

ON A THOMISTIC WORRY ABOUT
SCOTUS'S DOCTRINE OF THE *ESSE CHRISTI*

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Unofficial version – not for quotation or citation.

To appear in *Antonianum*.

Introduction

According to authoritative Christian teaching, Jesus Christ is a single person existing in two natures, divinity and humanity. In attempting to understand this claim, the high-scholastic theologians often asked whether there was more than one existence in Christ. The right answer is not obvious: the fact that Christ is one person suggests that the correct answer is “no,” while the fact that he has two natures suggests that the correct answer is “yes.” John Duns Scotus answers the question with a clear and strongly-formulated “yes,” and Thomists have sometimes suspected that his answer leads in a heretical direction. But before we can ask whether Scotus’s answer is acceptable or not, we have to come to a clear understanding of what his answer is. And before we can ask what his answer is, we have to come to a clear understanding of what question or questions he is trying to answer.

In this paper I begin by explaining that the question about Christ’s existence is ambiguous, i.e., that there are actually two questions hidden behind one formulation. Next I look at Scotus’s writings on the topic in order to determine which question he is really trying to answer, and I argue that he is trying to answer both of them, even though he does not make this clear. Third, I provide an initial look at the answers that he gives. Fourth, I explain why these answers might seem problematic, especially from a Thomistic perspective. Fifth, I explain Scotus’s answers in more detail and show that they are not problematic in the way that some Thomists have held. Indeed, at least some of Scotus’s ideas are the very same ideas that Thomas spells out in one of his works.

Before doing any of that, however, I would like to make a brief remark about the texts. Scotus discusses our topic in *Reportatio parisiensis* III, d. 6, q. 1, *Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, and *Lectura* III, d. 6, q. 1.¹ These texts come from relatively late in Scotus's career. Furthermore, it appears that Scotus's views on the topic are basically consistent. For these reasons, it will not be necessary to worry about developments in his thought. Instead, a fairly simple procedure can be followed. Because the *Lectura* text is more complete and spelled-out than the others, I will focus most of my remarks on it, noting parallels in the other texts as I go, and discussing differences when necessary.

Questions about Christ's *esse*

When we ask whether there is one existence in Christ or more than one, what are we really asking? We might be asking about existence inasmuch as this is attributable to Christ, who is a person, a supposit, a hypostasis. If this is what we mean, then we are asking whether Christ, this person, has more than one existence. But we might be asking a different sort of question. We might be asking about existence inasmuch as this is attributable to Christ's natures. If this is what we mean, then we are asking whether Christ's human nature has its own existence, distinct from the existence of his divine nature, or whether instead his human nature exists by virtue of the very same existence by which his divine nature exists.²

¹ In this paper I use the following editions: For the *Reportatio*, the Wadding-Vivès edition, vol. 23, Paris, 1894; for the *Ordinatio*, the Vatican edition, vol. 9, 2006; for the *Lectura*, the Vatican edition, vol. 20, 2003.

² For more on this distinction see my *Questions Concerning the Existences of Christ*, forthcoming in *Philosophy and Theology in the Long Middle Ages: A Tribute to Stephen F. Brown*, ed. Kent Emery, Jr., Russell L. Friedman, and Andreas Speer, Leiden, Brill. For an author who seems briefly to bring up the distinction, only to treat it as unimportant, see J.-H. Nicolas, *L'unité d'être dans le Christ, d'après saint Thomas*, in *Revue Thomiste*, 65 (1965) p. 229-260.

The medieval theologians did not always make this distinction clearly or explicitly, and it is sometimes not easy to tell which question they were concerned with. Close analysis shows, however, that both questions were of interest to them. For example, Thomas Aquinas mostly wanted to know whether Christ, the person, had one existence or more than one, although occasionally he made remarks that concerned the existence of Christ's natures. Giles of Rome was also interested in both questions, although he put more emphasis on the existence of the natures than Thomas did. Godfrey of Fontaines, to mention a third writer, was interested in both, and he seems to have been about equally interested in them—if only because he switches from one topic to the other without warning.³

Scotus, unfortunately, is a bit like Godfrey in this regard. Early in *Lectura* III, d. 6 q.1, Scotus mentions the opinion which says that in Christ there is no *esse* other than the uncreated *esse*.⁴ Then he goes on to describe this opinion as follows.

