

# SCOTUS ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A BETTER WORLD

GIORGIO PINI\*

SUMMARY: 1. *The Standard Position: Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas.* 2. *Henry of Ghent's Problem.* 3. *Scotus on God's Ability to Act Otherwise.* 4. *Order and Dispositions.* 5. *How Actual Things Could Be Better.*

SCOTUS developed an original strategy to investigate whether God could create a better world. Ever since Peter Lombard included a treatment of this topic in his *Sentences*, that question had become an issue any medieval theologian had to take into consideration.<sup>1</sup> The question of God's ability to create a better world is indeed very difficult. Anyone seriously trying to tackle it is quickly confronted with fundamental metaphysical issues that concern the Christian conception of God and His dealings with the world. Whether God could create a better world is also a very important question. Although other questions that address the issue of divine omnipotence may be technically more difficult, they are hardly as pressing as the present one.<sup>2</sup>

At first sight, this question is disarmingly simple. It seems intuitively true that it is possible to conceive of a better world. It also seems intuitively true, as a consequence of God's omnipotence, that God could do anything that it

\* Fordham University, Department of Philosophy, Collins Hall, 441 E. Fordham Road, Bronx NY 10458, USA; e-mail: pini@fordham.edu

<sup>1</sup> MAGISTRI PETRI LOMBARDI, *Sententiae in IV Libris Distinctae* (Grottaferrata: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas 1971) Liber I, Dist. 44, Cap. 1, Vol. 1, pp. 303-305. On the question whether God could do otherwise than He does, see: M. McCORD ADAMS, *William Ockham*. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press 1987) pp. 1177-1186.

<sup>2</sup> Medieval thinkers generally agreed that the actual world, as it is, could and ought to have been better. They reasoned that as a consequence of the Fall the entire world lost its original perfect state and is not as it should be. Most of the aspects that concerned early modern philosophers and that are still at the center of contemporary philosophical debates, particularly when dealing with the problem of evil, were explained by medieval thinkers as consequences of the Fall. They accounted for the presence of evils as a consequence of the sinful free decisions of some angels and the first human beings. Notwithstanding its catastrophic consequences, however, it was agreed that the Fall damaged but did not destroy the essences that constitute the world. For example, a human being is a human being both before and after the Fall even though after the Fall his condition is weakened. As opposed to this question, the issue addressed in this paper is the *metaphysical* question asking whether the world, as God created it, could have been better.

is possible to conceive of, as long as it is something good (and a better world is definitely one such thing). Accordingly, one is strongly inclined to state that God could create a world better than the actual one. Problems arise, however, when one further asks why God did not make the world better than He did, given that He could. For it seems that, since God is the supremely good Being, He must do the world as good as He can. Plato had already made this point when he had remarked in the *Timaeus*: «God desired that everything should be good and nothing evil, as far as possible. For him who is most good it neither was nor is permissible to do anything other than what is most beautiful».<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the problem posed by the question whether God can create a better world is only ostensibly a problem concerning God's omnipotence. The real issue is the potential conflict between God's omnipotence and His goodness. Accordingly, it was customary for medieval theologians dealing with this issue to answer two distinct questions. The first question concerns God's omnipotence and freedom: Can God create a better world? The second question concerns God's goodness in His dealings with the world, and more specifically with human beings: if God can create a better world do human beings have any reason to complain that He did not?

In the Middle Ages, it was commonly assumed that the second question should be answered in a negative way, but this negative answer was defended in a variety of ways. A point made by most medieval theologians was that, in a strictly legal sense, God owes nothing to His creatures, and that consequently He has no obligation towards them. Specifically, human beings do not have any *right* to complain that God did not create this world better than He did. Such remarks are, of course, correct, but do not settle the real issue. For one might agree that human beings are not legally entitled to complain because God has no debt towards them. All the same, given God's goodness, human beings may still have expectations of their Creator just as children can legitimately expect not only fair treatment, but also love from their parents. To make the same point differently, one can say that it is true that God owes nothing to His creatures, but He still owes it to Himself to love His creatures. Accordingly, it seems that God has to minimally make sure that the world is arranged in the most fitting of ways.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the problem posed by the second question is actually whether God meets the expectations that humans, as rational beings created by Him, may have about His dealings with the world.

By Scotus's time, the standard strategy to address the issue was to admit

<sup>3</sup> PLATO, *Timaeus*, 29 e - 30 b. See: N. KRETZMANN, *A Particular Problem of Creation: Why Would God Create This World?*, in *Being and Goodness. The Concept of The Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology*. ed. S. MacDonald (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1991) pp. 229-249, at pp. 230-231.

<sup>4</sup> See: THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 25, a. 5, ad 2.

that God could create a world better than the actual one. However, as far as the *actual* world is concerned, it was argued that human beings have no reason to complain because the actual world is organized in the best possible way. By contrast, Scotus focused not on the question as to whether the actual world can be organized in a better way, but rather on whether it makes sense to rank possible arrangements of things different from the actual one as better or worse.

Since Scotus's answer to the question of God's ability to create a better world can be best appreciated when contrasted with other approaches, this paper first presents Bonaventure's and Thomas Aquinas's treatments of the issue; second, a problem raised by Henry of Ghent is considered; third and finally, Scotus's position is analyzed and evaluated.

### 1. THE STANDARD POSITION: BONAVENTURE AND THOMAS AQUINAS

Bonaventure and Aquinas dealt with the question as to whether God could create the world better than He did in a strikingly similar way. Both of them held that one should distinguish two main issues. First, it should be asked whether God could create a world better than the actual one. Second, it should be asked whether God could make the actual world better than it is.<sup>5</sup>

In order to understand Bonaventure and Aquinas's position, one should notice that they held that any world (or, as sometimes it was said, any universe) is identified by its essential or substantial parts, and that those essential parts are the essences shared by all the members of a certain natural kind. (e.g. the essence *human being*, the essence *horse*, etc.) According to Bonaventure and Aquinas, neither individuals belonging to natural kinds nor their accidental properties are essential constituents of a world. A world remains the same even though it is constituted by different individuals or by individuals with different accidental properties as long as that world is constituted by the same essences. For example, a world constituted by the same essences that constitute the actual world but by different individuals, (e.g. a world with human beings but with different individual human beings) would still count as the actual world. Also, a world constituted by the same essences that constitute the actual world, but whose individuals have different accidental properties, (e.g. a world where all human beings were taller than they are now) would still count as the actual world.

With regard to the first question, both Bonaventure and Aquinas held that God could create a world better than the actual one when the world is defined

<sup>5</sup> BONAVENTURE, *In I Sent.*, d. 44, a. 1, qq. 1-3, in *Opera Omnia*, I, (Ad Claras Aquas: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae 1882), pp. 781-787; THOMAS AQUINAS, *In I Sent.*, d. 44, q. 1, aa. 1 - 2, ed. P. Mandonnet (Paris: Lethielleux 1929), pp. 1015-1021; IDEM, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 25, a. 6. For Aquinas's treatment of this issue, see: N. KRETZMANN, o. c., pp. 230-240.

by a certain set of essences. As a matter of fact, God could create an infinite number of worlds better than the actual one. God could do this in either of two ways. First, God could add some essences to the essences constituting the actual world, and specifically He could always create an essence more perfect than the most perfect essence present in the actual world. The resulting world would overlap with the actual one because it would have some essences in common with the actual world, but in addition to them that alternative world would also have one or more extra essences, making it a better world. Second, God could create a world completely different from the actual world, namely a world constituted by a set of essences that does not overlap with the set of essences that constitute the actual world. Since God could make some or all of those alternative essences better than the essences constituting the actual world, the alternative world could be better than the actual one.<sup>6</sup> In sum, God could make a world better than the actual one both because He can create more essences than He has created, and because He can create essences different and better from the ones He has created.

