

OCKHAM'S FLYING SOUL AN ARGUMENT AGAINST HENRY OF GHENT ON THE POWERS OF THE SOUL

EL ALMA VOLADORA DE OCKHAM: UN ARGUMENTO CONTRA ENRIQUE DE GANTE SOBRE LOS PODERES DEL ALMA

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Abstract

Medieval thinkers unanimously believed a human soul has various powers. Yet, the latter point is also nearly the only one they agreed upon. In the paper, I focus on two contrary opinions maintained by Henry of Ghent and William of Ockham. Whereas Henry of Ghent held powers of the soul are defined with respect to the activities they are powers-for, Ockham refuted such a contention. To make his point Ockham launches a thought experiment: if God created an intellective soul without creating anything else, wouldn't the powers in this soul still exist fully? Upon succinctly presenting Henry of Ghent's view on the powers of the soul, I provide a detailed analysis of Ockham's counterargument. I argue Henry could still reply to Ockham's rebuttal, and show how the latter bares a remote resemblance to Avicenna's flying man argument.

Keywords

Henry of Ghent; William of Ockham; powers of the soul; relations; flying man

Resumen

Los pensadores medievales estuvieron unánimemente de acuerdo en que el alma humana tiene diversas facultades. Sin embargo, este punto es casi el único en el que estuvieron de acuerdo. En el artículo, me centro en dos opiniones contrarias mantenidas por Enrique de Gante y Guillermo de Ockham. Mientras que Enrique de Gante sostenía que las facultades del alma se definen con respecto a las actividades para las que son facultades, Ockham refutó tal afirmación. Para respaldar su punto, Ockham lanza un experimento mental: si Dios creara un alma intelectual sin crear nada más, ¿no existirían plenamente las facultades en esta alma? Tras presentar sucintamente la visión de Enrique

de Gante sobre las facultades del alma, proporciono un análisis detallado de la contraargumentación de Ockham. Argumento que Enrique aún podría responder a la refutación de Ockham, y muestro cómo esta última guarda un parecido remoto con el argumento del hombre volador de Avicena.

Palabras clave

Enrique de Gante; Guillermo de Ockham; facultades del alma; relaciones; hombre volador

Introduction

When we think, love, believe, or exercise any other similar mental activity, these activities are usually directed towards some object. When we love, say, we love *someone* or have loving thoughts *about something* as opposed to experiencing some pure, abstract, and objectless love. Indeed, saying “Cindy loves” might strike us as fairly meaningless unless complemented with the object of Cindy’s love, whether she loves Greg, or that she loves her chocolate dark. In other words, the objects of human mental activities seem to be so inherently tied to the actual experiences of those activities as to be their essential constituents.

Ever since Anthony Kenny’s fundamental venture into the topic of emotions and their objects,¹ the issue of the relation between a particular mental state and its object has been widely debated by contemporary scholars of philosophy and psychology. Scholars have raised various concerns, pointing at just how difficult it is to define what an object of a mental state is and just how and to what extent the latter is truly determined by the former.² This paper proposes to examine some arguments that tackle the same issues way before the contemporary debate. I will focus on two medieval philosophers, Henry of Ghent and William of Ockham, both of whom offered insights into the mechanism of human psychology and provided divergent answers to the question how determinative, if at all, the objects of human psychological capacities are for those capacities.

¹ Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion, and Will* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), not to even mention Brentano’s theory of intentionality and all its echoes.

² With emotions and their objects the literature spans from early responses to Kenny’s theory in J. R. S. Wilson, *Emotion and Object* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), and, for instance, Richard E. Aquila, “Emotions, Objects and Causal Relations”, *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 26/3-4 (1974): 279-285, to contemporary repercussions like Fabrice Teroni, “Emotions and Formal Objects”, *Dialectica* 61/3 (2007): 395-415, or Daniel Shargel who makes an attempt to argue that emotions lack intentional objects whatsoever, in Daniel Shargel, “Emotions Without Objects”, *Biology and Philosophy* 30 (2015): 831-844. Needless to say, scholarly literature on the intentionality widely construed is vast and – with disciplines like the philosophy of mind and cognitive science – also ever growing.

When speaking about the powers of the soul – which for medieval thinkers comprised a wide range of human abilities including thinking, willing, sensing, digesting, and also experiencing emotions like love – Henry of Ghent claimed that the powers of the soul are to be defined in terms of the activities to which they are related, i.e., the activities for which they are powers.³ On Henry's view, the activity (and by extension the object of that activity) essentially determines the power itself. In other terms, if Cindy's love is not a love for someone or a love of something, it does not make sense for us to speak of it as love at all.

William of Ockham, however, challenged Henry's conception that powers are relational in nature. To prove his point, Ockham employed a brief yet compelling argument: powers cannot be defined in terms of relations, claims Ockham, since God could create an intellective soul before he created anything else, and the powers of this soul would – even in such a world where there would be no relata around – still exist completely.⁴ What Ockham wanted to point out with this counterargument, it seems, is that powers are so essential to the soul that they continue to exist even when there is no object on which they can act. Even a soul in such a pre-created world would still be able to love. Yet, however plausible Ockham's objection to Henry might be, it still seems to remain rather limited. For one, we could still defend Henry and argue that positing powers in a void-like world only inhabited by a single soul is, in turn, nonsensical. For what good would the powers do, and would they still be powers at all, if they never got to exercise the activity for which they are powers?