Since, therefore, the Word is constituted in the existence of a supposit, and the human nature comes to it ... the other nature will not give any new existence to the Word; the Word will only have a relation to that nature, and that nature will participate in the existence of the Word.⁵

Insofar as it speaks of whether the assumed nature gives existence to the Word, this passage seems to be concerned with existence that belongs to a supposit, i.e., the Word itself. But

³ For more on these thinkers, see my *Questions Concerning the Existences of Christ*.

⁴ I.e., “Quod in Christo non est aliud esse ab esse increato” (*Lectura* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 7).

⁵ “Cum igitur Verbum sit constitutum in esse suppositi et natura humana sibi adveniat ... alia natura non dabit Verbo aliquod novum esse, sed tantum Verbum habebit respectum ad illam naturam et illa natura participabit esse Verbi” (*Lectura* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 8). See also *Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 13, *Reportatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 2.

insofar as the passage talks about a nature's participating in the existence of the Word, the passage seems to be concerned with existence that belongs to a nature, i.e., the assumed human nature of Christ.

The same sort of ambiguity appears elsewhere. For example, after describing this opinion, Scotus goes on to describe a series of objections to it. The third objection says that in living things, to live is to exist; but Christ had not only his divine life but also a human life, as proved by the fact that he died; so if he has a twofold life, he must also have a twofold existence.⁶ This is a discussion of the existence of a supposit, not of the existence of a nature: it is Christ, a supposit, who is said to exist in two ways. But the very next objection seems different. It says that if Christ set aside his human nature, it would not be necessary for a new existence to be created for it; but that means that it must already have an existence of its own, and therefore that there is a twofold existence in Christ.⁷ This line of thought seems concerned with the existence of a nature, not the existence of a supposit.

The mere fact that Scotus discusses a certain argument is, of course, no proof that he accepts the argument. But which arguments Scotus considers worth discussing is a clue to what he considers the issue to be, and he seems to be jumping back and forth, sometimes talking about whether Christ, a *supposit*, has more than one existence, and sometimes talking about whether Christ's human *nature* has an existence of its own. The same thing happens even when Scotus explains his own views. As we will see in detail below, he makes remarks

⁶ *Lectura* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 15. Cf. *Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 17, *Reportatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 4.

⁷ *Lectura* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 16. Cf. *Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 20, *Reportatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 4.

about whether the assumed nature has existence, and he also makes remarks about whether Christ has existence in virtue of the assumed nature.⁸

This is all a bit frustrating, but we should not jump to the conclusion that Scotus is simply confused. It makes sense to speak of existence in both ways, i.e., to speak not only of the existence of a supposit but also of the existence of a nature, but presumably there is still some close connection between the two. Consider the principle that Richard Cross formulates as follows: “If a form *F*-ness is that in virtue of which something is *F*, then *F*-ness must itself exist.”⁹ Here Cross clearly means “form” in a broad sense, one that includes substantial natures such as human nature. I think that the textual basis that Cross offers for attributing this principle to Scotus is not adequate,¹⁰ and I am not aware of any explicit discussion of the issue by Scotus. However, if we follow Cross in reading Scotus as holding some such principle, then it will be much easier to make sense of what he wrote. Supposits do not exist in an undifferentiated way: they always exist in virtue of some nature or other. For this to be true, however, these natures themselves must exist. So, for example, Socrates exists, and he has this existence in virtue of his human nature; but this means that his human nature too exists.¹¹

Henceforth I will take it as given that for Scotus there is a difference between attributing existence to a supposit and attributing existence to a nature, and further that for

⁸ For examples of similar ambiguities in other texts, compare *Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 31 with *Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 36-37, and compare *Reportatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 2 (“natura humana non habet esse subsistentiae proprium”) with *Reportatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 8 (“Christus existit existentia naturae humanae”).

⁹ For Cross’s initial discussion of this principle see his *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 50.

¹⁰ See his *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, p. 127n28.

