

THE ORIGIN OF SCOTUS'S THEORY OF SYNCHRONIC CONTINGENCY*

I. SCOTUS AND SYNCHRONIC CONTINGENCY

IN a series of related and influential studies published over the past decade, Simo Knuuttila has portrayed Duns Scotus as breaking decisively with Aristotelian concepts of modality that had persisted up through the thirteenth century.¹ According to Knuuttila, Scotus was the first to advance what is called the 'synchronic' view of contingency, where something is contingent if, at the very moment it occurs, there is a real possibility for its opposite. This is in contrast to Aristotle's 'statistical' construction of contingency, where something is contingent if its opposite can actually occur at some other time.² This statistical modal theory is typified by Aristotle's resolution in *Sophistical Refutations* (166a22–30) of ambiguous, modal propositions into composed and divided senses, the standard analysis adopted by the scholastics. For example, the proposition, "A sitting man can stand," is false in the composed sense, since it is impossible for the opposed properties of sitting and standing to belong to the same subject at the same time. It is true, however, in the divided sense, since it is possible for a man to sit at one time and stand at another.³ That is, the statistical theory of modality construes contingency in terms of the possibility for opposed states at different times, rather than in terms of a state and the possibility of its opposite at the same time. According to Knuuttila, Scotus's new 'synchronic' conception of contingency was the divide between ancient and modern notions of modality.

Thus it was not Leibniz who invented the idea of possible worlds, which has similarities with the contemporary understanding of modality as it is codified in the so-called possible worlds semantics. The basic idea is present in Duns Scotus' modal theory, and this new view of modal notions is the general basis of fourteenth-century modal logic.⁴

Although Knuuttila has more recently tempered his historical claim that

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fidem codicum edita praeside Carolo Balić, Vols. 1–7, 16–19 (Vatican City, 1950–94); Vivès = *Joannis Duns Scoti Opera omnia, editio nova iuxta editionem Waddingi XII tomos continentes . . . recognita*, 26 vols. (Paris: L. Vivès, 1891–95).

this new modal theory originated with Scotus — he traces some antecedents to early twelfth-century theologians — his thesis has nevertheless become something of an *idée fixe* in the literature.⁵ In fact, this new conception of contingency is viewed by some as Scotus's most important philosophical contribution.⁶ While there can be no question that Scotus's analysis of what is called 'synchronic' contingency was extremely rigorous and innovative, and was for this reason so influential, the new idea itself of contingency cannot be his most important philosophical contribution for the simple reason that it was not his

¹Simo Knuutila, "Duns Scotus' Criticism of the 'Statistical' Interpretation of Modality," *Sprache und Erkenntnis im Mittelalter*, ed. Jan P. Beckmann et al. 2 vols. *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 13, (Berlin/New York, 1981) 1. 441–50; "Time and Modality in Scholasticism," *Reforging the Great Chain of Being: Studies in the History of Modal Theories*, ed. Simo Knuutila, Synthese Historical Library, (Dordrecht, 1981), pp. 163–257; "Modal Logic," *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretzmann et al. (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 342–57; *Modalities in Medieval Philosophy*, (London/New York, 1993). Working independently of Knuutila, Antonie Vos made similar claims for the originality and importance of Scotus's analysis of contingency. See his "On the Philosophy of the Young Duns Scotus. Some Semantical and Logical Aspects," *Medieval Semantics and Metaphysics. Studies Dedicated to L. M. de Rijk, Ph.D. on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday*, ed. E. P. Bos (Nijmegen, 1985), pp. 195–220 and A. Vos, et al., *John Duns Scotus, Contingency and Freedom: Lectura I 39*, Synthese Historical Library 42 (Dordrecht, 1994), pp. 1–36. On the other hand, a negative assessment of Scotus's theory of contingency can be found in Anthony Kenny, "Philosophy of Mind in the Thirteenth Century," in *L'homme et son univers au moyen âge*, ed. Christian Wenin (Louvain-la-neuve, 1986), pp. 50–55.

²Knuutila's depiction of the ancient view of contingency, from which Scotus departed, was based on Hintikka's interpretation of Aristotle's modal theory as 'statistical.' See Hintikka's *Time and Necessity. Studies in Aristotle's Theory of Modality* (Oxford, 1973), p. 102–3 and *Aristotle on Modality and Determinism* (Amsterdam, 1977), pp. 21–22. For Knuutila's own, more nuanced analysis of the ancient views of modality, which takes account of the significant reaction to Hintikka's

thesis, see his *Modalities in Medieval Philosophy*, pp. 3–44.

³Cf. Knuutila, "Time and Modality," pp. 166–70.

⁴"Time and Modality," p. 236.

⁵For Knuutila's more recent historical account, see *Modalities in Medieval Philosophy*, pp. vii and 62–98.

⁶See, for example, Vos as cited in note 1.

⁷For Scotus's treatment of divine foreknowledge, see William Lane Craig, *The Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents from Aristotle to Suarez* (Leiden, 1988), pp. 127–45. The state of Scotus's texts on divine foreknowledge is confused. The Vatican edition places the *Ordinatio* discussion of divine foreknowledge in an appendix on the basis of an annotation in Codex A (= Assisi, Biblioteca comunale MS 137), which notes that a space was left for 1 d. 39 in Scotus's own copy of the *Ordinatio*. To explain the presence of 1 d. 39 in every other manuscript of the *Ordinatio*, Balic hypothesized that it was an 'apograph' finished by Scotus's students and later inserted by them. Consequently, according to the Vatican editors, only the *Lectura* version of Scotus's treatment can be taken as truly authentic. For our purposes, it is enough to use the 'apograph' version of 1 d. 39, because its organization is more clear. In any event, there is no doctrinal conflict between this 'apograph' and the *Lectura*. As for Scotus's Parisian discussion of divine foreknowledge, the text printed as the *Reportatio parisiensis* in the Vivès edition is rather the *Additiones magnae* of William of Alnwick. For Scotus's Parisian treatment of divine foreknowledge based on the most authoritative manuscript of the *Reportatio parisiensis*, see Allan B. Wolter, *The Philosophical Theory of John Duns Scotus*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams (Ithaca/London, 1990), pp. 285–334.



contribution at all. Rather, he almost certainly adopted it from the previous generation of theologians, where it developed in response to a long standing difficulty concerning free will, the exact place where Scotus himself gives it the most attention.