Aquinas argued that this conclusion is entailed by the fact that there is a gap between God and even the best among His creatures. Because this gap is infinite, no creature is so good that God could not create a better one. As a consequence, God's goodness can be manifested in an infinite number of ways (i.e. in infinite sets of essences of which none is the best *possible* set of essences). Against Peter Abelard, who had argued that since God is supremely good He cannot but create the best of all possible worlds (a position adopted in the early modern period though in a different context by Leibniz), Aquinas argued that such an argument assumes that there is commensurability between God and the created world so that there could be a best of all possible worlds. However, this is not true. Because of the infinite gap that exists between God and His creatures, there is no best of all possible creatures and consequently no best of all possible worlds. No matter how good a creature is, God could always create a better one. Consequently, God can manifest Himself in many alternative ways and is not forced to pick up just one world, i.e. the best among all possible worlds.<sup>7</sup>

The question whether God could create a world better than He did must be given an unqualifiedly positive answer if that question is interpreted as asking whether God could create a better world different from the actual one. It should be noticed that this approach has the advantage of weakening the ground for

<sup>6</sup> BONAVENTURE, *In I Sent.*, d. 44, a. 1, q. 1, pp. 781-783; THOMAS AQUINAS, *In I Sent.*, d. 44, q. 1, a. 2, pp. 1018-1021; IDEM, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 25, a. 6.

<sup>7</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *De Pot.*, q. 1, a. 5, ed. P. M. Pession (Torino e Roma: Marietti 1949). See: IDEM, *In I Sent.*, d. 44, q. 1, a. 2; IDEM, *De Veritate*, q. 24, a. 3, in *Opera Omnia*, xxii, 3 (Santa Sabina, Roma: Ed. di San Tommaso 1976), pp. 687-688.

the complaint that God did not create the world better than He did. If it were possible to create the best of all possible worlds and God had chosen not to create it, human beings would indeed have reason to complain. However, it turns out that there is no best of all possible worlds. Therefore, once God decides to create, He cannot create the best of all possible worlds, not because the best of all possible worlds is something beyond His power, but simply because there is no such thing as the best of all possible worlds. For any given world it necessarily follows that God could create a better one. Now, to complain about something that necessarily follows from any way God could act with regard to the world is, indeed, to make an inane complaint. Rather, human beings should be grateful to God because He decided to create a world at all and did not have to. Bonaventure makes this point with particular eloquence:

[... S]o we must understand that, no matter how big or how good a creature may be, there is always a point at which one must stop, because any creature is finite. And what God does with regard to that creature is good within that limit, so that He does not do anything more. But I think that it is never the case that God could not do something more. Therefore, if God made another world better than this one, it will be possible to ask further why He did not make a better one, since He could, and we could ask the same question again and again. Therefore, such a question is stupid [*irrationalis*], and the only answer that could be given is that He did not because He did not want to, and He knew the reason why. Nevertheless, nobody can complain, if God did not make a better world, for everything He did was by grace, and creatures have no claim such that His not making the world better than it is could be interpreted as an act of envy.<sup>8</sup> [Trans. mine]

The question why God created this world rather than another is a question that exceeds the limits of human minds, for human beings could always ask it no matter how good the world they live in is. Nonetheless, Bonaventure still held that there is a reason why God created this world rather than another. However, that reason is known to God and unknown to human beings. Thus, the rationality of God's choice is guaranteed. The interesting point is that the reason for God's choice seems *necessarily* unknown to human beings, as we could go on asking, "Why this world and not another one?" *ad infinitum*.

Let now the second question be considered. Could God create the world

<sup>8</sup> «[...] Sic intelligendum est in magnitudine molis et bonitatis, quod quantumcumque sit in creatura, status est semper, quia finita; et bene agit Deus hucusque, ita quod non agit amplius, sed quin possit amplius, nunquam est dare, ut credo. Et ideo, si alium mundum meliorem hoc fecisset, adhuc erit ultra quaerere, quare non fecit meliorem, cum possit, et sic procedendo ulterius; et ideo talis quaestio est irrationalis, et solutio non potest dari nisi haec, quia voluit, et rationem ipse novit. Attamen si non fecit, nemo potest arguere, quia hoc totum, quod fecit, fuit gratia; nec erat aliqua exigentia, ratione cuius possit poni in eo fuisse invidia.» (BONAVENTURE, *In I Sent.*, d. 44, a. 1, q. 1, 783). Aquinas makes similar remarks in *De Pot.*, q. 3, a. 17, ed. P. M. Pession (Roma e Torino: Marietti 1949), p. 93.

better than He did? Both Bonaventure and Aquinas agree that one should distinguish whether one is talking about the parts that constitute this world or the organization of the world itself.

With regard to the parts constituting the world, it is clear that, within certain limits, those parts can be improved on as far as their accidental features are concerned. For example, horses can run faster and human beings can be smarter. But no part can be improved with regard to its essential features without losing its identity. For example, if horses became rational beings, they would no longer be horses because irrationality is constitutive of their essence as animals without reason.

With regard to the organization of the world, one should distinguish between two kinds of orders. First, all the essences constituting this world are related to their aim, and ultimately to the supreme end of the world, God. In this respect, no improvement is possible because each part is perfectly suited to reach its own aim, and no better aim is possible than God. Second, all the essences constituting this world are related among themselves (i.e. they are arranged in such a way that there is harmony and correspondence among them). The whole world is an organic unity where no part takes the place of another, but all work together in harmonious ways. One can legitimately say that the world is governed by laws that regulate the behavior of its parts smoothly. This is clearly the case for the physical world, which is governed by laws of nature that regulate the behavior of each thing. The same point can be made about moral laws.

Thus, with regard to the order that exists among the essences constituting this world, both Bonaventure and Aquinas held that no improvement is possible. The way that the current set of essences is arranged is such that there cannot be a better and more fitting order because the current order is the best among all possible orders. For example, according to Aristotelian natural philosophy it is fitting that in this world fire is hot and has a tendency to move upwards while water is cold and has a tendency to move downwards. No better arrangement is possible for such kinds of things.<sup>9</sup>

Aquinas argued that God could create *other* essences and give them a perfectly fitting order different from the order that holds in the actual world. However, given the current set of essences, there is only one perfectly fitting order and it is the order that God gave to the actual world.<sup>10</sup> It is true that it is possible to conceive each part of the world as better than it is, but if just one of its part were improved, as both Bonaventure and Aquinas argued, the total arrangement of the world would be worsened. Both Bonaventure and Aquinas

<sup>9</sup> BONAVENTURE, *In I Sent.*, d. 44, a. 1, q. 3, 785-787; THOMAS AQUINAS, *In I Sent.*, d. 44, q. 1, a. 2, p. 1020.

