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1. *Introduction*

The distinction between *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* was a much discussed theme in later medieval theology and philosophy. The content and usefulness of these concepts were disputed. It is clear, however, that the distinction was introduced in the first place to be able us to indicate that God, through his *potentia absoluta*, could have acted otherwise than He factually wills to do and factually does.<sup>1</sup>

The distinction is also a much discussed topic among medievalists of our century. Many hold the opinion that the distinction between absolute and ordained power led to theological deviations, especially during the fourteenth century, in which the reliability of God's character and the reliability of created reality would no longer be guaranteed, for it would imply that God could deviate from the order he created before.

The heart of this critique is as follows. The original function of the distinction between *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* was to explain that God could have created, by his *potentia absoluta*, another physical and moral order than He factually did. Given the order of this created reality his *potentia absoluta* only is a hypothetical realm of possibilities, which were not realised and never will be. Otherwise God would deviate from his earlier intentions and from the order to which He decided before, which would implicate unreliability and arbitrariness of God and of the order which He created.

Later on in medieval theology, however, one took over what is called 'operationalisation' of *potentia absoluta* (the phrase was introduced by Oberman).<sup>2</sup> Theologians started to see *potentia absoluta* as a capacity which really

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. for a description of origin and development of the concepts *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* W. J. Courtenay, *The Dialectic of Omnipotence in the High and Late Middle Ages*, in: T. Rudavsky (ed.), *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy*, Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster 1985, 243-69; *id.*, *Potentia absoluta/ordinata*, in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Herausg. v. J. Ritter und K. Gründer, Bd. 7, Darmstadt 1989, 1157-62; *id.*, *Capacity and Volition. A History of the Distinction of absolute and ordained Power*, Bergamo 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. H. A. Oberman, *Via Antiqua and Via Moderna: Late Medieval Prolegomena to Early*

is or can be actualised by God. Thus miracles can be interpreted as examples of God's acting by his *potentia absoluta* against the order He Himself established by his ordained power. During the later Middle Ages speculations on the operationalisation of *potentia absoluta* would have gone as far as fundamentally disputing God's reliability—for example by the question whether or not God can lie or deceive.

In a considerable part of the literature on this issue, moreover, John Duns Scotus is seen as the one who took an important if not *the* important initiative to this fatal 'operationalisation' of *potentia absoluta*. In his dissertation *Almighty God*, G. van den Brink poses that in Scotus' thinking the original meaning of the distinction "is turned completely upside down" and that "he prepared the way for a more scepticist interpretation of the distinction".<sup>3</sup>

My aim in this contribution is to show that this negative judgment of Scotus' work on the distinction between absolute and ordained power is argumentatively groundless. I hope to prove that, on the contrary, Scotus gives a correct interpretation of what in general is seen as the original function of the distinction, namely a theory, which expresses the contingency of created reality and the freedom of the divine will. In connection with this it will be shown, that there is no reason for weighty ethical reproaches, and that Scotus does not pave the path for nominalistic theories in which God's reliability and truthfulness would be damaged. My starting point is a close analysis of Scotus' own theory in *Ordinatio* I 44 (sections 2-4). A short evaluation in the light of the above mentioned reproaches at his address (section 5) and a conclusion (section 6) follow.

## 2. *Theory of Synchronic Contingency*

"Can God make things otherwise than He has ordered them to be made?"<sup>4</sup> It is this question that makes Scotus elaborate on the distinction of *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta*. We see, therefore, that Scotus starts with

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*Reformation Thought*, in: A. Hudson, M. Wilks (eds.), *From Ockham to Wyclif*, Oxford 1987, 445-63, at 462.

<sup>3</sup> G. van den Brink, *Almighty God. A study of the doctrine of divine omnipotence*, Kampen 1993, 79, 80. Cf. also a.o.: E. Randi, *A Scotist Way of Distinguishing between God's Absolute and Ordained Powers*, in: A. Hudson, M. Wilks (eds.), *From Ockham to Wyclif*, Oxford 1987, 43-50, at 44, 50. E. Randi, *Ockham, John XII and the Absolute Power of God*, in: *Franciscan Studies*, 46 (1986), 205-16, at 209 f.

