

VOLUNTARISM, ATONEMENT, AND DUNS SCOTUS

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The two most important concepts in Duns Scotus's (1265/6–1308) theology of the Atonement are satisfaction and merit. Just what these amount to and how they function in his theory are heavily conditioned by two more general commitments: Scotus's voluntarism, which includes the claim that nearly all of God's relations with the created order are contingent; and his formulation of the Franciscan Thesis, which holds that fixing the sin problem is not the primary purpose of God's Incarnation in Christ and that if Adam hadn't sinned God would have become incarnate anyway. In this essay I will discuss the theoretical background of Scotus's atonement theology—his voluntarism and his version of the Franciscan Thesis—before moving on to discuss his understanding of merit and satisfaction, how these are related, and how they relate to the theoretical background. I will engage some important recent scholarly attempts to position Scotus's Atonement theology as not quite as anti-Anselmian as history has characterized it, arguing that one of these attributes to Scotus an understanding of merit which cannot be Scotus's in fact, since it entails a restriction on divine freedom that Scotus certainly would reject.

Voluntarism is a thesis in the philosophy of action according to which an act of will is never determined by any object the intellect presents to it. Voluntarism is contrasted with what is sometimes called intellectualism, which is the thesis that an act of will, either always or just in some cases, is determined by an object the intellect presents to it. Theological voluntarism and theological intellectualism are usually intended as the labels for the views, respectively, that God's will is not determined by an object of his intellect, and that it is. (Henceforth, for brevity's sake, when I write 'voluntarism' I mean 'theological voluntarism.')

With respect to morality, voluntarism is usually taken to imply that God could have issued or could issue alternative commandments, and it is not difficult to see why the implication is valid. Since a commandment essentially involves an act of will, if God could not command otherwise than He has commanded, his willing just the commands he has commanded would have been determined by something (in some sense) 'outside' his will, such as a realm of God-independent, objective moral facts together with God's understanding of these facts. As God apprehends the realm of moral facts by his intellect, the proximate cause of God's determined act of willing will be his intellect—which is the direct antithesis of the voluntarist position. So the voluntarist seems committed to the (to some) startling thesis that God could have commanded otherwise than He has, not just about ritual matters but some moral matters as well. Duns Scotus is undoubtedly a voluntarist, but the degree and range of his voluntarism is still a matter of scholarly debate.¹

In general and also for Scotus himself, voluntarism is relevant to the theology of the Atonement due to its implications for morality and specifically those moral aspects of the Atonement which bear on God himself as a moral agent. Two examples of these aspects are: whether God is obligated to provide a means for saving sinners and, given that he did decide to do so, whether he could have saved sinners in some other way. Voluntarists maintain that all of God's dealings

with the world of creatures are contingent: he doesn't have to create, he doesn't have to sustain, he doesn't have to save, and if he does save, he could do it in a variety of ways. The precise modal character of these claims is well-captured by the familiar distinction between God's *absolute* and *ordained* power. Roughly speaking, God's absolute power extends to whatever is logically possible, whereas his ordained power ranges over those actions that are consistent with the general plan God has ordained for the world.² Given the general plan, it follows as a hypothetical imperative that God *must* do this or that, just as, given my plan to travel from Los Angeles to London in twenty-four hours or fewer using commercially available transportation, I *must* travel by air. But the *must* is completely conditioned by my prior, free, decision to be in London by tomorrow. Similarly, given God's plan to save sinners through Christ's death, Christ *must* die for sinners; but the *must* is completely conditioned by God's prior, free, decision to save sinners through Christ's death. And the crucial point for Scotus is that each and every one of God's plans is up to God in the sense that he could have justly planned otherwise. Scotus puts it this way:

Whenever the law and its rectitude are in the power of the agent, so that the law is right only because it has been established, then the agent can freely order things otherwise than this right law dictates and still can act orderly, because he can establish another right or just law according to which he may act orderly [...]³

