

William Ockham

Questions on the Books of Aristotle's *Physics*, q. 132–34

[Note: A portion of these questions are translated in Ockham, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. & trans. Philotheus Boehner, O.F.M., rev. Stephen F. Brown (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990). It serves as the first three parts of the section titled “The Proof of God’s Existence” in that collection. I found it difficult to grasp, from the series of questions translated there, Ockham’s peculiar understanding of essentially ordered causes. The full text of these questions sheds partial light on this issue, and so I have translated them for my students. I offer the translation here in case anyone else finds it useful. It is meant as a companion to the rest of the Hackett text. To make the translation, I have used Ockham, *Opera Philosophica* VI, ed. Stephen Brown, 753–62.]

Question 132

Whether in essentially ordered causes the second [cause] depends on the first [cause]

[I. Preliminary Objections]

Yes: Because in such causes the second cause is not able to cause an effect of its own species without the first cause, but the converse is possible. For it is clear that Sortes cannot generate a human without the sun, and the sun can produce a human without Sortes, because it can do so by the mediation of Plato. Therefore, etc.

To the contrary: If a human were created by God alone, then he would not depend on the sun, and nevertheless he would be a secondary cause with respect to the sun in the generation of [another] human.

[II. Ockham’s View]¹

To this question I say that there is a difference between causes essentially ordered and accidentally ordered, and partial causes concurring to produce an effect one in number. For in causes essentially ordered the second cause depends on the first as regards its first being and not as regards conservation.² Just as Sortes depends on Plato, because he cannot naturally be caused

¹ In the edition of the text, Stephen Brown labels the following section “Scotus’ opinion, substituting for “dico, I say”—the reading of the only two manuscripts—“dicitur, it is said” in the opening line. The text seems to make less sense that way. For the final section (IV) of this question, labeled “Against Scotus’ arguments” by Brown and clearly speaking in Ockham’s own voice, responds argument by argument to section III, which is thus clearly *not* in Ockham’s own voice. Section III, in turn, is clearly countering section II, which is thus again in Ockham’s own voice. Nevertheless there are textual difficulties on any reading.

² This is the reading of the only two manuscripts: “quantum ad primum esse et non quantum ad conservationem.” The text seems to be corrupt. Brown emends the text as follows (reasonably appealing to homoeoteleuton): “quantum ad primum esse et quantum ad conservari, in accidentaliter ordinatis secunda tantum dependet a prima quantum ad primum esse et non quantum ad conservationem (In causes essentially ordered the second cause depends on the first as regards first being and as regards conservation, in accidentally ordered causes the second only depends on the first as regards first being, and not as regards conservation.)”

without Plato, since he is his father, but is not conserved by Plato, in that Sortes lives [on] even if Plato is dead. In the case of partial causes in regards to the same effect, however, there is not any order, nor does one depend more on the other than conversely. For the sake of example: the object and the intellect are partial causes with respect to the act of understanding and neither depends on the other either in regards to being or in regards to conservation.

[III. Arguments against Ockham's View]

On the contrary: I [i.e., an objector] ask what is it for a second cause to depend on the first? Either [i.] it is the same as for the second to not be able to produce the effect without the first; [but] then the first would equally depend on the second, because neither can the first produce the effect without the second. For just as in those inferior things many partial agents cannot cause their effects without the sun, in the same way the sun is not capable of those effects without the second causes. Or [ii.] it is for the second to depend on the first in being; and this is not cogent: [ii.a] first, because in accidentally ordered causes the second can depend on the first in being, [ii.b] secondly, because then the cause of the cause would always be the cause of the caused, which is false, because sometimes the cause depends on something and nevertheless it would still cause that effect [even] if it were not to depend on it, just as the bodily object causing the act of vision depends on the sun, and nevertheless that object would cause the act of understanding [even] if it depended on God alone, and consequently that act depends on the sun, and nevertheless the sun is not a cause of that act. Or, [ii.c] thirdly, for the second cause to depend on the first is for it to receive some influence from it through which it acts. But this cannot be, because that influx would not be anything except local motion or some absolute form; but frequently a second cause causes without any such reception. This is clear in the case of heat, which causes another heat and nevertheless does not receive from the heavens either local motion or some absolute form. Scotus argues in this way, distinction 8, in proving that an intelligence, if it moves as a second mover, is caused by the first intelligence.

Secondly, this way, according to Scotus: the object and the intellect are two partial causes in regards to intellection, and according to him neither depends on the other in causing but each acts by its own power. Then I [i.e., an objector] ask: either those causes are essentially ordered or accidentally. If the first, then I have what I proposed, [namely] that the second cause does not always depend on the first in causing, because each causes by its own power. If the second, therefore one could cause without the other.

This is confirmed, because according to him the intellect is a more principal cause in regards to intellection, and nevertheless the object does not depend on the intellect in causing, not more than the converse.

