Scotists and many or most other theologians have long opposed the Thomist thesis that if someone possessing charity commits a venial sin, then the venial sin is referred habitually to God as the ultimate end.¹ Thomas Aquinas’ texts touching this point are themselves confusing, and there are different interpretations of how he does or should hold that venial sins are so referred.² Although this topic is in itself interesting, it seems to me that it can obscure an underlying general issue between Thomas and other thinkers over the way in which individual acts are referred to God. John Duns Scotus is significant because of his influence on later thinkers and also because he is among the first to use the terminology that Thomas had used, namely the threefold distinction between actual, virtual and habitual referral.³ Although the two thinkers use the same words, I will argue that their usage is slightly different, which can be seen both in their works and in the way in which the understanding of intention develops among Franciscan theologians. In this context, the different usage shows a different


understanding of willing and intention, which is masked by the apparent similarity of the language.

Thomas is the first thinker whom I know whose terminology closely resembles that of later writers. Bonaventure reflects contemporary and earlier thinkers by distinguishing only between an actual and a habitual ordering of acts to God.\(^4\) The actual referral of a deed is when God is thought of and willed as an end, whereas the habitual ordering occurs when someone commits an act that in some way is caused by a previous actual ordering to God. Someone might intend to give money for God’s sake and then in subsequent giving cease to think about God. The first relation to God is ‘actual’, whereas the second is ‘habitual’. Because the act with a habitual relation stems from an act with an actual relation, such an act is still meritorious.

Thomas uses the term ‘virtual referral’ to account for many aspects of what Bonaventure calls ‘habitual referral’. Thomas also uses the term ‘habitual referral’, but in a different way. For Thomas, acts are meritorious if they are either actually or virtually referred to God, but not if they are habitually ordered. Thomas thinks that there is an habitual order when an agent who is ordered correctly to God through charity performs a deed that does not violate charity and yet cannot be ordered actually or virtually to God. He includes deliberate acts such as venial sins, but in at least one passage he discusses the non-deliberative act of sleeping. Thomas’ distinction between the three kinds of ordering became standard for many later writers, although they drop Thomas’ use of the habitual order to cover non-deliberative acts. The difference between Thomas’ virtual order and that of Bonaventure, as we shall see, is that Bonaventure focuses more on the way in which a virtually ordered act is caused by another actually ordered act, whereas for Thomas the virtual order depends more on the kind of act and the agent. Such later thinkers as John Duns Scotus employ Thomas’ terminology and consider the three kinds of referral together systematically. However, although Scotus uses this terminology, it seems to me that his understanding of virtual order is more influenced by Bonaventure’s understanding of habitual order than it is by Thomas and his immediate followers.

The development of the relevant distinctions for understanding the difference between Thomas and Scotus comes to light in three issues.

\(^4\) Cf. Bonaventure, *In II Sent.*, dist. 41, art. 1, q. 3, ad 6 (ed. Collegium S. Bonaventurae), in: *Opera omnia* 2, Quaracchi 1885, p. 946.