Could it really have been otherwise?
Historiographical implications of the *POTENTIA ABSOLUTA* and *ORDINATA* debate

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The aim of this paper is to resume the debate about the theological concepts of potentia Dei absoluta and potentia Dei ordinata, not starting from the point of view of necessity, bound to divine action and the established order of the world, but rather from contingency. Thanks to the establishment of the Ockhamist position and the theological revolution of Duns Scotus. Thanks to the establishment of the Ockhamist position and the theological revolution of Duns Scotus, contingency becomes one of the most important topics of the XIV century debates.

Keywords: History of ideas, *potentia absoluta, potentia ordinata,* Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, *Contingentia*

1. *Contingency and necessity*

Theological discussions on divine omnipotence and the distinction between *potentia Dei absoluta* and *potentia Dei ordinata* have been subject to growing attention in contemporary historiography, ranging from the pioneering studies of Feckes to the more recent ones of Francis Oakley, Tamar Rudavsky and, most of all, William Courtenay. As far as Italy is concerned, it is appropriate to recall that the debate was ignited by the studies of Eugenio Randi[1]. The aim of this paper is to resume the topic of these reflections, not starting from the point of view of necessity, bound to divine action and the established order of the world, but rather from contingency. Thanks to the establishment of the Ockhamist position and the theological revolution of Duns

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[1] W.J. Courtenay, *The dialectic of divine onnipotence* in Courtenay 1984. On these topics cf. Courtenay 1990, Oakley 1984 and Rudavsky 1985. For the studies of Eugenio Randi, it is worth noting Randi 1987, the essay *Lex est in potestate agentis. Note per una storia della idea scotista di Potentia Absoluta,* in Fumagalli Beonio Brocchieri 1986 and Randi 1990. For a clear bibliographical review of the principal studies on the distinction, cf. Randi 1987, note 9 p. 4 (even if not updated, still a useful text).

Scotus (who considers contingency no longer as the sign of finitude of the created world but, rather, an essential attribute of the First Cause and the absolutely free action of his will), contingency becomes one of the most important topics of the XIV century debates.

Starting from Peter Damian's reflections in the *De divina omnipotentia* and Anselm of Canterbury's thoughts on the relation between *posse* and *velle* in reference to the nature of God, from the middle of the XII century the discussion on modality (necessity, contingency and possibility) appears strictly bound to the theological debate, to the properties that are analytically attributed to God in this context and the possibility of acting on the inside of the order of the laws (*ordinatio*) that he himself established as warrant of the stability of the world. These discussions become even more complex and subtle thanks to the grammatical-dialectical tools of the scholastic debates. The focus switches to the distinction of divine power in *potentia Dei absoluta* and *potentia Dei ordinata* (already present in Anselm and Hugh of Saint-Cher), distinction that will quickly rise to an institutional value in the canon of Latin sources, especially when it will take shape in the *distinctiones* 42-44 of the first book of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. It is possible to reconstruct its story as emblematic topic[2] of the theological-philosophical chiasmus that defines the thought of medieval centuries[3], but also in order to show the different points of view that gave birth to new readings of the distinction itself – both in philosophical and intellectual history - and how this led to the creation of categories and conceptual schemes that legitimize the interest in it, both as historical and historiographical object. We will start from the recent history of this distinction. In this way, we intend to rethink certain filiations that marked the historiography of the problem[4].

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[2] For the concept of topic in a historiographical setting, we refer here to the definition given by Panaccio 2007, p. 271.

[3] Martin Grabmann identifies instead Hugh of Saint Victor as the founder of the distinction. However, this is based on a position that relies on an unhistorical concept of "method" that we believe is historiographically unsustainable nowadays. Cf. Grabmann 1933.

[4] For a "weak" reading of the theologies of the XIV century starting from John Duns Scotus, cf. *Le verità dissonanti* (Bianchi/Randi 1990). In addition to the mentioned studies of W.J. Courtenay, cf. Bottin 1982, Tachau 1988 and Parodi 1987. *Le verità dissonanti* has surely been a fundamental reference point for the medievalism of the '80s and '90s. Reading it today, we should focus the attention on the strength of certain