In what follows, I will first succinctly present Henry of Ghent's view on the powers of the soul as relations and then analyse and evaluate Ockham's counter arguments against Henry's account. As it will turn out, Ockham's refutation was in fact inspired by Ockham's Franciscan predecessor, John Duns Scotus. Both Ockham and Scotus' rebuttal of Henry's view, however, fail to fully engage with the metaphysical commitments that undergird Henry's view on the powers of the soul. Finally, in the concluding part of the paper, I will briefly point to the potential link Ockham's counter argument against Henry bears with the most famous thought experiment regarding a man in a void-like world, i.e., Avicenna's flying man argument.

Henry of Ghent on the Powers of the Soul

Henry's most extensive and detailed treatment of the powers of the soul can be found in his *Quodlibet* 3.14.⁵ There, he first dismisses Aquinas' account which describes the

³ Henry of Ghent, *Quodlibeta*, edited by J. Badius (Louvain: Bibliothèque S. J., 1961 reprint). I provide more detailed references below.

⁴ William of Ockham, *Questiones in librum secundum Sententiarum = Reportatio*, II., q. 20, *Opera Theologica V*, edited by G. Gál and R. Wood (St. Bonaventure N.Y.: St Bonaventure University, 1981), 432, 10-15.

⁵ The full English translation accompanied by a succinct exposition of Henry's account was made

powers of the soul as distinct from the essence of the soul. The overarching question to which Henry responded differently than Aquinas is the following: how is it that living beings are – thanks to their souls – always alive but not always carrying out their life activities like thinking, willing, sensing, or digesting, which medieval thinkers understood as the “powers of the soul”. Alternatively, how can the soul as the principle of life be at all times enlivening a human being and yet not at all times performing its natural functions?

On Aquinas’ view, powers of the soul should not be identified with the essence of the soul precisely because, if one were to do that, it would be impossible to explain how these powers are not always active.⁶ As Aquinas points out, if the powers were the same as the essence of the soul, which first and foremost enlivens the body, human beings would have needed to incessantly think, sense, or digest without pause as long as they lived. Hence, for Aquinas the powers of the soul are something over and above the essence of the soul and are not to be identified with the soul’s essence.

Henry of Ghent departs from Aquinas’ view, arguing that it is untenable on the pain of infinite regress.⁷ For if a power is something distinct from the essence, we would need to posit another power that actually enables the essence to use some power, in order to explain how the soul becomes powerful. This however raises the question what would enable the first power to be linked to that further power. Since we can continue positing

freely available online by its author J.T. Paasch (Henry of Ghent, *Quodlibet* 3.14, translated by J.T. Paasch. Available at: Academia.edu) and is soon to appear in *Medieval Philosophical Writings on the Powers of the Soul from Aquinas to Ockham*, translated and edited by C. L. Löwe and R. L. Friedman, with B. Embry, J.T. Paasch, and J.H.L. van den Bercken (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming). I am most grateful to Russell Friedman who shared some of the excerpts of this forthcoming book with me. J.T. Paasch writes about Henry’s view on the powers of the soul also in a chapter entitled “Powers”, in *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, edited by R. Cross and J.T. Paasch (New York: Routledge, 2021), 111-114; and in his book *Divine Production in Late Medieval Trinitarian Theology Henry of Ghent, Duns Scotus, and William Ockham* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 117-122. For positioning Henry within the general medieval discussion on the powers of the soul and their nature, see the still useful Celestino Piana, “La controversia della distinzione fra anima e potenze ai primordi della Scuola Scotista”, in *Miscellanea del centro di studi medievali*, vol. 1 (Milano: Società Editrice Vita e pensiero, 1956), 65-169. To date, not many scholars focused on Henry’s view in sufficient detail. For a brief analysis, see Adam Wood, “The Faculties of the Soul and Some Medieval Mind-Body Problems”, *The Thomist* 75/4 (2011): 602-615. Only recently, Henry of Ghent’s view on the powers of the soul received a more extensive treatment in Can Laurens Löwe and Dominik Perler, “Complexity and Unity: Peter of John Olivi and Henry of Ghent on the Composition of the Soul”, *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales* 89/2 (2022): 365-386.

⁶ Aquinas tackles the issue of the powers of the soul in *QDA*, q. 12 and *ST I*, q. 77, art. 1. For a detailed analysis of Aquinas’ position, see Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 143-170.

⁷ Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.8; 13-15. All English translations are taken from J.T. Paasch (as quoted above), who used as a basis of his translation the 16th century Latin edition by Jodicus Badius (Paris, 1518), reprinted in Louvain: Bibliothèque S. J., 1961.

such powers *ad infinitum*, says Henry, it is necessary that some powers be identified with their essences, i.e., it is necessary to posit essences themselves as being powerful.

Henry considers the example of fire and its power, heat.⁸ If fire was not capable of heating on the basis of what it is, i.e., its essence, then we would have needed to posit another power that would enable the fire to heat in the first place. Furthermore, even this power would need a further power to be able to come into force. Thus, we would end up with an infinite regress, “unless we stopped at something through which the other acts and which is essentially the power.”⁹ For Henry, precisely as is the case with fire and heat, the essence of the soul and its powers entirely overlap: the soul itself is powerful. In Henry’s view, powers cannot be distinct from the soul itself. Having settled the question of their identity, Henry now faces the old question of how is it that the powers are not always active despite the fact that they are the same as the essence of the soul.

