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# MEDIEVAL SKEPTICISM AS A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CATEGORY

Guido J. R. Alt

**Resumo:**

O artigo analisa o conceito de ceticismo como uma categoria historiográfica para a filosofia medieval, abordando as epistemologias de Henrique de Gand e J. Duns Scotus. A primeira parte examina distinções metodológicas relativas a metodologia reconstrutiva na história da filosofia enquanto aplicadas ao problema do ceticismo. A segunda parte apresenta os principais problemas da aplicação desta categoria para o entendimento do ceticismo Scotista da epistemologia de Henrique de Gand.

**Palavras-chave:** Ceticismo; Epistemologia Medieval; J. Duns Scotus; Henrique de Gand

**Abstract:**

*The essay analyses the concept of skepticism as a historiographical category for medieval philosophy, drawing on Henry of Ghent's and Duns Scotus's epistemology. The first part examines methodological distinctions of reconstructive methodologies in the history of philosophy as applied to skepticism. The second part presents the main issues concerning the application of the category of skepticism in the understanding of Scotus's criticism of Henry of Ghent's epistemology.*

**Keywords:** *Skepticism; Medieval Epistemology; J. Duns Scotus; Henry of Ghent*

The concept of philosophical skepticism as a historiographical category for ancient philosophy often refers to a form of life and culture of belief suspension regarding disputable matters that typically challenges our standards of *personal* justification. In the historical study of philosophy, the recognition of this concept of skepticism dates back only to the critical reception of the relevant Greek texts in the renaissance<sup>1</sup>.

But there is also a theoretical form skepticism, most adequately understood as an epistemological use of doubt – instead of a practical use –, as we find paradigmatically in modern philosophy and maybe, or so I would like to argue, in later medieval scholasticism of the 13-14 centuries<sup>2</sup>. The authors I would like to talk about, Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus, were mostly preoccupied with *evidential* justification – not so much with the personal aspect of the rationality of our beliefs, but rather with their cognitive dimension<sup>3</sup>. The role skeptical arguments play in these contexts may easily pass unnoticed by historians of philosophy, but we should consider that in most of contemporary epistemology anti-skeptical strategies are not necessarily directed to skepticism as a form of life.

A serious occupation with skeptical arguments in the middle ages, especially in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, was not an important historiographical concern in medieval philosophy scholarship during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There was a view according to which high scholasticism, led by Ockham, adhered to a form of skeptical theism which engendered a decline in medieval intellectual life and philosophical crisis of Aristotelian metaphysics and science. A similar view was sometimes held by Etienne Gilson and several Neothomists, and its already to be found in the writings of Franz Brentano<sup>4</sup>.

To our mind, we know very well that a big ‘narrative of decline’ in 14<sup>th</sup> century philosophy is not only alien to the philosophical self-understanding of scholasticism but is highly dismissive of the role 14<sup>th</sup> thought played in the formation of modern science<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> As of the discovery of the doctrines of Pyrrho in the texts of Sextus Empiricus. To be sure, a translation of the text was available in the middle ages, but no significant impact of the epistemological doctrine itself is to be found. For the early modern reception of Pyrrhonic skepticism, see Popkin (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Descartes is frequently identified in the relevant epistemological literature as the starting point for this form of philosophical skepticism, at least since Ayer’s *The Problem of Knowledge*.

<sup>3</sup> The distinction between evidential and personal justification is from Michael Williams (1999).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview, see D. Perler (2002, p.13ff).

<sup>5</sup> To overviews of 14th thought in the history of science, see the brilliant essays of Anneliese Maier on the medieval ‘forerunners of Galilei’ (1949).

Currently, most scholars would endorse the view expressed by Katherine Tachau (2000, p. 75), when stating that it is a "most stubborn truism of twentieth-century accounts of late medieval philosophy is that after Scotus theologians became skeptics in epistemology". Several recent books show a tendency to fill a gap on the study of skeptical arguments in medieval thought, an approach which also calls for methodological studies to replace exegetical common sense of 20<sup>th</sup> historiography<sup>6</sup>.

Before going into a case study of skeptical arguments in the late 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century, in Henry of Ghent and John Duns Scotus, I would like to draw some methodological reflections about what I take to be reductionisms of the anti-skeptical stance on the historiography of medieval philosophy.

## I

The first and perhaps most trivial problem about this former historiographical paradigm on medieval skepticism is that it seems to overestimate, on purely historiographical grounds, the presence of Thomas Aquinas in philosophy in the 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>7</sup>. But more interestingly, comparing divergent historiographical theses may teach us how incompatible interpretations are the result of accepting different principles regarding philosophical theories *and* their explanatory historical account. To what extent are interpretation and historical explanation to be distinguished from one another? I would like to make some reflections about this distinction as found in a paper by Calvin Normore (2003), whose terminology I borrow.

