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Franciscan Studies, Volume 66, 2008, pp. 213-232 (Article)

Published by Franciscan Institute Publications

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/frc.0.0004>

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SCOTUS ON THE ESSENCE AND DEFINITION OF SENSIBLE SUBSTANCES

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I wish to present a textual and philosophical reconstruction of Scotus's sixteenth *Question* on Book VII of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, i.e. the question as to whether matter is part of the essence and definition of sensible substances. As Scotus's arguments in favour and against a positive answer to the question clearly show, the problem is a genuinely Aristotelian one, which Aristotle himself discusses at some length in Chs. 10-11 of Book VII. Thus, in Section 1, I shall present the question of the essence and definition of sensible substances as it is outlined by Aristotle. In particular, I shall try to show how Aristotle's text contains two conflicting lines of thought (Account A and Account B), which are to some extent reflected in the Medieval debate as well. Most of what Aristotle says seems to indicate that the essence of sensible substances contains their form alone and so matter should be excluded from the definition of such substances (Account A). However, some texts in the *Metaphysics* seem to support the opposed view that sensible substances are essentially material and so an account of what they are cannot dispense with mentioning the kind of matter these substances are made of (Account B).

In his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book VII, Aquinas provides a detailed treatment of the question of the essence and definition of sensible substances. Besides advancing a positive solution to the question, which is in line with what I shall be calling Account B, Aquinas also sketches out an influential reconstruction of the philosophical and historical moments of the controversy. In particular, he ranges Averroes among the supporters of the view that the essence of sensible substances includes form alone and hence matter should be excluded from the definition revealing the content of such an essence. Aquinas's positive solution as well as his

historical reconstruction are crucial to understanding Scotus's final position. Therefore, in Section 2 I shall briefly outline Aquinas's understanding of the problem as well as the main distinctions involved in his positive solution.

In Section 3 I shall finally tackle Scotus's view. The main point I shall be arguing for is that Scotus's final solution should be read as a refinement of Aquinas's view, i.e. the view that matter is part of the essence and definition of sensible substances. In particular, Scotus takes up and elaborates on Aquinas's distinction between common matter, which falls within the essence of sensible substances, and individual matter, which is, by contrast, external to the essence and definition of such substances.

1. The Aristotelian background

In the central books of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle raises the general question as to whether the parts of a thing are also parts of its essence and definition¹. In the case of sensible, i.e. material substances, the question consists mainly in deciding whether the material parts of such substances enter into their essence and definition. Aristotle's text presents two conflicting lines of thought on the problem at issue: "Account A" and "Account B."²

Account A. According to Account A, the essence of sensible substances only contains their form to the exclusion of any material characteristic. Thus, since the definition of a thing is usually supposed to reflect perfectly, i.e. without adding or leaving out anything, the content of its essence, the definition of sensible substances should also make reference to their form alone and mention no material characteristic. Account A seems to be Aristotle's main line of argument in *Met.*, VII, Ch. 10-11, the section of the seventh book especially devoted to definition and its parts. In the first part of Ch.

¹ Cf. Aristotle, *Met.*, VII, 10, 1034b20-24.

² For a general reconstruction of the main interpretative options concerning the issue of essence and definition in Book VII I take the liberty of referring to G. Galluzzo – M. Mariani, *Aristotle's Metaphysics Book Z: The Contemporary Debate* (Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore, 2006), 135-65.

10, for instance, Aristotle puts forward a particularly explicit argument in favour of Account A.³ (i) When we ask what a thing X is, we should first be clear about what we mean by X. For in general, when we talk about a sensible substance, we may refer either to the form of such a substance or to the substance taken as a composite of matter and form. (ii) Matter is part of a sensible substance when taken as a composite of matter and form, whilst it is not part of such a substance when taken as a form. (iii) Since when we define a sensible substance we define the substance taken as a form, matter should be left out of the definition of sensible substances. For matter is not part of the form of sensible substances, but only of sensible substances taken as composites of matter and form.