II. WILL AS THE CAUSE OF CONTINGENCY

The central text in Scotus's treatment of contingency is distinction 39 of the first book of the *Sentences*, the distinction typically devoted to the problem of divine foreknowledge.⁷ The starting point of Scotus's solution to that problem is to make the divine will the primary cause of contingency in things. How the divine will functions as the cause of contingency, says Scotus, we are to infer from how contingency arises from our own, created will. Here Scotus determines three points: (1) with respect to what is there freedom (*libertas*) of our will; (2) how does possibility or contingency (*possibilitas sive contingentia*) follow from that freedom; (3) and finally how can this contingency be expressed in terms of the accepted logical analysis of modal propositions.⁸

As for the first point, Scotus says that our will, considered as a first actuality, is free (*libera*) with respect to opposite acts, by means of those acts to opposite objects, and finally to producing opposite effects.⁹ The last of these, the will's ability to produce external effects, Scotus takes as incidental to the will as such and leaves aside. Although it is only by means of opposite acts (e.g., loving and hating) that our will can tend to opposite objects, these nonetheless form two distinct liberties of the will. The will's freedom for opposite acts has some imperfection attached to it, since the will is free in this regard only insofar as it is a passive power capable of undergoing change over time. The reason, of course, is that our will cannot have two opposed acts at the same time. Freedom for opposite objects, however, not only does not imply any imperfection, but is required for the will's perfection, for a power is perfect only if it can tend to all objects over which it by nature has scope. In the case of the will, this means that it is perfect only if it can tend to every object that can be willed, and hence to opposite objects. Scotus accordingly concludes that freedom (*libertas*) is a perfection, imputable even to the divine will, insofar as it is the ability to tend to opposite objects. In effect, as we shall presently see, the freedom for opposite acts arises from the will as a passive power, its freedom for opposite objects from it as an active power.

Scotus's second point, then, is to consider what possibility or contingency arises from these two liberties in the will. From the will's freedom for opposite acts follows a power for opposites successively, that is, for a succession of

opposed acts of willing or for willing after having not willed. This power for opposites is evident, says Scotus, in all things that change, since opposed states can exist in them successively. As indicated, Scotus regards this power for opposites as a function of the will as passive power, that is, as a subject that can over time successively receive opposed acts.

There is in addition, continues Scotus, a second, less evident power for opposites *without succession* that arises from the freedom of the will. It is here, in advancing a power for opposites without succession, that Scotus is seen as going beyond the Aristotelian construction of contingency as a possibility for opposite acts at different times. Scotus argues as follows for this less evident power for opposites without succession. Consider a created will that exists only for an instant and in that instant has a determinate volition or act of willing. Now that will cannot produce that volition necessarily. If it did, then it would follow that the will would be a necessary cause absolutely (*simpliciter*), since a cause, at that moment when it actually causes, either causes necessarily or contingently. That is, a cause is not now contingent because it existed previously and then, at that previous time, was able either to cause or not to cause. Rather, a cause is either necessary or contingent at the moment when it actually causes. Thus, if a will existing at an instant causes necessarily, it would so cause at every instant, which is impossible. Since the will causes this volition at this instant and does not do so necessarily, it must do so contingently. Therefore,

⁸¹ *Ord.* d. 39 Apograph (Vat. 6.417–19). For a translation of the relevant text concerning point (2), see Wolter, *Philosophical Theology*, pp. 187–88.

⁹For Scotus the will as power of the soul is formally distinct from, but really identical to and unitively contained in, the soul itself as first act. See 2 *Sent.* d.16 q. un. (Vivès 13.38b–44b). Note that this portion of book 2, printed by Wadding as belonging to Scotus's *Oxford Sentences*, in fact comes from his Paris lectures.

¹⁰“Tamen est et alia (non ita manifesta), absque omni successione. Ponendo enim voluntatem creatam tantum habere esse in uno instanti, et quod ipsa in illo instanti habeat hanc volitionem, non necessario tunc habet eam. Probatio: si enim in illo instanti haberet eam necessario, cum non sit causa nisi in illo instanti quando causaret eam, ergo simpliciter voluntas — quando causaret — necessario causaret; non enim modo est contingens causa quia praeexistebat ante istud instans in quo causat (et tunc ‘ut praeexistens’ potuit causare vel non causare), quia sicut hoc ens quando est, est necessarium vel contingens,

ita causa quando causat, tunc causat necessario vel contingenter. Ex quo ergo in isto instanti causat hoc velle et non necessario, ideo contingenter. Est ergo haec potentia causae ‘ad oppositum eius quod causat’ sine successione.” (Apograph, pp. 417–18).

¹¹On *potentia realis* versus *potentia logica*, see also 1 *Ord.* d.7 nn. 27–29 (Vat. 4.118–19). Generally speaking, Scotus restricts *potentia realis* in the *Ordinatio* to active and passive principles.

¹²The distinction between *actus primus* and *actus secundus*, of course, is a scholastic adaption of Aristotle's distinction in *entelecheia*. See, for example, *De an.* 2.1 (412a22–b10).

¹³“Et ista potentia, realis, est potentia prioris naturaliter (ut actus primi) ad opposita quae sunt posteriora naturaliter (ut actus secundi); actus enim primus, consideratus in illo instanti in quo est prior naturaliter actu secundo, ita ponit illum in esse — tamquam effectum suum contingentem — quod ut prior naturaliter, posset aeque ponere aliud oppositum in esse.” (Apograph, p. 418).

since the will causes contingently in that instant, there must be a potency for the opposite at that same instant, and thus a potency for opposites without succession.¹⁰

The evident point to Scotus's scenario of an instantaneously existing will is to isolate the causal nature of the will as such. That the will can cause opposed acts at successive times reveals nothing about the manner in which the will causes at either moment of time when it actually causes those acts. The true causal nature of the will emerges only if we collapse its existence to single instant, thereby removing from the will its opportunity to will contrary acts. Even under such a restriction that would limit the will to a single act, Scotus is arguing that the will cannot cause that act necessarily. To hold otherwise would be to admit a necessary, causal relation between the will and its act that could not be overcome by extending the existence of that will to any duration. To put it another way, Scotus's scenario of the instantaneously existing will is meant to show that the will must have the ability to cause or not to cause at the very instant when it is causing some act, because having that ability at some prior moment will not render it a contingent cause. If that is so, then the will cannot be adequately, or even essentially, described as a power for successive, opposing acts.