2. *Posse* and *velle*? *Posse* or *velle*? Confronting medievalists

According to the distinction made by Gelber, the discussion (and often, the dispute) on divine power and its distinction in contemporary historiography can be divided in three moments[5]. The first can be located in the 20's of last century, when Carl Feckes[6] associated the distinction between absolute and ordained power in God to nominalism, criticizing Ockham and his successors for having used the *potentia absoluta Dei* in order to hide an idea in potential contrast with the terms of theological orthodoxy. In fact, talking about *potentia absoluta Dei*, which consists in the capacity of realizing everything that does not imply contradiction (and, therefore, defining a divine power that can arbitrarily act on the level of the established order – *ordinatio*) seems to imply the fact that the christian God would share the same attribute of a capricious divinity with a mutable will. In the following years, many medievalists, headed by Paul Vignaux[7], began a critical revising process of these positions. However, the second moment of the modern debate began only in 1963, with Heiko Oberman's[8] research on Gabriel Biel and nominalism. The heart of discussion is the position held by William of Ockham and the Ockhamist tradition: the distinction between the two powers should not be understood as an articulation of the divine power to act, because it is identical to the unicity and simplicity of God and it analytically belongs to him. Therefore, it is indivisible. Affirming that, sometimes, God acts according to the *ordinatio* established by himself while other times he breaks it, would result in a contradiction. God has chosen *de potentia ordinata* to act according to certain laws that he himself freely established. However,

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theories based on a realism that forces the divine face to take part of its humanity. Theories built on a strong concept of absolute contingency (*simpliciter*) against any attempt to reduce contingency itself to a depowered image of necessity.

[5] Cf. Gelber 2004, in particular cap. VIII, pp. 309-339.
[6] Cf. Feckes 1925.
[7] Starting from three decisive articles (*Nicolas d'Autrecourt; Nominalisme; Guillaume d'Occam*), in the XI volume of the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (1931), later resumed in Vignaux 1938, 1948 and 1977.
[8] Cf. Oberman 1963.

he can do anything that does not include a contradiction *de potentia absoluta*. God has decided and ordained to do or not to do certain things, but the context of divine *velle* does not exhaust the *posse*. There are still many things that he can do but decides not to. The idea of a capricious divinity that arbitrarily acts outside of the order established by himself is unsustainable, because God always (and only) acts in an ordained way[9]. The third moment of the debate features a growing awareness of the plurality and complexity of the medieval positions on the topic, making them irreducible to schematisms and drastic contrasts. The context of the intertwined questions becomes broader; for example, the attention also shifts to the analogy between divine power and canonic right and to the effects that the latter had on theology, philosophy and political theory during the late Middle Ages and the early modern period. In particular, the most debated question in the historiographical debate becomes the following: in the scholastic tradition of the XIV century, was there an idea that God's absolute power was considered as a real form of action, capable of acting in the established order and even changing it? William Courtenay, in a work that became a milestone on the topic[10], firmly denied this hypothesis. The formulation that will become canonic starts to take shape around the first half of the XIII century and has widely been accepted in the common scholastic sense since 1245: *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* are defined *ex parte hominis* and not *ex parte Dei* and have to be intended not as two different powers in God but, rather, as different ways of referring to divine power. The first refers to the discussion on divine power in an abstract sense, without reference to God's will and the providential plane established in the *ordinatio*. The second refers to what God actually chose to do. Consequently, certain actions that are theoretically possible to

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[9] The statement that God, by absolute power, can do anything that does not include a contradiction leads to a series of conclusions that can be depressing under a human point of view. If God can do anything that does not include a contradiction, then he can condemn an innocent and save a sinner: this would mean that God does not judge in a rightful way. One of the traditional answers to this conclusion is given by Anselm of Canterbury: God cannot condemn an innocent and save a sinner because this action includes a contradiction (by doing so, God would not be good and right and, therefore, he would not be God). The Anselmian solution relies on divine goodness as a restriction of the actions that God can commit on the order he created. Cf. Gelber, *cit.*, pp. 329-330.

[10] Courtenay 1984.

God *de potentia absoluta* result impossible in the ordained frame established *de potentia ordinata.* Absolute power is supported in order to save divine omnipotence; at the same time, however, the fact that changes to the established order of the universe occur is considered irreconcilable with the perfection and immutability of divine nature.

The theological distinction became a political instrument during the XIII century, when the experts of canonic right referred to it in order to justify the fact that the Pope could have been subject to the ecclesiastical law and yet maintain full power (*plenitudo potestatis*) to suspend those same laws through various exemptions[11]. At this point, two possible interpretations seem to stand out: according to the first, God's absolute power describes the absolute freedom of divine will (able to express itself in the infinite series of possibilities) while the ordained system reflects the actual and real choices made by God's will. On the other hand, the second interpretation focuses on the fact that the *ordinatio* reflects the divine choice of a stable order while his *potentia absoluta* shows his capacity of suspending that order, in case God would like to act outside of it[12].