<sup>10</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 25, a. 5, ad 3; a. 6, ad 3.

nas illustrate this point with the example of a lute or a cithara. The strings of a lute are tuned in a way that if just one of the strings is overstretched the resulting harmony is destroyed. Aquinas states:

Supposing the things that are, the universe cannot be better than it is; its good consists in the world-order, most handsome it is and bestowed by God. For one part to be improved out of recognition would spoil the proportions of the whole design; overstretch one lute-string and the melody is lost. All the same God could make other things, or add them to those He has made, and there would be another and better universe.<sup>11</sup> [Trans. T. Gilby]

Aquinas seems to maintain that this is true even as far as the accidental improvement of parts is concerned. Only if all of the parts are improved at the same time does an actual improvement of the whole occur. Otherwise, the optimal arrangement among the essences constituting the world would be destroyed, and replaced by a worse arrangement.<sup>12</sup> Suppose, for example, that human beings had a better sense of sight, and could see things with microscopic precision. The contention is that such a local improvement on human faculties would result in a maladjustment to their environment.

One may capture the way Bonaventure and Aquinas conceived of the actual world and its order if one thinks of the essences that constitute the actual world as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Just as there is only one way to put jigsaw pieces together correctly, there is only one optimal arrangement for all the essences that constitute the actual world. Other pieces, however, may be arranged in different ways that are equally fitting *for them*. Because of God's obligation to Himself as the most perfect Being, one must assume that the actual order is the best possible order that the essences of this world could be arranged in.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the jigsaw puzzle has been correctly put together. The actual world cannot be better than it is since, given the parts that constitute it, the world is as good as it can be because no alternative order of the current parts is better than the actual one. If just one or some of the parts were improved on, the whole order would be destroyed. To use the example

<sup>11</sup> «Ad tertium dicendum quod universum, suppositis istis rebus, non potest esse melius, propter decentissimum ordinem his rebus attributum a Deo, in quo bonum universi consistit. Quorum si unum aliquod esset melius, corrumperetur proportio ordinis: sicut si una chorda plus debito intenderetur, corrumperetur citharae melodia. Posset tamen Deus alias res facere, vel aliis addere istis rebus factis: et sic esset illud universum melius». (THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, d. 25, a. 6, ad 3). English Translation, St. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, ol. 5, *God's Will and Providence*, Trans. Thomas Gilby O.P., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006<sup>2</sup>, p. 177. See also: BONAVENTURE, *In I Sent.*, d. 44, a. 3, ad 4, 787; RICHARD OF MIDDLETON, *In I Sent.*, d. 44, a. 1 (Brixiae, 1591; Repr. Frankfurt am Main: Minerva 1963), p. 391.

<sup>12</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *In I Sent.*, d. 44, q. 1, a. 2, p. 1019.

<sup>13</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 25, a. 5, ad 2.

of the jigsaw puzzle again, one may think of improving on the appearance of a single piece by cutting it in a more regular shape. The result would be that the piece would no longer fit the rest of the jigsaw puzzle, making it impossible to complete. Consequently, if one considers the world the way it is, one realizes that there is no reason to complain about it since no alternative ordering of its parts is more fitting than the actual one.

Let us summarize Bonaventure and Aquinas's positions. What is their answer to the question, whether God can create a better world? First, if one is asking whether God can create another world that is better than the actual one, then the answer is "yes." Because of the infinite gap between God and any of His creatures, God could always make a creature better than the best actual creature, and accordingly create a world better than the actual one. Alternatively, God could create a world constituted of essences each one of which is better than the essences constituting the actual world. All the same, one does not have any reason to complain that God could have made a better world because, *necessarily*, for any created world a better one could be created. That there could be a world better than the actual one necessarily follows from the fact that the world was *created*, and it is irrational, as Bonaventure said, to complain unless, of course, one is complaining that the world was created at all. To look for a reason why God created this world rather than another one is to look for something that necessarily escapes human finite minds.

Second, if one is asking whether God could arrange the actual world in a better way, the answer is "no," because the order in which the essences of the actual world are arranged is the best possible way that those essences could be arranged together (i.e. it is the order that best fits those essences).

Third, one may ask whether each of the parts that constitute the actual world can be improved. Then one should distinguish between two cases. If one is talking of an essential improvement, then one should answer "no," since in that case the result is a world different from the actual one. If one is talking of an accidental improvement, then one should answer "yes," but even in that case the improvement is not local, and concerns all the parts constituting the world at the same time lest the harmony of the current arrangement be destroyed. However, one would have a good reason to complain only if the accidental features pertaining to the actual essences were not fitting them the way they are (e.g. if human cognitive faculties were not good enough to assure human beings' well being in this world). However, this is not the case because of the general harmony that exists among the different parts of the world.

## 2. HENRY OF GHENT'S PROBLEM

So far, the question whether God could create a better world has been answered in a satisfactory way. There is, however, a possible complication. As shown, both Bonaventure and Aquinas held that the actual world is organized in the best possible way, since the essences that constitute the actual world are arranged in the way that most fits them. To say that the actual world is organized in the best of all possible ways, however, presupposes that there are other, worse ways it could be organized. So one may ask, Could God organize the actual world in one of those alternative ways?

This question is particularly difficult. On the one hand, it seems that God *could* organize the world in a different way, as He can do anything that is logically possible. On the other hand, it is problematic to say that God could act in a way that falls short of the best He can do. Notice that this case is different from that in which God cannot create the best of all possible worlds. According to Bonaventure and Aquinas, God cannot create the best of all possible worlds because there is no such thing as the best of all possible worlds, since, for any given world, God could create a better one. With regard to the order of the actual world, however, there is a best among all possible orders, and it is the order that God chose. However, this implies that it is possible for God to choose an alternative order for the actual world. Consequently, it is possible for God to choose a worse option when a better one is available and possible, and this is seemingly in contradiction with God's supreme perfection.

The possibility of the actual world's being organized in a way different from the current one is not so remote. Apparently, one is confronted with such an alternative order any time a miracle occurs. Take Transubstantiation, for example. According to the standard order of this world, accidental qualities inhere in their substances. After Transubstantiation has taken place, however, the accidents normally inhering in bread (e.g. its texture, color, and taste) exist without inhering in any subject. Therefore, an arrangement of things such that accidents do not inhere in their subjects is clearly possible, and it is even actual when Transubstantiation takes place. Does this mean that such alternative order is *worse* than the current one, where accidents naturally inhere in substances?

Both Bonaventure and Aquinas were familiar with this problem. Both of them solved it by distinguishing between the natural order and the general order God established on the world. Most of the time these two orders coincide. There are some situations, however, in which God acts against or, rather, beyond the nature of things. This does not mean that God acts in a disordered way since, even in those cases, God acts in accordance with His general plan for the world. The limits of that plan and general order are set by what is logically possible. Thus, when God acts according to an order that is not naturally the most fitting order for created essences, He is actually following a superior

order known to Him. However, the cases in which God acts beyond the natural order should be considered as exceptions to the rule. Most of the time, the actual order of the world is the order that is *naturally* most fitting for the essences God created.<sup>14</sup> Presumably, God could not systematically act against what the nature of things requires because that way of acting would not be a power, but a weakness. Thus, God “cannot” systematically break the laws of nature just as He cannot sin.

