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Intuitive and Abstractive Cognition

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The theory of intuitive and abstractive cognition was developed by John Duns Scotus in the late thirteenth century, and it dominated the discussion about cognition from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. The theory was changed and debated by the major philosophers of the time including William of Ockham, Peter Auriol, Gregory of Rimini, and Peter of Ailly.

The theory of intuitive and abstractive cognition is not simply a rehashing of the problem of abstraction, as it developed in the Middle Ages. In line with the texts of Aristotle and Alexander of Aphrodisias, abstraction was the process of separation of a form. It was either the gathering of similarities to constitute a universal concept or the extraction, the stripping off of the material and singular conditions of the form. In these cases, abstraction was based on the act of the intellect, which is the only faculty able to grasp the abstracted or universal form, whereas the senses grasp the singular together with all its concrete and material conditions. The Peripatetic saying that only the intellect knows the universal does not necessarily mean that it has no access to the singular, since the form could be present in a certain mode of being in the individual substance itself. But it was difficult to hold that the intellect knows directly the singular as such. Faith certainly implies that the divine intellect knows the singulars directly, at least in the case of humans since some are to be saved while others damned. But it was generally thought that this capacity is restricted to the divine intellect. In the thirteenth century, as far as human cognition is concerned, there were conflicting views between those that supported the view that intellection is exclusively of universals such as Robert Grosseteste, Alexander of Hales and Albert the Great, and those, notably Thomas Aquinas, that supported the view that intellection is indirectly of singulars, in a dematerialized form, but proper to the singular. The theory of intuitive and abstractive cognition, on the other hand, is linked to the emergence of the idea that a singular can be grasped directly by the intellect itself. It was in the Franciscan, anti-Thomist, tradition that this theory was developed. Perhaps the theory of perception developed in the *Perspectiva* of Roger Bacon contributes to change the idea of the direct cognition of an object. In the *Correctorium fratris Thome* of William de la Mare, which was adopted in 1282 as an official position of the Franciscan order, Aquinas was criticized for having maintained that the intellect does not cognize singulars. Without a doubt, this is a simplification. But what is at stake is the possibility of a direct cognition of the singular. And it is from such a direct cognition that the idea of intuition or intuitive cognition is formed. In this sense, the theory is not truly formed until the last quarter of the thirteenth century, and finds its canonical expression in Duns Scotus before becoming a central component of theories of cognition from the fourteenth until the sixteenth century.

The idea of intuition refers to vision. Since Augustine, the idea of vision has been applied not only to sensible vision, and not only to the inner vision of an image, but also to thought. Augustine generally used the term *visio* in this sense, but he introduces the verb *intueri* to describe the act of grasping the eternal reasons, and calls *intuitus* this immediate act of the mind (*De trinitate*, IX, vi, 9–11). The verb *intueri* and the adverb *intuitive* were first used in conjunction with singular cognition by Matthew of Aquasparta. We find them again used by Vital du Four, John Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham. The Augustinian origin is reinforced by the theory of vision, as it was received from the optics of Alhazen, where certain and direct vision by a straight ray, is named *intuitio*.

As is well known, it was Duns Scotus that develops the standard theory of intuitive and abstractive cognition. The most explicit text is the *Quodlibetal Questions*. In question 6, Scotus is led to examine the beatific vision. He then examines the capacities of the human intellect itself. It is hence in his treatment of the intellect in relation to the beatific vision that he distinguishes two simple acts of apprehension (*Questiones quodlibetales*, VI, §§. 18–20). The essential distinguishing criterion takes into account the existence or nonexistence of the object. The first type of act is, in fact, indifferent to the object's existence or nonexistence, or rather the presence or absence of the object. Scotus justifies the acceptance of such an act by our internal experience. He evokes the intellection of a universal, which is indifferent to its existence in a *suppositum*, and what happens in science, in which we know the conclusion of a demonstration, whether the signified objects either exist or not. This act is called "abstractive." One might ask why? The answer is because it abstracts from something, namely primarily from the existence or nonexistence of the thing. Scotus, however, immediately changes this characterization by highlighting the indifference with respect to the presence or absence of the thing, since one thing can exist while being absent. The context of this description of the acts of cognition, namely the question of the beatific vision, is important, since it implies a "face-to-face" vision. But it is here extended to a mode of cognition, generally characterized.

To this first type of simple act of the intellect, Scotus contrasts another one that relies uniquely on the object as present and existing. He admits that we do not experience this with much certainty, but he justifies it with reasoning. We can draw an analogy with sense, since it grasps a present object, and that act is implicitly considered a greater perfection. Hence, the intellect would be less perfect than the sense if it did not grasp the object in itself, but only in a derived image.

There are several other expositions of this theory in Scotus' works, but none of them changes this pattern. Certain passages emphasize more than others the fact that an intuitive cognition grasps the thing as it is in itself, *in se*, while abstractive cognition captures only a *similitudo*, or a species (*Reportata parisiensa*). This way of presenting the contrast will find its way into many texts of the fourteenth century, as we shall see.

