

The Problem with the Vatican Edition of *Ordinatio* III.26–40

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This is very much work in progress and is not yet for citation, though I am prepared to stand behind the general gist of the work and expect even the details to change largely by way of addition rather than revision. I hope to publish a final version of this either as a free-standing essay or in the OUP volume, doubtless stripped of all its snark, in conformity with the modern principle that nothing worth saying is worth saying with verve.

My conclusion is simple: the text of the Vatican edition¹ of Book III, distinctions 26–40, of John Duns Scotus's *Ordinatio* is so frequently bad that no responsible scholar can rely on it.

The argument for this conclusion, in outline, is as follows:

- (1) Codex A, on which the editors rely heavily, frequently transmits nonsense, non-sequiturs, impossible syntax, and outright gibberish.
- (2) In nearly every case in which A's reading is problematic, some or all of the other manuscripts transmit sensible readings.
- (3) By far the most consistently reliable manuscript—in that it gives sense in the place of A's nonsense, good arguments in the place of A's non-sequiturs, reasonable syntax in the place of A's impossible syntax, and comprehensible text in the place of A's gibberish—is Codex Q, which the editors decline to use.

I turn to the evidence for each of these claims.

¹I was once rebuked by the late Leonard Boyle, OP, Prefect of the Vatican Library, for referring to the edition as "the Vatican edition." "There's no such thing," he insisted: the Scotistic Commission's edition was published *in* the Vatican but not *by* the Vatican. Fine. But everyone calls it that, and though I would not be willing to follow all my friends should their interests extend to the proverbial jumping off bridges, I feel no qualms about doing so in less lethal circumstances.

The unreliability of Codex A

The first piece of evidence for (1) comes from the most unlikely source: the editors themselves. In their prefatory matter for volume X, which contains their edition of Book III, distinctions 26–40, they note that after the first seven distinctions in Book III, the scribe of Codex A² apparently no longer had access to the *Liber Duns* or *Liber Scoti* by which he had, up to that point, been able to correct the text before him. Instead he relied on some other manuscript. And that he does not fully trust either the text before him or this other (unidentified) exemplar is evidenced by the fact that the scribe “frequently manifests his hesitation either in the margin or in the text itself.”³ After offering twenty-something examples of this phenomenon, the editors go on to say that

the scribe’s uncertainty and (to a certain extent) his lesser degree of faithfulness in transmitting a text that he has compared not with the *Liber Scoti* but with some other exemplar is also evident from the rather frequent errors or incongruities, such as omissions of words, changes, additions, substitutions, clarifications, repetitions, incorrect interpretations of abbreviations, etc., as can be readily seen by looking at the apparatus of variants.⁴

Note the oddity of this argument. The fact that there are “frequent errors or incongruities” in the text of A is supposed to be evidence that the scribe grew uneasy with his text, and less faithful to it, in the absence of the *Liber Scoti* with which to compare it. Surely, though, what the errors and incongruities tell us about the scribe’s

²A is Assisi, Biblioteca comunale (Communal Library), MS 137.

³Vatican ed., X:39*: “haesitationem suam sive in margine sive in ipso textu saepius manifestat.”

⁴*Ibid.*, 39*–40*: “Amanuensis incertitudo et aliquantulum minor eiusdem fidelitas in textu non cum ‘libro Scoti’ sed cum alio exemplari comparato tradendo apparet etiam ex frequentioribus erroribus vel incongruentiis, prouti sunt ex. gr. verborum omissiones, mutationes, additiones, substitutiones, clarificationes, repetitiones, erroneae abbreviationum interpretationes etc., ut facile ex apparatu variantium conspici potest.” I have translated ‘frequentioribus’ as “rather frequent” rather than merely “more frequent” because (a) from the context I don’t think the editors mean merely to say that such errors become more frequent after III.7 than they are up to that point and (b) such errors *are* rather frequent. But not much hinges on this choice beyond a slight frisson of rhetorical pleasure on my part.

text—namely, that it wasn't very good—is more important than what they tell us about the scribe's state of mind.⁵