Henry proceeds to resolve this issue by maintaining a distinction between active and passive powers.¹⁰ Whereas only God, who is *per se* powerful, is fully and essentially active, and only prime matter is fully and essentially passive, every creature in between these two extreme ends of the spectrum,¹¹ is never either entirely passive or entirely active. Thus, even though the powers of the soul are the same as the essence of the soul, this in no way means that they are always active. Henry notes that creatures, in contrast to God, always depend on something else in order to go into act. The powers in the created world, Henry contends, are “not always operating, but only when they are brought to act by another.”¹²

To clarify what he has in mind, Henry again employs the example of fire: even though, in his view, heat and fire are essentially one and the same thing, their identity does not imply that fire is at all times heating. Rather, fire heats only in the presence of some heatable object.¹³ Furthermore, even if there was just heat, abstracted from the materiality of fire itself, this heat would still not be always heating, since to heat, it needs an object which it can heat. Thus, as Henry insists, even the heat in its purest form would necessarily need the right external circumstances prompting the power to spring forth into action.¹⁴ As Henry sees it, no power can fully activate itself of its own accord. Rather,

⁸ Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.8.

⁹ Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.8.

¹⁰ First introduced at the very beginning of Henry’s *Quodl.*, 3.14 and constituting the general frame of his discussion on the powers of the soul. Note that Henry’s distinction between an active and a passive power highlights a different point from the classical distinction between having the power to cause change on the one hand and having the power to undergo change on the other. Rather, for Henry here, an active power – as opposed to passive power – can spring into action completely out of its own accord.

¹¹ Aristotelian origins of such a spectrum with two ends, one totally active the other totally passive, is found in *Meteorology* IV 390a3-7.

¹² Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.8.

¹³ Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.13.

¹⁴ Henry refers to the example of such abstracted heat repeatedly: see Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14. 13; 21; and 86.

it acts only when triggered by external stimuli.¹⁵

In Henry's view, the powers of the soul are just like the power of fire: they only spring forth into action when there is something present on which they can act. Our souls are thus at all times enlivening our bodies but activate their powers only when triggered by external stimuli. Put differently, a soul always remains the principle of life but becomes a principle of operation only in the right circumstances. As Henry puts it: "the form in every single thing gives the act of being and the principle of operation, and it is called 'essence' insofar as it is the principle of being and it is called 'power' insofar as it is the principle of operation."¹⁶

Finally, despite Henry's claim that the powers of the soul overlap with the essence of the soul, Henry still maintains that they "differ from it and from one another", but this is "solely by reason of respect" to the activity they are powers-for.¹⁷ On his view, the soul has different respects to diverse acts "and it is from this that it takes on the names of diverse powers."¹⁸ Henry succinctly concludes that "a power is said to be what it is from its relation to act."¹⁹ Thus, what a specific power is a 'power-for' forms a constitutive part of what this power is. In other words, Henry affirms that to define a power one needs to know how this power is related to an act, i.e., what this power is a power-for.

To recapitulate, Henry claims that powers are the very same things as substances. The heat is the same as fire, as are the powers of thinking, willing, sensing, or digesting the same thing as the human soul. However, both the powers of the soul and the power of fire only get exercised when there is something out there that prompts their activation. In the case of fire, this would be some heatable object, and in the case of the powers of the soul, some thinkable, willable, sensible, or other object corresponding with the powers of our souls. For Henry, powers can only be defined in relation to what they are powers-for. Their relation to act is their essential character. Or, as Henry himself puts it while speaking about causal powers in general: "Concerning power in as much as it is a power: a power is that which is spoken of with respect to an act, in the way that a power is not an absolute thing, but rather a respect that is founded upon that absolute thing."²⁰

¹⁵ Later in the *Quodl.* 3.14, Henry goes at great pains to show how the external stimuli work for different powers of the human soul, first the sentient and then the rational, see, Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.48-90.

¹⁶ Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.26.

¹⁷ Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.24.

¹⁸ Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.42.

¹⁹ Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.67: "Potentia enim id quod est dicitur ex relatione ad actum." See also Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.35: "Potentia enim non definitur nisi ex relatione ad actum."

²⁰ "De ratione potentiae in quantum potentia, est quod dicatur ad actum, ita quod nihil absolutum sit, sed solus respectus fundatus in re super aliquo absolute" (Henry of Ghent, *Summa* 35.2, Henrici de Gandavo Opera Omnia 28, edited by G. A. Wilson [Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994], 15), the English translation is mine.

William of Ockham Against Henry of Ghent

Ockham discards the notion of the powers of the soul as relational. His brief but heavily loaded rejection of Henry's view is to be found in Ockham's *Reportatio* and merits quotation in its entirety:

If there were a relation of this sort in the soul, it would be either a real relation or a relation of reason.

It is not a relation of reason, because a relation of reason is due to some intellect's act of comparing; but the powers exist completely [*perfectae*] in the essence of the soul prior to any act of the intellect.

Nor is it a real relation, because even he [sc. Henry] agrees that there is never a real relation without a really existing terminus; but the powers of the soul can be complete when no object exists, since God can make an intellective soul without making any object in the world. In that case the powers of the soul would be complete [*perfectae*] and yet there would be no actual terminus (since there are no objects); therefore, etc.²¹

Ockham sets out to refute Henry's view by breaking it down to two possible sorts of relations. As Ockham claims, if Henry was right and the powers of the soul were relational in nature, that would mean they are either 1.) relations of reason or 2.) real relations.²² Evidently, Ockham is going to deny that powers of the soul could fall under either of these two categories.

