Ockham thought that things which were described with a particular predicate did not have a common nature, he thought everything was unique, and that the common nature only existed in our minds. (He is known as a kind of **nominalist** or *conceptualist* or *terminist* position).

Ockham's Razor: 'Don't multiply entities beyond necessity' - Ockham didn't actually say that, but he did say similar things. It basically means reduce things down to the smallest number of things if you can. Which was a different attitude to Duns Scotus (who was nicknamed *the subtle* doctor) because he liked distinctions.

A summary of the three views

Aquinas	Duns Scotus	Ockham
Everything <i>is</i> in a different (but analogous) way: A real person <i>is</i> ... in a different way to Harry Potter <i>is</i> ...	The word 'is' always means the same. <i>To be</i> something is <i>to be</i> one of any number of possible things: Adriana could either <i>be</i> ... a person, a pumpkin, Harry Potter.	There is nothing but entirely individual objects, and when we say that an object (or collection of objects) <i>is</i> something, we are simply giving them a <i>name</i> . When we say that Adriana <i>is</i> a person, the word <i>person</i> is just a name, it doesn't describe anything real and distinct. Abstract objects don't exist at all.

Tasks

1. Compare and contrast the views of Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham.
2. Whose views do you find most convincing? Explain your answer.

Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham: Power and politics

S.Q. When (if ever) is political power justified?

Background

The two major religious orders in the catholic church were the Dominicans (like Aquinas) and the Franciscans (like Bonaventure, Scotus, and Ockham). The Franciscans believed that they should be like Jesus and not own any property.

Previously, the popes had agreed to 'own' everything for the Franciscans - i.e. their monasteries etc. The Franciscan's said that there was a difference between 'using' stuff that belonged to someone else and owning stuff.

Pope John XXII didn't like the arrangement. He (and other Popes) felt that the Franciscan's behaviour seemed to imply that the church was wrong (not Christlike) for owning property. So Pope John XXII gave the property back to the Franciscans and caused a right old fuss, sparking a great deal of discussion on the nature of power and politics.

Marsilius of Padua

- There were two kinds of power and laws:
 - temporal and eternal (state and church)
- Jesus was not interested in the temporal, and so neither should the church. The church should only be interested in eternal laws (which included studying maths and science)
- There were two types of temporal power:
 - That which had the consent of the governed
 - Ideally this is demonstrated through elections, but there are many different ways consent can be shown.
 - And tyranny - obviously only that with the consent of the governed is right.

William of Ockham

- Argued that we had natural rights, and that these fall into two categories:
 - inalienable rights (which we cannot renounce) and those which we can renounce - e.g right to property.

Discussion

Do you think that we need an authority for deciding eternal laws? Perhaps you think we already have that authority? In the past, the church was able to *excommunicate* people, and denounce them as *heretics* - William of Ockham and Marsilius were excommunicated. Should people, for example, like climate change deniers, be denounced and excommunicated?

Tasks

1. Explain the views of Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham about power.
2. What do you think of Marsilius of Padua's and William of Ockham's ideas?

The Oxford Calculators

S.Q. Can we quantify everything? What can we quantify and what can't we? Explain your answer.

- Aristotle believed that only length and motion could be quantified. The Oxford Calculators attempted to quantify every physical and observable characteristic: heat, force, colour, density and light.
- Their aim was to use numbers in logical and philosophical arguments, rather than physics.
- They developed the mean speed theorem, (also known as the uniform acceleration, wrongly attributed to Galileo) – one of the foundations of modern physics.
- From Aristotle:
 - A body moves when the force exceeds the resistance
 - The velocity of a body was proportional to the force divided by the resistance
- Bradwardine argued that these two rules were inconsistent:
 - He imagined an initial force and resistance, and then supposed that the resistance doubled, doubled again etc. Eventually, the resistance would exceed the force so the body wouldn't move. But according to the second rule, the velocity could never be zero.
 - Bradwardine tried to reconcile the two by claiming that an arithmetic increase in velocity corresponds with a geometric increase in the original ratio of force to resistance.
- The beginning of the end for the Scholastics and Aristotelianism.

John Wycliffe

1. First to translate the Bible into English

2. Was a *Realist* and argued against the *nominalists*:

- a. If A resembles B, then there must be some respect C in which A resembles B
- b. 'Seeing that A resembles B in respect C' is the same thing as 'seeing the C-ness of A and B'
- c. \therefore C-ness is a universal – it is *real*.

3. Wycliffe thought that all sin and error started from nominalism:

- a. Nominalism leads to preferring the lesser good to the greater and to valuing one's individual self over the humanity of one's fellow humans.

4. This led to his very radical views on property:

- a. No sinner ever had the right to own property:
 - i. You can justly possess a thing, only if you can use it justly
 - ii. A sinner cannot use anything justly
 - iii. \therefore A sinner cannot justly possess anything
- b. All the goods of God should be common:
 - i. Every person should be in a state of grace
 - ii. If a person is in a state of grace, then they are lord of the world and all it contains
 - iii. \therefore Every person should be the lord of the universe.
 - iv. Every person can be the lord of the universe, only if they have everything in common.
 - v. \therefore all things should be in common

5. Wycliffe did not believe in transubstantiation, and for this he was denounced as a heretic and kicked out of Oxford. It was a strange time, because there were two Popes: one in Rome and one in Avignon. Wycliffe is important because he was the last of the great Scholastic philosophers, but his views also presaged the reformation that was coming. He did not believe that the church should be rich, and he was one of those held responsible for the Peasants Revolt.