In any event, the editors acknowledge that the text of A after III.7 is marred by “frequent errors or incongruities.” And yet the very next thing they say is this: “Whatever it is, Codex A, on account of its origin and authority, always remains the foremost leader and guide in discovering the text of Scotus.”⁶ Do I really need to lay out how completely bizarre this statement is? By the editors' own lights, the text of A from III.8 on is full of mistakes, it was transmitted in the absence of the very thing that made the earlier parts of A reliable and authoritative—the availability of the *Liber Scoti* as a source by which to correct the text at hand—and *the scribe of A himself knew he had a bad text on his hands*. And yet, in spite of all this, they are going to continue to privilege A over all the other manuscripts? This is sheer editorial irresponsibility.

This is by no means the whole case for (1), though I should think the editors' own confession of the unreliability of A, combined with their expressed determination to make it their “foremost leader and guide” in establishing the text, is enough by itself to show that their edition is untrustworthy. Further evidence for (1), along with evidence for (2) and (3), will come at the end of this essay, when I perform the boring but necessary task of laying out a variety of the errors and incongruities in the edition that derive from A and the superior readings in other manuscripts, especially Q, that—by the editors' own acknowledgment—“can be readily seen by looking at the apparatus of

⁵And do the editors really mean us to conclude that he was so at sea because of the text(s) he had before him that he started *introducing* errors and incongruities that weren't already there? Surely not—although of course it doesn't really matter, because the editors themselves admit that the text of A after III.7 is a mess. Whether it was a mess before, or instead because of, its transmission by the scribe of A—or some combination of both—is immaterial.

⁶Ibid., 40*: “Quidquid est, codex A, ob suam originem et auctoritatem, semper manet in textu Scoti detegendo praecipuus dux et manuductor.”

variants.”⁷ But before that, I want to look briefly at what the editors have to say about (3).

The superiority of Codex Q

After the passage just quoted, the editors turn to “the text of Scotus in other codices.” They first note three kinds of involuntary scribal errors: misinterpretations of abbreviations (because the scribes are either bad at theology or bad at paleography⁸), double- or even triple-barreled renderings of over-abbreviated abbreviations (just to be safe),⁹ and the omissions and repetitions occasioned by homoioteleuton, line-jumpings, and the like. That brings us to Codex Q¹⁰:

A fourth category of variants comprises all those voluntary changes that certain redactors introduced into the text of Scotus, and especially the redactor of the text that Codex Q and others along with it transmit. They did this, to be sure, with the intention of making certain difficult statements easier to understand, rendering more elegant the occasional awkward manner of expression, correcting errors or infelicitous forms in style or grammar, explaining a rather obscure meaning, or, finally, completing certain expressions.¹¹

⁷Not that the edition’s apparatus is perfectly reliable, but I shall not have occasion to address that problem in what follows.

⁸Vatican ed., X:40*: “quae tam doctrinali amanuensium paupertate quam etiam abbreviationum ignorantiae tribuenda est.”

⁹Ibid.: “Aliud genus variantium ortum est ex incertitudine amanuensium in compendiis nimis brevibus ac proinde ambiguis interpretandis, ita ut, ne in errorem inciderent, compendia duobus — immo etiam aliquando tribus — modis legerint.”

¹⁰Q is Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (National Library of France), Latin MS 15854.

¹¹Vatican ed., X:40*: “Quartam variantium seriem constituunt omnes illae voluntarie mutationes, quas in Scoti textum invexerunt aliqui redactores, et praesertim redactor textus quem codex Q aliique cum illo tradunt. Hoc quidem eo fine fecerunt, ut dicta quaedam difficilia redderent intellectu faciliora, ut modum dicendi hic illic rudem elegantius exhiberent, ut stili et grammaticae errores vel ineptas formas corrigerent, ut obscuriorem sensum explicarent, vel tandem ut aliquas expressiones complerent.”

In other words, the frequent errors of A have been corrected in Q, the frequent infelicities made felicitous. But these changes, the editors tell us, were *voluntary*: the redactor made them for purposes of his own, and therefore presumably they lead us further away from, rather than toward, the authentic text of Scotus.

