

## SHORT TREATISE ON THE MODES OF DISTINCTION

[1] Since, according to the opinion expressed by the Commentator when discussing the ninth book of the *Metaphysics*,<sup>1</sup> a distinction is a proper attribute of being,<sup>2</sup> we must therefore – in order to be able to grasp the nature of beings – establish what is the nature of distinctions or of the modes of distinguishing nature.<sup>3</sup> For, accord-

<sup>1</sup> AVERROES. *In Metaphysicam Aristotelis*, 9.1. In: *Aristotelis opera cum Averrois commentariis* (ed. Venet. 8, f. 226v B): «When we have spoken about the differences between things which exist in act and of how they are organised therein, the ultimate difference which is the focus of our inquiry will be made known to us» (Cum locuti fuerimus de differentiis rerum existentium in actu et quomodo ordinantur in hoc, declarabitur nobis natura ultimae differentiae de qua intendimus perscrutari).

<sup>2</sup> «Attributes of beings» (*passiones entis*) are those which necessarily characterise all beings; cf. JOHN DUNS SCOTUS. *Ordinatio*, I, dist. 3, pars 1, q. 3, § 134 (ed. Vat. 3, 83). Such attributes are of two kinds: those that are coextensive or convertible (i.e. interchangeable) with being, namely the traditional transcendentals such as «one», «true», «good»; and those that are disjunctive or opposite to each other (cf. below, § 27), namely pairs such as possible/necessary, act/potency, etc., of which only one may lend shape to being; *Ordinatio*, I, dist. 8, pars 1, q. 3, § 115 (ed. Vat. 4, 206-207): «Being does not only have simple interchangeable attributes, such as one, true and good, but also possesses those which may be distinguished in terms of opposites, such as being necessary or possible, act or potency, and so on» (Ens non tantum habet passiones simplices convertibiles – sicut unum, verum et bonum – sed habet aliquas passiones ubi opposita distinguuntur contra se – sicut necessarium esse vel possibile, actus vel potentia, et huiusmodi).

<sup>3</sup> Exemplarism, inherent in Augustinian Platonism, requires a perfect parallelism between the order of being and the order of knowledge; JOHN DUNS SCOTUS. *Quaestiones super libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis*, VI, q. 3, § 25 (OPh 4, 657): «The created realm [...] imitates the exemplar which it resembles in some way» (Creatura [...] imitatur exemplar cui aliquo modo assimilatur).

ing to the opinion of the said Commentator regarding the ninth book of the *Metaphysics*, proper attributes<sup>4</sup> allow us to have knowledge of objects.

We shall proceed, therefore, in the following manner: First, we shall put forward certain distinctions; second, we shall set forth certain propositions; third, we shall infer certain corollaries; fourth, we shall resolve certain matters of doubt.

#### I. SEVEN TYPES OF DISTINCTION

[2] As regards the first point, the first distinction is the following: Everything which may be distinguished, is distinct either according to reason or *ex natura rei*.<sup>5</sup>

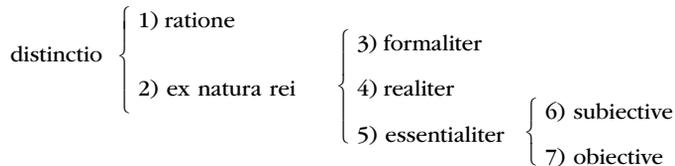
[3] The second distinction is the following: Everything which may be distinguished *ex natura rei*, is distinct either really, formally or essentially.

[4] The third distinction is the following: Of those things which we distinguish essentially, some are totally and subjectively distinct and some are totally and objectively distinct.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> AVERROES. *In Metaphysicam Aristotelis*, 9.2. (cit. note 1) f. 227vb-rg. For the *passiones propriae* of being, cf. JOHN DUNS SCOTUS. *Quaestiones super libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis*, IX, q. 14, § 74 (OPh 4, 653): «A proper attribute is that which exists prior to anything else in a proper subject» (*Propria passio dicitur primo inesse proprio subiecto*).

<sup>5</sup> The expression *ex natura rei* (literally, «from the nature of the thing») indicates the source or ground of an ontological determination: it stems from being's very manner of being, insofar as one's intellect ascertains that it is concerned with something which exists and acts *secundum naturam*.

<sup>6</sup> For the *septemplex distinctio*, cf. Introduction, section 2:



## II. PROPOSITIONS CONCERNING EACH OF THE DISTINCTIONS

## 1

[5] As regards the second point, the first proposition is the following: Those things may be distinguished according to reason – though certainly not according to a real reason located in that which is distinguishable or distinct, but rather according to one forged by the intellect – which are distinct according to an act of collation or comparison carried out by the possible intellect<sup>7</sup> or by another collative power,<sup>8</sup> an example of this within the field of logic being the relation that exists between a definition and that which is defined.

[6] I refer to the act of collation, because the act of the possible intellect is twofold: there is a primary or direct act and a secondary, reflexive or comparative act. The one is said to be primary because it addresses the object in absolute terms; the other is said to be secondary or collative because it addresses that object by comparing it with something else.<sup>9</sup>

We speak therefore of a distinction of reason or say that something differs from something else in terms of reason when

<sup>7</sup> Using ARISTOTLE. *De anima*, 3.5 (430a 10-25), medieval psychology distinguished between the *intellectus agens*, which abstracts the *species* – i.e. that which is intelligible within the contents of the mind (*phantasmata*) as gathered together by the *intellectus passivus* – and the *intellectus possibilis* which grasps and understands it. JOHN DUNS SCOTUS. *Quaestiones super De anima*, q. 13 § 4 (OPh 5, 114): «The act of abstracting, which we attribute to the active intellect, is not as noble an operation as is the act of understanding, which we attribute to the possible intellect.» (Abstrahere quod attribuitur [intellectui] agenti, non est ita nobilis operatio sicut intelligere, quo attribuitur possibili).