This is confirmed secondly because the sun and a partial cause are causes essentially ordered, and if the partial cause were produced by God alone, then it would not depend on the sun in causing. Therefore neither does it now, because a second cause does not happen to depend on the first except when the second is an instrument of the first.

[IV. Reply to arguments against Ockham's view]

To the first of these I say that the second cause depends on the first in being and in conservation. Whence [responding] to the form [of the argument] I concede that the second cause depends on the first in the first way, because the second cause cannot produce an effect of a certain species without the first cause, nevertheless the converse is possible, for Sortes cannot produce any human without the sun co-causing, nevertheless the sun by the mediation of Plato can produce many humans without Sortes. Similarly it can be said that the second cause depends on the first in the second way to the extent that (*pro tanto quia*) it is conserved by the first, and it receives no influx.

To the second I say that they are causes neither essentially ordered nor accidentally ordered, according as those are opposed, but they are disparate partial causes of one effect.

Through this [the reply] to the first confirmation is clear, because the object and the intellect are not causes essentially ordered, because neither depends on the other, nor accidentally ordered, because one cannot naturally cause without the other.

To the other confirmation I say that the consequence is not valid, because when a partial cause is produced naturally, then it depends on the sun in regards to being and conservation; when, however, it is produced by God alone, then it depends on the sun in regards to conservation only, just as if light were caused by God alone it could still be conserved by the sun.

[V. Ockham's Reply to the Preliminary Objection]

[The reply] to the principal argument is clear from what has been said.

Question 133

Whether in essentially ordered causes the superior cause is more perfect

[I. Preliminary Objections]

Yes, for those causes differ in species, therefore one is more perfect than the other. But it is not inferior, therefore it is superior.

On the contrary, the sun is a superior cause with respect to a human, and nevertheless it is more imperfect, therefore, etc.

[II. Scotus' Opinion]

Here Scotus says, book I, distinction 2 [of his commentary on the *Sentences*], that the answer is yes, because essentially ordered causes have different notions and are of different orders, because the superior cause is more perfect.

[III. Objections that Some Might Raise against Scotus' Opinion]

On the contrary, when he speaks thus, either he takes "superiority" for priority in perfection, or for priority in unlimitedness. If in the first mode, this would be to beg the question, because then it would be only to say that the causes are of another order, because the more perfect is more perfect. Therefore it is necessary that he takes it in the second mode and says that every more unlimited cause is more perfect than a more limited cause. But this is simply false, because sometimes the more unlimited cause is more imperfect and sometimes more perfect.

An example of the first, according to Scotus himself: a heavenly body, which is not alive, is more imperfect than perfect living being, and nevertheless as a more unlimited cause it concurs with an ass to produce something else, and consequently there the more unlimited is more imperfect. Similarly, if the human intellect understands the essence of an angel, the human intellect is a more unlimited cause of that act of understanding, [and the essence of the angel is a more limited cause, and nevertheless the human intellect] is inferior to the essence of the angel. Similarly, heat concurs with the vegetative soul, as a more unlimited cause to produce a certain effect, and nevertheless heat is more imperfect.

An example of the second: the heaven, as a more unlimited cause, concurs with the elements to produce certain effects, and the will, as a more unlimited cause, concurs with intelligible notions to produce volitions, and the will is a more perfect cause and similarly the heaven is more perfect than the elements.

[IV. Ockham's Response]

Therefore, first, I will posit two distinctions; second, I will speak to the question,

In regards to the first, the first distinction is this: that there are total causes, and partial causes. The second distinction is that something is called more perfect than another in one way because it is a nature in itself perfect absolutely, in another way because some more perfect denomination or predication belongs to it.

In regards to the second I posit three conclusions. The first is that a superior total cause is more perfect than an inferior cause. This is clear because such a cause includes God, the sun, and all the partial causes of that effect besides the posterior cause.

The second conclusion is that a superior partial cause is not universally more perfect than the second cause, and this speaking of perfection in the first mode. This is clear, because the sun is a superior partial cause with respect to the generation of a human and nevertheless it is not more perfect than a human, and nevertheless the first superior cause is more perfect.

If you say that every cause is either univocal or equivocal, and that if it is univocal, then it is equally perfect as the effect, and that if it is equivocal, then it is more perfect, I respond, first, that that objection is not to the point, because it only proves that it is a cause more perfect than its effect, but it does not prove that the univocal [Shields: should be "equivocal"] cause is more perfect than the other when both concur to produce the effect. Second, I say that it is not

universally true that the equivocal cause is more perfect than its effect, unless I were to understand this as referring to the total cause.

If you say: the equivocal cause contains the effect virtually, I concede this in the particular case. But it does not follow that “as it is a principle, therefore it is more perfect,” and the reason is because to contain [the effect virtually] is nothing other than to be able to cause the effect. But then it does not follow that “the cause is able to cause the effect partially, therefore it is more perfect.”