<sup>4</sup> *Ioannis Duns Scoti Opera Omnia* VI, Civitas Vaticana 1963, *Ordinatio* I 44, 363: "Utrum deus possit aliter facere res quam ab ipso ordinatum est eas fieri." See for an English translation of *Ordinatio* I 44: *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, Selected and Translated

the question which lies behind the *original* meaning of the distinction. Scotus too gives an affirmative answer to this question and he also uses the distinction of *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* to articulate that God could have created reality different from how He did it factually. Or, to express it somewhat differently, the distinction is used to articulate the contingency of God's creating will as well as the contingency of created reality.

We should also recognize that contingency of created reality was elaborately discussed before by Scotus, namely in distinction I 39. In the *Ordinatio* this distinction is lacking, but no doubt its main lines can be traced in *Lectura* I 39.<sup>5</sup> It is important to discuss this distinction briefly, even more so when we see that at the end of *Ordinatio* I 44 Scotus himself explicitly refers to the explanation he gave before in I 39.

In I 39 the question is asked whether God can have certain knowledge of future and contingent states of affairs. In the context of his answer to this question Scotus introduces his so-called theory of 'synchronic contingency'.<sup>6</sup> The heart of this theory is the thesis, that a state of affairs *p* is contingent, if for *the very same* moment that *p* is true (hence the term *synchronic*) *not-p* is possible. Contingency only is guaranteed, according to Scotus, if the opposite state of affairs is a real possibility, not only for an earlier or later moment, but also for *the same moment*. Then, in I 39, Scotus reveals the fact that the contingency of reality is the ontological basis for the freedom of the divine will and also for the freedom of man's will.

We will defend the thesis that *Ordinatio* I 44 is nothing else than Scotus' own application of his theory of synchronic contingency to the distinction between absolute and ordained power as it already had been used

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with an Introduction by Allan B. Wolter, O.F.M., Washington D.C. 1986, 254-61. See for a French translation: O. Boulnois (ed.), *La puissance et son ombre. De Pierre Lombard à Luther*, Textes traduits et présentés par O. Boulnois a.o., Paris 1994, 279-85.

<sup>5</sup> See for a Dutch translation with commentary of *Lectura* I 39: *Johannes Duns Scotus. Contingentie en vrijheid. Lectura I 39*, Ingeleid, vertaald en van commentaar voorzien door A. Vos, H. Veldhuis, A. H. Looman-Graaskamp, E. Dekker en N. W. den Bok, Zoetermeer 1992. The English translation: *John Duns Scotus. Contingency and Freedom*, Translated with an Introduction and Commentary by A. Vos, a.o., Dordrecht/Boston/London 1994.

<sup>6</sup> This term was introduced by A. Vos, *On the philosophy of the young Duns Scotus. Some semantical and logical aspects*, in: E. P. Bos (ed.), *Mediaeval Semantics and Metaphysics. Studies dedicated to L. M. de Rijck, Ph. D. on the occasion of his 60th birthday*, Nijmegen 1985, 195-220, at 213. See for an exposition on Scotus' theory of synchronic contingency: A. Vos, *Kennis en Noodzakelijkheid. Een kritische analyse van het absolute evidentialisme in wijsbegeerte en theologie*, Kampen 1981, 81-7, 269-74.

in the tradition. In the light of *quaestio* I 44 and Duns' own theory of contingency in I 39 this could of course be expected.

### 3. '*Potentia ordinata/absoluta*' in the Light of Scotus' Theory of Contingency

In I 44 Duns first poses that the distinction of *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* can be applied to "every agent acting intelligently and voluntarily that can act in conformity with a right law, but does not have to do so of necessity".<sup>7</sup> Defined like this the distinction can be applied to both God and man. This is quite remarkable compared to other medieval theologians, who apply the distinction only to God. However, when seen in the perspective of the theory of contingency as it was developed by Duns himself, this is just a matter of course; for, as Duns proved in I 39, the contingency of reality is not only the basis for the freedom of God's acting, but also for man's freedom to act.