Scotus stresses that this possibility for opposites without succession arising from the will is a real and not merely logical possibility.¹¹ It is real because the will, as a first act, namely, as a potency really identical with the soul, is an active, causal power naturally prior to opposites, which, as second acts, are naturally posterior to the will as their cause.¹² The will as a first act is a cause, which, considered in that moment naturally prior to its second act or effect, so brings that second act into being as its contingent effect that, as naturally prior, it could equally bring the opposite into being. That is, the non-successive possibility for opposites is real, because the will, 'before' it causes a given volition as its effect, has a real ability to cause the opposite of what it in fact causes, where 'before' is not taken temporally but, as in all causes essentially related to their effects, in the order of nature.¹³

Consequent on this real potency for opposites is a logical potency or possibility, which Scotus defines as a lack of contradiction or formal repugnancy between terms (*non repugnantia terminorum*). That is, Scotus is claiming that there is a logical possibility for opposites in the same instant, because there is no formal repugnancy between the will, considered as first act, and the opposite of what it is in fact willing at that moment. While Scotus holds that logical possibility in the sense of non-repugnancy of subject and predicate terms is enough for the truth of modal propositions, even if, *per impossibile*, there

were no corresponding real possibility, there is in this case a corresponding real possibility in the will as a contingent cause and as a subject capable of receiving opposites.¹⁴

In sum, Scotus recognizes three different potencies or possibilities arising from our will's freedom for opposites: (1) a potency for opposites successively at different times and both a (2) real and (3) logical possibility for opposites in the same instant. Scotus's new 'synchronic' theory of contingency is seen to consist in the latter two potencies, according to which something is contingent not if its opposite can occur at a different time, but if its opposite is really and logically possible at the same time.

Scotus clearly saw that his construction of the will as a power for opposites without succession had to be located in the accepted distinction between composed and divided senses of propositions, the standard tool for analysis of ambiguous, modal statements. At the same time, he also saw that the most common use of this distinction was inadequate to capture this non-successive type of potency arising from the will and so had to be expanded. Scotus's third and final point about the freedom of the created will is to express this sense of contingency in the current logic of modal propositions.¹⁵

Consider the proposition:

P_i: *voluntas volens a, potest non velle a*

(A will that is willing *a* is able not to will *a*).¹⁶

According to the usual analysis into composed and divided senses, Scotus says the proposition is false in the composed sense because it means that the will is both willing and not willing *a* at the same time:

COMPOSED SENSE OF P_i: *voluntas volens a, non vult a*

(A will that is willing *a* is not willing *a*.)

Taken in the usual divided sense, the proposition is true because then it means that at different times the will can will and not will:

DIVIDED SENSE OF P_i: *voluntas volens pro a potest non velle pro b*

(A will that is willing at instant *a* is able not to will at instant *b*.)

According to Scotus, this standard analysis of modal propositions only covers the first type of potency arising from the will, the possibility for

¹⁴"Hanc etiam potentiam realem activam (priorem naturaliter ipso quod producit) concomitatur potentia logica, quae est non repugnancia terminorum. Voluntati enim ut actus primus, etiam quando producit hoc velle, non repugnat oppositum velle: tum quia causa contingens est, respectu effectus, et ideo non repugnat sibi oppositum in ratione effectus;

tum quia ut subiectum est, contingenter se habet ad istum actum ut informat, quia subiecto non repugnat oppositum sui 'accidentis per accidens.'" (*ibid.*)

¹⁵Apograph, p. 418–420.

¹⁶Participles are usually taken temporally in this connection, typically expanded by "when" (*cum*) or "while" (*dum*).

opposites successively. The difference between the composed and divided senses consists of taking the opposite states at the same time versus taking them at different times. In order to capture the non-successive potency for opposites, Scotus sees that he must expand this analysis so that *both* the composed and divided senses of the proposition refer to the same time. That is, a new divided sense of a modal proposition must be constructed that is true not by referring to two different times but to a single instant of time. Thus, reconsider P₁ so that the terms *volens* and *potest non velle* are both taken at the same time:

P₂: *voluntas non volens aliquid pro a, potest velle illud pro a.*

(A will that is not willing something at instant *a* can will it at instant *a*.)

Even under such a restriction, Scotus says, the proposition can still be construed in composed and divided senses, although, like the non-successive sense of possibility to which it corresponds, this distinction is more difficult to see. In the composed sense, there is a single, categorical proposition whose subject is “a will not willing at instant *a*” (*voluntas non volens pro a*) and whose predicate is “is willing at instant *a*” (*volens pro a*). Taken in this sense, the proposition asserts that it is possible for ‘willing’ to exist in the will at the time when it is not willing. The composite sense is clearly false, since it asserts as possible that which is impossible, namely, that the contradictories willing and not willing can exist in the will as a subject together (*simul*).

But how can the divided sense be true if, as in the composed sense, the terms ‘not willing’ and ‘able to will’ are taken together in the same moment of time? Scotus replies that in the divided sense we have not one but two categorical propositions, one non-modal (*de inesse*) and one modal (*de possibili*), both taken at the same instant of time and each having as their subject term the will. In the first proposition, then, it is asserted that the will is not willing *a*; in the second, it is asserted that it is possible for the will to will *a*. This divided sense is true, because when the will is actually willing *a*, it still remains possible at that moment for it to will the opposite, just as a *de inesse* proposition is consistent with a *de possibili* proposition for the opposite.

In order to express in logical terms his new sense of possibility for opposites at an instant, Scotus had to add to the accepted analysis of the divided sense as a single *de possibili* proposition referring to two different times that of two different propositions, one *de inesse* and the other *de possibili*, referring to the same time. The first type of divided, modal statement expressed the potency for opposites successively owing to mutability of a subject over time; the second type expresses a non-successive potency for opposites required for the will as a free cause. In rough terms, the logical difference between the two can be

expressed as follows, where W_a and W_b mean respectively willing at instant 'a' and willing at instant 'b'.

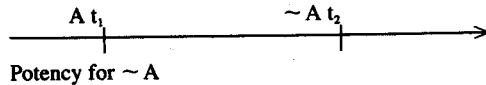
COMPOSED SENSE: $\diamond(W_a \& \sim W_a) =$ Contradiction

OLD DIVIDED SENSE: $W_a \& \diamond \sim W_b =$ Potency for opposites successively

NEW DIVIDED SENSE: $W_a \& \diamond \sim W_a =$ Potency for opposites without succession

Scotus's expanded sense of possibility was, as he himself admitted, difficult to grasp and went hard with firmly held convictions about the relationship between contingency and time. Scotus addresses some of these convictions in a series of three objections to his revision of the distinction between composed and divided senses of a proposition. The first two argue in turn that the new distinction is not logical because it denies Aristotle's dictum that "Everything that is, when it is, is necessary" and violates a fundamental rule in *obligatio* governing the relation between the truth of a contingent proposition and the moment at which it is uttered.¹⁷ The third objection runs to the very notion of *potentia* and for our concerns is the most important.

The objection denies that at any given instant there can be potency for the opposite of what actually exists at that same instant. For if so, then that potency for the opposite is either together with its act or before it. It cannot be with its act, for then both opposites would be in act at the same instant of time. Neither can it be before its act, since then it would be a potency for an act at some instant other than the one assumed.¹⁸ The argument of the objection can be illustrated as follows:



¹⁷Apograph, p. 421.