¹¹ The way in which a nature exists must, of course, be different from the way in which a supposit exists; how that difference is to be explained is a topic that cannot be discussed here.

Scotus these are related inasmuch as only *existing natures* can be principles in virtue of which *supposits exist*. This means that while Scotus is indeed switching from one topic to another, and sometimes in a confusing way, he is not proceeding at random or on the basis of deep-seated confusion. The two topics are closely related to one another, and both of them need to be addressed.

So we have not one but two questions: first, the question whether Christ's human nature has an existence distinct from that of his divine nature, and second, the question whether Christ has more than one existence. We have seen already that Scotus is interested in both. Now let us turn to considering his answers. We will, as noted in the introduction, begin with a brief exposition; then we will look at reasons why his answers might seem troubling; finally we will look in more detail to see whether the difficulties are real or merely apparent.

A first look at Scotus's claims

Since Duns Scotus is dealing with two questions—the question of the *esse* that belongs to a nature, and the question of the *esse* that belongs to a person—we have to look at two Scotistic claims, not just one. In both cases, as we will now see, Scotus strongly affirms a second existence.

With respect to the claim that there is only one existence in Christ, Scotus says the following:

If, then, the stated opinion is understood to mean that the human nature assumed by the Word does not have an existence except for the uncreated existence of the supposit ... then it is altogether false.¹²

In other words, Scotus denies that Christ's human nature has no existence of its own but merely depends on the existence of the Word. He would therefore reject the idea proposed by Thomists such as Garrigou-Lagrange.¹³ The assumed nature does, to be sure, depend on the divine existence of the Word, but there is more to the story than this:

I say ... that the human nature has a proper existence in the Word.¹⁴

The assumed nature has a "proper" existence, an existence of its own. Scotus states this quite clearly. As we will see in the next section, however, such a statement has to be understood correctly so that it does not lead in a heretical direction.

Turning now to the second issue, Scotus does not think it sufficient to affirm that Christ's human nature has its own existence. This can be seen by his reaction to a view he formulates as follows:

¹² "Si tunc intelligitur dicta opinio sic quod natura humana assumpta a Verbo non habeat esse sed tantum esse suppositi increatum ... est omnino falsa" (*Lectura III*, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 33).

¹³ Cf. Garrigou-Lagrange, *De Christo Salvatore, commentarius in IIIam partem Summæ theologicæ sancti Thomae*, Turin, R. Berruti, 1945, p. 314-321.

¹⁴ "Dico ... quod natura humana habeat propriam existentiam in Verbo" (*Lectura III*, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 32); see also for example *Ordinatio III*, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 31, *Reportatio III*, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 7.

[T]here is in Christ an existence other than the uncreated existence ... there is not, however, an existence of Christ other than the uncreated existence, because Christ does not exist except by the existence of the Word.¹⁵

According to this view, there is more than one *esse* to be found “in Christ” (*in Christo*): there is in him not only the divine *esse* but also the *esse* of the assumed nature. But this second *esse* is not “of Christ” (*Christi*), i.e., it does not belong to him as a person. Using the distinction introduced earlier in this paper, we can understand this view as saying that while there is, in Christ, a nature that possesses its own existence and therefore also, in Christ, a second, uncreated existence, there is no second existence that belongs to the person Christ himself. So this view accepts a second existence if that means an existence of a nature, but it rejects a second existence if that means an existence of a supposit.

Scotus rejects the view just described:

A supposit exists properly by the existence of the nature whose supposit it is; but the human nature in Christ has no supposit other than that one [sc. Christ’s]; therefore, Christ exists by the human nature.¹⁶

¹⁵ “[I]n Christo sit aliud esse quam esse increatum, ... non tamen Christi est aliud esse quam esse increatum, quia Christus non existit nisi existentia Verbi....” (*Lectura* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 36).

¹⁶ “[S]uppositum proprie existit existentia naturae cui est suppositum; natura autem humana in Christo non habet aliud suppositum quam illud; igitur Christus existit natura humana” (*Lectura* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 36). For some parallels, see e.g. *Reportatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 8, *Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 36.