It is helpful to think of the distinction between a knowledge system and histories of past knowledge by an analogy between a situation and different possible descriptions of the same situation. Let me give an example from an ahistorical intellectual enterprise<sup>8</sup>. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Elements de Arithmetique* became a widely influential book in mathematical education; it was coauthored by a group of French mathematicians and published under the pseudonym of N. Bourbaki. Would the

<sup>6</sup> Among such recent books are Lagerlund (2010), D. Perler (2002).

<sup>7</sup> To mention only the example, in the writings of Duns Scotus, a thinker whose impact on medieval and early modern thought of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was of massive proportions, Thomas Aquinas is a relevant interlocutor only in *some* of the texts produced during the Parisian period, namely, the *Reportatio Parisiensis*, and certainly not in the texts produced in Oxford and (possibly) Cambridge.

<sup>8</sup> The example is extracted also from C. Normore (2003, p.204f).

historical knowledge of some social fact such as this one (that N. Bourbaki was not a real mathematician) change something about how we consistently think of the *truths of mathematics*? Apparently not, although social facts are clearly truths *about* mathematics. The question if there is a mathematical history of mathematics would first ask whether there *could be* a history of the truths of mathematics - whether there are internal elements of mathematical theories which could be plausible reasons for completing and thereby partially substituting or correcting former ones. And if a mathematical history of mathematics is then plausible and a positive answer to the first question is given, then we are committed to saying that these internal reasons were also causes of paradigm shifts; they became truths *about* mathematical knowledge and not only *of* mathematics. In this sense, there would be an important difference between what a purely doxological account of past knowledge and a historical account are committed to, but they can cooperate.

The same seems to hold good for histories of philosophy. We can remark that historical approaches to *truths about* philosophy are quite recent, while reconstructions of the *truths of philosophy* have always been practiced. Philosophers clearly have always had an interest in the knowledge of the past. What are compilations, collations and commentaries if not a kind of study of the past of philosophy? But while commentators are after local rational reconstruction or doxology, a historian is seeking the best causal explanation for intellectual change, and even, sometimes, affirming that at least some *truths about philosophy* may be philosophically relevant.

To this someone could object that philosophically relevant facts of past are confined within doxology or in texts, more precisely, in the theories and arguments inside them. I think there is at least one hermeneutical reason (about the theory of understanding, itself a branch of the theory of knowledge) to reject this objection, namely, that historical artifacts often cannot be reliably understood under the concepts of a traditional metaparadigm, for the study of past knowledge became considerably more difficult over time, and doxological reconstructions of its truths may lead to incompatible results which are not decidable based purely on the convictions of a given philosophical tradition, which makes philosophical past theories and arguments even more difficult to evaluate. This sometimes suggests that textual evidence is not evidence enough for understanding what a philosopher of the past really asserted.

Doxology, then, is quite different in that it doesn't seek causal nexus but rational reconstruction, and a dialogue with the dead is a good metaphor for its pursuit, for a plausible doxology always concerns the *truths of philosophy* and would resemble the way agreements and disagreements are construed in a simulated conversational context. This would also hold good for the truths of skeptical arguments, that is, their epistemic principles. In the case of the doxology of skeptical arguments, the epistemic principles that partners in a philosophical dialogue could agree upon can make the difference in textual interpretation, since the identification of skeptical threats depends at least on an understanding of the epistemic standards accepted. This charitable understanding doesn't entail their acceptance – besides its being valid or sound within metaphysical assumptions, a principle may not be useful within a given epistemic context.

An example of what I have in mind is brilliantly depicted in the first of Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*. As in any philosophical dialogue, the characters hold opposite positions: Hylas believes what we perceive through the senses is the material world, while Philonous does not believe that we have (direct) perceptual knowledge of the material world. But it is not the case simply that Hylas is a dogmatist and Philonous a skeptic regarding perceptual knowledge. They only disagree whether this knowledge commits us to a certain consequence, that is, the acceptance of the metaphysical type of 'material things'. The dialogue begins by depicting this very misunderstanding and agreement was only obtained when they adopted for each other's disjunct positions on metaphysics a *prima facie* plausibility with our knowledge claims, so that they could investigate further which position really has skeptical consequences. The first step illustrated by this agreement exemplifies an epistemological use of doubt, and it concerns only the nature of evidence. It is not, by any means, a pragmatic use of doubt or a form of agnosticism.