¹⁸"Praeterea, tertio: si pro aliquo instanti sit potentia ad aliquid cuius oppositum inest, aut illa est potentia cum actu aut ante actum; non cum actu, patet; non ante actum, quia tunc esset ad actum pro alio instanti quam pro quo inest illa potentia." (Apograph, p. 421). This compressed reasoning is expanded in the parallel text of 1 *Rep. par. d. 39* where it is applied to the divine will. The following passage is missing from Vivès text, so we quote from Vienna, Österreichische Nationabibliothek, fol. 116rb: "Item, ista potentia qua Deus potest velle, vel est cum actu vel ante actum. Si est potentia cum actu, ergo necessario inest. Ergo in eodem instanti, cum possit velle 'a' et nolle 'a' per te, vult opposita simul esse, quod est impossibile. Si autem sit potentia ante actum, ergo possibile est sequi actum duratione, et per consequens talis potentia pro isto instanti in quo praecedit actum non potest

velle aliud sive oppositum, quod est contra te." For the *Lectura* version of the objection, see next note.

¹⁹"Praeterea, si voluntas volens aliquid in a, potest non velle illud in a, — aut igitur ista potentia est cum actu, aut ante actum. Non cum actu, quia tunc opposita essent simul; ergo est potentia ante actum. Sed hoc falsum est, cum nulla potentia potest esse in a, praecedens actum suum: tunc enim a esset divisibile et non instans indivisibile, cuius oppositum supponitur" (1 *Lect. d.39 n.57* [Vat. 17.488–99]).

²⁰For Henry's argument against eternal creation, see: 2 *Lect. d.1 nn.108–109, 120* (Vat. 18.34–35, 40); 2 *Ord. d.1 nn. 121–123, 158* (Vat. 7.60–61, 79–80); 2 *Rep. par. d.1 q.4 nn.6, 8–9* (Vivès 22.540b–41a, 542a–b). On the sin of the angels, see 2 *Ord. d.5 q.2 nn.6–7* (Vivès 12.316b–317b); 2 *Rep. par. d.4 q.un. n.5* (Vivès 22.603b).

Consider that *A* is the case at some instant of time t_1 . The argument is that there cannot be at that same time t_1 a potency for $\sim A$. The reason is that a *potentia* must bear some relation to its act, so that any potency must either be simultaneous with or, at the least, before its act. But the potency for $\sim A$ at time t_1 cannot be simultaneous with its act, for then *A* and $\sim A$ would both be the case at that instant. Nor can the potency for $\sim A$ be before its act, so that it can realize its act only at some future instant t_2 , for then it would not be, as assumed, a potency for instant t_1 . To put the same argument equivalently, as Scotus does in the *Lectura*, the potency for $\sim A$ cannot be before its act at instant t_1 because in a given instant nothing can be 'before' anything, since this would mean that an instant is divisible into further instants.¹⁹ That is, a potency cannot be before its act in an instant, but only over a temporal duration, which is contrary to the original assumption of an instant. Therefore, there can be no potency for something at the very instant when its opposite is actually the case.

Clearly the objection is attacking Scotus's rather strong claim that there remains in the will a *real*, as opposed to a merely logical, potency for the opposite of an act at the very time when that act is being willed. The basis of the objection is that a *real* potency must at some time be capable of realizing its act. Therefore, either this potency is simultaneous with its act or before it. The only way Scotus can avoid the live contradiction entailed by the first alternative is to make the potency 'before' its act, thereby rendering it a potency not for the assumed instant, but for some future one. As the *Lectura* explains, no potency can be before its act in an instant. In other words, to avoid placing opposite acts together in the same instant, Scotus must temporally separate the potency for the opposite from its act, thereby violating the indivisibility of the assumed instant. Scotus's position that there can be a *real* potency for the opposite of an act at the very instant when that act is the case must therefore either endure a contradiction or give up the indivisibility of the instant.

Scotus encounters this same objection in two other places where he uses his theory of contingency to solve related problems. It recurs as an argument by Henry of Ghent against eternal creation, and yet again as the reason for denying that angels could have sinned in the first instant of their existence.²⁰ Scotus makes reference in both cases to the present text. The significance of the objection's connection with the sin of the angels will be evident enough in the next section. Of immediate interest is Henry of Ghent's argument against eternal creation, for it brings out clearly the conception of contingency being defended by the objection.

Henry of Ghent's strategy against the possibility of an eternal creation, aimed in part at Aquinas, was to establish that an eternal world would be an

absolutely necessary one, a result seen as fatal to divine freedom.²¹ Henry's argument that the world's eternity entails its necessity is based on Aristotle's dictum in *De interpretatione* c. 9 (19a23–24) that, "Everything that is, when it is, necessarily is." This means, according to Henry, that there can be no potency for the opposite of an act at the very time that act exists, whether from the thing itself or from some efficient cause, because such would be a potency for contradictories at the same time. This apparently follows because a real potency must be one capable of realization. Consequently, to admit a real potency for the opposite of an act at the very time when that act is the case would be to admit a potency capable of realizing opposites at the same time. Thus, if there is some potency for the contrary of an act, it must exist at some time prior to the act itself, so that it is able to impede the act before it occurs. If, however, the world were eternal, then its existence would be an act of infinite duration. Consequently, there would be no time prior to that act at which a potency for its opposite could be found. Thus, if the world is eternal, it is absolutely necessary.²²

Scotus himself is explicit that Henry's reasoning is the same as that found in the above objection against the conception of a power for opposites without succession.²³ It is thus clear from Henry's argument that the above objection is advancing a theory of contingency according to which any *real* potency for the opposite of an act must temporally precede that act. This temporal separation of an act and a real potency for its opposite is seen as necessary in order to avoid making contradiction a real possibility. Since there can be no real possibility for the opposite of an act when it actually is the case, it must be, as Aristotle says, necessary at that time. The absurdities confronting Scotus in the above objection — either opposites are both true at the same time or the instant is divisible — arise from his attempt to maintain that something can be contingent when it actually is the case. This means that at that same time there must be a genuine possibility for its contrary, which excludes any temporal duration between an

²¹Henry's treatment is contained in *Quod. 1* qq. 7–8 in *Henrici de Gandavo Opera Omnia V: Quodlibet I*, ed. Raymond Macken (Leiden, 1979), pp. 27–46. On Henry's arguments against the eternity of the world, see especially Raymond Macken "La temporalité de la créature selon Henri de Gand," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 38 (1971) 211–72. A summary of *Quod. 1* qq. 7–8 can be found in Richard C. Dales, *Medieval Discussions of the Eternity of the World* (Leiden, 1990), pp. 165–70. For Aquinas's position, see John F. Wippel, "Thomas Aquinas on the Possibility of Eternal Creation," in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C., 1984), pp. 191–214.