Clearly, the implicit thought in Aristotle's argument is that form captures and exhausts the essence of a sensible substance and so matter, in so far as it falls outside the essence of a sensible substance, should not be mentioned in its definition. From the point of view of its essence, i.e. of what it essentially is, a sensible substance is just its form, and so this fact should be reflected in the definition expressing what a sensible substance is. Account A is supported by several texts in *Met.*, VII where Aristotle explicitly holds that the essence and definition of sensible substances is confined to their form alone.⁴ In particular, in his summary of the issue of essence in Ch. 11, Aristotle says that material substances in one sense have a definition, whereas in another they do not have one. They do not have a definition when they are taken together with their matter, whilst they have one when they are taken according to their primary substance, i.e. to their form. A man, for instance, has a definition only in so far as his soul is definable.⁵ The upshot of Aristotle's distinction seems clearly to be that the essence of sensible substances contains their form alone and so does, accordingly, their definition. In other words, there is no definition of sensible

³ Cf. Aristotle, *Met.*, VII, 1035a4-22.

⁴ Cf. Aristotle, *Met.*, VII, 7, 1032b1-2; 10, 1035b32; 1035b33-a6; 11, 1036a28-29; 1037a29; 12, 1038a19-20; 25-26. See also: VII, 17, 1041b7-9; VIII, 3, 1043b1-2.

⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *Met.*, VII, 11, 1037a25-29.

substances which mentions their material characteristics, because such characteristics fall outside the essence of such substances.

Although Scotus ultimately rejects Account A both as a correct philosophical position and as an accurate reconstruction of Aristotle's text, the line of thought underlying Account A is well represented in the arguments in favour of the position Scotus argues against. Thus, Scotus is well aware of the Aristotelian origin of the view that matter should be excluded from the essence and definition of sensible substances.

Account B. Alongside texts which speak in favour of Account A, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* presents another line of argument, which seems to suggest that matter should not be excluded from the essence and definition of sensible substances. Account B mainly relies on the idea of completeness. Since sensible substances are composites of matter and form, a complete account of what they are should mention both the matter and the form they are made of. Thus, an account of sensible substances which only mentions their form would be an incomplete one, in that it would leave out an important aspect of what sensible substances are. Theoretically, it would be possible to meet Account B's demands for completeness by preserving also some features of Account A. One could abandon, for instance, the perfect parallelism between essence and definition and maintain that, whilst the essence of a sensible substance contains only its form, its *definition* must make reference also to the matter a sensible substance is necessarily made of in order to make it clear that we are confronted with a material – and not an immaterial – kind of substance. Supporters of Account B, however, do not usually take this course. They rather insist that the leading premiss of Account A, i.e. that matter falls outside the essence of sensible substances, is false and so sensible substances are essentially material and must be defined accordingly. After all, it is a crucial piece of Aristotelian doctrine that the definition of a substance, unlike that of an accident, does not mention anything which is external to its essence.⁶ Therefore, if mat-

⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Met.*, VII, 5 (esp. 1030b14-16 and 1031a1-5).

ter is mentioned in the definition of sensible substances, it must be mentioned as a part of their essence.

Account B receives some support from a couple of passages in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which are also important for understanding Aquinas's and Scotus's positions. In *Met.*, VI, 1, in the course of his famous classification of theoretical sciences, Aristotle says that the objects of physics are defined like "snub," whilst those of mathematics are defined like "concave."⁷ What Aristotle means is that the definition of physical objects makes reference to the sensible matter such objects are made of, whilst the definition of mathematical objects makes no reference to sensible matter. As Aristotle's passage makes clear, this difference between physical and mathematical definitions is grounded in the objective, essential features of the objects defined. Physical objects can exist only in one kind of material and so are essentially material, whilst mathematical objects can exist in many different kinds of material and so are not essentially composed of any of them. A sphere, for instance, can exist in wood, iron, bronze and so on, whilst a man can only exist in flesh and bones. Since sensible substances are physical objects, the outcome of Aristotle's argument seems to be that sensible substances are essentially material and so their definition must mention the kind of matter they are essentially made of.

Interestingly, texts in support of Account B can also be found within the very Chs. 10-11 of Book VII that seem to back up so strongly Account A.⁸ One is particularly famous and is also quoted by Scotus.⁹ In *Met.* VII, 11, Aristotle criticises Socrates the Younger's view on essence and definition. He observes that it is wrong to eliminate matter from all kinds of definition, in that some things are intrinsically "this in this," i.e. a certain form in a certain kind of matter. So-

⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Met.*, VI, 1, 1025b30-1026a6.

⁸ Cf. for instance: Aristotle, *Met.*, VII, 10, 1035a22-31. Two texts in Book VIII (2, 1043a5-29; 3, 1043b23-32), furthermore, make particularly explicit the demand for completeness which is at the heart of Account B.