4. *Actions and agents in the contingent universe: confronting interpretations*

In every agent that acts through intellect and will, with the power of acting in conformity with a *lex recta* and with the power to not necessarily act in conformity with that law, there is a distinction between ordained and absolute power. The reason lies in the fact that the agent can act in conformity with the current law (ordained power) and can act outside this law or even against it [...] not only in God but in every free agent [...]; therefore jurists distinguish between acting *de facto* or *de jure*.[13]

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[11] The first person to apply the theological distinction between the two powers to the Papal authority in the second half of the XIII century was the Hostiensis, in his *Lectura in quinque decretalium Gregorianarum libros* (Ad 3, 35, 6, Venice 1581 rpt. 1965, III, fol. 134r). The question was the following: does the Pope have the power to relieve a monk from his poverty vow? While Innocent III held that this type of action was not inside the Pope's privileges, the Hostiensis replied that, thanks to the *plenitudo potestatis*, the Pope could change *de potentia absoluta* (and not *de potentia ordinata*) the nature of the monastic state and exercise this absolute power in those rare cases where the Church's good would itself be at stake. Cf. Randi 1987, pp. 34-35.

[12] «The first view would situate God's absolute power in his omnipotent being and situate his ordinate power in his will, whereas the second would situate both sorts of power in God's will and distinguish them in terms of different kinds of divine willing», Gelber 2004, p. 312.

[13] «In omni agente per intellectum et voluntatem, potente conformiter agere legi rectae et tamen non necessario conformiter agere legi rectae, est distinguere potentiam ordinatam a potentia absoluta; et ratio

This is the new *rectitudo* that Scotus intends to follow, in order to escape the necessitarian causality of Aquinas. According to William Courtenay – whose interpretation is shared by Eugenio Randi[14] – Scotus wants to claim the existence of two divine powers or, at least, of two different ways of acting towards the established law[15]. In reality, Scotus does not define God's absolute power as a direct action on the world but, rather, considers it as the capacity of suspending an order and replacing it with another one[16]. Absolute and ordained power work in tandem: the first allows the suspension of the issued statute while the second ensures that God would never act disorderly[17]. *Potentia absoluta* transcends the order of the created law and can establish another *ordinatio*. This does not mean that it has to be intended as a form of direct action on the world: on contrary, it represents an indirect operation thanks to the new *ordinatio* (that replaces the old, now suspended). Therefore, when God acts, he acts only *ordinate* and the *potentia absoluta* just reveals the reserve of possible orders of the world that are situated in God's contingent will. It can be affirmed, then, that Scotus' position is at a crossing point between the two interpretative lines we referred to. Moreover, according to the Franciscan *magister*,

huius est, quia potest agere conformiter illi legi rectae,et tunc secundum potentiam ordinatam (ordinata enim est in quantum est principium exsequendi aliqua conformiter legi rectae), et potest agere praeter illam legem vel contra eam, […] Et ideo non tantum in Deo, sed in omni agente libere – […] ideo dicunt iuristae quod aliquis hoc potest facere de facto, hoc est de potentia sua absoluta, - vel de iure, hoc est de potentia ordinata secundum iura.» *Ordinatio* I, d. 44, q. unica in Duns Scotus 1963 (my translation).

[14] Randi 1987, pp. 56-65.

[15] Courtenay fundamentally distinguishes two "categories" in regard to the distinction: the first one considers God's absolute power as the capacity of acting and choosing differently, only belonging to the moment before the creation of the actual order (Bonaventure and Aquinas share this idea, for example); the second considers *potentia absoluta Dei* as the capacity of acting differently in regards to an already established divine order (among the followers, Duns Scotus).

[16] «Sed quando in potestate agentis est lex et rectitudo legis, ita quod non est recta nisi quia statuta, tunc potest aliter agens ex libertate sua ordinare quam lex illa recta dictet; et tamen cum hoc potest ordinate agere, quia potest statuere aliam legem rectam secundum quam agat ordinate. Nec tunc potentia sua absoluta simpliciter excedit potentiam ordinatam, quia esset ordinata secundum aliam legem sicut secundum priorem; tamen excedit potentiam ordinatam praecise secundum priorem legem, contra quam vel praeter quam facit. Ita posset exemplificari de principe et subditis, et lege positiva» *Ordinatio* I, d. 44. q. unica, in Duns Scotus 1963.

[17] Gelber notes that «one motivation for Scotus' taking the position he did may have been the condemnations of 1277. The Parisian masters had rejected restrictions on God's absolute power to do what is impossible according to the natural order, had rejected the idea that God acts out of necessity or could not do otherwise than he does, and had rejected restrictions on God's power to do anything new. Without referring to the 1277 decrees, Scotus' description of God's power to act in the world satisfies the Parisian requirements», Gelber 2004, p. 317.

God has the power, in special cases, of setting the *ordinatio* aside: *de potentia absoluta*, he can always cast a certain order of the world aside and enforce a new one, more aligned with his aims. *De potentia ordinata*, he can formulates judgments that go against the universal rule[18] without having a subversion of the universal order but, rather, only a particular realization of it.