We should say not merely that Christ's human nature has an existence, an existence that is then to be numbered among those found "in Christ"; we should also say that Christ himself, the person, exists in a human way, i.e., that there is another existence "of Christ."

This fits well with something that we saw earlier, namely, that there is a connection between the existence of a person and the existence of a nature. But the precise relationship is perhaps not entirely clear. At the end of the passage just quoted, Scotus says that Christ exists by his human nature. But earlier in the passage, he states the more general point of which this is a special case, and this is how he puts it: a supposit exists properly by the *existence of its nature*. In other words, sometimes Scotus says that a supposit exists by its nature, and sometimes he says that it exists by the existence of its nature. Since he says both of them, and in such close proximity, it is likely that he considers both to be correct. Nor is it difficult to see why. The nature can be a principle of the supposit's existence only if the nature itself exists, so in an indirect way, the nature's existence is itself a principle of the supposit.

Let us now return to the main line of thought. Scotus does not say merely that Christ exists by his human nature. He specifies this further in two ways. The first is that Christ exists *formaliter* by his assumed nature. By this Scotus means that Christ's humanity is related to him not as a part to a whole but instead either as an accident to a subject or as a nature to a supposit.¹⁷ Thus Christ is human not by a part, but instead by an accident or nature. The idea that Christ's human nature might be related to him as an accident might seem rather disturbing; as we will see below, Scotus rules it out explicitly. I do not think that

¹⁷ See especially *Lectura III*, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 40. Scotus does not appear to say anything like this in the *Reportatio*, but then again he says nothing to contradict it either. In the *Ordinatio*, he says little or nothing explicit about this, but he does say something that seems to bring out pretty much the same point at *Ordinatio III*, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 37.

Scotus's view that Christ exists *formaliter* by his humanity poses any difficulties that are relevant to this paper, so we will not be examining the point any further.¹⁸

A much more important issue is Scotus's second way of specifying how Christ exists in a human way:

I say that Christ has *simpliciter* an existence other than the uncreated existence:

Christ, *simpliciter*, exists and has an existence other than the uncreated one. ... The Word, therefore, exists *simpliciter* through the existence of the human nature.¹⁹

It is not merely that the human existence is an existence "of Christ"; it is also that he has it *simpliciter*. That Scotus says this is very clear. But again it is important to ask about the proper interpretation of Scotus's claim, which can easily appear to be problematic and even verging on the heretical.

Why Scotus's claims might appear problematic

Scotus says that Christ's humanity, the assumed nature, has its own existence. He also says that Christ, the person, exists *simpliciter* by this human nature. Someone might find such claims worrisome.

¹⁸ For discussion of a dispute over *formaliter* in Scotus's Christology, see Chrysostomos A. Pampilona, *De Christologia Duns Scoti*, Barcelona, Herder, 1969, p. 69ff.

¹⁹ "Dico quod Christus habet aliud esse 'simpliciter' ab esse increato, ita quod Christus simpliciter est et habet aliud esse quam increatum.... Verbum igitur est simpliciter per esse naturae humanae" (*Lectura* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 41); see also *Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 37, *Reportatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 8.

If Christ's human nature has its own existence, an existence that is an existence *in Christ*, then the nature might seem to be a person—but this would mean that there are two persons in Christ, in which case Scotus would be guilty of Nestorianism.²⁰

In the *Ordinatio*, Scotus clearly avoids the problem:

It is also certain with regard to the existence of subsistence [esse subsistentiae] ... that there is only one such existence in Christ, just as there is only one supposit.²¹

* * *

[T]his nature ... necessarily has its own proper actual existence ... but it does not have a proper existence of subsistence [esse subsistentiae].²²

While affirming that the nature *exists*, Scotus denies that it *subsists*. So it is very clear that Scotus's understanding of the existence of the nature avoids Nestorianism.

Curiously, Scotus does not seem to make this point explicitly in either the *Reportatio* or in the *Lectura*. In my view, however, it would be unreasonable to see this as a difference in doctrine. I believe he simply considered it too obvious to need stating.