Concerning the difference between *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* Duns then uses the so-called 'canonistic interpretation':<sup>8</sup> *potentia ordinata* means "it can act in conformity with a right law"; *potentia absoluta* means "it can act beyond or against such a right law".<sup>9</sup> As said before, man too has *potentia absoluta* at his disposal. In this connection Duns adds a very important distinction. While man can act inordinately against a certain law or order by his *potentia absoluta*, God can only act ordinately by his *potentia absoluta*. By definition God always acts ordinately.

Let us now return to the *quaestio* of this distinction: "Can God make things otherwise than he has ordered them to be made?" Scotus' answer is affirmative and contains the following aspects:

1. God has the *possibility* to choose another than the factual state of affairs within the order He himself established. This concerns alternativity *within* the order of ordained power.

<sup>7</sup> I 44, § 3: "In omni agente per intellectum et voluntatem, potente conformiter agere legi rectae et tamen non necessario conformiter agere legi rectae".

<sup>8</sup> Cf. for this 'canonistic interpretation' of the distinction *potentia ordinata/potentia absoluta*: Courtenay 1985 (*op.cit.*, above, n. 1), 251 v., 264 v.; Courtenay 1990 (*op.cit.*, above, n. 1), 92-5.

<sup>9</sup> Scotus calls acting from *potentia ordinata* 'facere de iure', acting from *potentia absoluta* 'facere de facto' (I 44, § 3). According to Courtenay 1985 (*op.cit.*, above, n. 1), 276, n. 43, the terms 'de facto' and 'de iure' originally were used in connection with 'impotentia'. There can be an 'impotency' based on legal limits ('de iure') or on physical limits ('de facto'). Understood like that the term 'de facto' does not concern *actualising potentia absoluta*, as Van den Brink 1993 (*op.cit.*, above, n. 3), 79 suggests.

2. Besides this, God has the *possibility* to choose other factual states of affairs in accordance with a new order, which deviates from the order that was established by Him before. These other or new states of affairs are not just something done at random, but expression of a new order as it is established by God. So *potentia absoluta* is a term which has its meaning in relation to the factually existing order. It concerns not-realised *possibilities*, which are outside the established order of *potentia ordinata*. As soon as God actualises these possibilities, they belong to a new order of *potentia ordinata*.<sup>10</sup>

3. In the light of I 39 it is important to notice that alternative, but not-realised possibilities of both ordained and absolute power are *real* and *synchronic* possibilities for the actual reality. The possibilities of *potentia absoluta* constitute more than a realm which was only initially open for God when He created and which would *no longer* comprise *real* possibilities. For if they were not real logical and ontological possibilities, any factual state of affairs would be necessary, which Scotus never would defend. On the contrary, elaborating on the distinction between *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* Duns once more aims at a consistent theory of contingent reality. By doing so he explicitly guards and unfolds the original function of the distinction. One even can say that the original meaning of the distinction of *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* gets a consistent theoretical basis only in Scotus' explanation.<sup>11</sup>

There is a limited sense in which the accusation that Duns 'operationalized' the *potentia absoluta* is correct. However, we must realise that this is about an 'operationalisation' as he had already done it in *Lectura* I 39, in which he convincingly proves that the contingency of created reality and the freedom of the divine and human will—both essential elements of christian doctrine—only can be guaranteed in a theory of synchronic contingency. Scotus operationalises *potentia absoluta* by posing that there is a real possibility for the opposite of any contingent state of affairs. Reality is an *open* reality, and God has access to this open universe of possibilities by his absolute (*and* ordained) power. Below attention will be given to the question whether or not this openness is threatening God's reliability and the reliability of creation's order.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Lectura* I 44, § 3: "quia potest legem mutare et aliam statuere."

<sup>11</sup> Here we cannot endorse Courtenay's conclusion (Courtenay 1990 (*op.cit.*, above, n. 1), 102): "However much one might wish to bring this passage [in *Ordinatio* I 44] into conformity with the way Scotus uses the distinction of absolute and ordained power throughout the rest of his works, it stands out as a radical departure from his normal usage and from the theological tradition of which he was a part."