As regards the first option according to which the powers of the soul are relations of reason, Ockham states that they exist independently of any act of the intellect. Ockham's argument is based on the more general presupposition among medieval thinkers who conceived of a relation of reason as relying on the intellect inferring relations. That is to say, a relation of reason would not exist if the intellect did not establish it. If the powers of the soul were relations of reason, this would thus imply that the intellect at some point acknowledged them as such. If spelled out, a more detailed counter-argument that Ockham likely had in mind would proceed as follows: 1) if the powers of the soul were indeed the

²¹ Ockham, *Reportatio* II, q. 20 (OTh V: 432, 10-15): "Si in anima esset talis respectus, aut est respectus realis aut rationis. Non rationis, quia ille est per actum intellectus comparantis. Sed ante omnem actum intellectus sunt potentiae in essentia animae perfecte. Nec est respectus realis, quia nunquam est respectus realis sine termino realiter existente, secundum eum etiam. Sed potentiae animae possunt esse perfectae et nullum obiectum [esse], quia Deus potest facere animam intellectivam non faciendo aliquod obiectum in mundo. Et tunc erunt potentiae animae perfectae, et tamen nullus terminus in actu, quia nullum obiectum, igitur etc." The English is taken from a recent translation of a selection of Ockham's works by Eric W. Hagedorn, *William of Ockham, Questions on Virtue, Goodness, and the Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 11.

²² On Ockham's view on relations in general see Mark G. Henninger S.J., *Relations: Medieval Theories 1250-1325* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 119-150, and Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham*, vol. 1 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 215-277.

powers of the soul they are only if they were relations of reason; 2) they could not have been the powers they are before the intellect established the relation; 3) but at least the intellect was exactly the power it is even before the relation was established, since 4) the relation of reason allegedly obtaining in the powers of the soul is itself an act of intellect. Ockham thus concludes that the view equating the powers of the soul with relations of reason begs the question. For him, the powers of the soul cannot be relations of reason.

But neither does Ockham allow for the powers of the soul to be real relations. In medieval philosophy, real relations are those that obtain between two really existing *relata*, regardless of our intellect acknowledging this or not. For example, any human being is identical to herself, and the intellect does nothing to bring about this identity. Or else, Peter and Paul are really related as brothers since if there was no Paul, Peter would not be a twin—there would be no relation of brotherhood obtaining. Ockham disagrees with the view that the powers of the soul would be such real relations. To demonstrate his point, he provides us with a counterfactual scenario of an intellectual soul as the only inhabitant in a world where nothing else has yet been created. Even in such a soul, with no *relata* around, claims Ockham, the powers of the soul would exist completely (*perfecte*). There would be no thing that the powers of the soul could get related to, no object upon which they can act, and yet, claims Ockham, the powers of the soul would exist completely.

When parsed in full, Ockham's argument against Henry can be outlined as follows: 1) every real relation needs a *relatum* to really exist, 2) powers of the soul can exist without a real *relatum*, 3) powers of the soul are not real relations. What Ockham is employing is a *reductio ad absurdum* argument designed to make us realize how untenable it is to hold that powers of the soul are relations.²³ As Ockham claims, if the powers of the soul were relations, the soul would be powerless in circumstances where there is no *terminus* they could be related to. In his view, even if there were no external circumstances triggering the powers of the soul to spring forth into act, the human soul would still be perfectly capable of exercising those acts. In other words, in Ockham's view, a relation cannot be regarded as the integral part of what a power is. For those powers themselves form too essential a part of the essence of the soul to be at a danger of non-existence *qua* powers in the absence of any *relata*. If, as Henry claims, having a power means having a relation to act, then when there is no possibility for a relation to obtain, there is no power. But to endorse that view, Ockham avers, is nonsensical: powers of the soul cannot just cease to exist *qua* powers in the absence of any *relata*. It is the respective objects of the powers of the soul that rely on those powers and not vice versa.

²³ See Heine Hansen, who in his chapter on relations in medieval philosophy spontaneously employs the same reasoning: "Of course, a human being can be the double of something, namely by standing toward that something in a certain way, but a human being in and of itself is not a relative. If God made everything else disappear, you could still be a human being, but you could not be double, for there would be nothing else for you to stand toward in that way" (Heine Hansen, "Relations", in *Routledge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, edited by R. Cross and J.T. Paasch [New York: Routledge, 2021], 97).

In some other places when Ockham is discussing the theory of relations in general, he speaks along the same lines, employing the example of fire: "I prove this [sc. that relation of heat is not a thing outside the fire], first, from the fact that a real relation of the sort in question does not have nothing as its terminus. But what is capable of being heated can be pure nothing with respect to which to which the heat is a thing capable of producing heat."²⁴ That is to say, for the ability to heat to exist, for Ockham, no real heatable object or really exercised act of heating is necessary. Fire just is an absolute thing with the essential ability to heat, regardless of whether some heatable objects really exists around the fire or not.²⁵

The argument Ockham is levelling against Henry's account, however, is not as original as it may seem at first glance.²⁶ For even before Ockham, his important Franciscan predecessor, John Duns Scotus had argued against Henry's view in a similar way. What is more, his rebuke is even more extensive and technical.²⁷ To establish his point, Scotus refers to the distinction between the natural priority and natural posteriority with which he signifies the dependence of the posterior thing on the existence of the prior thing. In simplified terms, Scotus' main objection to Henry is that something that is naturally prior

²⁴ Ockham, *Quodl.*, 6.13: "Quod probo primo, quia talis relatio realis non est ad nihil sicut ad terminum; sed calefactibile potest esse purum nihil, respectu cuius est calor calefactivus" in *Opera Theologica IX*, edited by Joseph C. Way (St. Bonaventure N.Y.: St Bonaventure University, 1980), 633, 11-13. The English translation above is by Alfred J. Freddoso and Francis E. Kelley (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 533.