⁹ Cf. Aristotle, *Met.*, VII, 11, 1036b21-32; B. Iohannis Duns Scoti *Quaestiones Super Libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis*, Lib. VII, q. 16, edited by R. Andrews - G. Etzkorn - G. Gál - R. Green - F. Kelly - G. Marcil - T. Noone - D. Flood (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute, 1997), n. 16.

crates the Younger's mistake consists in misleading people into thinking that an animal could exist without its bodily parts in the same way as a circle can exist without bronze. But an animal is a sensible substance and so cannot be defined without making reference to movement and to the material parts that make movement possible. Clearly, Socrates the Younger's view is along the lines of Account A. According to him, the essence of both physical and mathematical objects contains only the form of such objects and hence both physical and mathematical objects should be defined by mentioning form alone and leaving out any reference to matter. Aristotle's reaction is that such a view is wrong in so far as the essence and definition of physical objects is concerned. Physical objects, and so sensible substances as well, are intrinsically material and so should be defined by making reference to both their form and their matter. So, the passage on Socrates the Younger clearly supports Account B.

2. The essence and definition of sensible substances in Aquinas's *Commentary on the Metaphysics*

Aquinas introduces his exposition of *Met.*, VII, Ch. 10 with a preliminary note in which he sketches out two opposed views concerning the essence and definition of sensible substances.¹⁰ It should not be hard to identify the two views in question with Account A and Account B.

According to one view the whole essence of a sensible substance is its form. The essence of a human being, for instance, is exhausted by his soul. Accordingly, the definition of sensible substances should make reference to their form alone. The definition of a human being, for instance, should mention only his form. Aquinas describes the view in question in more technical terms by observing that it implies that the

¹⁰ Cf. S. Thomae Aquinatis *In Duodecim Libros Metaphysicorum Expositio*, Lib. VII, lect. 9, edited by M.-R. Cathala – Spiazzi (Taurini-Romae: Marietti, 1964), nn. 1467-69. For a more detailed discussion of Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle's doctrine of essence and definition see: G. Galluzzo, "Aquinas's Interpretation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book Z," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales* 74, n. 2 (2007): 423-81 (esp. 451-61).

so-called *forma partis* and the so-called *forma totius* are not really, but only conceptually distinct.¹¹ The point Aquinas has in mind seems to be the following. There are two facts about a sensible substance that need explaining. First, we need to explain why the matter of such a substance, which is in itself only a potential being, is now an actual being. Second, we need to explain why the sensible substance as a whole belongs to a natural kind or species. One might think that these two facts are explained by two mind-independently distinct principles: form (the so-called *forma partis*) explains why matter is an actual being, whilst essence (the so-called *forma totius*), which contains also some matter in addition to form, explains why the sensible substance as a whole belongs to a natural kind. Now, it is precisely this way of looking at things that is rejected by supporters of the view Aquinas is presenting. According to them, it is one and the same principle – i.e. form – which explains both why matter is an actual being and why a sensible substance belongs to a natural kind. So, form is not really, i.e. mind-independently, distinct from essence. Form and essence can at most be distinguished conceptually, in that we can still distinguish two different functions (that of actualising matter and that of placing the whole substance in a natural kind) performed by one single principle. Nonetheless, from the point of view of the number of entities involved, form and essence are one and the same thing. As can be seen, the first view described by Aquinas is very close to what we have labelled Account A.

Aquinas attributes the view in question to Averroes and his followers. It is hard to say whether Aquinas's attribution is correct or not, but some evidence suggests that it may be so, after all. In his sixteenth *Question*, for instance, Scotus, who is clearly following Aquinas's reconstruction very closely, quotes an important text from Averroes' *Long Commentary* on the *Metaphysics*.¹² In the text, Averroes seems to distin-

¹¹ Cf. Aquinas, *Exp. Met.*, Lib. VII, lect. 9, n. 1467.