#### 4. *Two Modes for God to Act Ordinately*

In § 9 of *Ordinatio* I 44 Scotus discusses two ways according to which it can be said that things happen ordinately. The first way ('Uno modo, ordine universali') is the way of a *general law*, which is valid for all situations of a certain kind, e.g. the law "every impenitent sinner must be damned". The other way ("Secundo modo, ordine particulari") concerns an *individual judgment*, in which a general law is applied to an individual situation, e.g. the expression "this murderer is to die".

In connection with this distinction Scotus poses in § 10 that God does not only have alternative possibilities at his disposal for *individual* situations, but that He can (according to his *potentia absoluta*) also deviate from *general* laws by establishing another order. Scotus emphasises that God also acts ordinately in the latter case.

After his explanation of how we can speak in two ways about events that happen ordinately, Scotus remarks in § 11 that we only speak of *potentia ordinata* in relation to an order which is valid on the basis of a *general* law and not in reference to one specific case.

Next Duns illustrates the distinctions made with the help of two examples, which pose a series of difficulties for the interpreter. They can be understood as follows. The starting point for the examples is the factual situation of a persistent sinner who will be condemned by God. This condemnation by God is a *contingent* act, which as such supposes that the opposite state of affairs (salvation of the sinner) is a real possibility. According to Duns this is indeed the case; this real possibility can exist by ordained or absolute power.

*Within* the context of *potentia ordinata*, which is expressed by the general law that only converted people can be saved, God *can* give the sinner so much grace (though He will not do it factually), that the sinner will be converted. Then God can save him in accordance with the established order. In this individual case God would act according to the universal law of his ordained power.

But what about Judas? He already has been condemned by God through a certain judgment. Which alternative is possible for Judas, presumed that he is factually unconverted and he is factually condemned? As it concerns a state of affairs in the *past*, according to Duns there is no such possibility within the order of God's ordained power, for then He would act against the general law that unconverted sinners will be condemned. However, by his *potentia absoluta* God still can establish another order and save Judas in agreement with that order. This salvation of Judas—which

as a specific event goes against the earlier established order—then has an ordered position among a new order established by God. In this way God always acts in an orderly manner.<sup>12</sup>

We see that in both examples of the sinner and of Judas, Scotus makes *time* play a significant part, in our view, without good reason. In the case of the sinner, who could be saved within the order of *potentia ordinata*, Duns speaks of a still living sinner who will remain unconverted, but who *could* drawn toward conversion by God in the future, even if God factually will not do so. Judas already died unconverted and condemned. However, with regard to the synchronic possibilities of God's *potentia ordinata* or *potentia absoluta* for an unconverted sinner, time does not play an essential part. The two alternative possibilities of *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* are therefore available *both* for the former sinner and for Judas. Thus it was also possible for Judas to be converted by God within the order of *potentia ordinata*.

Duns ends his explanation of the modes in which God acts ordinately with the important remark that the *possibility* that God has according his ordained or absolute power, was explained in distinction I 39. His qualifier, “without actually willing the opposite of what he now wills,”<sup>13</sup> is crucial here; in other words, the fact that there are other real possibilities for God, does not mean that He actualises these possibilities!

### 5. *God Always Acts Ordinately*

Concerning the distinction of *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* the strongest reproach against Duns is that he paves a path toward a way of thinking in which God's acting attains an arbitrary and unpredictable character and in which creation's structure becomes unreliable. Such a reproach has weighty ethical and spiritual implications, inasmuch as it

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<sup>12</sup> M. McCord Adams explains Scotus' *Ordinatio* I 44 in *William Ockham*, Vol. II, Notre Dame, Indiana 1987, 1190-8. There she points at the problem how Scotus' opinion that God *always* acts according *general* laws (although a given system of general laws may from time to time be changed by another system) can accord with events (as miracles) which deviate from them (cf. 1195 ff.). Scotus however does only speak of a *general* order in connection with Gods *potentia ordinata*. This general order of his *potentia ordinata* is not so general that God (according to his *potentia absoluta*) cannot replace it in specific situations by another order. This new order may exist for only one moment or a short period, but it does not mean arbitrariness; it is order, because it is established by God and as such related to his essential goodness, wisdom and justice.