In the last quarter of the thirteenth century, however, the whole issue was considered again. Specifically, the question whether God could arrange the world in a way that is not the most fitting, became the focus of a discussion between Giles of Rome and Henry of Ghent. In order to defend the claim that God could have created several angels in the same species but did not, Giles of Rome argued that God *could* have acted in such a way but that, if He had, He would have attributed less existence to the angels than is suitable for them.<sup>15</sup> Against Giles, Henry of Ghent argued that it is impossible for God to fail to act in the best of all possible ways. Henry admitted that there are several ways things can be arranged, but he argued that the way things are arranged in the actual world is the best way only *in the actual world*. If things had been arranged in a different way, as they could have been, they would have been arranged in an equally good way:

So I say, with no qualification, that in no way can God do what in no way and according to no order would be fitting for Him to do. Rather, it is fitting for God to do whatever He does, and it would be fitting for Him to do whatever He is able to do, if He did it, and He would do it only according to a fitting order [...]. In answer to the second objection, namely that what God does is done in such a way that it is impossible for it to be done in a better way, we must reply that this is true if we take into account the order that now holds in its entirety. And to what is assumed in the argument, namely that what is contrary to the current order is completely unfitting, we must reply that this is true according to the order that now holds; but if God could do [what is contrary to the current order] and if He did it according to another order, it would be fitting to do it and it would be better to do it rather than not to do it. For absolutely nothing can occur in nature outside the order of divine wisdom and justice.<sup>16</sup> [Trans. mine]

<sup>14</sup> BONAVENTURE, *In I Sent.*, d. 42, art. unicus, q. 3 and q. 4, pp. 751-759; IDEM, *In I Sent.*, d. 44, a. 1, q. 1, ad 3, p. 783; IDEM, *In II Sent.*, d. 3, p. 1, a. 1, q. 1, in *Opera Omnia*, II (Ad Claras Aquas: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae 1885), p. 91; THOMAS AQUINAS, *In I Sent.*, d. 43, q. 2, a. 2, pp. 1010-1011; IDEM, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 25, a. 5. The distinction between absolute and ordained powers is relevant here. See: M. MCCORD ADAMS, *William Ockham*, cit., pp. 1186-1190; W. J. COURTENAY, *Capacity and Volition. A History of the Distinction of Absolute and Ordained Power* (Bergamo: Lubrina 1990).

<sup>15</sup> GILES OF ROME, *Quodlibet* II, q. 7 (Lovanii, 1646; repr., Frankfurt am Main: Minerva 1966), pp. 64-69. Giles disputed his second *Quodlibet* in the Lent of 1287.

<sup>16</sup> «Et sic absolute dico quod Deus nullo modo potest facere quod nullo modo et secun-

Henry of Ghent's position is very similar to what both Bonaventure and Aquinas had held. One should distinguish between a particular and universal order. God can act against the particular order, but anything God does is necessarily in accordance with the universal order and it is impossible for God to act in a disordered way. It should be noticed, however, that in order to reject Giles's position that God could act in a way that is not fitting, Henry eventually endorses the view that any possible order God could choose for any set of essences is always a fitting order. Even though God could act against the order that *presently* fits the actual world, God necessarily acts in a way that fits the actual world. As a consequence, any possible way that God could arrange the world is equally good. What seems disordered in the current order is perfectly ordered according to another order. Therefore, God can arrange the same set of essences in many alternative ways, where none of those ways is more fitting or preferable.

### 3. SCOTUS ON GOD'S ABILITY TO ACT OTHERWISE

Scotus's treatment of the issue of God's ability to create a better world is in some way surprising. As is well known, there are at least three versions of his commentary on the *Sentences* (i.e. the *Lectura*, the *Ordinatio*, and the *Reportatio Parisiensis*). Neither in the *Lectura* nor in the *Ordinatio* does Scotus address the question whether God can create a better world. Where one would expect him to deal with that topic, Scotus rather asks whether God could make things otherwise than He has ordered them to be. Ostensibly, the issue is neither about the possibility of a better world nor about the possibility of the actual world's being organized in a better way. Rather, Scotus's focus is on the possibility of *this* world's being organized in a *different* way, with no concern for whether that alternative way is better or worse.

This way of addressing, or rather of *not* addressing, the issue of the possibility of a better world is deliberate. The key problem for Scotus was the one raised by Henry of Ghent, namely, whether it is possible for God to organize this world in an unfitting way. Like Henry of Ghent, Scotus ultimately held that an unfit organization is not possible. In order to provide a solid argument

dum nullum ordinem deceret eum facere, immo quicquid facit decet eum facere, et quicquid facere potest, si faceret, deceret eum facere et non nisi secundum ordinem decentem faceret [...]. Ad secundum, quod factum a Deo factum est meliori modo quo fieri potest, dicendum quod verum est aspiciendo ad totum ordinem qui nunc est in rebus. Et quod assumitur quod contrarium illius nullo modo decet, dicendum quod verum est secundum illum ordinem qui nunc est; si tamen potest illud facere et faceret secundum alium ordinem, esset decens et melius quam non facere. Nihil enim omnino potest fieri in rerum natura quod cadit extra ordinem divinae sapientiae atque iustitiae omnino» (HENRY OF GHENT, *Quodl.* XI, q. 2 – Parisiis, 1518; repr., Leuven, Bibliothèque S. J. 1961 – f. 440rC-vH). Henry of Ghent disputed his eleventh *Quodlibet* in the Advent of 1287.

for that conclusion, Scotus set the whole issue of the possibility of a better world on new ground.

For Scotus it is clear that the things constituting the actual world could be organized in a different way. The occurrence of miracles is taken as a demonstration of this possibility. Even those who hold that things are currently arranged in the most fitting way clearly assume that there could be other less fitting ways. If God chooses one of those alternative ways, however, that alternative arrangement of things counts as an exception to the particular and natural order of things but is still part of the general order of those things. As Henry of Ghent points out, the very view that God could arrange things in an unfitting order, or according to an order worse than the current order, is at odds with the claim that God is the most perfect Being and acts in the best of all possible ways.

Scotus's strategy is to distinguish between two issues. First, one might ask whether God can do things otherwise, namely, whether God can arrange things according to an order different from the current one. Scotus's answer to this question is positive, and this is not a controversial point. Second, one might ask whether all the ways that things in this world could be arranged can be ranked as better or worse to each other. As seen above, Giles of Rome thought that such a ranking is possible. He argues that, given the essences that constitute this world, there is a most fitting way that they could be arranged. Even Bonaventure and Aquinas agreed on that point. As suggested above, one could compare their view of the actual world to a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces could be arranged in just one correct way. Admittedly, God could go beyond the rules that hold in this world, but this does not mean there is no *natural* order in which things *should* be disposed. Only one order is optimal, and one may be assured that it is this order that God has given to His creatures because He is the most rational of agents.

By contrast, Scotus took the possibility of exceptions to the order of the actual world seriously. Those exceptions, according to Scotus, hint that the set of essences that constitute the actual world *could* be arranged differently. Therefore, since anything God can do is done in an ordered way, it follows that any alternative order God can bestow on the world is equally good and fitting. There is no most fitting and best possible arrangement of things because each arrangement, when chosen by God, is equally good and fitting.