God is such an agent, of course, so he can act in accord with those right laws he established (and so act by his ordained power), but he can also act in some other way and in doing so he would be acting justly (and acting by his absolute power).⁴

Scotus makes a similar point in his discussion of whether there is justice in God.⁵ Of course there is, Scotus thinks, but we have got to understand God's justice in such a way that it does not entail his having any moral obligations to other agents such that the preservation of divine justice depended on fulfilling those obligations. And it's not hard to see why: if the preservation of God's justice depended on how he acted toward other agents (things like you and me), then God's having just the character he has would be *dependent* on creatures, from which it follows that God would depend on us for being just as he is. But he does not depend on us. There is but one moral obligation, what Scotus calls a 'practical truth,' that is what it is independent of any act of divine willing, and this is the obligation that God ought to be loved above all things.⁶ God couldn't establish a law inconsistent with this first practical truth, either for himself or for any creature, even with respect to his absolute power. So the preservation of divine justice depends on his continually loving himself above all things, and continually willing whatever is *logically entailed* by loving himself above all things. Anything not thus entailed, including all actual or merely possible laws and actions toward creatures, make no difference to God's preservation of justice. So God's being just has nothing to do with what he does or doesn't do to or for us sinners.

In light of this it is no surprise that Scotus offers the most forceful (but not the first) medieval expression of the so-called Franciscan Thesis.⁷ Building on earlier and more tentative formulations from Rupert of Deutz (c. 1075 – 1129/30) and Robert Grosseteste (c. 1168 – 1253), Scotus held that the Incarnation was not part of the divine response to sin but instead was predestined, logically prior to God's foreknowledge of Adam's sin, as the crowning achievement of creation itself, that the Son should be united with human nature and rule the cosmos as its native King. This is utterly in contrast to the Anselmian thesis that God is obliged to become incarnate in order to achieve his goal of saving sinners (and otherwise wouldn't lower himself to our frail condition.) Scotus's story of Incarnation goes something like this: we can distinguish logically

prior and posterior acts of thought and willing in the divine nature, and prior to creating the world God knows everything he could create and among the whole set of creatables loves some more than others. The most loved of these is the soul of Christ, and so loving the soul of Christ God wills for it to exist, to be in a loving relationship with God and to exist in a world of which it can be the center. The whole plan of creation is thus subordinate to God's end of loving and glorifying Christ, and of loving and glorifying Himself through Christ. God hand-picks, as it were, all the constituents of our world from the set of creatables, to compose the realm and court of Christ the King. God intends Incarnation, therefore, primarily as the way to glorify Christ. He intends our redemption and glorification not for its own sake but *instrumentally*, for Christ's sake.⁸ The liberality of God's love for us is rationally grounded in the fact that this love is instrumental: it is God-in-Christ, not us sinners, who is the final cause of God's creative and redemptive action.⁹

Indeed, as Marilyn McCord Adams puts it, 'Not only is sin not a *sine qua non* of Incarnation; for Scotus, Incarnation is not a *sine qua non* for solving the sin-problem, either.'¹⁰ Scotus is well-known for furnishing a long list of alternative possible ways in which God could have taken care of the sin problem, including: not requiring satisfaction for sins at all, allowing an angel or a mere human to make satisfaction, or allowing Christ to make satisfaction in some way other than the cross.¹¹ The point of the list is not idle scholastic speculation but, as Adams notes, to emphasize the logical independence of Incarnation and redemption.¹²

Given Scotus's voluntarism and his formulation of the Franciscan Thesis, we should expect that an accurate understanding of his doctrine of the Atonement will include no claim about what God cannot do, or must or must not do, with the exceptions of course that God must love himself above all things, must do anything logically entailed by this obligation, and cannot do anything that is logically impossible. And this is just what we find.