In this sense, the skeptic certainly accepts the truth of certain principles, precisely those ones which have an epistemological consequence we are not willing to accept. The methodological problem in the historiography of skeptical arguments seems then to reside on the fact that medievalists strongly oriented by a modern defense of thomism were apparently diagnosing agnostic positions which in their own standards had skeptical consequences, therefore proceeding externally and remaining unreflective

about the fact that they were criticizing skeptical consequences using standards of knowledge that these thinkers might not even have accepted.

## II

If we adopt a similar principle of charity to reconstruct skeptical arguments, then they may be identified within philosophical circles who had a dogmatic approach to knowledge, as long as we find out how disagreement over epistemic standards was motivated by or itself motivated an epistemological use of doubt. I would like to illustrate this point by interpreting one of Duns Scotus' criticisms of Henry of Ghent's epistemology and their assessments about the certainty of perceptual knowledge<sup>9</sup>. I think they are in fact engaging in a question about whether we can be certain of the content of our individual cognitions.

Henry of Ghent was, to my knowledge, the single first philosopher in later scholasticism to make a methodical use of skeptical arguments, a habit he took from his knowledge of latin Hellenistic philosophy. Famously, he defends a version of Augustinian illuminationism which denies that we can have certainty of natural knowledge without the interference of a correcting activity from God's own mind<sup>10</sup>. To be sure, Henry grants we have a kind of direct access to the world by natural sense perception, but only in the level of simple apprehension, and not in propositional knowledge. The point Henry seems to make is that intellectual knowledge rests upon totally different evidential requirements than sense perception: instead of knowing what is true (*id quod verum est*), intellectual knowledge needs also to cognize the truth itself (*veritas / veritas rei*), by which Henry means an essence. Now, clearly, to have knowledge of something on the basis of its essence or definition amounts to nothing else than knowing a self-evident state of affairs, which is precisely the condition Henry wants to deny natural sense perception to have. We could only achieve such certainty in the case of analytical truths.

<sup>9</sup> The selection of the relevant texts was guided by M. Pickavé (2010).

<sup>10</sup> For what follows, the main source is Henry's *Summa quaestionum ordinariarum*, a.1 qq.1-2 (ed. Wilson, p.10ff.).

With Anselm of Canterbury, Henry defines the truth of propositional knowledge as an adjudication of conformity between individuals and mental representations or 'exemplars'; and Henry holds that these are not naturally acquired. He adduces three considerations to support this view. The first is the view that the objects of knowledge are in perpetual change and therefore unstable, and knowledge could not derive its stability from its contents. The second reason is that he thinks rectification of our incorrect knowledge in the disorderly mind is not possible without the recognition of an external criterion which is not present in its natural disorderly state.

The third consideration, of more interest for our present purposes, is the reception of a skeptical principle, the idea that we cannot distinguish phenomenally identical items<sup>11</sup>. As Henry states it, we are not naturally able to distinguish the '*verum*' from the '*verosimile*'. This principle is operative in classical skeptical scenarios such as the dream argument, according to which we could not know on the basis of sense perception alone whether we are having veridical or non-veridical perceptions, because we would have an indistinguishable content as we have the impression of the horse on the top of Martin's Church, were we awake in Groningen or were we asleep in somewhere else in the world. Now, Henry does not apply the principle of indistinguishability to affirm that sense perception is not reliable at all. He does think that, in the case of contradictory perceptions, one must be veridical while the other is not. So, when I see the golden horse at the Martin's Tower at Groningen to be 2 inches large from afar, I don't get by visual perception the same information that I would, if I were on the top of the church; and one of these perceptions must non-veridical. But he does think that we cannot get to veridical perceptions based on the evidence of our own mental acts alone, but only as the result of divine illumination. I am focusing on this third consideration.

Scotus thinks Henry's illuminationism has skeptical consequences that led to the view of the academics; namely, that his application of the principle of indistinguishability undermines the possibility of veridical sense perception. To be sure, Henry and Scotus were both trying to conceive of anti-skeptical strategies. But Scotus has a remarkable different strategy from Henry's. In a nutshell, while Henry's strategy

<sup>11</sup> This has been labeled as 'the principle of indistinguishability' by José L. Bermudéz (2008).

is ‘bottom-up’, from sensory to intellectual cognition, Scotus’ is ‘top-down’ for he is modelling our perceptual knowledge on an account of self-evident propositions (*propositiones per se notae*), which is a way of testing some of his original views on modal epistemology. Scotus tries to refute what he sees as skeptical consequences from Henry’s illuminationism with three or four accounts of the objects of knowledge.