In order to prove his point, Scotus distinguishes between two kinds of free agents. Some agents are free to act in accordance with or against a law that they did not establish. If they decide to act against that law, those agents cannot but act in a disordered way (i.e. illegally). By contrast, other agents are free to act in accordance with or against a given law, but are also free to establish a *new* law. Scotus uses the example of the way rulers can act towards their subjects. When the latter agents decide to break a given law, they do not necessar-

ily act illegally because they are free to establish a new law according to which their breaking of the previous law is actually a legal act.<sup>17</sup> God is a free agent that acts according to laws that He has established. Accordingly, God is free to act against a given law as any other free agent is. However, if God acts against a given law He does not necessarily act illegally because God can, at the same time, establish a new law and act in accordance with that new law. Thus, God can act in many alternative ways, and can arrange created things in alternative ways as well. None of these alternative ways, however, is necessarily unfitting or unregulated:

Hence, I say that He can do in a regulated way many other things, and for many other things to be able to be done in a regulated way – other, that is, than the things which are done in conformity to these laws – does not include a contradiction when the rightness of a law of the sort in virtue of which someone acts rightly and in a regulated way is in the power of the agent. Consequently, just as He can do otherwise, so He can set up another right law, and if this were set up by God it would be right, because no law is right except to the extent that it is set up by the divine will that accepts it. In this case His absolute power does not extend to anything other than what is brought about in a regulated way, if it is brought about. Certainly it would not be brought about in accord with this regulation, but it would be done in a regulated way in virtue of some other regulation, and that regulation the divine will would be able to set up in just the way that He is able to act.<sup>18</sup> [Trans. Bosley and Tweedale, with modifications]

Scotus' conclusion in this passage is remarkably weak. His point is that God can act against the order of the actual world without acting in a disordered way or illegally because God *can* establish a different order. However, the fact that God can establish a different order does not entail that He necessarily does so any time He acts against or beyond the specific order holding in the world. By contrast, in a parallel passage of his *Reportatio*, Scotus makes a much stronger claim. In that passage, he states that it is *impossible* for God to act in a disordered way or illegally:

<sup>17</sup> SCOTUS, *Ordinatio* I, d. 44, q. unica, nn. 3-5, in *Opera Omnia*, VI (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis: Civitas Vaticana 1963), pp. 363-365.

<sup>18</sup> «Unde dico quod multa alia potest agere ordinate; et multa alia posse fieri ordinate, ab illis quae fiunt conformiter illis legibus, non includit contradictionem quando rectitudo huiusmodi legis – secundum quam dicitur quis recte et ordinate agere – est in potestate ipsius agentis. Ideo sicut potest aliter agere, ita potest aliam legem rectam statuere, – quae si statueretur a Deo, recta esset, quia nulla lex est recta nisi quatenus a voluntate divina acceptante est statuta; et tunc potentia eius absoluta ad aliquid, non se extendit ad aliud quam ad illud quod ordinate fieret, si fieret: non quidem fieret ordinate secundum istum ordinem, sed fieret ordinate secundum alium ordinem, quem ordinem ita posset voluntas divina statuere sicut potest agere» (SCOTUS, *Ord.* I, d. 44, q. unica, n. 8, 366). English Translation: R. N. Bosley, M. Tweedale eds., *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy*, Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press 1997, p. 71.

However, if someone is not subject to the law, but on the contrary the law is subject to [him] as the one who instituted it, for he can change the law, or institute another one, such an agent cannot act disorderly.<sup>19</sup> [Trans. Wolter and Bychkov]

As Scotus goes on to argue, the practical rules that establish what ought to be done and what ought not to be done are set by the divine will and not by the divine intellect. It seems that the same point holds for the laws that regulate the course of nature, such as the law that establishes that fire heats. Since it is possible for God to act against such a law, as when he prevented three boys in a furnace from being burnt,<sup>20</sup> one can conclude that such a law is not a necessary proposition true in virtue of the meaning of its terms, because a state contrary to what it prescribes is possible. Accordingly, the law “fire heats” is established by God’s will. If God wants to establish a different law, He could, and God does not do anything unjust or unfitting when acting according to that different law. Any time God performs a miracle (i.e. any time He acts against the normal order of the world) He does not suspend the specific rules holding in the world, but rather arranges things in a different way. This is not just a possibility open to God, rather, any time God acts against the current order He necessarily acts according to the different order He established.<sup>21</sup>

Scotus is committed to the claim that it does not make sense to say that God could act in a way that does not conform to the law He established. In other words, it is possible for a created rational agent to fail to act as she ought to, but it is impossible for God to fail to act as He ought to. The reason is not that God decides to act in conformity to some standards that are independent of His own conduct (e.g. some standards that holds necessarily and independently of His will). Rather, God cannot fail to act as He ought to because any divine volition is a legal act, i.e. an act that is necessarily in accordance with a right law. Scotus’s suggestion seems to be that any divine volition is a divine law. In that respect, the analogy that Scotus draws between God and human lawgivers is misleading. A human lawgiver can act against a given law without acting illegally because the human lawgiver *can* change the law. Presumably, however, a human lawgiver does not have to change the law so she can fail to conform to standards that she has previously established. In the case of God, however, this is logically impossible. Any time God does not act according to

<sup>19</sup> «Si autem aliquis non subest legi, sed e converso lex subest instituenti, quia potest aliter vel aliam legem ordinare, talis non potest inordinate agere, nec ibi potentia ordinata excedit potentiam absolutam, licet excedat istam legem sic ordinatam» (SCOTUS, *The Examined Report of the Paris Lecture. Reportatio I-A*, d. 44, q. 1, n. 8, ed. A. B. Wolter and O. V. Bychkov, vol. 2, St. Bonaventure, NY: Publications of the Franciscan Institute 2008, p. 533).

<sup>20</sup> DANIEL 3: 20-22. See: M. McCORD ADAMS, *William Ockham*, pp. 1195-1196.

<sup>21</sup> *Rep. I-A*, d. 44, q. 1, n. 9, 533. On Scotus’s views on necessary propositions, see: *Quaestiones super Metaphysicam* VI, q. 3, nn. 52-55, in *Opera Philosophica* IV (St. Bonaventure, NY: Publications of the Franciscan Institute 1997), pp. 74-76.

the standards normally holding in this world, He acts according to different standards.

Scotus could hold the view that it makes no sense to state that a divine act can fail to conform to the right law because he endorses a specific conception of divine agency. According to Scotus, one should distinguish between two logical constituents in the divine act of creation. First, all the logically compossible entities are present to the divine intellect. Second, the divine will chooses some of them rather than others. Scotus's characteristic position was that among all the compossible entities present to the divine intellect, there is none that is in itself better or preferable over the others. Rather, they are all "indifferent". One could say that they are all equally good, and that God can choose anyone of them and never go wrong. Accordingly, there is no rule of conduct to which God should conform in order to make right choices between possible things He can create. Scotus's point was that, when God contemplates all the possible ways of acting, there is no particular course of action that is better than another, since none of them has an intrinsic value distinct from the fact that God wills it (i.e. apart from God's love of it). Only once God chooses a certain possible arrangement of things, rather than the other ones, does the chosen arrangement of things become better because it is both willed and loved by God. However, God's choice is not motivated by anything due to any arrangement prior to His own choice and act of love.<sup>22</sup> Incidentally, this is a very Augustinian point. As Augustine held, there is no goodness in creatures independent of God's act of loving them. Creatures are good because God created them, and have no merit apart from what God attributes to them because He loves them.