²⁵ See Ockham on the intellect and its ability to acquire knowledge: "According to everyone, if a relation is real, then its extremes must actually exist. But as long as the quality that is called knowledge remains in the soul, then regardless of whether or not the knowable objects exist, the quality will be called knowledge all the same – especially if it is knowledge properly speaking, which is of necessary [truths]" (Ockham, *Quodl.*, 6.14, English translation as in the previous footnote, 535).

²⁶ It should be noted, however, that Ockham engages with Henry's theory on relations widely construed also in some other loci. In *Quodl.* 4.32 he refers to Divine omnipotence discussing the same possibility of God sustaining a cause without there ever being an effect; see also *Quodl.* 6.8. Further, in *Ordinatio* 1.7.1, Ockham writes about the sun and its relation to the world; while he discusses the relation the prime matter allegedly has with a form (Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.14-18) immediately after using the flying soul in *Reportatio II*, q. 20.

²⁷ John Duns Scotus' discussion is to be found in his *Quaestiones super Libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis* 9.5.8-10; 9.5.15, edited by R. Andrews *et al.* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute Press, 1997), translated by Girard J. Etzkorn and Allan B. Wolter, in *Questions on the Metaphysics of Aristotle by John Duns Scotus* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute Press, 1998). See the fundamental article on Scotus' view on relations by Richard Cross, "Accidents, Substantial Forms, and Causal Powers in the Late Thirteenth Century: Some Reflections on the Axiom *actiones sunt suppositorum*", in *Compléments de substance: Études sur les propriétés accidentelles offertes à Alain de Libera*, edited by C. Erismann and A. Schniewind (Paris: Vrin, 2008), 133-146. For a shorter analysis focused on the powers of the soul see Paasch's chapter on the "Powers", in *Routledge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, 114-118. On Scotus' view on relations more generally see van den J. H. L. Bercken, "John Duns Scotus in Two Minds About the Powers of the Soul", *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales* 82/2 (2015): 199-240.

cannot be dependent upon something that is naturally posterior. Therefore, the power, which is naturally prior to the effect it causes by its action, cannot be essentially dependent on that very effect. For in Scotus' view, Henry is endorsing precisely the view that relations are essentially constitutive of powers. If one were to embrace Henry's view, claims Scotus, the (prior) essence of the power would depend on the (posterior) effect the power brings about. Scotus sees such contention as a plain contradiction, saying:

But the intrinsic [or essential] relation of an active power must be prior by nature to what is principiated. Consequently, no such constitutive relationship whatsoever can be found for an active power.²⁸

For Scotus, the powers of the soul as conceived by Henry stand on a metaphysical ground that is upside-down. If we borrow Henry's example of fire and heat and ask why fire has the power to heat, the correct answer – for Scotus – would be that the fire is essentially powerful and not because the power is related to the heatable objects. In other words, if fire did not have the power it has even before some heatable objects were around, it could not have started to heat the heatable objects around it in the first place. The heatable objects themselves do not contribute, much less constitute the power of the fire. As Paasch fittingly puts it: for Scotus relations show up “too late on the metaphysical scene” to do any essential constituting of the power.²⁹

Having examined Scotus' main counterargument against Henry of Ghent, it is easy to tell where Ockham probably took his cue from. For both Scotus and Ockham, the main error of Henry's account was that it established too tight a link between the essence of a power and a relation, i.e., the thing a power is a power-for. If such a claim would be right – as Scotus' radicalized account in Ockham's counterfactual example shows – the essence of the intellectual soul free-floating in a world before creation would be powerless. But to hold that an intellectual soul can ever be powerless, i.e., having no intellect and no will, is unsustainable. For both Ockham and Scotus, powers are at all times essential parts of the soul, regardless of their respective acts.

In Defence of Henry

Both Scotus and Ockham offer a solid objection to Henry's theory of the powers of the soul. Contra Henry, they claim that powers of the soul are first and foremost essentially in the soul being exactly the powers they are, with actions they are powers-for contributing nothing to their essential definitions. It is not the actions they are powers-for that make them the powers they are. Rather, the powers act in this or that way precisely *because* of the powers they are in the first place. In other words, Scotus and Ockham think Henry was wrong in endorsing the view that the relations have anything to do with the essential nature of a power. If they did, the flying soul in Ockham's thought

²⁸ John Duns Scotus, *Questions on the Metaphysics*, 9.5, n. 10 (tr. Etzkorn and Wolter), 505-506.

²⁹ Paasch, “Powers”, 117.

experiment would end up being powerless.