Scotus agrees with his tradition that Christ makes satisfaction for sins and earns merit. Satisfaction is the voluntary return of equivalent for equivalent, whereas merit is the assignation of a reward to an act.¹³ I'll discuss each of these concepts in turn before examining their relationship.

J. Patout Burns and Douglas Langston have argued that Scotus rejects the concept of satisfaction.¹⁴ Richard Cross and Andrew Rosato have cogently argued against this view.¹⁵ Patout Burns argues that in denying the Anselmian idea that Adam's sin was intrinsically infinitely evil, Scotus abolishes the need for an equivalent act of satisfaction that is intrinsically infinitely good. Inasmuch as an act of sin is a turning away from God, who is infinitely good, any sin can be said to be infinitely evil 'extrinsically'. But then any intrinsically finitely good act that is directed toward God can be said to be infinitely *good*, 'extrinsically'.¹⁶ In this case there is no need for a redeemer who is able to perform an intrinsically infinitely good act; the equivalence demanded by satisfaction might have been made in any number of ways.

In response, Cross concedes that Scotus prioritizes the concept of merit over satisfaction in his Atonement theorizing, but points out that Scotus makes use of the concept of satisfaction in expressing his own view and never outright rejects Anselm's theory but merely qualifies it as valid only with respect to God's ordained power. Taking his cue from a text in which Scotus claims that *if* Christ's death makes satisfaction, then it does so as a meritorious cause,¹⁷ Cross reasons that Scotus retains the notion of satisfaction (equivalence), by locating it precisely in the merit (reward) *God* gives to Christ for Christ's voluntary sacrifice on behalf of his human brothers and sisters! In this way, Cross is able to concede the scholarly consensus that merit is the dominant concept of Scotus's Atonement theology, and do justice to the unarguable presence of the concept of satisfaction in the same.

Rosato takes inspiration from Cross and offers several reasons for thinking that Scotus has a robust concept of satisfaction, however much it differs from Anselm's. By way of background, Rosato distinguishes between two concepts of satisfaction found in Bonaventure: satisfaction *pro iniuria*, which involves offering some good equivalent to the injury God suffers through Adam's sin; and satisfaction *pro damno*, which involves offering some good equivalent to the loss God suffers through Adam's sin.¹⁸ For Bonaventure, Christ makes satisfaction *pro iniuria* inasmuch as God's injury was dishonor and Christ's sacrifice honors God more than Adam's sin dishonors Him. Christ makes satisfaction *pro damno* inasmuch as God's loss was humanity itself and Christ's sacrifice restores humanity to God. But, crucially for Rosato's account of Scotus's concept of satisfaction, Christ's sacrifice restores humanity to God precisely by meriting the graces we need to return to God. Noting that Scotus himself does not explicitly use the distinction between these two aspects of satisfaction, Rosato nevertheless makes a good case for the presence of each in Scotus's texts, and for the dominance in his texts of satisfaction *pro damno* over satisfaction *pro iniuria*. The case for Scotus's endorsement of the concept of satisfaction *pro iniuria* is that Scotus's argument against Anselm's thesis that satisfaction requires returning to God something greater than the whole of creation *presupposes* that satisfaction involves paying a debt owed to God.¹⁹ The difference between Anselm and Scotus on this issue is simply that the former thinks the debt is infinite and therefore its payment must be infinite, while the latter thinks the debt is finite and therefore its payment can be merely finite.²⁰ Scotus's thesis that Adam's sin is a merely finite offense against God also motivates his aforementioned position that the debt of sin might have been repaid in any number of ways by any number of created (and therefore finite) agents and actions. Christ makes satisfaction *pro damno*, according to Rosato's Scotus, inasmuch as his motivation for his sacrifice involved providing the means by which humans could escape from their sin and be united with God.²¹ But making satisfaction in this way is accomplished precisely by meriting the graces we need to escape from sin and be united with God.²²

Summing up, then, Cross and Rosato have shown that Scotus does indeed retain satisfaction as a component of his Atonement theology. But his theory of satisfaction emphatically does not require the repayment of an infinite debt (because there isn't one) and therefore does not require a redeemer capable of making such a repayment. But there is a second and for Scotus apparently more important sense of satisfaction, according to which Christ makes satisfaction by meriting from God that which is necessary to restore humanity to union with God.