²²*Quod. 1* qq. 7–8 (ed. Macken, pp. 40–41).

²³2 *Ord. d.1* n.158 (Vat. 7.79).

²⁴"Ad tertium dico quod est potentia ante actum; non 'ante' duratione, sed 'ante' ordine naturae, — quia illud quod praecedit naturaliter illum actum, ut praecedit actum naturaliter, posset esse cum opposito illius actus. Et tunc negandum est quod omnis potentia est 'cum actu vel ante actum', intelligendo 'ante' pro prioritate durationis; vera est intelligendo per 'ante' prioritatem naturae." (Apograph, p. 423).

²⁵2 *Lect. d.1* n.120 (Vat. 18.40); 2 *Ord. d.1* n.158 (Vat. 7.79–80); 2 *Rep. par. d.1* q.4 nn. 8–9 (Vivès 22.542a–b).

act and a real power for its opposite. Henry's reasoning further shows that, on the view of contingency advanced by the objection, the necessity of the present instant is seen to entail the necessity of an eternal duration. An eternal act no more permits a temporally prior potency for the opposite than an instantaneous one.

In light of Henry's argument, then, the force of the above objection is that a real potency for the opposite of an act must temporally precede that act upon pain of contradiction. Scotus's reply is that a potency for the opposite of an act is not 'before' that act in time but in nature. This is because that which naturally precedes an act insofar as it is naturally prior, can be together with the opposite of that act. Therefore, Scotus says he denies the dictum that "A potency is either together with or before its act" if 'before' is taken temporally, but not if it is taken to mean 'before in nature.'²⁴ In other words, Scotus avoids the contradiction imputed in the objection by separating an act and a real potency for its opposite not in time but in the order of nature.

Scotus expands this response somewhat when rejecting Henry's argument against eternal creation.²⁵ There Scotus bases his reply on the general nature of causal relations. A cause does not function as a cause insofar as it is prior in duration to its effect, but only as it is prior in nature. Therefore, either a cause contingently causes at the very time it actually produces its effect, or else it never does, for there is no other time at which it functions as the cause of that effect. Accordingly, either a cause is capable of producing the opposite of an effect at the very time it causes that effect, or it never will be so capable. If the latter is the case, then no cause will be contingent and all will be necessary. Consequently, given the simultaneity of cause and effect, something is contingent not because a potency or cause for its opposite is prior to it in duration, but only in nature. According to Scotus, the view of contingency that requires a real power for the opposite of an act to be temporally prior to that act is inconsistent with the general requirement that a cause must be simultaneous with its effect. Consequently, such a view of contingency excludes any relation of contingency between a cause and its effect.

It should be noted that the very generality of Scotus's reply here means that it is not a full explanation of contingency. Precisely because *every* cause is simultaneous with, but naturally prior to, its effect, such a relation belongs to necessary as well as to contingent causes. That is, a cause is not contingent as opposed to necessary simply because it is naturally prior to its effect. So while natural priority makes a contingent cause or power possible by protecting it from an apparent contradiction arising from its 'synchronic' nature, it does not explain what makes such a cause contingent rather than necessary. This

explanation will require a transformation of Aristotle's notion of *potentia* itself, which Scotus does not take up here, but in the final book of his questions on *Metaphysics* when discussing the notion of the will as a rational power.²⁶

This then is Scotus's theory of 'synchronic' contingency according to which the opposite of what is actually the case is both logically and really possible at the very time when it is actually the case. Scotus's clear motivation for this sense of contingency is to guarantee freedom of the will, both created and divine, which requires that the will be an active cause for opposites even at the very moment it has a determinate volition. Indeed, Scotus argues that unless the will is such a cause at the moment of its volition, it can never be so. The question is whether this 'new' notion of free will and the 'new' theory of possibility and contingency it involved were in fact 'new' with Scotus.

III. PETER OLIVI AND FREE WILL

In point of fact, the essentials of Scotus's doctrine of the created will as a

²⁶See Scotus, *QQ in Metaph.* 9 q.15 (Vivès 7.606–17). An improved Latin text with translation is in Allan B. Wolter, *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality* (Washington, D.C., 1986), pp. 145–72. See also by the same, "Duns Scotus on the Will as Rational Potency," in *Philosophical Theology*, pp. 163–180.

²⁷"Tertia opinio est Petri Ioannis, quam dimisi scribere, propter causam certam." (1 *Lect* d.26 n.42 [Vat. 6.327]). The *causa certa* was probably the general chapter of 1285 in Milan, where Olivi's writings were ordered out of circulation pending future action by the minister general. This was an official reaffirmation of Olivi's censure in 1283 by a commission of seven Parisian theologians that included Richard of Middleton. The commission issued a *rotulus* of censored articles from Olivi's writings and the *Letter of Seven Seals*, so named because it bore the seal of each of the examining members, that contained 22 articles of positive doctrine which Olivi purportedly denied. Upon the findings of the commission, the minister general ordered Olivi's writings confiscated and adherence to the *Letter of Seven Seals*. See David Burr, *The Persecution of Peter Olivi* (Philadelphia, 1976), pp. 41–42, 67. The opinion of Olivi that Scotus refuses to report concerns the constitution of the Persons in the Trinity, a point indirectly referred to in the first two articles of the *Letter of Seven Seals*. See Geroldus Fus-senegger, "*Littera septem sigillorum* contra doctrinam Petri Ioannis Olivi edita," *Ar-*

chivum franciscanum historicum 47 (1954) 51.

²⁸Olivi's *Sentences* are cited according to the edition of Bernard Jansen, *Quaestiones in secundum librum Sententiarum*, 3 vols. (Quaracchi, 1922–26).

²⁹*Chartularium universitatis Parisiensis*, ed. H. Denifle and A. Chatelain, 4 vols. (Paris, 1889–1897) 1.171: "Quintus, quod malus angelus in principio sue creationis fuit malus, et nunquam fuit nisi malus. Hunc errorem reprobamus, firmiter enim credimus quod bonus creatus sit et post peccando factus sit malus." Cf., Aquinas, 2 *Sent.* d.2 q.2 a.1 resp. (ed. Mandonnet, 2.110): "Ideo alii dixerunt quod angelus in principio suae creationis, malus fuit, non tamen malitiam a Deo habuit, sed actu propriae voluntatis. Haec autem positio vana, et erronea est, et falsa. . . . Erronea est, quia primae opinioni nimis vicina est et a magistris damnata." For Bonaventure, see the next note.