The above arguments notwithstanding, we cannot exclude a defence of Henry's view against Ockham's thought experiment of a flying soul. For in the case of a lonesome soul, the sole inhabitant of the pre-created world, one could legitimately start questioning the need to posit any sort of powers whatsoever.³⁰ For even if those powers would nevertheless be fully present in the soul, they would also be positively irrelevant – the flying soul having the powers or not having them would not make a difference since the powers could never get exercised anyhow. More generally, if a power was never exercised, would we still speak of it as a power at all? Is a power that is never activated in an everlasting potency still a power? If Ockham claims that powers do not need to ever exercise the actions to which they are related in order to be exactly the powers they are, one could object by saying what kind of a power at all would a power be which never exercised the act to which it is related.

That is to say, in reality we always live in a world *after* creation, surrounded by objects that trigger our powers to elicit acts. Even though one can contemplate what would happen with the powers in a free-floating soul in a vacuum, the plain truth is this: any power of the soul a human being has in their life is a power-for-something. Henry could thus still object to Ockham's counterargument: if a power was not a power-for-something, be it exercised or not, we probably would not speak of it as a power at all. Thus, the relation a power has with its own action may still be seen as an essential part of what a power is.

One other point needs to be made, namely, that Ockham, as well as Scotus before him, might both have underestimated Henry's account, which is in fact more nuanced than it appears to be when read through Ockham and Scotus' eyes. To understand what Henry had in mind when maintaining that the powers of the soul are relational in nature, his account needs to be read against the backdrop of his view on relations in general. As Henninger shows in a fundamental study on Henry's theory on relations, Henry makes an intentional distinction between the basic thing, i.e., the foundation, and the relation, which is founded upon that foundation.³¹ Even though Henry holds that the relation and foundation are the same, he still sees them as intentionally distinct. Namely, they are distinct in so far as a relation, in Henry's view, in fact amounts to a *mode of being* of some

³⁰ Paasch already hinted in that direction in "Powers", 119.

³¹ Henninger, *Relations: Medieval Theories*, 40-59. On Henry's intentional distinction see also Raymond Macken, "Les diverses applications de la distinction intentionnelle chez Henri de Gand", in *Sprache und Erkenntnis im Mittelalter* (Miscellanea Mediaevalia 13.2), edited by W. Kluxen (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 1981), 769-776. Following up on Henninger's study is an article arguing for the indispensable need of reading Henry's theory on relation within the Trinitarian context by Jos Decorte, "Relatio as Modus Essendi: The Origins of Henry of Ghent's Definition of Relation", *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 10/3 (2002): 309-336; Scot M. Williams argues that Decorte, in turn, misinterpreted Henry's theology in "Henry of Ghent on Real Relations and the Trinity: The Case for Numerical Sameness Without Identity", *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales* 79/1 (2012): 109-148.

foundation. That is, for Henry, a relation is a mode of *being-toward-another* that can get, as it were, switched on when needed and goes to a sleeping mode when there is no “another” around that the foundation can be “directed-towards.”³²

In simpler terms, if we have two white chairs, there is a relation of similarity somehow obtaining between those two chairs being both white. In Henry’s view, a relation of similarity is nothing that is going on only in someone’s mind, i.e., is not a relation of reason. Nor is this relation of similarity a real thing in the sense of being an additional accident that inheres in both chairs alongside the accident of whiteness. As Henry sees it, the relation of similarity is a mode that the same “whiteness” in both chairs enters into. That is to say, one and the same whiteness now has two aspects: firstly, it exists by inhering in the chair and secondly, it exists as looking-toward-the-other-chair. This same whiteness is thus, for Henry, simultaneously and overlappingly an accident inhering in the chair and a relation towards another chair.

The powers of the soul operate in like fashion. They are the same as the essence of the soul, while that very essence can also have a “respect to diverse actions and diverse objects /.../ which adds nothing beyond its essence (sc. that of the soul) except a respect to acts.”³³ As Henry further claims, even “without any help from anything else, the soul has in its essence the character (*ratio*) of the power by which it springs forth into action.”³⁴ Elsewhere in the same text, Henry will also write about powers residing in the essence of the soul as a “root.”³⁵ Thus, the basis of what a power of the soul can do is, for Henry, always already a part of the basic essence of the soul. What the external stimuli condition that triggers the powers to elicit an act does is only to individuate the powers, i.e., make them be specific powers directed towards a specific object. Properly understanding Henry’s metaphysics of power can therefore reduce the strength of Ockham’s counterargument considerably. Henry could counter Ockham’s flying soul thought experiment simply by underscoring the point that he himself never claimed that the very existence of the powers *qua* powers is in any way determined by the actions the power is a power-for. The only thing that an action itself determines is the very specific character of a power of the soul.³⁶ Powers could never get exercised as specific powers since there

³² In Henry’s own words (Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, IX, q. 3): “Because of this we often said elsewhere that a relation ‘contracts’ its reality from its foundation, and of itself is only a bare condition that is only a certain mode holding a thing toward another, and so not a thing in so far as it is of itself, but only a mode of a thing” (“Propter quod saepius alibi diximus quod relatione realitatem suam contrahit a suo fundamento, et quod ex se non est nisi habitudo nuda, quae non est nisi modus quidam rem habendi ad aliud, et ita non res quantum est ex se, sed solummodo modus rei”). The Latin text and its English translation are taken from Henninger, *Relations: Medieval Theories*, 53.

³³ Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.22.

³⁴ Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.35.

³⁵ See Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.22; 39; 75; and 84.

