CHAPTER 4

DUNS SCOTUS AND INTUITIVE KNOWLEDGE

The Condemnations of 1277
and the Existing Singular

As mentioned earlier, a commission of theologians “and other wise men” drew up, at the request of the bishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier, a list of propositions that could not be held or taught at Paris. Oxford soon followed in handing down similar condemnations. The condemnations focus on propositions of metaphysics, psychology, epistemology, and natural philosophy that seem to arise out of the Latin appropriation of the Islamic, and particularly Averroistic, reception of Aristotle. The condemned propositions concern everything from the agent intellect to the eternity of the world. A good number of the propositions, especially those concerning cosmology and natural philosophy, bring forth condemnation principally because of their limitations on divine power. There are some such propositions that are taken from the work of Aquinas. One such proposition, which would have deep and long-lasting consequences on medieval philosophy, was “God could not make more than one world.” This proposition goes to the very heart of the relation between existing singular and rational ground.

The proposition that God could not have made more than one world was asserted by Aquinas on the basis of the intelligibility of the cosmos and on the basis of the intelligibility of God as creator of the cosmos. If more than one world is posited, Aquinas argues, then there is not a cause of the world but only chance. For Aquinas, the unicity of the world works in two directions at the same time. First, it is what allows us to posit the unicity of God as its rational cause. Second, it is what allows us to posit the rational order of the world as being caused by God. In short, the order of the world, for Aquinas, points to there being only one God and the uniqueness of God points to there being only one world.

Aquinas saw that in order for God to provide a rational ground for existing singulars, the creative activity of God had to be given some ground.
in reason. For if we admit of a multiplicity of worlds, then this world in itself tells us nothing about the creator other than that the creator created. Without being able to trace existing singulars to a rational ground in the divine intellect, the world appears as chance. Cause is the mode of being of the rational ground, chance is the mode of being without ground. Aquinas, therefore, argues that this is the only world that God has created, and consequently the divine intellect can serve as the rational ground of existing singulars within the world. The rationality of the cause demands that there not be a plurality of effects. The rationality of the cause, in turn, is seen in the order of the world.

The Condemnations of 1277 ushered in the requirement that one pay attention to God’s creative will, rather than God’s knowing and creative intellect. This has serious implications for the theory of science and for the question of whether theology is a science. It meant that one could no longer posit God as the rational ground of existing singulars, at least not in the way that had been done by Aquinas. From this point on, the ground of the existing singulars had to be found independently of the divine intellect. We turn now to see how Duns Scotus attempts to reformulate the concept of science in such a way that it does not bind God’s creative will at all.

Science in Scotus

Scotus’s theory of science is remarkable in that it seems to leave the existing singular aside altogether. This move away from knowledge of the singular as existing as the basis of scientia is possible only because of Scotus’s understanding of the role of the “subject” of a science and the truths that are “virtually contained” within it. Scotus’s terminology shifts from speaking of the “subject” of a science to speaking of the “object” of a science, though at times he uses both interchangeably. However, these two terms have different senses that point out different aspects of the role it fulfills. The term “subject” finds its philosophical site in Aristotle’s logical and metaphysical writings as that which is able to take predicates. The term “object,” on the other hand, finds its philosophical site in relation to a potency (such as sight and its proper object) or as the relation of cause and effect. Scotus likens the “object” of a science to the latter. The object of a science is related to the habitus of science as a cause is related to its effect. Each science would have one determinate thing that serves both as the subject to which all propositions must refer and as the object that functions as a cause of the habit. These no longer need to be held apart.

Science as such, according to Scotus, is not ordered on a determinate common genus, under which all objects of this science fall, but fundamentally