³⁰"Dicendum, quod antiqua positio fuit aliorum, quod simul tempore fuit diabolus et peccavit, nec unquam fuit nisi malus; et videtur Augustinus illam approbare *Super Genesim ad litteram*; et ideo aliqui moderni eam tenuerunt . . . communis opinio magistrorum Parisiensium est, quod duratione conditio Angeli praecessit lapsum; et de communi consilio magistrorum positio opposita excommunicata est ab episcopo Parisiensi." (Bonaventure, 2 *Sent.* d.3 p.2 a.1 q.2 [ed. Quaracchi, 2.116b]). The text of Augustine at issue is *De gen. ad lit.* 11.19.

power for opposites and the attached notion of contingency can be found in a theologian of the previous generation, Peter John Olivi, a noted voluntarist and otherwise notorious for his role in the dispute over Franciscan poverty. Whether Olivi was the first to hold the doctrine so firmly associated with Scotus is not known, nor is it even all that historically relevant. It seems very likely that Olivi was one of Scotus's sources for this doctrine of will and contingency. Scotus knew of Olivi's opinions, whom he cites by name, and Olivi's arguments and language on this issue are very close to those of Scotus at critical points.²⁷

The first place Olivi takes up the nature of free will is in *2 Sent.* q. 42, which is devoted to the sin of the angels and, in particular, to whether angels could have sinned in the first instant of their creation.²⁸ While generally speaking the sin of the angels was a main locus for scholastic discussions of free will in the creature, Olivi's treatment under this topic is highly relevant to Scotus's own discussion. As we have just seen, Scotus's analysis of free will took place on the supposition that a created will existed only for an instant and in that instant had a determinate volition. The paradigm case, of course, for such an instantaneous act of willing would be the angel sinning in the first instant of its creation, and, as we shall presently see, Olivi's treatment of that problem coincides exactly with Scotus's own analysis.

Taking up the sin of the angels, Olivi says that all recent thinkers hold that in fact the angels did not sin in the first instant of their creation and could not have so sinned. Likely Olivi has in mind the condemnation in 1241, referred to by both Bonaventure and Aquinas, which included the proposition that the fallen angels were always evil because they had sinned at the beginning of their creation.²⁹ As Bonaventure explains, this was an ancient view having some textual support in Augustine, but one that all the masters at Paris had rejected and that the Bishop of Paris, then William of Auvergne, had condemned upon consulting them.³⁰ Despite this agreement, Olivi continues, not everyone gives the same reason why it was impossible for the angels to have sinned in the first instant of their existence. Olivi proceeds to examine seven false reasons, the second of which concerns us.

The second of these seven invalid reasons, which Olivi says is attributed to Hugh of St. Victor, is that a power is free for or capable of opposites only with respect to future acts or acts not yet done. For an act, at the very time when it is coming about, cannot not be coming about. Therefore, the power by which an angel was able to sin was only a power with respect to some future moment relative to the first instant of its existence.³¹

While Olivi attributes this reason to Hugh of St. Victor, it is in fact based on the description of free choice made standard by Peter Lombard and transmitted

in his 2 *Sentences* d. 25 to the thirteenth century. Borrowing from Hugh of St. Victor's *De sacramentis* and Abelard's *Theologia scholarium*, Lombard defines choice as free only with respect to something in the future.³²

It should be known that free choice does not refer to the present or past but to future contingents. For what is in the present is determined, nor is it in our power that, when it is, it be or not be. It is possible for it not to be or to be something else afterwards, but it is impossible for it not to be while it is, or to be something else while it is what it is. But whether it be one thing or another in the future pertains to the power of free choice.³³

³¹"Secunda ratio quae Hugoni de Sancto Victore adscribitur est: quia potestas non est libera seu potens in opposita nisi respectu actuum futurorum seu nondum factorum, quia actus, dum fit vel est factus, non potest non fieri; ergo potestas qua angelus potuit peccare fuit tantum respectu futuri ad primum nunc suae potestatis." (Olivi, 2 *Sent.* q.42 [ed. Jansen, 1.705]).

³²Hugh of St. Victor, *De sacramentis* 1 p.5 c.22 (PL 176.256A–D); cf., Abelard, *Theologia scholarium* 3 (CCL 536–39).

³³"Hoc autem sciendum est, quoniam liberum arbitrium ad praesens vel ad praeteritum non refertur, sed ad futura contingentia. Quod enim in praesenti est, determinatum est; nec in potestate nostra est ut tunc sit vel non sit, quando est. Potest enim non esse, vel aliud esse postea; sed non potest non esse dum est, vel aliud esse dum id est quod est. Sed in futuro, an hoc sit vel aliud, ad potestatem liberi arbitrii spectat." (Lombard, 2 *Sent.* d.25 c.1 [ed. Quaracchi, 1.461]).

³⁴"Item, haec duo sunt vera per se, quod nullus in illo instanti, quo peccat, potest vitare peccatum; et nullus peccat actuali peccato in eo quod vitare non potest; sed si Angelus peccavit in illo instanti, non potuit in illo vitare, nec in aliquo, quod esset ante illud, nec post: ergo non potuit vitare. Sed si non potuit vitare, non peccavit: ergo si peccavit in primo instanti, non peccavit." (Bonaventure, 2 *Sent.* d.3 p.2 a.2 q.1 [ed. Quaracchi, 2.116a]).

³⁵"Item si angelus peccasset ab instanti suae creationis, de necessitate peccasset, quia non potest dici quod potuisset non peccare antequam esset, quia antequam esset nulla erat in eo potentia; nec dum peccasset, quia quod factum est non potest non fuisse factum. . . . Ergo si angelus ab instanti suae creationis potuisset peccare, possibile fuisset illum primo peccato de necessitate peccare. Sed hoc nullo modo fuit possibile." (Richard of Middleton, 2 *Sent.* d.3 a.8 q.2 [ed. 1591; rpt.

Frankfurt, 1963, 2.64a]).

³⁶"Arguit tertio ad istam conclusionem sic: Si voluntas Angeli peccat in primo instanti; ergo non peccat. Probatio consequentiae, quia si in primo instanti peccavit, non potuit non peccare, ergo necessario peccavit. Probatio istius consequentiae, quia si potuit non peccare, aut potentia ante actum, quod falsum est; nam ante primum instans non fuit potentia in ipso, nec potentia cum actu, quia in isto instanti in quo peccavit, non potuit non peccare, et ideo per illam potentiam non potuit non peccare." (2 *Ord.* d.5 q.2 n.6 [Vivès 12.316b–317a]).

