Richard Cross


Richard Cross’s latest book on John Duns Scotus provides the first comprehensive study of the cognition theory advanced by this ingenious and understudied medieval thinker.\(^1\) Drawing on his considerable expertise with Scotus’ thought, Cross disentangles the threads of Scotus’ theory of cognition from the dauntingly dense texts through which they are woven and re-weaves them into a fresh, compelling, and accessible narrative.

The book begins with a contextualizing introduction and proceeds to cover all the major themes of Scotus’ cognition theory: sensory perception (Chapter 1); intuitive vs. abstractive cognition and the ontology of intelligible species (Chapters 2-4); the ontology and causation of occurrent acts (Chapters 5-6); the powers of the soul (Chapter 7). The last three chapters focus on mental content, with a crucial distinction between content and intentionality (Chapter 8), the linguistic character of mental content (Chapter 9), and the ontological status of _esse intentionale/intelligibile_, which Cross identifies with mental content (Chapter 10). Along the way, other topics such as intellectual memory and self-consciousness are also addressed. The conclusion summarizes the novelties in the interpretation of Scotus presented and situates Scotus’ contributions historically. Interestingly, the Scotus who emerges from these pages anticipates Ockham’s theory of cognition to a much greater degree than has been previously supposed, with respect to intuitive cognition, mental language, intentionality, and consciousness.

One of the virtues of _Duns Scotus’s Theory of Cognition_—in contrast to its namesake—is its readability. Cross unpacks technical scholastic concepts and terms in an accessible and engaging way, using a contemporary philosophical vernacular. (Sometimes, though, the translation to this vernacular happens a little too easily; the key notion of ‘content’ is transferred univocally in its contemporary sense to Scotus with rather little ado, considering that this notion is intended to capture a feature of Scotus’ thought that is central to the book’s project.) Despite its accessible tone and comprehensive character, however, the book is no introductory survey, but rather paints an interesting new picture of Scotus. In addition to offering Cross’s take on existing interpretive debates, it opens up new lines of investigation into hitherto unexplored areas of the Subtle Doctor’s thought.

\(^1\) Dominique Demange, _Jean Duns Scot. La théorie du savoir_, Paris: Vrin 2007, addresses cognition from a more epistemological than psychological perspective.
An important—perhaps the central—thesis of the book is that medieval and contemporary readers of Scotus have been mistaken in seeing *esse intelligibile* or *esse intentionale* as having a certain metaphysical status or spooky quasi-existence distinct from “real being” (*esse reale*). Rather, Cross argues, Scotus is merely describing a cognitive act’s content, and this content does not constitute an item in addition to the act, but is reducible to the structure of the act itself (Chapters 8, 10; more on this in a moment). Another theme that receives a substantial amount of attention is, as one would expect, intuitive and abstractive cognition (Chapters 2-4). In intuitive cognition, an object is cognized “as existent and present,” whereas abstractive cognition of common natures prescinds from the existence, presence, and particularity of this individual and can be had in the absence of its object. Cross argues (agreeing with Bérubé against Pasnau, Day, and Marenbon) that for Scotus intuitive intellectual cognition is partly caused by sensory perception. Thus although intuitive cognition needs no intelligible species, it does rely on both a sensible species and an occurrent sensory act.

Attention to developmental possibilities, moreover, enables Cross to complicate existing scholarly narratives, as when he identifies a development in Scotus’ theory of the powers of the soul (Chapter 7). Initially Scotus tentatively describes the powers as formally distinct from each other and “unitively contained” in the soul as *propria* (this is the view usually straightforwardly associated with Scotus). But in the *Quodlibet*, he no longer attempts to adjudicate between this view and a competing view now associated with Ockham, according to which power-terms merely name the soul as the principle of diverse operations. For Cross, this is a sign of Scotus’ increasing uncertainty through his career about the best way of resolving the famous debate over the powers of the soul.

One important new theme in Scotus that the book brings to light is that of consciousness, phenomenal “feel,” and introspective self-knowledge (Chapters 1 and 2; I return to this in a moment). Scotus has remained conspicuously absent from the recent wave of research on thirteenth- and fourteenth-century accounts of consciousness, so this addition to the repertoire is especially timely. Interestingly, according to Cross, it is only once Scotus has accepted the possibility of intuitive cognition of extramental objects—which implies abandoning the requirement that all intellectual cognition be accompanied by an imaginative representation—that he defends intuitive introspection of the soul.

Another innovative interpretation concerns mental language (Chapter 9). Cross argues that because Scotus equates the Augustinian “mental word” with the intellectual act and asserts the possibility of many simultaneously existing