One issue raised by some of Scotus' texts is whether or not we truly have an intuitive cognition in this life, or if it is a capacity of our intellect that is only realized after death. A text from the *Questions on the Metaphysics* (Book II, q. 3) seems to exclude it from this life. However, a text of the *Quodlibetal Questions* does not deny this possibility. Scotus says only that we do not experience it with certainty, and in the *Opus oxoniense* (dist. 3, q. IX) he says that we do have an intuitive cognition *pro statu isto*. An objection that will be dealt with by Scotus' successors is caused by the fact that on his view, two distinct acts can have the same object. But on Scotus' theory of cognition, we can say that the same object is known by different formal reasons.

On the model of an intuitive cognition as a vision face to face, it is necessary that its object exists and is present. Yet from another point of view, it is important for Scotus to differentiate what actually exists, on one hand, from what is simply possible (and therefore may not even exist), or what is necessary and what can perhaps be thought independently of its actuality. Scotus, therefore, introduces a surprising distinction, which was taken over by his successors, between a perfect intuitive cognition, which presents something real and given to the intellect, and an imperfect intuitive cognition. The latter type accounts for memory as well as for vision of the future in the case of prophetic vision.

The theory of intuitive and abstractive cognition is found in most theologians of the fourteenth century. Peter Auriol begins with the definition of intuitive cognition as the cognition of a thing as present, whereas abstractive cognition is of the thing as absent. But he inserts this distinction in his analysis of experience and optical illusions. I can not only judge but also see something other than this. Hence, we must distinguish what he calls *esse apparens* from real being. *Esse apparens* is not as

an intermediary entity, as William of Ockham believed or pretended to read into Auriol, but the very appearance of the thing to my intellect. The difference that arises in some cases (illusions) between this apparent or intentional being and real or subjective being leads one to think that my intellectual act terminates at this *esse apparens*. Consequently, an intuitive cognition terminates at the being as it appears. The difference is reformulated by highlighting the direct character of an intuitive cognition that makes the object appear as present in its *presentialitas*.

However, it was mainly Ockham's theory that stimulated discussion due to the modifications it introduces into Scotus' theory. William of Ockham is concerned with ensuring the epistemological realism of his theory of cognition, criticizing Auriol's theory, which he perceives as a skeptical threat. Intuitive cognition is the starting point for all intellectual activities, not by a process of drawing out a form, but through a series of acts, which, ultimately, depend on direct contact with the thing itself.

This – at least in the mature theory where the concept is viewed as an act of intellection – causes the rise of the concept in the intellect, which in turn is viewed as a natural sign. Such a concept is at first singular but it may be followed by a concept that abstracts either from the existence of the thing or from a particular feature, in order to form a universal concept, through a confused apprehension of a plurality of things bearing a certain resemblance. Ockham often insists on the fact that intuitive and abstractive cognitions do not differ in their objects and that both terminate in the same thing.

Furthermore, things do not have different formalities (*formalitates*) within them that could be objects of different intellections, since Ockham only admits of real distinctions. These two acts are independent of one another, although in our actual state one presupposes the other.

It is clear that in Scotus, these cognitions are simple acts prior to any judgment. In a way this is still the case with Ockham, but the Ockhamist definition shifts to a characterization that bases this distinction on the types of judgments that these different acts allow.

Abstractive cognition has several meanings. In one sense, it means a cognition, which, given that it abstracts from certain traits of the thing, may be suitable for many singulars. In this sense, therefore, cognition allows for the formation of universal concepts through a joint apprehension of a plurality of singular things. But it is not this sense that identifies the abstraction to the universal, which is the most important here. In another sense, "we understand an abstractive cognition in the way in which it abstracts from existence or non-existence, and from other conditions that, in a contingent manner, happen to a thing or are predicated of it." Up to this point, we are close to Scotus. But the main thing is that, on that basis, two relations to the thing are characterized, and these descriptions are immediately connected with the types of judgments possible. These are Ockham's proper definition of intuitive and abstractive cognition. An intuitive cognition of a thing is a cognition such that, by it, I can know if the thing exists or not. In other words, the intellect, which perfectly captures these terms or signs, and also what they signify, is forced to assent to a proposition stating that the thing exists, if it exists. Consequently, such a cognition will also allow with certainty the formulation of judgments about contingent truths. Conversely, abstractive cognition is that by which I cannot judge whether an object exists or not, and that does not permit me to have knowledge about contingent truths.

Ockham's theory thus departs from Scotus' position, although it depends on it, since the presence or absence of the thing is not the primary criterion for the definition of these two kinds of cognitions.

Ockham pushes to the breaking point the idea that the very nature of the act alone should be the criterion, and these acts then are the basis of these two different types of judgments.