So what the editors would have us believe is that the error-ridden text of A presents the authentic text of Scotus—notwithstanding the reasons the editors themselves offer us for concluding that something was amiss in the text(s) the scribe had before him, *and that the scribe himself knew this and was bothered by it*—and that the far more satisfactory text of Q represents an unauthorized tidying-up that leads us away from the authentic text. We have absolutely no reason to believe this. We have no reason to believe that the text transmitted in A is closer to Scotus’s. We have no reason to believe that the text transmitted in Q departs from Scotus’s. We have no reason to believe that the superior readings in Q are the products of an interventionist scribe rather than faithful transmissions of a better text than the one possessed by the dissatisfied scribe of A. The only thing the editors can offer in support of any of those suppositions is their groundless ideological commitment to the superiority of A. Abandon that commitment—as I take it I have shown we have ample reason to do—and all those suppositions fall to the ground.

Notice, indeed, what the editors are asking us to believe. They are asking us to believe that an otherwise unknown 14th-century scribe was a more capable thinker than John Duns Scotus, better able to supply the right kinds of examples, to complete arguments consequentially, to treat the difference between necessary and sufficient conditions properly. For the Scotus of A is frequently bad at all those things; the Scotus of Q is quite adept. If it were just a matter of grammar and style, the editors’ view would not be quite so crazy; all of us who work on Scotus know that his Latin can be

pretty rough (though even Scotus knows the difference between *enim* and *autem*, between *vel* and *et*, which are frequently confused in A). But we are talking about basic philosophical skill here. *The Scotus of Codex A is a frequently inept reasoner; the Scotus of Codex Q is a capable philosopher and theologian.* I recognize that this is a kind of “internalist” argument, rather than a proper text-critical one. I do not have adequate (or indeed any) text-critical grounds for thinking that the Scotus of Q is the real Scotus, but then the editors do not have adequate (or indeed any) text-critical grounds for thinking that the Scotus of A is the real Scotus. And at least my Scotus doesn’t suck at philosophy, a fact that I think warrants affirming that my Scotus is the real Scotus. For we know at least this much about the real Scotus: he didn’t suck at philosophy.¹²

A variety of bad readings and good variants

Now I turn to the boring but necessary task of supplying illustrations of bad readings in A with sensible variants in other manuscripts, and especially in Q. This is nowhere close to a complete list; it’s just a representative sampling.

distinction 26, n. 102, lines 589–591

The edition has *respondeo: tres sunt condiciones quae ponuntur pertinere ad virtutem theologicam veram vel ad primam Veritatem.* But the criteria that follow are criteria for something’s being a theological virtue, not for something’s being the First Truth. Every manuscript other than A omits *veram . . . Veritatem.*

¹²Let me put that a bit more carefully: given two rivals with equal text-critical claims to transmit the thought of Scotus, other things being equal, the one that represents Scotus as a capable thinker should be preferred to the one that represents him as inept. For Scotus was in fact a capable thinker, and not an inept one.

distinction 26, n. 118, lines 756–760

The edition has *Sed ipsa apprehensio eius tamquam possibilis non est 'desiderare' absolutum, sed tantum condicionatum, ut scilicet quantum in illo est, – quod tamen 'desiderare', si esset sine apprehensione [sic] tali et esset condicionatum, non esset 'sperare'*. There is no sense to be made of this, not least because Scotus surely can't be talking about whether an *apprehension* (cognitive) is or is not a *desire* (appetitive). Q offers *quia si ostenditur ut impossibile tunc eius non est desiderium absolute sed tantum condicionatum, quia scilicet desideraret si non esset talis apprehensio, et tale desiderium condicionatum non est sperare*, which makes perfect sense.¹³