The first of Scotus’ arguments<sup>12</sup> for certainty of natural knowledge, which would be conceded by Henry, is that we have evident knowledge of analytical or necessary truths, propositions known in virtue of the meaning of their terms. This is so because of a conformity of the composition or judgment to its terms on the sheer basis of the knowledge of their meaning, such as “the whole is greater than its parts”; and the acquisition of the terms composing such propositions is irrelevant on Scotus’ account since the senses are only an occasion for their formation, and are not causally operative. The second Scotist argument in defense of certain natural knowledge is an account of ‘knowledge by experience’, which is an Aristotelian theory of inductive knowledge, for it models knowledge of propositions that are only true as in most cases (*ut in pluribus*) upon the case of self-evident propositions. It does so by introducing a necessitation rule for natural causality – that whatever is observed in the most cases as a resulting of unfree causes are their natural and determined effects<sup>13</sup>.

Both these arguments refer to a quite undisputed view on modal epistemology in ancient and medieval philosophy that self-evidence only applies to necessary truths. But in a third and fourth defense of certain natural knowledge, Scotus is originally saying that contingent propositions can also be self-evident and primitive in epistemonic proofs<sup>14</sup>. Presumably he is defending our perceptual knowledge of the external world and our awareness of our own acts against what he saw to be skeptical threats stemming from Henry’s reception of the principle of indistinguishability.

But why is Scotus applying a modal criterion on this context? Scotus has in mind is the sort of knowledge he claims to have discovered and which he labels

<sup>12</sup> The source for the following discussion is the text following *Ord.* I dist.3 pt.1 q.4 (ed. Vaticana, vol III 1954 p.123 n.202): “Quaero an aliqua veritas certa et sincera possit naturaliter cognosci ab intellectu viatoris, absque lucis increatae speciali illustratione”. This is the starting point for the interlocution with Henry of Ghent. For the detailed treatment of this interlocution within the context of skepticism, see again M. Pickavé (2010, p.61ff).

<sup>13</sup> *Ord.* I d.3, pt. 1, q.4 (ed. Vaticana, pp. 146-147, nn.240-241).

<sup>14</sup> For the conception of epistemonic proof, see L. M. de Rijk (2002, pp. 593ff).



intuitive cognition (*cognition visiva* or epistemic vision), an existential awareness of an immediately present and contingent state of affairs. Intuitive cognition furnishes the mind with evidence for existential judgements of contingent propositions, since it involves both the simple apprehension and propositional knowledge simultaneously, while Henry has separated them. Scotus contrasted this form of knowledge with abstractive cognition, which does not involve an existential judgement, but rather abstracts from the indexical hold of the here and now.

The class of propositions which refer to our own acts belong to the epistemic type of cognitive intuitions, for they are clearly contingent propositions. An intuitive cognition would be, for example, when I am presented the proposition through perceptual knowledge, that “I am seeing the golden horse on the top of Martin’s Church”. They have the form of present tensed first personal sentences, and their contents apparently are not restricted to information gained by sense perception or by intellectual perception. By affirming that they are self-evident, Scotus means that the senses would be only an occasion for their truth, but are not causally sufficient without intellectual knowledge. He traces his account of evidence of our own mental acts back to Augustine’s *cogito* argument, according to which we have an unshakable certainty about the occurrence of our own mental acts such as “I see”, “I doubt”, or “I am awake”. As intuitive cognitions, Scotus seemed committed to say that they are factive states as to imply the truth of their contents, and therefore they are regarded as certain cognitions. To be sure, on Scotus’ account, it is not clear whether what we are immediately aware of are the objects of the external world or our own mental acts; Scotus may have assimilated these points in a sort of inchoate mental language.

This account of the certainty of intuitive cognitions clearly motivates a rejection of the principle of indistinguishability of identical phenomenal items, which figured in ancient skeptical strategies and in Henry of Ghent’s illuminationism. Scotus thinks this to be an implausible epistemic consideration of mental operations, for he thinks intuitive knowledge is a factive state which is discriminable for us as we reflect about our own mental acts.

### III

The story hereby presented suggests that Henry adhered to a form of illuminationism which Scotus rejected while advancing his views on modal epistemology; I think it may be very plausible to say Scotus' objections to Henry's epistemology discusses a principle of indistinguishability, which is clearly a skeptical principle, and that he thereby evaluates and seeks to reject skeptical arguments, even though on the putative basis of skeptical consequences. And for its epistemological function, medieval skepticism would be a plausible historiographical category.

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