Nevertheless, Scotus does not think that creatures are worthless. Since God created the very creatures that now exist rather than other possible ones, and since He created them the way He did, each creature is now supremely worthwhile as the object of God's preference and love. It does not make sense to speak of better or worse possible options *before* God's choice to create certain things and not others because all the objects of God's intellect and consequently all the possible objects of His choice are equally compatible with His goodness. However, *after* God's choice (i.e. after His act of loving some specific possible entities to such a point as to make them actual), the things that are actually created by God *are* good, and have received value as objects of God's volition and love.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, Scotus never wavered in his position.

<sup>22</sup> *Lect.* 1, d. 39, q. 1-5, nn. 42-61, in *Opera Omnia*, xvii (Civitas Vaticana: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis 1966), 492-500; *Ord.* 1, d. 38, q. unica, nn. 5-6, in *Opera Omnia*, 6 (Civitas Vaticana: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis 1963), pp. 304-305.

<sup>23</sup> When one speaks of *before* and *after* with regard to different components of God's actions, one should interpret them not as establishing a temporal but logical priority. They

Accordingly, his view of divine agency does not entail any devaluation of the actual world and its order. He even insists that God's choice to actualize some possible things rather than others extends to the choice between which *individuals* to create. From the very beginning God's act of love is directed not just at specific essences, but at individual things. As a consequence, Scotus, unlike some of his contemporaries, held that the numerical variety of things of the same kind that is found in the actual world (e.g. the variety of human beings or plants belonging to the same species) is neither an afterthought nor an inevitable consequence of God's will to create a specifically diversified world. Rather, every individual in each species is the special object of God's volition and love. As such, each individual should be regarded as uniquely and supremely valuable.<sup>24</sup>

Scotus, Bonaventure, and Aquinas all held that God never acts in a disordered way. However, there is a difference between Scotus and his predecessors. According to Scotus, there is no way that things of this world could be arranged better or worse than the other possible arrangements, and no possible order is, in itself, the most fitting for the things constituting this world. That a specific possible arrangement of things turns out to be *actually* the best is a consequence of God's choice, and not a motivation for God's creative act. According to Scotus, it makes sense to speak of a better or worse possible way of acting only as far as created rational agents are concerned. Created rational agents are free to act in accordance with or against the laws dictating what ought to be done. However, if they decide to act against a law, they do something wrong unless they are in a position to change the law. Even in that case, however, a created rational agent can fail to act in accordance to the law she has previously established if she does not abrogate the old law and actually establishes a new one. Such a possibility, however, does not hold in the case of God. Thus, Bonaventure's and Aquinas's world can be compared to a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces connect in just one correct way. By contrast, one can think of Scotus's conception of the world and its order as a construction toy, whose pieces can be arranged in a number of ways in order to build a number of different objects. The only limit to what God can do and do in a perfectly good way, is set by what is logically impossible. Any possible arrangement of things can be chosen by God because God can do anything that is possible,

refer to what Scotus calls different "instants of nature".

<sup>24</sup> SCOTUS, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 7, n. 251, in *Opera omnia* VII (Civitas Vaticana: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis 1973), pp. 513-514; IDEM, *Reportatio*, I-A, d. 36, q. 3-4, n. 61, ed. Timothy Noone in IDEM, *Scotus on Divine Ideas*, «Medioevo», 24 (1998), pp. 359-453, at 445 (cfr. SCOTUS, *Reportatio* I-A, d. 36, p. 2, q. 1-2, n. 146, eds. Wolter and Bychkov, p. 429). On Scotus's view that God's creative act is directed at individuals, see T. HOFFMANN, *Ideen der Individuen und intentio naturae. Duns Scotus im Dialog mit Thomas von Aquin und Heinrich von Gent*, «Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie», 46 (1999), pp. 138-152, at 149.

and anything chosen by God is good. So any arrangement of things, as long as it is merely possible, is potentially equally good, since God can make it the object of His love.

Sometimes Scotus's view of divine agency is regarded as positing an arbitrary element in God's choices, and consequently in the world He created.<sup>25</sup> Since God could have created other things, and since He could have arranged the things He created in a different way, one can contend that God chose the things and the arrangement He did for no particular reason at all, and consequently acted in an irrational way. This charge, however, would hold only if God were like created rational agents who could never legislate concerning what is rational and what is not. Any created ruler can always act against what is natural and reasonable in the actual order of the world, since such an order only depends on God's will and not on a created agent's will. For example, a dictator's rule is arbitrary if that dictator chooses to legislate without taking into account the natural standards of justice that are independent of his decisions. Such a scenario, however, is impossible in the case of God. Any divine volition is, by itself, an act that establishes a right law. One can capture this point by stating that any divine volition is necessarily an act of love that confers value on its object. Scotus's point is that there is no way God *ought* to act. God did not have to create the world, He did not have to create *this* world, and He did not have to create *this* world *the way* He did. God's choices are, therefore, generous and gratuitous rather than arbitrary.

#### 4. ORDER AND DISPOSITIONS

Still, there may be a problem. One can concede Scotus's point that any possible order is compatible with God's aim, and that any order God chooses is

<sup>25</sup> This point is amply debated among scholars, who are divided with regard to the correct interpretation of Scotus's position. Some argue that, according to Scotus, God acts rationally and there are reasons for God's volitions. This position is vigorously defended by A. B. Wolter in his introduction to *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of American Press 1986.) as well as in *IDEM, The Unshredded Scotus: A Reply to Thomas Williams*, «American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly», 77 (2003), pp. 315-356; See also: M. B. INGHAM, *Letting Scotus Speak for Himself*, «Medieval Philosophy and Theology», 10 (2001), pp. 173-216. Other scholars contend that Scotus' conception of divine agency is better described as arbitrary. Some of the latter scholars have in turn given a negative evaluation of Scotus' position; see: R. CROSS, *Duns Scotus on Goodness, Justice, and What God Can Do*, «Journal of Theological Studies», 48 (1997), pp. 48-76. Others contend that despite Scotus's attribution of arbitrariness to God's will, this is "nothing to worry about;" see: T. WILLIAMS, *A Most Methodical Lover? On Scotus' Arbitrary Creator*, «Journal of the History of Philosophy», 38 (2000), pp. 169-202.

equally good from God's point of view. However, if one considers things not from God's point of view but from the point of view of the created essences, it seems that one could rank all possible arrangements as better or worse since creatures have needs that may or may not be satisfied. For example, fire is naturally inclined to heat. It is true that God can arrange things in such a way that fire does not heat (as is demonstrated with the miracle of the three boys in the furnace). However, it is difficult to contend that that arrangement is not against or beyond the order naturally befitting fire. Any possible arrangement imposed on created essences may be indifferent from God's point of view, but there seems to be a most fitting order from the creatures' point of view, even though God may decide to act without taking that consideration into account.

Scotus is aware of this problem. He distinguishes between what is logically possible for a certain thing to do, and what a certain thing is naturally disposed to do.<sup>26</sup> For example, Scotus holds that it is logically possible for fire not to heat; all the same, fire is *naturally disposed* to heat. Accordingly, Scotus maintains that there are some dispositions (*aptitudines*) necessarily pertaining to essences. Scotus maintains that God can arrange things in such a way that the dispositions naturally pertaining to a certain essence are not actualized. Nevertheless, God cannot arrange things in any way that certain dispositions do not pertain to certain essences, since such dispositions are really identical with the essences to which they pertain.<sup>27</sup>

Fire may, miraculously, fail to heat. All the same, fire has a necessary disposition to heat. Any situation where fire does not actually heat is a situation where fire's natural disposition is prevented from being actualized. Such a situation is accordingly violent with respect to fire's nature. Thus, created things have some dispositions and needs that can be actualized only if the world is arranged in a certain way. And that arrangement seems to be the most fitting arrangement given the essences that constitute the actual world.