³⁶ Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.67: “For a power is said to be what it is from its relation to act, and it takes its species from its objects. But from the nature of its absolute substance insofar as it is a substance, the soul does not determine for itself an act ... and for that reason it also does not

would be no object around which would call for their specific action.

Henry even deals with an example similar to Ockham's flying soul: that of abstracted heat.³⁷ He points out that if the heat as the power of fire was separated from the latter, even this abstracted bit of pure heat could not heat in the absence of a heatable object. For Henry, such a heat would only be hot in potency.³⁸ Within the same discussion concerning abstracted heat, Henry distinguishes between the potential agent (*in potentia agens*) and an agent in act (*agens in actu*).³⁹ For him, the heat always has a power to heat potentially, whereas for this heat to actually heat and therewith become an agent in act is possible only insofar as something heatable is present.

Henry's view that the powers of the soul are nothing but relations to act is thus more nuanced than either Scotus or Ockham allow. For even though the relational aspect is of paramount importance in Henry's definition of a power, the power for him remains exactly the power it is even if there is no *relatum* around. Therefore, a flying soul in a pre-created world would still have the same powers of the soul. With this difference, however, that Henry would claim those powers could not become relations – could not enter into a mode of *being-towards-another* since there would be no *another* around. They would always remain an unspecified potential power. To claim anything else, would, from Henry's perspective, hardly make any sense.

The Flying Soul

Above I attempted to outline Ockham's counterargument against Henry and the possibility of Henry facing the objections. In this last section, however, I would like to put forth a more unconventional reading of Ockham's thought experiment of the flying soul. Namely, his thought experiment (advertently or not) provides ground for the question of what exactly would the powers of such a flying soul actually amount to. For if one took Ockham to be saying that the powers in the free-floating soul would not only perfectly exist qua powers (Ockham's phrasing is *potentiae animae possunt esse perfectae*), but also have the possibility to be "perfected", i.e., actualized, we could wonder what this actualization would amount to. Could the powers of the intellectual soul, e.g., the intellect and the will, be exercised even if there was no external world around, i.e., there was

determine the character of the power. It is therefore required that, in order to determine a power in it, [the substance of the soul] be determined by something [else] in order that it may determinately have a respect to a determinate act and through this the character of a power." ("Potentia enim id quod est dicitur ex relatione ad actum, quae ex obiectis sumit species: anima autem ex natura substantiae suae absolutae, ut substantia est, non determinat sibi actum ... quare neque rationem potentiae. Oportet igitur ad determinationem potentiae in ea eam aliquo determinari, ut determinate ad actum determinatum habeat respectum, et per hoc rationem potentiae").

³⁷ See the first chapter of this paper.

³⁸ Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.13.

³⁹ Henry of Ghent, *Quodl.*, 3.14.20.

nothing for the powers of the soul to act on. That is to say, would even a flying soul in a void-like world think and will? What would the flying soul think about if there was nothing in the world but itself? Would it really still think? Would it know that it thinks?

Even though such an interpretation of Ockham's rejection of Henry as I have just suggested most likely amounts to reading into Ockham, it can still be seen as worth mentioning. I would humbly note that it merits a comment for two reasons. Firstly, it may be seen as an indirect echo of the most famous thought experiment evoking the same sort of questions, i.e., Avicenna's flying man argument. Secondly, since it could bear a link – however slight – with some hotly debated issue among contemporary Ockham scholars.

First, Avicenna's flying man argument. To date, not many scholars have brought their attention to the *Nachleben* of Avicenna's flying man argument in the Latin West of the Middle Ages. The first to provide a list of the names was Étienne Gilson,⁴⁰ who mentions: Dominicus Gundissalinus (d. c.1190-1993), William of Auvergne (d. 1249), John of la Rochelle (d. 1245), Matthew of Aquasparta (c.1240-1302), and Vital du Four (1260-1327). Later, Dag Nikolaus Hasse⁴¹ adds Peter of Spain (fl. c.1240) and the anonymous author of *Dubitaciones circa animam*, while Juhana Toivanen proposes to upgrade the list with the name of Peter of John Olivi (c.1248-98).⁴²

While Ockham's flying soul is evidently not employed for the same purposes nor does it have the same structure as Avicenna's flying man argument, it can still be seen as fitting into the wider story of the reception of Avicenna's argument. To be more precise, Ockham's flying soul resembles an argument Peter of Olivi uses when discussing his theory of perception. Even though the structure of the argument is similar, Olivi's flying man is not in fact "a flying man". Rather, Olivi invites us to imagine a "man before creation", introducing the argument within the framework of his theory of perception.⁴³

⁴⁰ Étienne Gilson, "Les sources greco-arabes de l'augustinisme avicennisant", *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 4 (1929): 40-42.

⁴¹ Dag Nikolaus Hasse, *Avicenna's De anima in the Latin West: The Formation of a Peripatetic Philosophy of the Soul, 1160-1300* (London: The Warburg Institute, 2000), 80-92 and 236.

⁴² Juhana Toivanen, "The Fate of the Flying Man: Medieval Reception of Avicenna's Thought Experiment", *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy* 3 (2015): 64-98. Note that the first to address Avicenna's flying man argument in the Latin West were certainly the translators of Avicenna's *De anima* themselves, Domenicus Gundissalinus and Avendouth, that prepared the possibly direct primary source for all the subsequent authors who made use of this argument. On their role and context of their translatory activity see Nicola Polloni, *The Twelfth-Century Renewal of Latin Metaphysics: Gundissalinus's Ontology of Matter and Form* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020).