¹² Cf. Averrois Cordubensis *In Aristotelis Metaphysicorum Libros Commentarium*, Lib. VII, t.c. 35, in *Aristotelis Opera cum Averrois Commentariis* (Venetiis apud Juntas, 1562-74, repr. Frankfurt a. M.: Minerva, 1962), vol. VIII, f. 186rE-F. See also: Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16, ecc. For Averroes' view on the essence and definition of sensible substances

guish between two definitions of a sensible substance, one which includes no reference to its material parts and another which mentions, by contrast, such parts. Averroes remarks that only the definition which mentions exclusively the formal parts of a sensible substance is a definition that contains only the parts of its essence and nothing else, whilst the definition which includes the material parts is a definition that mentions, in addition to the parts of the essence, some other parts which fall outside the essence itself. Thus, although Averroes admits of an account of sensible substances that mentions their material parts, he does not regard such an account as an account of their essence, thereby restricting essence to formal characteristics alone. Possibly, the account of sensible substances which also mentions their matter is only a rough description of the way sensible substances exist, which includes both essential and inessential characteristics.

Predictably, the second view Aquinas presents is very close to Account B.¹³ It represents, according to Aquinas, Aristotle's and Avicenna's view, besides being the Dominican Master's constant position throughout his career.¹⁴ The second view maintains that both matter and form enter into the essence and definition of sensible substances. Consequently, such a view also implies, in Aquinas's technical terminology, that the *forma partis* and the *forma totius* are really, i.e. mind-independently, distinct. In other words, the fact that the matter of a substance is an actual being and the further fact that the substance as a whole belongs to a natural kind are explained by two distinct principles. Form (the *forma partis*) explains why matter is an actual being, whilst essence (the *forma totius*), which includes matter in addition to form, explains why the sensible substance as a whole belongs to a natural kind. In defence of his view Aquinas appeals to

see: M. Di Giovanni, "La definizione delle sostanze sensibili nel *Commento Grande (Tafsir)* di Averroè a *Metafisica Z* 10-11," *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 14 (2003): 27-63.

¹³ Cf. Aquinas, *Exp. Met.*, Lib. VII, lect. 9, n. 1469.

¹⁴ See, for instance: S. Thomae De Aquino *De ente et essentia* c. 2, *Opera Omnia* XLIII (Opuscula IV) (Ad S. Sabinae, Roma: Editori di S. Tommaso, 1976), 370-71, ll. 1-84.

the same Aristotelian texts as are often invoked by modern advocates of Account B. He makes reference for instance to Aristotle's considerations in *Met.*, VI, 1 to the effect that, unlike mathematical objects, physical objects are intrinsically and essentially material and so their definition must include both matter and form.¹⁵

It is crucial to understand what exactly Aquinas means by saying that matter enters into the essence and definition of sensible substances. For his view is clearly not that *any* matter is part of the essence and definition of physical objects. Aquinas distinguishes in fact between common matter, which is part of the essence of sensible substances and so should be included in their definition, and individual matter, which falls outside the essence of sensible substances and so should be excluded from their definition.¹⁶ Common matter is the *type* of matter which is characteristic of a certain natural kind, i.e. the type of matter all the individuals belonging to a certain natural kind can be rightly said to be made of. Individual matter, by contrast, is the matter proper to this or that individual of a certain natural kind, i.e. the matter as determined by certain individual features which mark off one individual from the other. For instance: the common matter of human beings is flesh and bones, for all human beings are made of flesh and bones, whilst the individual matter of a certain human being is the flesh and bones that are peculiar to that particular human being, e.g. flesh and bones of a certain size and of specified dimensions. Thus, Aquinas's view is that it is the type of matter characteristic of a certain natural kind which is part of the essence, whilst the individual matter of the single individuals of the kind is excluded from the essence which all the individuals are said to possess. On Aquinas's account, therefore, whilst individual substances are correctly described as *individual* composites of matter and form, i.e. composites of individual matter and form, their essence should be described as a *universal* composite of mat-

¹⁵ Cf. Aquinas, *Exp. Met.*, Lib. VII, lect. 9, n. 1468. See also Aquinas's remarks on the passage about Socrates the Younger in *Exp. Met.*, Lib. VII, lect. 11, n. 1516-20.