<sup>13</sup> I, 44, § 12: “non volendo oppositum eius quod nunc vult.”

would undermine the trustworthiness of faith in God and consistent ethical behaviour on the basis of that faith.

Such accusations against Scotus are unjustified in our opinion. We mention two important features in Scotus' theology which make a sceptical-nominalistic explanation of his theory on *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* impossible.

First, Duns' most important intention, in both I 39 and I 44, is to make clear that contingency and freedom only are guaranteed if there are synchronic-alternative possibilities. Reality was not only initially open at the 'moment' of God's act of creating; it is so at any moment. This does not mean, however, that alternative possibilities factually will be realised. Concerning one particular factual state of affairs this is impossible, for two opposite states of affairs cannot be the case at the same moment. Nor will every alternatively possible order be realised. Moreover, if God would create by his *potentia absoluta* an alternative order, there is no reason to assume that He does not guarantee the coherence with the order He established before.

Second, Duns posits that *potentia absoluta* concerns all non-contradictory states of affairs. The *potentia absoluta* comprises therefore every possible state of affairs, of which the region of *potentia ordinata* is a subset. This implies that every state of affairs which is in conflict with God's essence, with his essential goodness, wisdom and justice, is impossible, a point which is valid for the realm of God's *potentia absoluta* as well. Therefore, later speculations about the question if God can lie, can, as far as Duns is concerned, be finished rather quickly by the remark that this is impossible. On essential points God's acting is structured by his essence, so that there is no reason for a sceptical interpretation of God and of reality as it is created by Him. By this we touch upon an essential difference between God and men: man can act inordinately, God cannot.

A concrete illustration of Scotus' opinion can be found in his ethics, one out of many areas in which Scotus uses the distinction of *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta*.<sup>14</sup> There are commandments which are so directly connected with God's essence that these are necessary and cannot be changed, not even by God's *potentia absoluta*. An example of this is the commandment to love God. There are other commandments which could have been different or for which could have been given other ones. An

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<sup>14</sup> See for Scotus' use of the distinction in his doctrine of justification (*Lectura* I 17, §§ 61-103): A. Vos, H. Veldhuis, E. Dekker, N. W. den Bok, A. J. Beck, *Johannes Duns Scotus. Teksten over God en werkelijkheid*, vertaald en ingeleid, Zoetermeer 1995, 29-52.



example of these is keeping the seventh day as a day of rest. From his ordained power God could have chosen another day and then this commandment would still have been in accord with God's goodness.<sup>15</sup>

## 6. *Conclusions*

Let us summarise the preceding discussion in some conclusions.

Scotus' theory and use of the distinction between *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* are an elaboration and application of his theory of synchronic contingency. One can only understand the correct meaning of Scotus' so-called 'operationalisation' of *potentia absoluta* in the light of this synchronic contingency. This operationalisation does not open a door to a sceptical nominalism, but it is a consistent extrapolation of his theory of contingency to the distinction of *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta*. By this the original function is not turned upside down, but on the contrary it is saved.

The criterion that God's acts cannot be in conflict with his essence—a criterion that Duns himself applies explicitly—is a sufficient guarantee against a nominalistic interpretation of his theology. Or put differently: the reproach that Scotus' theory of absolute and ordained power is spiritually and ethically erroneous, cannot be sustained.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. on the relation between God's acting, his moral laws and his essence: Wolter 1986 (*op.cit.*, above, n. 4), 13-5, 22-3, 29; A. B. Wolter, *Native Freedom of the Will as a Key to the Ethics of Scotus*, in: A. B. Wolter, O.F.M., *The Philosophical Theology of John Duns Scotus*, ed. M. McCord Adams, Ithaca N.Y./London 1990, 148-62, at 159-62; A. Vos, *De ethische optie van Duns Scotus*, in: *Kerk en Theologie*, 44 (1993), 17-32; A. Vos a.o. 1995 (*op.cit.*, above, n. 14), 85-92.