Scotus's understanding of merit is just as contested as his understanding of satisfaction. It has two well-known features: first, all merit is conventional; second, Christ's merit is intrinsically finite. The conventionality of merit follows from Scotus's voluntarism. If merit were not conventional then some creature's being what it is (meritorious by nature) would compel God to accept it as such on pain of misvaluing things (which He cannot do because he is infinitely good and infinitely intelligent). Instead, Scotus thinks that being meritorious is a matter of being accepted as such by God.²³ In other words, it is up to God to decide what to count as meritorious.

Notoriously, Scotus argues that Christ's merits are finite. The reasoning is fairly straightforward: God cannot merit anything, since by his nature he has necessarily every perfection He is capable of having; so Christ with respect to his divine nature cannot merit anything. Humans can earn merit, but merit follows and is proportionate to an act, any human act is finite, and therefore any merit following on a human act is finite. So Christ with respect to his human nature can (and does) earn merit, but this merit is finite.²⁴ This might sound Nestorian, but it isn't, despite what some have said.²⁵ Even if we grant with Scotus that if Christ merits something then it is in virtue of his human nature, we could still say that the action that merited grace

was an action of the *person*—we'd just have to be clear that the merit accrued to the person only through its human nature. And there's nothing Nestorian about that. In fact, says Scotus, it's precisely because of the divine nature of the *person* who performs the meritorious act that the intrinsically finite merit Christ gains can have an infinite sufficiency (it *could* redeem *everyone*), even if it in fact has merely finite efficacy (it *does* redeem *only some*).

The relationship between the intrinsic finitude of Christ's merit, its infinite sufficiency, and its finite efficacy has been a source of confusion and conflict. Langston infers from the finitude of Christ's merit that Scotus is committed to the following hypothetical: 'if an infinite sacrifice were required to redeem mankind, Christ's finite sacrifice would not have redeemed mankind.'²⁶ Patout Burns found in Scotus the proto-Calvinist larva of limited atonement, denying the infinite sufficiency of Christ's merits (though acknowledging the possibility of their infinite sufficiency) but emphasizing their finite efficacy.²⁷ But Andrew S. Yang has argued compellingly that on the sufficiency and efficacy of Christ's merit, Scotus is fully in line with his Scholastic predecessors who held that Christ's merits are intrinsically infinite.²⁸ Scotus's innovation instead is to make a case that Christ's merit can be both infinitely sufficient and intrinsically finite. Like his predecessors and peers, Scotus thinks only the elect will benefit from Christ's merit (and therefore it has only finite efficacy), despite the fact that it is sufficient to benefit all.

Yang notes that, for Scotus, any act of sin is intrinsically finite and therefore, with respect to any one sin, the merit that wins remission of that sin need only be merely finite. Yang then highlights one of Scotus's objections to his own view, namely, that if the universe were sempiternal such that there were an infinitely growing number of sinners, then while each act of sin would be intrinsically finite, the sum of the infinite sins committed by an infinite number of people would be intrinsically infinite by addition. Scotus considers the hypothetical scenario valid for the sake of argument, so he is compelled to offer an account of how Christ's finite merit can overcome an intrinsically infinite evil. Scotus reasons that even though Christ's merits are intrinsically finite because they are merited on account of Christ's human nature, it is open to God to count them as of intrinsically infinite value because they are actions of an infinitely lovable *person*—the Second Person of the Trinity—subsisting in divine and human natures.²⁹ Thus, while any number of creatures might have earned finite merit to the same degree as Christ, Christ merits can be counted as of infinite value because they are merits accruing to a divine person.