<sup>8</sup> The will and the imagination, as mentioned a little further down in the text. Cf. also JOHN DUNS SCOTUS. *Ordinatio*, 1, dist. 3, pars 3, q. 1, § 368-369 (ed. Vat. 3, 224-225) where he discusses the imagination (*virtus phantastica*).

<sup>9</sup> The primary act of the *intellectus possibilis* is that which directly (*recte*) grasps the essence of the thing understood (*forma rei*); the secondary act is that which reflects upon what has been understood by relating it to other of the mind's contents.

it so differs not according to a primary or direct act of the possible intellect or of another power, but rather according to a secondary or reflexive act which we call comparative.

[7] The possible intellect is not alone in being a collative power; so too are the will and the imagination, since any of these powers is able to draw together or compare one thing with another. Therefore, not only the possible intellect but also the two aforementioned powers are able to bring about or give rise to a distinction of reason. This distinction is given the common name «of reason» both because it falls primarily and principally to reason to bring about the act of collation and because it is the possible intellect itself which, in the majority of cases, brings about the distinction of reason.<sup>10</sup>

## 2

[8] The second proposition is the following: Those beings may be distinguished *ex natura rei* whose distinction depends strictly upon the reasons themselves of what is under consideration<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the *intellectus*, considered to be the faculty for understanding reality, the Scotist tradition attaches the term *ratio* to the discursive faculty which presupposes constant elements (*rationes*) within reality that enable one to make connections between things, elements which, once abstracted from reality, give rise to *entia rationis*. Cf. JOHN DUNS SCOTUS. *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, q. 3, § 9 (ed. Wadding 12, 76): «To call something a “reason” can have two meanings: 1) the mode of that to which we compare things, something which has no reality and which the more it recedes from perfect reality, the more it approaches reason; 2) however, we may also give the name “reason” or “being of reason” to something considered formally according to reason» (Quod aliquid dicatur ratio potest [...] intelligi dupliciter; 1) [...] quia est modus illius cui comparatur et non res tali realitate [...], et quando aliquid recedit a realitate perfecta tanto magis accedit ad rationem; 2) [...] aliquid ut accipitur sub ratione formaliter potest dici ratio vel ens rationis).

<sup>11</sup> According to JOHN DUNS SCOTUS. *Ordinatio*, I, dist. 8, pars 1, q. 4, § 192 (ed. Vat. 4, 261), a real distinction is that which has a basis which «precedes the intellect in every respect» (*praecedens intellectum omni modo*), with the result that «it exists in things *ex natura rei*» (*est in re ex natura rei*).

rather than upon the act of a particular collative power,<sup>12</sup> such as the distinction between man and donkey.

## 3

[9] The third proposition is the following: Those beings may be distinguished formally which are constituted in such a way that, when one is abstracted ultimately from another,<sup>13</sup> the one does not include the other quidditatively. An example of this is goodness, truth and wisdom within the divinity, since their having been abstracted ultimately means that they are not included in each other quidditatively or in terms of their quidditative reasons, even though they are so included identically or essentially.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> A collative power is a faculty which plays a role in the mental processes surrounding discursive knowledge; cf. below, § 42. According to RADULF BRITO. *Quaestiones super librum Sex Principiorum*, q. 1, ad 3: «There are three types of science: that which is collative and gains knowledge through demonstration; that which is definitional and gains knowledge through definition; and the third, divisive science, which gains knowledge through division» (Triplex est scientia: quaedam est collativa, et illa habet cognosci per demonstrationem; alia est definitiva, et illa habet cognosci per definitionem; tertia est divisiva, et illa habet cognosci per divisionem), unedited text cited by William McMAHON. «The Medieval Sufficientiae: Attempts at a Definitive Division of the Categories». *Proceedings of the Society for Medieval Logic and Metaphysics*, 2 (2002) 12-25.

<sup>13</sup> Ultimate abstraction is the knowledge of a thing at its extreme, something which is only possible once one has succeeded in isolating intellectually what that thing is (*quidditas*) from all that it is not; cf. JOHN DUNS SCOTUS. *Ordinatio*, I, dist. 8, pars 1, q. 4, § 219 (ed. Vat. 4, 274-275): «By means of ultimate abstraction we may conceive the quiddity without any reference to whatever falls outside the proper reason of that quiddity» (Ultima abstractione concipitur quidditas absque habitudine ad quodcumque quod est extra propriam rationem quidditatis).

<sup>14</sup> Formal distinction is that which enables one to become aware of aspects of reality which, although they exist in an identical manner (*includunt se identice sive essentialiter*), may be defined as having distinctive characteristics which set them apart from each other (*non includunt se quidditative*). JOHN DUNS SCOTUS. *Reportata parisiensia*, II, dist. 45, q. 2, § 9 (ed. Wadding 11/1, 234): «Formal non-identity between two things obtains when one does not form part of the other's formal reason, in such a way