If you say that to contain virtually is to contain equivalently, I deny this, because everything containing another equivalently is more perfect than it. Whence two species of which one is more perfect than another relate in such a way that the more perfect contains the imperfect equivalently but not virtually, because to contain equivalently is to be a more perfect nature, even if that which contains does not have causality in respect to that which is contained.

The third conclusion is that the superior cause is a more perfect cause in the second mode of speaking of perfection. This is clear, for the second cause is not capable of some effect of its own species unless the superior cause co-causes that effect. But the converse is very possible, because although Sortes cannot naturally produce a human being without the sun, nevertheless the sun is able to naturally produce a human being without Sortes, because it can do so by the mediation of Plato, and consequently the superior cause causes more independently than the inferior cause. But to cause independently belongs to perfection, and consequently the superior cause causes more perfectly in regards to independence than the inferior.

[V. Ockham’s Reply to III., Objections to Scotus]

To the argument to the contrary, I say that through superiority is understood greater unlimitedness in causing, and in this way it argues for greater independence in causing; and this belongs to perfection. In response to those examples I say that those are neither essentially ordered nor accidentally ordered, as is clear from what has already been said; rather they are partial causes of one effect.

[VI. Ockham’s Reply to the Preliminary Objections]

To the principal arguments it is clear from what has been said in what way the superior cause is more perfect and in what way it is not necessarily more perfect.

Question 134

Whether essentially ordered causes are necessarily simultaneously required for producing the effect in respect to which they are essentially ordered causes

[I. Preliminary Objections]

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That yes: It is incompatible that all those are essential causes of that effect and that nevertheless that same effect can be naturally produced with some of those causes excluded. For this follows: the effect can be naturally produced without *a*, therefore *a* is not essentially required for its production, and consequently it is not its essential cause.

On the contrary: The sun produces a worm with a worm and without a worm, therefore, etc.

[II. Scotus' Opinion]

On this question Scotus says, in the second distinction of the first book: it is necessary that one be unable to act without the other.

[III. Ockham's Response]

But here are three contrary conclusions. The first is that an effect of the same species as that which is produced by all simultaneously can sometimes be produced by one cause through itself. This is clear, because it is manifest that a worm generated through propagation and one generated through putrefaction are of the same species. And nevertheless the worm produced through propagation is produced by all the essentially ordered causes simultaneously; the worm produced through putrefaction, however, is produced by the sun without the action of a worm.

If you say that then the particular cause is superfluous, I say that that is not the case, because the universal cause is not always able to produce the effect without the particular cause, because the determinate agent determines for it a certain effect in the same recipient (*in eodem passo*), although it [i.e., the universal cause] is able itself alone to produce an effect of the same species with the effect which it produces by the mediation of the particular cause.

The second conclusion is that sometimes a universal cause can produce a perfect effect through itself just as together [with a particular cause.] This is clear because although a divisible effect is more perfect [if it is caused] by all those causes simultaneously than [if it is caused] by one through itself, as is clear in the case of heat caused by fire and the sun simultaneously, nevertheless when the effect is indivisible, as is a substantial form, above all [when received] in the same part of matter, then it can be just as perfect [when caused] by one through itself as [when caused] by all simultaneously.

The third conclusion is that the same effect in number which is caused by all simultaneously cannot be caused by one alone. This is clear, because as will be said later in the matter of motion, one effect in number determines for itself a certain agent and a certain matter, in such a way that that effect cannot be produced by another agent. And consequently that effect in number which is produced by all cannot be produced by one alone. In that way they necessarily concur to produce the effect. But nevertheless an effect of the same species can sometimes be produced by one alone, as is clear in the case of a worm.

[IV. The Opinion of Walter Chatton and Ockham's Response to It]

And if Scotus understood the matter this way, he spoke the truth; nevertheless he himself said the contrary, for according to him if Adam had remained in the state of innocence, those

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who are now elect would have been elect then [even] if they had different fathers, so that according to him variation of the agent does not vary the effect, and consequently according to him the same effect in number can have diverse equivocal causes in such a way that that effect, same in number, can be produced without one of them.

If you say that he intended that if Adam had remained [in the state of innocence] those sons could have had other fathers by God's power, if he had been pleased to decree other laws, but not according to the order now established, I respond that if he understood the matter in this way, I agree with him.

Scotus can be saved in another way, [by saying] that all the essentially ordered causes necessarily concur in conserving the effect caused by all simultaneously, naturally speaking, although not by the first. But from this it follows that man is not an essentially ordered cause for producing Sortes, because neither a singular man nor man in common [is such a cause], in that Sortes can be saved and conserved without either.

[V. Ockham's Reply to the Preliminary Objections]

To the principal argument: I concede the conclusion, speaking of an effect the same in number, not however speaking of an effect the same in species.

To the principal argument to the contrary: I say that the same effect in number is not produced nor can naturally be produced through putrefaction and propagation. Nor can that same effect in number which is produced through propagation be produced naturally without the concurrence of its essentially ordered causes, although it can happen otherwise through the power of God.

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