Things are not so easily cleared up, however, when we turn to the second question, the question of the existence of the person, which is existence not merely *in Christ* but *of Christ*. As we have seen, Scotus holds that Christ exists *simpliciter* by his human nature. To see why

²⁰ For reasoning of this sort, see e.g. Garrigou-Lagrange, *De Christo salvatore*, p. 316-317. Other reasons have been given for suspecting Scotus of Nestorianism, but they fall outside the scope of this paper; for discussion, see for example Richard Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, p. 190-191, 322.

²¹ "Certum est etiam de esse subsistentiae ... quod non est nisi unicum tale esse in Christo, sicut nec nisi unicum suppositum" (*Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 8).

²² "[N]atura ista ... necessario habet propriam existentiam eius actualem ... sed non habet proprium esse subsistentiae" (*Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 31).

this might seem troubling to some, let us look at something that Thomas Aquinas says in his *Quaestio disputata de unione Verbi incarnati* art. 4.

But it must be noted that some forms are such that, by them, a being exists, not *simpliciter*, but *secundum quid*; all accidental forms are like this. But some forms are such that, by them, a subsisting thing has existence *simpliciter*, because they constitute the substantial existence of the subsisting thing. In Christ, however, the subsisting supposit is the person of the Son of God, which person is made a substance *simpliciter* by the divine nature but is not made a substance *simpliciter* by the human nature. For the person of the Son of God existed before the assumed humanity, and the person was not in any way augmented or made more complete by the assumed human nature. But the eternal supposit is made a substance by the human nature, in so far as it is this human being. Thus, just as Christ is one *simpliciter* in virtue of his unity of supposit, and two *secundum quid* in virtue of his two natures, so too does he have one existence *simpliciter* in virtue of the one eternal existence of the eternal supposit.²³

²³ “Considerandum est autem, quod aliquae formae sunt quibus est aliquid ens non simpliciter, sed secundum quid; sicut sunt omnes formae accidentales. Aliquae autem formae sunt quibus res subsistens simpliciter habet esse; quia videlicet constituunt esse substantiale rei subsistentis. In Christo autem suppositum subsistens est persona filii Dei, quae simpliciter substantificatur per naturam divinam, non autem simpliciter substantificatur per naturam humanam. Quia persona filii Dei fuit ante humanitatem assumptam, nec in aliquo persona est augmentata, seu perfectior, per naturam humanam assumptam. Substantificatur autem suppositum aeternum per naturam humanam, in quantum est hic homo. Et ideo sicut Christus est unum simpliciter propter unitatem suppositi, et duo secundum quid propter duas naturas, ita habet unum esse simpliciter propter unum esse aeternum aeterni suppositi” (Thomas Aquinas, *De unione Verbi incarnati*, art. 4).

Thomas distinguishes two kinds of forms—he clearly means “forms” broadly, in a way that includes natures—and he says that some of them are principles in virtue of which a supposit exists *simpliciter*, while others are not. The difference between them turns on the following: unlike the latter, the former constitute the substantial existence of the supposit they belong to. Such a form or nature is that in virtue of which a supposit exists *as a supposit*, that in virtue of which the supposit exists with the type of independence that is characteristic of supposits.²⁴ No supposit could have two such forms, because then it would exist as a supposit twice over, which would really mean that “it” was actually two supposits, not one.

According to this way of thinking, then, Christ cannot have existence *simpliciter* in virtue of his human nature. He, Christ, exists as a supposit, *simpliciter*, but he does so only according to his divine nature: his being a supposit depends on his being divine, not on his being human. If there were a supposit that had existence *simpliciter* in virtue of the assumed human nature, it would be a second supposit, which would amount to Nestorianism. All this means that from the Thomistic perspective, Scotus’s claim that Christ exists *simpliciter* by his human nature is—at least at first glance—Nestorian in tendency. If Christ exists according to his human nature, he must do so *secundum quid*.²⁵

²⁴ Of course there are debates about just how this independence is to be understood. Scotus discusses the matter in his nineteenth quodlibetal question.