distinction 26, n. 133, lines 867–871

The edition has *Ad quartum dico quod voluntas habet duas affectiones, secundum quarum utramque est attingens Deum immediate, puta secundum affectionem iustitiae elicitam, tendentis in Deum immediate ut est bonum in se, et etiam secundum affectionem commodi vel concupiscentiae attingentis Deum ut est bonum mihi*. So far as I know (perhaps someone can correct me), this would be the only place in which Scotus ever speaks of an *elicited* affection for justice (and it is hard to see what sense can be made of that idea) or of an affection of desire. Moreover, given the grammar, 'tending' has to modify 'justice' and 'attaining' has to modify 'advantageous' or 'desire' – syntax that is baffling even by Scotus's standards. Q offers *Ad quartum dico quod voluntas habet duas affectiones, et utraque attingit Deum immediate, scilicet affectionem iustitiae, quae per actum amicitiae tendit in Deum immediate ut est bonum in se, et affectionem commodi, quae per actum concupiscentiae tendit in Deum immediate ut est bonum huic*. Isn't that better? All the terminology is used

¹³It would be tacky of me to point out that Wadding agrees with Q here, as it generally does, so that the critical edition is actually a step backward from the Wadding edition, at least in terms of intelligibility (and, as I keep noting, we have no real way of judging fidelity).

correctly, the right things are tending and being elicited and so forth, and the syntax is perfectly straightforward.

distinction 27, n. 58, lines 421–424

The context is a discussion of a special “sweetness” that some people experience in their love for God. The edition has *nec tamen talis dulcedo est actus elicited a voluntate, sed passio quaedam actui eius acquisita, qua allicit et nutrit Deus parvulos ne deficiant in via*. It is hard to construe *acquisita* with the dative *actui* (“by an act” would be ablative, *actu*), and the suggestion that a passion of spiritual sweetness can be *acquired* smacks of Pelagianism, which is in turn at odds with the statement that such a passion is something *God* uses to uphold his wayfaring little ones. All the manuscripts besides AP read *retributa*, making the syntactical awkwardness, the flirtation with heresy, and the internal inconsistency all disappear at once.

distinction 30, n. 39, lines 260–262

The edition has *si enim color haberet contrarium, puta a, non sequitur ‘album est coloratum, ergo nigrum est coloratum, puta a’*. Stare at that for a while and see if you can make any sense of it. (You can’t.) What would be the “right” wrong inference? Obviously *si enim color haberet contrarium, puta a, non sequitur ‘album est coloratum, ergo nigrum est a’*—which, surprise!, is what Q says (and Q alone, of all the collated manuscripts).

distinction 33, n. 17, lines 112–117

The edition has *Appetitus sensitivus non tantum est persuasibilis, sed etiam obedibilis est: et haec verba bene possunt probari, quia bene ‘liberum’ est persuasibile, sed non proprie persuasibile sed obedibile. Appetitus autem sensitivus, qui non est liber, non est proprie*

persuasibilis, sed obedibilis, quia subicibilis imperio voluntatis. So is the sensory appetite *persuasibilis* or not? Yes, according to the first sentence; no, according to the second. Is something free *persuasibile* or *obedibile*? *Persuasibile*, but not properly so, but instead *obedibile* according to the first sentence. So then what is unfree should be *persuasibile*, right? Wrong, according to the last sentence; it too is *obedibile*. That's a lot of muddle in a very short space. Now look at Q: *Appetitus autem sensitivus non est persuasibilis a ratione sed obedibilis rationi: et haec verba bene possunt ponderari, quia liberum est bene persuasibile, non tamen proprie obedibile. Appetitus autem sensitivus, quia non est liber persuasibilis, sed obedibilis imperio voluntatis.* Even this is a bit more elliptical than one would like, but it's internally coherent and makes an intelligible argument. What is free is not subject to obedience but is responsive to persuasion; what is not free is subject to obedience. The sensory appetite is not free. Therefore, etc.