³⁷"Haec autem ratio fallit, quia prima propositio eius est falsa, nisi futurum sumatur ibi communiter tam ad posterius natura et non duratione quam ad posterius duratione; unde millies dicitur quod potestas talis est respectu fiendi, et hoc sive sit fiendum in eodem nunc praesenti sive in alio nunc futuro. Quod autem sub hoc secundo modo fiendi sit prima propositio falsa, probatum est sufficienter in quaestione an in nobis sit liberum arbitrium; nam si in eodem nunc et respectu eiusdem nunc non potest nostra voluntas disiunctive in opposita, ita quod in eodem nunc est prius naturaliter potens hoc velle vel nolle quam illud in eodem nunc velit vel nolit, et ita quod in eodem nunc in quo illud voluit potuit illud nolle: impossibile est ipsam esse liberam in opposita, sicut ibi est probatum. Constat enim quod nihil possumus agere in futuro nunc, usquequo illud futurum nunc advenerit; unde nulla potentia nostra est plene et ultimate potens exire in actum fiendum in futuro nunc, usquequo illud futurum nunc sit praesens. Si ergo in nullo nunc, dum est praesens, potest disiunctive agere in ipsa opposita: tunc in quolibet praesenti est necessitata et necessario determinata ad alterum oppositorum; ex quo sequitur quod nunquam sit plene potens in opposita" (Olivi, 2 *Sent.* q.42 [ed. Jansen, 1.705–6]).

The argument, then, that Olivi is about to reject is based on a long standing conception of freedom that is defined as a power for opposites solely with respect to the future. On this conception of freedom, the angels could not have sinned in the first instant of creation, because there can be no freely made choice in an instant. Accordingly, if the angels sinned in the first instant of their creation, such an act would not have been free but necessary, and thus not a sin. This line of reasoning can be found as far back as Bonaventure, who argues that if the angels sinned in their first instant, they would have been unable to avoid sin, for at the very instant at which one sins, one cannot avoid sinning. Therefore, if they had sinned at the instant of their creation, they would not have sinned.³⁴ This argument is developed in Richard of Middleton in language somewhat closer to Hugh of St. Victor and Lombard. Middleton explicitly draws the conclusion that if the angels sinned in their first instant, they would have sinned of necessity.³⁵ This is in fact the form of the argument found in Scotus's discussion of the sin of the angels.³⁶

Olivi replies that this second argument is invalid because the proposition, "Our will is a power free for or capable of opposites only with respect to future acts," (*potestas non est libera seu potens in opposita nisi respectu actuum futurorum*) is false unless 'future' is taken with respect to what is posterior in nature but not in time, as well as to what is posterior in time. That is, the proposition is false unless the will is a power for opposites at the present instant it is willing and not just at some future instant. While Olivi says he has already demonstrated in his question on free will that this proposition concerning the will is false if "future" is construed purely in temporal terms, he argues the point again here. If the will does not have the power for opposites in the same instant and with respect to the same instant, so that in the same instant at which it is actually willing something, it has by a priority of nature the power not to will it, then it is impossible for our will to be free for opposites at all. For it is clear that we can do nothing in a future instant until that future moment arrives and becomes a present 'now'. But if our will does not have the power for opposites at any present 'now' but only at some future 'now', then it will never be the case that our will is free for opposites. Therefore, if our will does not have a power for opposites at any present instant or now, then in any present moment the will is necessitated to one of two opposites, from which it follows that there is never any free will.³⁷

We can see in Olivi's response the core of Scotus's analysis of an instantaneously existing will in language that is very close to Scotus's own. Olivi refuses to admit, as does Scotus, that the will's freedom for opposite acts can be limited to a possibility for that act in the future, or to what Scotus calls

possibility for opposites successively. Rather, the opposite of what the will is actually willing must be possible at the present moment it is so willing. In language identical to Scotus's, Olivi says that the will has this power for opposites naturally prior to any act it does will, so that the will's power for opposites cannot be temporally prior to any of its acts but prior only in the order of nature. Finally, Olivi reasons that if the will does not have the power for opposites at the present instant of its willing, it will be as such a necessary cause, for it cannot have such a power at any other instant. This is identical to Scotus's core argument that, given an instantaneously existing will, if it does not will contingently in that instant, it will be a necessary cause at every instant.

Olivi returns to this same train of reasoning in q. 57 concerning the possibility of free will in us, which is related to q. 42 by mutual cross-references. The objection is that free will is impossible because any cause, when it actually operates, cannot not be operating. Therefore, at the time when a cause is actually producing its effect, it does so necessarily, because, at that time, the opposite is impossible. Thus, no free cause is possible. The response of some to this objection, says Olivi, is that the cause can produce the opposite not at the present moment when it is causing a given effect, but at some future time. Referring to his own q. 42, Olivi says that this is the account of free choice in Hugh of St. Victor and the reason given by these thinkers why angels cannot sin in the first instant of their creation. Olivi replies that this solution would totally destroy free will, for it is clear that free choice cannot perform a future act in the 'now' that precedes that future act. Therefore, as long as the will is in that 'now' that precedes that future act, it does not have the power for opposites. When that future 'now' arrives, however, it will not then have the power for opposites, for, by assumption, the power for opposites refers to the future, not the present. Therefore, at no 'now' — present or future — will free choice be a power for opposites.³⁸ Rather, to save free choice, the will must be free while it is actually operating, for even though its act is together in time or in the same

³⁸ "Advertendum est autem hic quod quidam respondent dicendo quod potentia non est ad opposita respectu praesentis, sed solum respectu futuri. Unde Hugo, *De sacramentis* libro I, parte V, capitulo 21, dicit quod liberum arbitrium ad praesens tempus non refertur, sed ad futurum contingens. Et hac de causa dicunt quod angelus non potuit peccare nec aliquid eligere in primo nunc, sicut in quaestione illa habet tangi. Sed istud expresse destruit liberum arbitrium et omnia supra dicta; constat enim quod liberum arbitrium actum futurum non potest de facto agere in nunc quod praecedit illud futurum. Ergo pro illo nunc sic praecedenti, dum est in eo, non potest actu in opposita, nec pro nunc futuro,

quia nondum est ibi, et quando erit ibi, tunc respectu eius hoc minus poterit, quia potestas oppositorum dicitur esse respectu futuri et non respectu praesentis. Ergo pro omni nunc praesenti et futuro est impotens in opposita." (Olivi, 2 *Sent.* q.57 [ed. Jansen, 3.348–49]).

³⁹ "... dicendum quod dum voluntas, prout est libera, operatur, licet eius actus sit tempore simul seu in eodem nunc cum ea: tamen ipsa est prius natura potens ipsum producere quam producat. Et respectu eiusdem nunc et secundum illam prioritatem naturalem in ipso eodem nunc fuit prius naturaliter potens ad exeundum in actum oppositum seu ad cessandum ab ipso quam fuerit ponendus in actu ipse effectus." (*op. cit.*, p. 348).

instant with it, it is nonetheless prior by nature capable of producing that which it produces. Thus, with respect to the same temporal instant and according to its natural priority in the same instant, the will, as naturally prior to its act, was able to issue in an opposite act or cease from producing the act it did.³⁹

Here, once again, we have Scotus's actual position on the non-successive potency of the will for opposites. The will, as naturally prior to its acts, is capable of willing the opposite of what it does will even at the moment it is so willing. Direct textual comparison reveals just how close the language of Olivi and Scotus are on this point.