Therefore, one may contend that there is a most fitting arrangement for any given set of essences. Once God creates certain natures, He may not have an obligation to arrange things in the most fitting way (i.e. in such a way that created essences can exert their particular dispositions). But if there is a most fitting order and God chooses not to adopt it, God's choice does assume an ar-

<sup>26</sup> Scotus distinguished between an essence's actual, possible, and aptitudinal dependence on something else in *Ord.* III, d. 1, p. 1, q. 1, in *Opera Omnia*, 9 (Civitas Vaticana: Typis Poliglottis Vaticanis 2006), pp. 20-21. See also *Ord.* IV, d. 12, q. 1, n. 5, in *Opera Omnia*, 17 (Paris: Vivès 1894), 534; *Quaestiones Super Metaphysicam*, VII, q. 1, n. 9, in *Opera Philosophica*, 4 (St. Bonaventure, NY: Publications of the Franciscan Institute 1997), p. 92. The same distinction can be drawn with regard to any disposition present in a created essence.

<sup>27</sup> See: *Ord.* IV, d. 12, q. 1, n. 23, 557; *Quaestiones Super Metaphysicam*, VII, q. 1, n. 17, 95; *Rep.* I-A, d. 44, q. 1, n. 17, ed. Wolter and Bychkov, p. 536.

bitrary character. Against what Scotus contends, there seems to be a best way to do things. Admittedly, God can ignore the best way he ought to act. But then, it would be difficult to claim that God did not arrange the world in a way that is worse than another He could have chosen. If the actual world were arranged in such a way that fire only rarely or never actualized its disposition to heat, the world would be organized in a worse way than it currently is. Thus, one can contend that it makes sense to speak of better and worse possible arrangements of things, against what Scotus claims. Moreover, God could fail to organize the world in the best of all possible ways, and, if that occurred, human beings would be entitled to complain.

This is a serious challenge against the coherence of Scotus's view. However, much of its appeal depends on the fact that, because of the way the actual world is organized, things can actualize their natural dispositions at least *most* of the time. As a consequence, human beings think that they would be entitled to complain if the meeting of their dispositions did not occur. In some way, human beings are "spoiled" by God's decision to arrange the world in this way and it is very difficult, if not impossible, for human beings to think of the way things would be if God chose a different order for the essences that constitute the actual world. It is natural for human beings to consider the current order of things as good, since all (or possibly, most) natural dispositions are actualized. However, following Scotus, one should distinguish two issues here. It is one thing to state that certain essences have certain natural dispositions that are actualized only if those essences are arranged in a certain way. It is another thing to state that the arrangement where those dispositions are actualized is, in itself, the most fitting and best arrangement for those essences. Whereas Scotus would agree that human beings are entitled to make the first claim, he could contend that the first claim does not entail the second one and that human beings are actually not entitled to make the second claim. The fact that something has a natural disposition to behave in a certain way does not entail that an arrangement of things that allows that disposition to be actualized is in itself better than an arrangement that does not allow that disposition to be actualized.

This point can be illustrated clearly. Glass has a disposition to break, but it is controversial to claim that a world organized in a way that glass actually breaks is, in itself, better than a world where glass is fragile but never breaks. Also, it is clear that if one has a genetic disposition to develop a certain disease, a world organized in a way that her disposition will never be actualized is not worse than a world where she will eventually become sick.

These examples are admittedly biased, for they focus on dispositions whose actualization is destructive for that which has the disposition. It can be contended that there are many dispositions whose actualizations are necessary for the flourishing of the thing that has that disposition. Scotus may argue, how-

ever, that this is undoubtedly the case in the actual way things are organized. Nonetheless, if things were organized in a different way, it is at best controversial whether the mere presence of an unactualized disposition would give human beings sufficient reasons for complaining that things are not organized differently. This point can be illustrated by one further example.

Suppose that I was born with a disposition to become dark-skinned. Suppose also that this disposition can be actualized only in a sunny climate. If I grow up in a sunny and warm climate, I become dark-skinned. In such a climate, the actualization of that disposition may even be beneficial to me and contribute to my general well-being – e.g. because I have fewer chances to become sunburned or to develop skin cancer. If I grow up in a cold climate, however, I still have the disposition to become dark-skinned, but I do not actualize it. In that case, my skin remains very light. Now suppose that at the moment of my birth, doctors could diagnose my disposition. Accordingly, if I was born in the sunny climate, they can predict that I am likely to become dark-skinned. If I eventually turn out light-skinned that would be surprising, and in some way considered against the natural order of things. This is not because it is an impossible outcome, but because it is an unlikely one. By contrast, suppose that I was born in a cold climate. There too, doctors discover my skin disposition at the moment of my birth. They can also reliably predict that I will remain light-skinned, even though I have a disposition to become dark-skinned. The fact that the skin disposition is not actualized is not surprising at all, quite the contrary, it would be surprising if it were actualized. However, no harm follows from this.

Similarly, a fire that does not actualize its aptitude to heat is very surprising *in the current order*, just as, in my example, it would be surprising if I should remain light-skinned if I grew up in a sunny climate (even though my remaining light-skinned in a sunny climate is not logically impossible). In another order, however, where things are organized in a different way, such an outcome would not be surprising and definitely not “against nature.” That such an alternative arrangement looks like a disordered state of affairs merely depends on the fact that human beings can only try to conceive of that alternative situation from within the actual order.

Scotus’s point is that things have dispositions that pertain to them necessarily, no matter which way they are arranged. However, those dispositions are not necessarily actualized. Only when things are arranged in a certain way can they actualize their natural dispositions. This does not mean, however, that the world would be worse if some or even all of those dispositions failed to be actualized. It makes no sense to complain about the way things are ordered because any order chosen by God is good by definition. “Better” and “worse” are concepts that do not apply to alternative possible arrangements of the world. Rather, according to Scotus the fact that the actual order of the world

allows so many natural dispositions to be actualized is due to God's generosity and gratuitous act of love.

##### 5. HOW ACTUAL THINGS COULD BE BETTER

So far the focus has been on Scotus's treatment of God's ability to create alternative orders in his *Ordinatio* (to which the treatment of the *Lectura* is parallel). Scotus, however, did raise the question whether God can make things better than He did at least once in his writings (i.e. in his *Reportatio Examinata*, Bk. I, d. 44). Scotus answered that God could, and still can, make things better both in their accidental and essential respects. Scotus did not develop the latter point, but he argued in some detail that God can make things better as far as their accidental features are concerned in two ways. Intensively, both human beings and angels are capable of receiving more beatitude than they actually do or will, and even bodies are capable of becoming more perfect than they are. Extensively, all creatures are capable of receiving more perfections than they actually do or will. Accordingly, Scotus holds that there is a gap between a creature's capacity to be perfected and the actual way that a creature is or will be perfected. One can say that in the actual order of things all creatures have a capacity for improvement that is never completely exhausted.<sup>28</sup>

One should notice that Scotus does not speak of alternative worlds (i.e. sets of essences) that may be better than the actual world. Neither does he say that there are alternative orders that are better than the current order of the world. Accordingly, as far as alternative worlds and alternative orders of the actual world are concerned, Scotus does not give up his "deflationary" strategy concerning the possibility of a better world, according to which it is meaningless to ask whether things could be better. Rather, he raises the question of the possibility of improvements only with regard to actual things in the actual world. Nevertheless, Scotus's admission in the *Reportatio* that things *could* be better seems to be at odds with his usual way to approach the issue of God's ability to create a better world.