distinction 36, n. 12, lines 65–68

The edition has *Conceditur ergo quod in duobus primis gradibus non est virtus, quia potest in habitibus virtutum aliquis esse exercitatus in actibus unius virtutis et non alterius, et ita acquirere tam perseverantiam quam temperantiam, et unam et non aliam.* This is all kinds of a mess. First, we're supposed to be getting an argument (from Henry) that there is no necessary *connection* between good habits at the first two levels, *perseverantia* and *continentia*; that's what the argument from uneven moral effort establishes. The edition instead makes this an argument that there is no *virtue* at the first two levels— a fact that was stated in the previous paragraph and is not under dispute. Second, temperance *is* a virtue, and what is possessed at the second level is not a virtue but *continence*. Third, what is the feminine noun we're supposed to supply in that last clause? *Virtus* is the only one in the neighborhood, but if we are indeed to supply *virtus* there, the view

would be saying that at the first two levels someone can acquire one virtue but not another, but we've already been told that there *is* no virtue at the first two levels. (And if we're not to supply *virtus* in the last clause, I don't know what feminine noun we're meant to supply that would make any sense.) Let's turn to Q: *Conceditur ergo quod in primis duobus gradibus non est connexio, quia potest aliquis exercitari in actibus unius virtutis et non alterius, et ita acquirere tam perseverantiam unius et non alterius.* That gives us the right argument for the relevant conclusion. Its only problem is that we're missing *quam continentiam*, which should surely follow *tam perseverantiam*. Fortunately Z supplies the missing words.

distinction 36, n. 17, lines 87–95

Scotus has just argued (on Henry's behalf) that in order to have one virtue (at a certain level) one must have them all. For if I have the virtue that regulates behavior in the domain of x but lack the virtue that regulates behavior in the domain of y, I can go astray with respect to y, and my going astray with respect to y can lead to my going astray with respect to x, so that I don't in fact have the virtue in that domain either. Here's what the edition thinks is a suitable illustration of that argument: *Hoc patet in exemplo, quia habens fortitudinem et non temperantiam, non firmatur circa delectabilia refrenanda; similiter habens temperantiam et non fortitudinem, non firmatur circa terribilia sustinenda; ergo si praesententur sibi terribilia simul et delectabilia, puta quod fornicetur vel sustineat mortem, potest obliquari circa terribilia, et per consequens circa ea quae sunt fortitudinis, et non circa ea quae sunt temperantiae: prius enim eligeret talis non sustinere mortem quam non fornicari, quia non est firmatus circa illam passionem terribilem.* If in fact someone who commits fornication to save his life does not go astray with respect to the matter of temperance, but only with respect to the matter of fortitude, then this isn't an

example of the claim it's supposed to exemplify. (Also, obviously neither Henry nor Scotus is going to say that such a person sins only against fortitude and not against temperance. That's just crazy.) Only a single manuscript contains the words that ruin the example--- *fortitudinis, et non circa ea quae sunt*—but that manuscript is A, so the editors follow it. Most manuscripts do have the extraneous bit at the beginning about the person who has fortitude but not temperance, but NYQ omit it (as does Wadding). Here's Q: *Hoc patet in exemplo, quia habens temperantiam et non fortitudinem non firmatur circa terribilia sustinenda. Igitur si praesententur sibi terribilia, puta quod vel fornicetur vel sustineat mortem, patet obliquari circa terribilia et per consequens circa ea quae sunt temperantiae, nam talis prius eligeret non sustinere mortem quam non fornicari, quia non est firmatus circa illam passionem terribilem.*

The upshot

As I have said, this is nowhere close to an exhaustive list of the errors and incongruities that the editors see fit to include in their text in their misbegotten allegiance to Codex A. It's just a representative sample. These *kinds* of errors are frequent, and they can generally be remedied by the very thing that the editors themselves recommend but oddly do not act on: attention to variant readings in other manuscripts. Preeminent among these is Codex Q, which is reliable in all the ways in which A is unreliable.¹⁴ Dare I speculate that if the scribe of A had had Q in front of him, the *incertitudo* and *haesitatio* that the editors profess to discern in him would have been entirely alleviated? Circumstances, alas, were not so propitious for him. But they are for us. We have Q. Let's use it.

¹⁴Because the apparatus is not wholly reliable, it is a good thing that Q is available online. Book 3, distinction 26, begins here: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b90725618/f199>