Scotus's solution is ingenious (and so is Yang's recognition of it). But it raises an additional puzzle about how to understand the modal force of its claim that God *could not* have accepted intrinsically finite merit as earning remission of an intrinsic infinity of sins (unless it was merit accrued to a divine person). As we have seen, Scotus acknowledges very few limitations on what God cannot do with respect to the created order: he cannot do or command what is logically impossible and he cannot do or command anything that violates the maxim that God ought to be loved above all things or any principle that is logically entailed by this maxim. The easy way out of the puzzle is, of course, just to claim that with respect to God's *ordained power*, he could not have accepted finite merit as having infinite value unless that finite merit accrued to a divine person. But things are not so simple. For God to accept Christ's finite merit as infinitely valuable is or involves God's infinitely loving Christ and/or his finite merit. But God loves *himself* infinitely and (according to the maxim) he cannot love anything else as much as or more than he loves himself. Thus, given the hypothetical scenario of an additively infinite number of sins, it seems that God could not, *even with respect to his absolute power*, accept any finite merit as sufficient to cover those sins unless that finite merit belonged to God Himself—in this case in the Person of the Divine Word.

Still, this observation is not quite as radical as it might at first seem. After all, Scotus argues only that, *if* human sinfulness were intrinsically infinite, *then* only merit belonging to a divine person could atone for it. But human sinfulness is not in fact intrinsically infinite, and Scotus has other reasons for thinking that merit sufficient to atone for human sinfulness could have been earned by persons other than a divine person. So we might say, a bit anachronistically, that there is a possible world in which God *must* become man in order to redeem mankind, but that world is not the actual world. For this reason, Yang's criticism of Grensted and van Harnack, who argued that Scotus's God could accept any finite good as sufficient merit to redeem humanity, does not quite hit the mark.³⁰ In the actual world, where human sinfulness is intrinsically finite, God can, with respect to his absolute power, accept any finite good as sufficiently meritorious of human redemption.

I will close with a final reflection on God's ordained power. It is true that with respect to God's ordained power, in this actual world where God was incarnate in Christ and Christ suffered and died to win for humanity remission of sins and union with God, God does not accept anything as sufficient for the redemption of the world except for Christ's merits. God has ordained that this is how things should be. But to infer therefore that he cannot do otherwise is to misrepresent Scotus's understanding of ordained power. It's tempting for some to think of God's ordained power as God's power limited within rules he has established, and as entailing that God would not (even if he could, with respect to his absolute power), act contrary to these rules. But this is not Scotus's idea at all. Instead, Scotus thinks that God is acting according to his ordained power whenever he is acting in accordance with rules he has established and is acting according to his absolute power whenever he is not: 'Insofar as he is able to act in accord with those right laws he set up previously, [God] is said to act according to his ordained power; but insofar as he is able to do many things that are not in accord with, but go beyond, these pre-established laws, God is said to act according to his absolute power.'³¹ The created order is subject to the full force of God's power, ordained and absolute alike. God's ordained power is not his leash; it's his gospel.

Notes

1 Allan B. Wolter, 'Introduction', in Duns Scotus, *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, trans. Allan B. Wolter (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), pp. 1–30; Thomas Williams, 'The Unmitigated Scotus', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 80 (1998), pp. 162–81; Mary Beth Ingham, 'Letting Scotus Speak for Himself', in *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 10:2 (2001), pp. 173–216.

2 Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* I d.44, in Duns Scotus, *Will & Morality*, pp. 254–61.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 192.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* IV, d.46, in Duns Scotus, *Will & Morality*, pp. 238–54.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 240–1.

7 For discussion of the medieval antecedents of Scotus's view, see Daniel P. Horan, OFM, 'How Original was Scotus on the Incarnation? Reconsidering the History of the Absolute Primacy of Christ in Light of Robert Grosseteste', *The Heythrop Journal* 52:3 (2011), pp. 374–91.