⁴³ Peter John of Olivi, *Summa II = Quaestiones in secundum librum sententiarum*, edited by B. Jansen (Bibliotheca Franciscana Scholastica Medii Aevi 4-6) (Florence: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1922-1926), q. 73, 68-9: "For example, given that only a man whose eyes are open would have been created before the creation of everything else, and he would strive with all effort to tend to see by his eyes as if there were external visible things: it is clear that in that case his *aspectus* would not be terminated at or determinately carried to any external object. If, after a while, all the external things (which exist now) were created, the first *aspectus* of the eyes would be thereby fixed at external objects." ("Ut verbi gratia, detur quod solus homo apertis oculis esset ante omnia

Olivi deploys the argument to underpin his active theory on perception: he wants to show that even a man before creation would try to actively sense the world around him even though there would be no world around him. Olivi and Ockham thus both invite us to imagine a pre-created world with only a single inhabitant. Moreover, they both conclude that the powers of the soul would nevertheless retain their essential nature, even if there was no object whatsoever that surrounded the lonely resident of the void-like world. Following a fundamental article of Juhana Toivanen, where he proposed to count Peter of Olivi among the authors remotely echoing Avicenna's flying man in the Latin West, I propose to add a further echo: William of Ockham possibly taking his cue from Peter of Olivi.

Secondly, Ockham's flying soul could also bear some potential implications for Ockham's theory on cognition in general. In Ockham scholarship, his theory on intuitive cognition and self-awareness has been a subject of an extensive debate. The scholars tackling this issue are divided into the supporters and the opponents of Ockham's theory of cognition being externalistic.⁴⁴ According to the externalist reading, the mental content of someone's intuitive cognition in Ockham is, at least in part, essentially determined by the sensible external object. The opponents of externalism rebuke such a reading, appealing to the fact that Ockham famously allows for an intuitive cognition of a non-existent thing to occur. God could, Ockham claims, create an intuitive cognition of a thing in us even though this thing was not in our near proximity and we could not have cognized it. Even more, God could even create in us an intuitive cognition of a thing that doesn't exist at all. On a non-externalist reading of Ockham, those two examples are the strongest weapons with which to counter the externalists' claims.

Humbly adding to this debate, I would suggest that if the effect or side-effect Ockham wanted his flying soul argument to have truly might be the contention that even in a void-like world we could exercise full mental activities, this would be an additional argument showing that Ockham is not as much of an externalist as he seems to be. For his flying

creatus et sic toto conatu niteretur per oculos intendere ad videndum acsi essent visibilia extra: constat quod tunc aspectus eius non terminaretur nec determinate ferretur in aliquod extrinsecum obiectum, et si paulo post omnia exteriora sicut nunc sunt crearentur, eo ipso primus aspectus oculis determinaretur ad obiecta exteriora. Ero tunc primus aspectus esset immediata causa secundi, quamvis primus motor esset imperium voluntatis vel alius motor per naturalem colligantiam causans et conservans primum") English translation is from Toivanen, "The Fate of the Flying Man", 88.

⁴⁴ On the externalists' camp, some of the most notable contributions were published by Peter King, Calvin Normore, Gyula Klima, and Claude Panaccio. Opposing the externalistic reading is Susan Brower-Toland, most recently in "Intuition, Externalism, and Direct Reference in Ockham", *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 24/4 (2007): 317-335, whereas Philip Choi attempted to carve out a middle path and argued in favour of "Ockham's Weak Externalism", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24/6 (2016): 1075-1096. Sonja Schierbaum, furthermore, has already established some link between Ockham's theory on cognition and his theory on the powers of the soul: Sonja Schierbaum, "Ockham on Awareness of One's Acts: A Way Out of the Circle", *Society and Politics* 12/2 (2018): 8-27.

soul argument levelled against Henry of Ghent might allow for the possibility of fully active thinking and willing going on in the soul surrounded by the external nothingness.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to show Henry of Ghent's answer and Ockham's rejection of Henry's answer to the question how to define a power of the soul. Henry claims that powers are relations to acts and thus defined with respect to the actions they are powers-for. Ockham disagrees with this contention. In his view, if a power was nothing more and nothing less than a relation to act, then where there would be no objects around on which a power could act, the power qua power would cease to exist. Or as Ockham phrases it, if Henry was right, a soul God created before he created anything else would be powerless. That is to say, in Ockham's view Henry's account on the powers of the soul ends up being untenable. Or so Ockham's thought experiment at least sought to show.

In light of Ockham's critiques, I argued that Henry could still defend his own view. For one, his theory of relations is far more nuanced than Ockham makes it seem. As outlined above, Henry never held that the powers of the soul are real relations that cannot exist in the absence of relata. Secondly, moreover, even if we were to concede to Ockham's view that the powers of the soul before creation would perfectly well exist qua powers, the question remains: would such powers be powers at all? To return to the opening lines of this paper: even if the flying soul could had the ability to love, what would this love be? If it could not be directed to someone and something, would it still be love? How should we define a power if we do not have the slightest idea what this power is a power-for? In light of these considerations, it seems that there is no way around admitting that a relation plays an important and constitutive part of what a power is, at least to a certain degree. In other words, love is always love for someone or something, or else we would have a hard time saying it is love at all.

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