Ockham's theory serves as a point of reference throughout the fourteenth century. However, it encountered resistance. Thus, in his *Lectures on the Sentences* (Book I, dist. 3, q. 3, art. 1), Gregory of Rimini stays close to the Scotist view but develops it in several directions. First, he applies the distinction between intuitive and abstractive cognition as well to sensitive as to intellectual cognition. Although Scotus used the comparison with the senses, the problem was raised by him in the context

of the beatific vision, which concerns the intellect alone. Gregory of Rimini defines an intuitive cognition as that by which “something is formally known in itself,” and an abstractive cognition as that by which “something is formally known through some representation.” But he goes on to explicitly distinguish the real existence from the type of presence required here. An intuitive cognition does not have as a criterion that the object actually exists in reality or not; the difference is between the immediate presence of the thing and the presence of a representative intermediary. Consequently, an abstractive cognition does not abstract from real existence, but from what is named “the objective presence of the known thing.” In an intuitive cognition, it is the thing that is present “objectively” (*obiective*), that is, as something in front of the intellect and facing it directly – whether it exists, or that our cognition, by a natural or divine power, ends at an object that does not exist at all. Abstractive cognition, on the other hand, abstracts from such an “objective presence” and ends immediately at a “representation.”

These ideas are reflected in Peter of Ailly. In his *Commentary on the Sentences*, he begins by literally following Ockham’s presentation, claiming that an abstractive cognition does not allow me to judge whether something exists when it exists or does not exist, when it does not exist. But further, he insists on the fact that abstractive cognition gives us the object “in a representation” thereby restating, via Gregory of Rimini, certain Scotistic formulations. In the *Commentary on the Sentences* as well as in the *Treatise on the Soul*, the most appropriate formulation seems to be that “an intuitive cognition is a simple cognition by which some thing is formally known in itself in an immediate way, while an abstractive cognition is a simple cognition by which something is formally known by means of a representation.” Hence, abstractive cognition does not, properly speaking, set aside the existence of the thing, but its *praesentialitas obiectiva*. The thing is not facing it as an object (i.e., what is placed in front of the intellect), but as “means” that is representative of this thing (either an image or another type of sign). Conversely, in the intuitive cognition, “the thing itself is the object for the cognizer, as immediately present to him.”

The modification that William of Ockham made to the definition of an intuitive cognition led him to formulate the hypothesis of an intuitive cognition of a nonexistent thing. This thesis has perplexed contemporaries, but it has also been overestimated and overly interpreted by many commentators. Ockham’s concern is mainly about the separation of the act, analyzed in itself and in its relations to other acts, from the thing at which it terminates. This real distinction implies that, perhaps not in the course of nature, at least according to the absolute power of God, we can conceive of one without the other, as is the case with all truly distinct things. This argument does not ruin in any way the fact that, in the ordained power of God, intuitive cognition supposes the presence of the thing. Moreover, his own definition has the consequence that has not always been emphasized (see *Quodlibet* V, q. 5) that if an intuitive cognition enables me to judge that something exists when it exists, or does not exist when it does not exist, then in the supernatural case of an intuitive cognition of the nonexistent, I should judge that this thing does not exist! Of course, this is hardly conceivable in the normal course of events, but in any case, there would be no deception here, certainly not divine deception.

This hypothesis of an intuitive cognition of nonexistent objects, *de potentia absoluta*, was widely accepted after Ockham, though differently used. It demonstrates the widespread influence of the Ockhamist theses. Gregory of Rimini and Peter of Ailly both repeat it, without opening the door to skepticism. Indeed, Walter Chatton tried to infer skeptical consequences of Ockham’s theory: God could produce such a representation that I should formulate an existential judgment, in the absence of the thing. But for Ockham, this would be a belief, not an intuitive cognition. In any case, it is true that this idea would supply some of Ockham’s successors (like Walter Chatton, Adam Wodeham, Richard Fitzralph, John Rodington in Oxford, and Peter of Ailly in Paris) with the hypothesis of Divine deception. This hypothesis had not been developed by itself, nor as a simple radicalization of demonic

deceptions, but as part of a broader debate on the discussion of the relation of divine power to the course of nature, including what the natural process of cognition is concerned with. It does not in any way led to a renouncement of epistemological realism. It was part of a development of certain conceptual tools and arguments allowing for a new way to think about the status of a concept and its object, as well as about the concept of evidence. In less than a century, the theory of intuitive and abstractive cognition challenged the traditional Aristotelian theory of abstraction, as well as the theory of divine illumination, and became one of the major elements in the transformation of the medieval theory of cognition.

See also: [Adam Wodeham](#); [Albert the Great](#); [Alexander of Hales](#); [Certainty](#); [Epistemology](#); [Gregory of Rimini](#); [John Duns Scotus](#); [Peter Auriol](#); [Peter of Ailly](#); [Robert Grosseteste](#); [Thomas Aquinas](#); [William of Ockham](#)

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