²⁵ As has been widely discussed, Thomas’s views on Christ’s existence are not entirely clear. In most of his treatments of the topic, he seems to say that Christ does not exist in virtue of his human nature, either *simpliciter* or *secundum quid*. In the *De unione*, however, he seems to say that Christ does exist in virtue of his human nature, albeit only *secundum quid*. For some of the history of the ensuing dispute among Thomists, see Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Le thomisme dans le débat christologique contemporain*, in *Saint Thomas au XXe siècle*, ed. Serge-Thomas Bonino, Paris, Saint-Paul, 1994, p. 379-393. For present purposes, what matters is not Thomas’s positive proposal but his reason for rejecting the idea that Christ exists *simpliciter* in virtue of his human nature. I hope to explore Thomas’s views in more depth on another occasion.

Some of Thomas's admirers have had precisely this worry. Consider, for example, the following remarks from Herman Diepen:

Can one fail to see that a *duplex ens* is logically implied by the *duplex esse*, and therefore that the Scotistic theologian runs the risk of finding at the end of his path—let us say it again openly—the negation of the dogma of Ephesus? At the start of this paragraph we stated that such an affirmation claims in no way to be a theological censure. At least, it is one only for those among the Scotists who prefer the corollaries of Scotus's theology to his faith. Such theologians are, alas, to be found. ... The master having been bypassed, nonetheless it is by the path of Scotism that they have arrived there.²⁶

The worry, in sum, would appear to be as follows. Let us grant—as admittedly some Thomists would not—that Christ exists in two ways, as God and as man, and let us then accept that as long as we speak carefully, it is right to say that Christ has a twofold existence. Still, according to this criticism, Scotus's way of affirming the twofold existence is dangerous or worse. He says that Christ not only has his divine existence *simpliciter* but also his human

²⁶ “Est-il possible de méconnaître que *duplex ens* est logiquement impliqué dans le *duplex esse*, et par conséquent que le théologien scotiste risque de trouver au bout de son chemin, redisons-les franchement, la négation du dogme d’Éphèse? Nous posions au début de ce paragraphe qu’une telle affirmation ne prétend nullement être une censure théologique. Du moins elle ne l’est que pour celui-là d’entre les scotistes qui préférerait les corollaires de sa théologie à la foi de Duns Scot. Ces théologiens, hélas, se sont trouvés. ... Le maître dépassé, c’est néanmoins par la voie du scotisme qu’on en est venu là” (Diepen, *La critique du baslisme selon saint Thomas d’Aquin II*, in *Revue thomiste*, 50 (1950), p. 329); this is part of a discussion that runs from 324-329. Garrigou-Lagrange would appear to have the same sort of worry about Scotus; see *De Christo Salvatore*, p. 314-321, esp. 314. See also Nicolas, *L’unité d’être*, p. 258.

existence *simpliciter*, and this is not compatible with Christ's being just one person or supposit.²⁷

In defense of Scotus

I now wish to show that Scotus's claim that Christ exists *simpliciter* by his human nature does not have any Nestorian tendency; furthermore, the difference between Scotus's claim and what Thomas says in the text we saw above is a merely verbal one.

The whole issue turns on what Scotus means when he says that Christ exists *simpliciter* by his human nature. As we saw, Thomas says that a supposit exists *simpliciter* by a certain nature in order to indicate that the nature in question is that in virtue of which the supposit exists as a supposit. This is why, for Thomas, no supposit can have more than one existence in this way, and it is why Christ cannot have existence *simpliciter* by his human nature.

But Scotus is using the expressions *simpliciter* and *secundum quid* in a different way. To understand what he is thinking, we need to note the following three points. First, existence that is had *simpliciter* is had in virtue of a different sort of principle than is existence that is had *secundum quid*:

The existence of human nature is existence *simpliciter* ... within being, one must distinguish between *esse simpliciter* (which is the existence of a substance) and *esse secundum quid* (which is the existence of an accident)²⁸

²⁷ Torrell summarizes this line of thought in his *Le thomisme dans le débat christologique contemporain*, p. 382-384.

I think we should understand this as follows. For Scotus, the distinction between existence that is possessed *simpliciter* and existence that is possessed *secundum quid* corresponds to the distinction between substantial and accidental principles. Whenever existence is had in virtue of a substantial principle, it is had *simpliciter*; whenever it is had in virtue of an accidental principle, it is had *secundum quid*.