The position of William of Ockham is another turning point, not only in the historical reflection over the two powers but also in the contemporary historiographical debate. A widespread interpretative line considers the theory of two powers in Ockham in relation to that of Aquinas[19]: according to the *Aquinatis*, *potentia absoluta Dei* is the power of having acted differently and not the power of radically replacing an order with another. Therefore, even if starting from theological presuppositions quite far from Aquinas, Ockham would share the idea that absolute power has to be intended as the possibility of doing everything that does not bring contradiction, rather than a concrete and possible form of action. Consider, for example, the case of miracles and supernatural events: the *Venerabilis Inceptor* does not consider them a realization of the *potentia absoluta* but, rather, an historical event that happens against the laws of the *ordinatio* without subverting it[20]. In any case, it is undeniable that the distance between the contingentism of the English philosopher and the Thomist necessarianism is quite large[21]. According to the Thomist model, the

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[18] Scotus gives the example of a person who died in a state of sin. He will be damned: but God could still save him with a gift of grace, sparing him from damnation. It follows then that God's mercy in some ways can surpass his own justice, without destroying the universal pertinence of the law for all believers.

[19] Cf. Ghisalberti 1986.

[20] Cf. *ibidem*, p. 35.

[21] Gelber pools the different interpretations of authors such as Courtenay, Randi and Ghisalberti (who read Aquinas and Ockham's realism in historiographical harmony against the position of Duns Scotus) in a group of so-called traditionalists, who only have a comparison between Ockham and Aquinas' works in common. Actually, Randi nor Courtenay never affirms this continuity. While they both signal an opposition to Scotus, none of them thinks about associating historiographically the linguistic-semantical contingent model of Ockham to the causal one of Aquinas' providential determinism. The simplicity and parsimony that move Ockham's model refer to two sides of the same power and they cannot be located in Aquinas' causal determinism. The debate on the strong or weak role of the causal relation for knowledge in Ockham (two different interpreters are, for example, Claude Panaccio and Brower-Toland) demonstrates the distance from Aquinas. One could even affirm that it is exactly the distance from Aquinas that brings closer, under the sign of contingency, the Scotist and Ockhamist models: even if still different, they seem to have something in common that surely is not shared by the necessitarian causalism of Aquinas. On causality in Aquinas, cf. Porro 2013 and Brock 2002.

world is created by the First Cause: by knowing the whole system of causes, the First Cause providentially delegates to second and extrinsic causes the determinism of effects that are already established by God as modally contingent or necessary, according to a *lex necessitatis et contingentis*[22]. On the other side, Ockham believes that even if the ordination, once established, has to follow the causal law, the world is only depictable starting from contingent propositions such as «if there is a man, it is necessary for him to be mortal». This is not anymore a *propter quid* contingency, then, but rather absolute (*simpliciter*), because it is ontological quality of the *ordinatio* and at the same time possibility condition for the linguistic statements that humankind uses in order to comprehend and reproduce the divine order of the world. Other positions, chronologically prior to Ockham's one, show the same crucial role of contingency, even if declined in different forms each time.

From these considerations, it is clear that a new reading of the different interpretations that the medieval studies built on the distinction is necessary[23]. The historiographical agreement between Aquinas and Ockham appears purely fictional in a optic that orders the medieval thinkers according to different gradations of doctrinal orthodoxy and theoretical correctness using, as a ruler, the distance from Thomist theology (this is even more difficult with a complex theological question such as divine omnipotence). This operation would be justified by the need of protecting Ockham from an association with an epistemological and ethical skepticism, intended as a direct consequence of the concrete possibility of a divine intervention *de potentia absoluta* in the world. Gelber's interpretation, on the other side, even if revisable for what concerns the understanding of Courtenay and Randi's positions, allow us to read Ockham's solutions under a different light. This light is the dialogue with the Scotist theory and it has the undoubted merit of having shed light on certain incongruences

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[22] Cf. the commentary to *Metaph VI, lectio* III.

[23] In addition to the classic research of Maier 1949, it is also useful to confront the second issue of Esposito/Porro 2002 (in particular the article of Stephen L. Brock, *Causality and Necessity in Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 217-240). On the reconstruction of the debate concerning Tempier's condamnation of 1277 (in particular of articles 21 and 60), reaching the conclusion that the position of philosophers who try to remain faithful to the antideterminist position of Aristotle has to be condemned because too indeterminist compared to the «providential determinism» of theologians like Aquinas, cf. Porro 2013, in particular pp. 121-138.

between the "Thomist" lecture of Ockham and the theory of time and possibility that is traceable in the work of the *Venerabilis Inceptor*.

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