8 The classic text is Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* III, d.7, q.3, in Duns Scotus, *Opera Omnia*, 18 vols., ed. The Scotistic Commission (Vatican City: Typis Vaticanis, 1950–), vol. IX, pp.284–91. For a better and more thorough scholarly expression of Scotus's view, and for additional texts, see Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 174–87.

9 I am grateful to Patrick Madigan, SJ, and to an anonymous referee for comments which enriched this paragraph.

10 Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, p. 183.

11 Duns Scotus, *Lectura* III, d.20, q. un, in Duns Scotus, Vatican edition, vol. XXI, pp. 39–55.

12 Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, p. 184

13 Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* IV, d.15, q.1, in Duns Scotus, Vatican edition, vol. XIII, pp. 59–75. On the distinction between merit and satisfaction in Scotus, also see Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 129–32.

14 J. Patout Burns, 'The Concept of Satisfaction in Medieval Redemption Theory', *Theological Studies* 36:2 (1975), pp. 285–304. Douglas Langston, 'Scotus's Departure from Anselm's Theory of the Atonement', *Recherche de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 50 (1983), pp. 227–41.

15 Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus*, pp. 129–32; Andrew Rosato, 'The Interpretation of Anselm's Teaching on Christ's Satisfaction in the Franciscan Tradition from Alexander of Hales to Duns Scotus', *Franciscan Studies* 71 (2013), pp. 411–44.

16 Duns Scotus, *Lectura* III, d.19, q. un, in Duns Scotus, Vatican edition, vol. XXI, pp. 35–38.

17 Duns Scotus, *Reportatio* IV, d.15, q.1, n.16 in Duns Scotus, *Opera Omnia*, 12 vols., ed. Luke Wadding (Lyon: Durand, 1639), vol. XI, p. 719.

18 Bonaventure, *III Sent.* d. 20, art. 1, q. 3, in Bonaventure, *Opera Omnia*, 10 vols. (Rome: Quaracchi, 1882–1902), vol. III, p.423a.

19 Duns Scotus, *Lectura* III, d. 20, q. un, n. 31, in Duns Scotus, Vatican edition, vol. XXI, p. 49.

20 *Ibid.*; Rosato, 'Interpretation of Anselm's Teaching', p. 442.

21 Duns Scotus, *Lectura* III, d. 20, q. un, nn. 37–38, in Duns Scotus, Vatican edition, vol. XXI, p. 51; Rosato, 'Interpretation of Anselm's Teaching', pp. 441–2.

22 Duns Scotus, *Lectura* III, d. 20, q. un, nn. 24–26, in Duns Scotus, Vatican edition, vol. XXI, p. 34–5; Rosato, 'Interpretation of Anselm's Teaching', p. 442.

23 Duns Scotus *Lectura* III, d. 19, q. un, in Duns Scotus, Vatican edition, vol. XXI, p. 25–38.

24 *Ibid.*

25 L. W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962), p. 159, n. 2; Steven S. Aspengren, 'Anselmian Satisfaction, Duns Scotus and the Debt of Sin', *Modern Schoolman* 73 (1996), p. 144.

26 Douglas Langston, 'Scotus's Departure', p. 238.

27 J. Patout Burns 'Concept of Satisfaction', p. 302.

28 Andrew S. Yang, 'Scotus's Voluntarist Approach to the Atonement Reconsidered', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62 (2009), pp. 421–40, especially p. 422.

29 Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* III, d. 19, q. un, n. 7, in Duns Scotus, Wadding edition, vol. VII.I, pp. 417–8; Yang, 'Scotus's Voluntarist Approach', p. 429.

30 L. W. Grensted, *Short History*, p. 161; Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 3 vols., vol. 3, *Sammlung theologischer Lehrbücher* (Freiburg: Mohr, 1890), p. 459; Yang, 'Scotus's Voluntarist Approach', p. 428.

31 Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, d.44, in Duns Scotus, *Will and Morality*, pp. 256–7.