The second point is that if a nature or form is a principle in virtue of which a supposit exists *simpliciter* in *any* case, it is such a principle in *every* case:

That which is a substance in itself is a substance with respect to anything whatever and is an accident with respect to nothing, although it can have the mode of existing in something . . . if therefore ‘to exist as human’ is to exist *simpliciter*, then to whatever the nature gives existence as human, it gives existence *simpliciter*.²⁹

For anything that exists in a human way, to exist in a human way is to exist *simpliciter*; this applies to Christ just as much as it applies to Socrates.

Given the first point, the second point is not surprising, because substantial principles are always substantial (and accidental principles are always accidental). Humanity is a substantial nature, a principle in virtue of which someone is human, regardless of whether it

²⁸ “[E]sse naturae humanae est esse simpliciter. ... [S]ub ente distinguitur ‘esse simpliciter’ (quod est esse substantiae) et ‘esse secundum quid’ (quod est esse accidentis)” (*Lectura* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 41).

²⁹ “[I]llud quod est substantia in se, respectu cuiuscumque est substantia, et nulli accidit, licet possit habere modum inexistentis ... si igitur ‘esse homo’ sit esse simpliciter, cuicumque dat natura ‘esse homo’, dat esse simpliciter” (*Lectura* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 41); see also *Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 38, *Reportatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 8.

is had in such a way that the supposit having it is thereby constituted as a supposit (as in the case of Socrates) or not (as in the case of Christ).

Now let us turn to the third point. Of course Scotus cares about the difference between a principle that serves as that in virtue of which a supposit is made a supposit and a principle that does not serve in this way. He does not use the language of *simpliciter* and *secundum quid* to talk about it, however. Instead, he talks about what is *primum* and what is not.

If, fourth, they say not only that there is another existence in Christ, and that this other existence is of Christ, and also that there is another existence of Christ *simpliciter*, but that there is no primary existence of Christ other than the existence of the Word—then they are not disagreeing, because everyone says and concedes that Christ’s primary existence is the existence of the Word.³⁰

Scotus is here talking about why people might hesitate to attribute a double existence to Christ. If their reason is that Christ has only one *primary* existence, then Scotus is happy to concede the point, as in fact it is something that all parties agree on. It appears that what Scotus means here by “primary” is the first existence on which all others depend, which would naturally be the existence in virtue of which the supposit exists as a supposit. Non-primary existence, by contrast, would be existence in virtue of which the supposit does not exist as a supposit.

³⁰ “[S]i quarto dicant quod non solum in Christo est aliud esse et quod Christi est aliud esse et etiam quod Christi sit aliud esse simpliciter, sed quod Christi non sit aliud esse primum quam esse Verbi, —tunc non contradicunt quia o m n e s dicunt et concedunt quod esse Christi primum sit esse Verbi” (*Lectura* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 38); see also *Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 39-40, *Reportatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 8.

In one place Scotus points to the failure to distinguish primary existence from existence had *simpliciter* in attempting to understand those whose views at least appear to deviate from his own:

And that . . . was perhaps the motivation of others holding this opinion [sc. that there is no second existence], because the existence of the human nature was not the primary existence of this supposit, but came to it as to something already having a complete existence; therefore it seemed to be an existence of the supposit *secundum quid*.³¹

Christ's human existence does not constitute him as a supposit but instead comes to him as to an already-existing supposit. Some see this as a reason for saying that Christ possesses his existence-as-human only *secundum quid*, but Scotus does not:

But this does not follow, because not every non-primary existence of something is its [existence] *secundum quid*.³²

So Scotus accepts the distinction between existence that is had in a supposit-constituting way and existence that is not had in a supposit-constituting way, and he agrees that Christ's human existence is of the second sort; this is enough to distinguish Scotus's view from Nestorianism.

³¹ “Et istud ... forte erat ratio motiva aliorum de ista opinione, quia ista existentia naturae humanae non erat prima existentia huius suppositi, sed adveniens ei jam habenti esse perfectum; ideo videbatur esse existentia suppositi secundum ‘quid’ ” (*Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 39).

³² “Sed istud non concludit, quia non omnis existentia alicuius non-prima est eius secundum ‘quid’” (*Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 40).