OLIVI

... dum voluntas, prout est libera, operatur, licet eius actus sit tempore simul seu in eodem nunc cum ea, tamen ipsa est prius natura potens ipsum producere quam producat. Et respectu eiusdem nunc et secundum illam prioritatem naturalem in ipso eodem nunc fuit prius naturaliter potens ad exeundum in actum oppositum seu ad cessandum ab ipso quam fuerit ponendus in actu ipse effectus. (q. 57 [3.348])

... ita quod in eodem nunc est prius naturaliter potens hoc velle vel nolle quam illud in eodem nunc velit vel nolit ... (q. 42 [2.706])

Accordingly, both hold that the will, as naturally prior to its act, but in the same instant of that act, is disposed in a disjunctive way to that act which it is in fact causing at that moment and to its opposite. That is, at the very instant the will is causing one of two opposites, it is still capable of causing either opposite:

... nam si in eodem nunc et respectu eiusdem nunc non potest nostra voluntas disjunctive in opposita ... (q. 42 [2.705-6])

SCOTUS

Et ista potentia, realis, est potentia prioris naturaliter (ut actus primi) ad opposita quae sunt posteriora naturaliter (ut actus secundi); actus enim primus, consideratus in illo instanti in quo est prior naturaliter actu secundo, ita ponit illum in esse — tanquam effectum suum contingentem — quod ut prior naturaliter, posset aequè ponere aliud oppositum in esse. (Apograph, p. 418)

... potest esse potentia ad utrumlibet oppositorum disjunctim pro aliquo instanti. (p. 424)

Both Olivi and Scotus therefore refuse to separate the will as an active power for opposites from any of its acts in the order of time. Thus, to avoid contradiction that the will could simultaneously cause opposites, the will as a power for opposites is separated from its act in the order of nature. Traditional terms ordering a power and its act, such as 'future' or 'before', are not to be understood temporally.

Haec autem ratio fallit, quia prima propositio eius [sc. 'potestas non est libera seu potens in opposita nisi respectu actuum futurorum'] est falsa, nisi futurum sumatur ibi communiter tam ad posterius natura et non duratione quam ad posterius duratione. (*ibid.*)

. . . dico quod est potentia ante actum; non 'ante' duratione, sed 'ante' ordine naturae, — quia illud quod praecedit naturaliter illum actum, ut praecedit actum naturaliter, posset esse cum opposito illius actus. (p. 423)

IV. CONCLUSION

It is recognized that a major, if not the major, feature of Scotus's doctrine of will consists in it being a power for opposites at the same time, such that even during its act of willing there is both a real and logical possibility for the opposite act. This conception of will, however, was not original with Scotus but had clearly been developed, at least in the form and language so insistently associated with Scotus, in the previous generation. While there may have been other or prior theologians who developed a similar doctrine of will, it is likely that Scotus knew of it from Olivi. Having seen this, we can now situate this central aspect of Scotus's doctrine of will in its proper context and assess his contribution, which, as it turns out, is not at all insignificant.

Olivi's discussions make clear that there had persisted up through the thirteenth century a conception of will that went back to the previous century and had been given a standard expression by Lombard. According to this conception, the will was a power for opposites only with reference to future acts. This conception was grounded in the dictum that a power, while it was actually causing or operating, could not be a power for the opposite of what it was in fact causing or doing at that time. As a result, it could only be a power for an opposite at some time other than the present moment of its actual operation. A consequence of this construal of the will's power for opposites is that no will could freely act unless it existed for some duration. Equivalently put, a will that existed only for an instant would, under this conception of will, act necessarily. A proponent of this older theory of contingency can be found in Henry of Ghent, who used it to argue against the eternity of the world. Henry's analysis clearly showed that the core concern in this theory was to separate temporally an act from a real power for its opposite in order to avoid a real power capable of realizing contradictories at the same time. Henry further showed, as a corollary, this theory would hold an eternal act to be as necessary as an instantaneous one.

The consequences of this older theory, at least for the finite, created will, came into full view in thirteenth-century questions on the sin of the angels, a fertile area for exploring human freedom going back at least as far as Anselm. The fall of the angels provided a test case for this conception of will in the form of the traditional problem of whether an angel could have sinned in the first instant of its creation. The constraints of this problem effectively collapsed the

existence of the will and its act of willing into a single instant, since the angel could not will before it existed nor could it will the opposite after it had sinned. Olivi clearly saw that these constraints revealed the inadequacy of this older conception of will as a free cause. If a created will, even if limited to willing only for an instant, willed necessarily, then it had to will necessarily at every instant. To put it another way, Olivi saw that if the older conception of will entailed that the will was necessitated at any instant of its causal operation, then that older conception of will was inadequate and had to be augmented by a conception of will as free for opposites at every instant of its causal action. This was the core insight of Olivi that passed to Scotus, who generalized it somewhat by arguing that the simultaneity of cause and effect meant that, if a cause acted necessarily at the moment when it actually produced its effect, it would be as such an absolutely necessary cause.

The various elements of Scotus's discussion can now be located. What Scotus calls a power for opposites successively corresponds to this older theory of will formalized by Lombard, exemplified in Henry of Ghent, and targeted by Olivi. The conception of the will as a power for opposites without succession is found, together with its argument, in Olivi. Indeed, the scenario of the instantaneously existing will, used by Scotus to argue for this new conception of possibility, is quite evidently nothing more than a restatement of the angel willing in the first instant of its creation. Scotus as much as establishes this himself. When he comes to deal with the sin of the angels, he explicitly refers to his prior proof of the will as a power for opposites in his discussion of divine foreknowledge.

But what, if any, is Scotus's contribution to this new notion of will and contingency so often thought to be his own innovation? It is, of course, one thing to make an adjustment in a notion so basic as the will and quite another to see what consequences such an adjustment can wreak, and yet another thing still to render an accounting of those consequences in a consistent way. Herein is found Scotus's contribution. Scotus did not simply take over a new theory of will as it stood, but developed it in a way that required penetration into what consequences it held. He distinguished sharply, in ways that Olivi did not, the different levels of possibility that it implied, both logical and real. What is more, Scotus drew out the logical consequences of this theory of will and gave them accurate expression by expanding considerably the tools of logical analysis for modal statements. This was no small achievement, adding significantly to the philosophical understanding of this new idea of will. More likely Scotus was the first to do this, and for this reason, no doubt, Scotus's construction of the will as a simultaneous power for opposites has proved so influential.

The Origin of Scotus's Theory of Synchronic Contingency
Stephen D. Dumont