A possible solution to this problem is suggested by Scotus's interpretation of an important passage from Augustine's *On free choice of the will*. In that passage, Augustine ostensibly argues that God brought about whatever appears to human beings as better according to right reason.<sup>29</sup> Bonaventure interpret-

<sup>28</sup> Scotus, *Rep.* I-A, d. 44, q. 2, nn. 22-28, ed. Wolter and Bychknov, pp. 537-540. Scotus held the traditional view that even though God could make things better than they are, the fact that He did not cannot be regarded as a case of envy. This is because envy results from taking away from a certain thing what is owed to it, but God owes nothing to His creatures in terms of their perfections. Rather, God does everything out of generosity. See: *ibidem*, n. 30, 430.

<sup>29</sup> AUGUSTINE, *De Libero Arbitrio*, III, 5, ed. W. M. Green, CSEL XXIX (Turnhout: Brepols

ed Augustine's claim as referring to the order holding in the current world. Even though there may be better worlds alternative to the actual one, it is impossible to conceive of the actual world as organized in a better way since the organization of the actual world is the most suitable organization *for the actual world*.<sup>30</sup> Scotus, however, gives a different reading of Augustine, which is not surprising, since Scotus thinks that it makes no sense to speak of alternative orders that God could have chosen for the actual world as worse than the current one. If God had chosen an alternative order, that order would have been equally good.

Scotus holds that Augustine's claim is true in the sense that there is nothing better according to right reason than what God has willed *because* God has willed it.<sup>31</sup> This is in agreement with Scotus's view that God's volitions are by themselves right laws, and it is impossible for them not to be in accordance with what is right. But then, how should one interpret the claim that Scotus defends, i.e. that things could be better than they are?

Scotus states that, in an unqualified way (*simpliciter*), nothing can be better according to right reason than insofar as it is willed by God. For example, if God created a human being gifted with certain perfections but lacking of others, that human being, in an unqualified way, cannot be better than the way God had created him or her, because God created him or her in that way. Scotus's use of "*simpliciter*" here should be stressed. What has a certain feature *simpliciter* is usually contrasted to what has the same feature *secundum quid*. For example, I may say that you are a better person than I am (*simpliciter*), but that nevertheless I am better than you are as a runner (*secundum quid*). Accordingly, Scotus is implicitly contrasting two ways something is said to be better. In one way, something is better *simpliciter* if and only if it is willed by God. This holds for all actual things as God decides to create them. In another way, something is better *secundum quid*, or in a qualified way. As is clear from what Scotus says immediately afterwards, the qualification that one should add is the conditional clause "if those things had been made" (*si fierent*). Therefore, the actual things gifted with the limited perfections that God decides to give them are unconditionally better than the improved versions of those same things that God did not create. This is because God's free act of love is directed towards the former and not towards the latter. However, the improved version of the actual things is *conditionally* better than the actual things. This is true in the sense that if God had decided to create them side by side with the

1970), p. 283.

<sup>30</sup> BONAVENTURE, *In I Sent.*, d. 44, a. 1, q. 1, ad 1, in *Opera Omnia*, I, p. 782.

<sup>31</sup> SCOTUS, *Rep. I-A*, d. 44, q. 2, n. 31, ed. Wolter and Bychkov, p. 540. On Scotus's interpretation of this passage, see: T. WILLIAMS, *A Most Methodical Lover? On Scotus's Arbitrary Creator*, cit., pp. 195-196.

actual things as they are, the improved version would be better than the actual things.<sup>32</sup> For example, suppose that I entertain the idea of myself as gifted with more intelligence than I am. According to Scotus, it makes no sense for me to complain that God could have created me more intelligent than I am, because it makes no sense to say that my possible self is or would be more intelligent than I am. Certainly, God could have created me more intelligent, but it is the current version of myself that He loves and wills, with all my intellectual limitations. Nevertheless, suppose that God actually created another person that, although in all other respects is exactly like myself, is more intelligent. If both this person and I actually existed in this world, it would be possible to compare us and to judge correctly that the other person is more intelligent than I am. However, Scotus's point is that the comparison between an actual thing and a possible one can be carried out only under the condition that the possible thing is made actual. Any comparison between two things can be carried out only if one imagines that both of them are parts of the actual world. In an unqualified way, it does not make sense to state that a possible thing is better than an actual one, or that the possible improved version of an actual thing is better than the actual thing as it is. This is because it is the actual thing as it currently is that God wills and loves.

If compared with the standard approach endorsed by both Bonaventure and Aquinas, Scotus's strategy to investigate whether God could create a better world can be labeled as "deflationary." Scotus did not argue that there is no best of all possible worlds or that the arrangement of the actual world is the most fitting among all the possible ways it could be organized. Rather, his main point is that it does not make sense to compare possible alternative organizations of essences constituting the actual world as better or worse because any ranking applies only to things God has created and made objects of His love. Scotus holds, for example, that human beings are better than horses, and that the worst human being is still better than the best horse. In this respect, Scotus's conviction that the essences of this world are organized in a hierarchical way and that a hierarchical order pertains necessarily to the essences of this world is as solid a view as that of any of his predecessors and contemporaries. Scotus's point does not concern the ranking of essences in the actual world, but the possibility of comparing possible states of affairs *before* God's act of choosing them. Accordingly, any complaint about God's

<sup>32</sup> «Ad aliud dico quod 'quidquid recta ratione tibi melius occurrerit, hoc scias Deum fecisse' verum est, quia nihil est melius simpliciter recta ratione quam in quantum volitum a Deo; et ideo alia 'quae, si fierent, essent meliora', non sunt modo meliora entibus. Unde auctoritas nihil plus vult dicere nisi quod quidquid Deus fecit, hoc scias cum recta ratione fecisse. *Omnia enim quaecumque voluit, fecit*, in Psalmis [113, 11], cuius voluntas sit benedicta». (SCOTUS, *Rep.* 1-A, d. 44, q. 2, n. 31, ed. Wolter and Bychkov, p. 540).

failing to make things better than He did is not so much a groundless claim as a meaningless one.

*ABSTRACT: Scotus gave an original answer to the standard question whether God can make the world better than He did. Whereas Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas had held that God can create other worlds, better than the actual one, but that the order of the actual world is the most fitting one, Scotus's strategy is based on the claim that it makes no sense to compare alternative possible states of affairs as better or worse before God's choice. He held that the order of the actual world is good not because it is the best among other alternative orders but because it is the order that God has made the object of His volition. Accordingly, any complaint about God's failing to make things better than He did is not so much groundless as meaningless.*

*KEYWORDS: John Duns Scotus, absolute power, divine volition, divine freedom, possible worlds, order.*