He does not, however, want to label this difference with the expressions *simpliciter* and *secundum quid* but instead with the expressions *primum* and *non-primum*.³³

If all this is correct, then on the precise point at issue, the difference between Scotus's view and a view like Thomas's is merely verbal. In fact, in one place Scotus himself says as much.³⁴ Diepen reacts with skepticism,³⁵ but Scotus is right. Scotus says that Christ has human existence *simpliciter*, and Thomas says that he does not, but the two are not talking about the same thing, and therefore there is no contradiction. What Thomas is denying—that Christ exists as a supposit in virtue of his human nature—is something that Scotus denies too. The only difference is that Scotus denies it in different words.

If—on this point, at any rate—Scotus means what Thomas and others mean, why does he not use their language, too, in order to remove all possibility of misunderstanding? For better or for worse, he wants to reserve the expressions *simpliciter* and *secundum quid* for another distinction: by saying that Christ has existence *simpliciter* in virtue of his human nature, he wants to draw attention to the fact that Christ's human existence is not a merely accidental one. Even in the special case of the incarnation, in which we find a human existence that is not primary, it is wrong to assimilate it too closely to accidental existence such as existence-as-white. Christ's human existence is truly substantial, despite the fact that it is not subsistence.

That's an appealing claim, but what does it really mean? If Christ's human existence is not primary, if the assumed nature does not constitute any supposit as such, then what does

³³ For analysis of Scotus's use of *simpliciter* and *primum as* applied to a slightly different topic, see Pampilona, *De Christologia*, p. 47-49.

³⁴ "Quod si omnino fiat altercatio, pro eodem accipi esse non-primum suppositi et non simpliciter, tunc non est contentio nisi in verbis, neque opiniones – quae videntur oppositae – contradicunt, sed tantum vocaliter" (*Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 41).

³⁵ Diepen, *La critique*, p. 327.

it mean to say that this human existence is substantial? Again a remark from the *Ordinatio* helps make Scotus's thought clear. As we saw earlier, Scotus holds that even though Christ's human nature is a principle of non-primary existence, we still should not think of it as a principle of existence *secundum quid*:

It is not the sort of thing to give existence *secundum quid*, and such is every substantial nature, howsoever it might be related to that to which it gives existence.³⁶

Scotus does not make his point entirely clear, but I believe it is best understood as follows. Some natures are of themselves suited to constitute supposita as supposita; this goes *pari passu* with their being substantial natures. If a nature of this sort is joined to an already-existing suppositum, the nature will not constitute that suppositum as a suppositum, but it will still grant a sort of existence in virtue of which subsistence is possible. Christ's humanity is, by nature, *capable* of serving as a principle in virtue of which its bearer can subsist; this is so even though that nature is not *in fact* a principle of subsistence for him.

Again we see not a tension but a parallel with Thomas, who after denying that Christ has his human existence *simpliciter*, goes on to say that this is no accidental existence: it is instead a secondary existence (*esse secundarium*).³⁷ Both Thomas and Scotus, then, are trying to make the same distinctions: the existence that Christ has by his human nature is not his fundamental existence as a suppositum, but neither is it accidental.

³⁶ “[I]llud non est natum dare existentiam secundum ‘quid’, qualis est omnis natura substantialis, qualitercumque se habeat ad illud cui dat esse” (*Ordinatio* III, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, n. 40).

³⁷ Thomas, *De unione*, art. 4.

Conclusion

Scotus's account of the *esse Christi* has looked suspicious to some Thomistic commentators, but this is only the result of a misunderstanding. Scotus affirms clearly the existence (but not subsistence) of Christ's human nature. He also affirms the non-accidental human existence of Christ the person, without denying that Christ is one person who is constituted as such solely by his divine nature. Such a teaching is dangerous only for the unwary.³⁸

³⁸ An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference titled *In cammino verso la verità: Attualità del pensiero di Giovanni Duns Scoto*, held at the Pontificia Università Antonianum, Rome, 15-16 January 2009. I am grateful to conference participants for their remarks, and also to Richard Cross, Anne-Marie Gorman, Timothy Noone, and Clare Storck.