¹⁶ Cf. Aquinas, *Exp. Met.*, Lib. VII, lect. 9, n. 1469; see also: lect. 11, n. 1535.

ter and form, i.e. a composite of the kind of matter and form all the individuals of a certain species possess.¹⁷

Aquinas's crucial distinction between common and individual matter has some basis in Aristotle's text. Occasionally, Aristotle describes man in general or animal in general as composites of matter and form taken universally and contrasts them with individual men and animals, which are, instead, individual composites of matter and form.¹⁸ Moreover, if some matter enters into the essence and definition of sensible substances, it must be the type of matter all the individuals of a certain kind share and not the matter which is proper to this or that individual of the kind in question. However, when he raises the question whether matter is part of the essence and definition of sensible substances, Aristotle seems to disregard the distinction between universal and individual composites. In other words, he frames the question in terms of an unqualified opposition between matter and form without paying any attention to the possibility of taking matter universally. Such an exegetical difficulty surfaces in Scotus's sixteenth *Question* as well. Some of the arguments in favour of Account A are objections to the distinction between common and individual matter on the grounds that, when Aristotle excludes matter from the essence and definition of sensible substances, he seems to be talking of all kinds of matter. So, whether we should in fact distinguish between common and individual matter or not – supporters of Account A insist – it is clear that for Aristotle no matter, be it common or individual, should be included in the essence and definition of sensible substances.

¹⁷ Cf. Aquinas, *Exp. Met.*, Lib. VII, lect. 10, nn. 1490-91; lect. 11, n. 1523.

¹⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Met.*, VII, 10, 1035b27-31; 11, 1037a5-10; VIII, 1043a29 ff.

3. Scotus's solution

1. *Preliminary remarks: the structure of Question 16*

Scotus's solution to the problem of the essence and definition of sensible substances is in line with Aquinas's view. For Scotus too, the essence and definition of sensible substances does not contain form alone, but also matter. Thus, like Aquinas, Scotus rejects Account A both as a correct philosophical position and as an accurate understanding of Aristotle's doctrine in *Met.*, Book VII, and endorses, instead, Account B. Moreover, Scotus agrees with Aquinas that it is not individual matter but rather common matter that is part of the essence and definition of sensible substances. Therefore, the essences of sensible substances are composites of matter and form just like the things of which they are the essences: sensible substances are individual composites of matter and form, whilst their essences are universal ones. Although preserving the general structure of Aquinas's solution, however, Scotus slightly complicates the picture by introducing, in addition to the distinction between individual and universal or common matter, a distinction between per se and accidental matter. Thus, from a doctrinal point of view, the most interesting aspect of Scotus's solution consists in understanding the distinction between per se and accidental matter as well as how it relates to the traditional one between common and individual matter.

Before tackling such an issue, however, it may be useful to sketch out the general structure of Scotus's *Question 16* and to illustrate the way in which Account A and Account B figure in Scotus's argument. *Question 16* starts with a series of arguments in favour of the view that matter falls outside the essence and definition of sensible substances. Such arguments are mainly drawn from Aristotle's text in Book VII (especially Chs. 10-11) and from a number of other passages which contain the main intuition behind Account A: form exhausts the essence of sensible substances, and so an account of what sensible substances are should make reference to

form alone.¹⁹ Scotus also quotes the claim expounded in Ch. 11's summary to the effect that the composite of matter and form has no definition in its own right, but only in so far as its form is definable.²⁰ Interestingly, this block of arguments also rejects the suggestion that Aristotle's text might be explained by having recourse to the distinction between individual and common matter by urging the point that Aristotle contrasts matter with form without introducing any distinction between kinds of matter.²¹

Scotus presents arguments in favour of Account B in two steps. First, he puts forward three textual arguments in direct opposition to those in favour of Account A.²² The third argument is particularly significant in that it makes reference to the passage in *Met.*, VII, 11 where Aristotle reports and criticises Socrates the Younger's view. Clearly, Scotus takes the text to imply that, unlike mathematical objects, physical objects – and so sensible substances – cannot be defined without making reference to the sensible matter they are composed of.²³ After this first series of arguments, Scotus reports some philosophical views in support of Account A, including Averroes' and Avicenna's opinions.²⁴ Before addressing and criticising the views reported, Scotus presents a second series of authorities against Account A and in support of Account B.²⁵ Also this second series of textual arguments is important. Indeed, Scotus refers to the principal texts in Books VII and VIII where Aristotle seems to insist on the idea of completeness, i.e. on the claim that the definition of sensible substances would be incomplete had no mention been made of the matter these substances are composed of.²⁶ Moreover, one of the arguments hinges on Aristotle's claim in *Met.*, VI, 1 that, unlike mathematical objects, physical objects are essentially material and so an account of what they

¹⁹ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., nn. 1-3.

²⁰ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., n. 13.

²¹ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., nn. 10-12.

²² Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., nn. 14-16.

²³ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., n. 16.

²⁴ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., nn. 17-19.

²⁵ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., nn. 20-26.

²⁶ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., nn. 20; 22; 23; 24.

are, i.e. a definition, should include the kind of matter such objects are made of.²⁷ Thus, the general impression one gets from Scotus's textual evidence in favour of either Account A or Account B is that his understanding of the argument in the central books of the *Metaphysics* perfectly reflects the contemporary scholars' difficulty in adjudicating between the two rivaling interpretations of Aristotle's text.

A few comments deserve to be added about Scotus's presentation of the view of the supporters of Account A and about the arguments against them, which Scotus presents before advancing his own solution. Averroes' presence among the supporters of Account A does not come as a surprise, as we have seen in Section 2.²⁸ More surprising, by contrast, is that Avicenna too should be taken to endorse Account A, especially in light of Aquinas's assessment of the Arabic philosopher to the contrary in his *Commentary on the Metaphysics*.²⁹ However, Scotus's arguments against supporters of Account A make it clear that the Franciscan theologian does not really take Avicenna to be a supporter of Account A and so thinks that the Avicennian text which seems to back up Account A can be explained away and brought in line with Account B. In the arguments by supporters of Account A, Avicenna is quoted as supporting the view that materiality and intelligibility are in fact incompatible.³⁰ Matter – so the argument runs – is the principle of individuation, i.e. the principle explaining why an individual is the individual it is. Being such a principle, matter prevents things from being intelligible, presumably because we understand universals and not individuals. Therefore, since an essence is intelligible in itself, it must be known by being abstracted from matter and hence must contain no matter. For if it did, it would not be intelligible in itself. Now, Scotus's arguments against supporters of Account A are mainly aimed at establishing the distinction between

²⁷ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., n. 25.

²⁸ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., n. 17.

²⁹ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., n. 19.

³⁰ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., n. 19. The text Scotus alludes to is: *Avicenna Latinus, Liber de Philosophia prima sive Scientia divinae* V-X, edited by S. Van Riet, introduction by G. Verbeke (Louvain-Leiden: Peeters-Brill, 1980), tr. VIII, c. 6, 414, ll. 3-5.

individual and common matter.³¹ For Scotus the main point of the distinction is to separate individuality from materiality, thereby allowing the universal essence to contain matter as well as form. In other words, it is not the fact of containing matter that makes an individual the individual it is, but rather the fact of existing as a concrete object which possesses determinate and unsharable material characteristics.³² So, the essence of a species does contain some matter, i.e. the kind of matter all the individuals of a certain species share independently of the material features that distinguish one individual from another. And this is precisely common matter as opposed to individual matter. Clearly, the distinction between common and individual matter implies the further one between universal and individual composites of matter and form.³³ Just as there are individual composites of matter and form, i.e. the concrete material objects populating our everyday world, so there are also universal composites of matter and form, i.e. the essences of such objects, which contain universal form and matter. Scotus's distinctions help us also to explain away the Avicennian text quoted in support of Account A.³⁴ It is not materiality in itself that prevents intelligibility, but rather the materiality of a concrete existing object, i.e. the materiality accompanied by the individual features and conditions which characterise an individual object as such. Thus interpreted, Avicenna does not turn out to be a supporter of Account A, because on Scotus's reading his claim is not that the essence of sensible substances, being an object of understanding, cannot contain matter, but only

³¹ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., nn. 27-34.

³² As is well known, Scotus does not share the view that individual matter is the principle of individuation for sensible substances, i.e. what explains why an individual sensible substance is the individual it is (cf. *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 13 ecc.). However, he seems to accept here the weaker view that the existence of a concrete, material individual is invariably accompanied by individual material features which such an individual does not share with other co-specific individuals. In other words, even if individual matter is not the cause and explanation of individuality, nonetheless individuality and actual existence always bring along with them individual material conditions.

³³ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., n. 28-29.

³⁴ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., n. 32.

that it cannot contain individual matter, i.e. common matter plus the individual features which accompany the concrete existence of an object.

2. The core of Scotus's solution: different kinds of matter

Scotus argues that the question of the essence and definition of sensible substances, as well as the apparent contradictions in Aristotle's text, can be solved once a series of distinctions is introduced. There are mainly four distinctions which Scotus has in mind: (i) the distinction between individual and common matter; (ii) that between per se and accidental matter; (iii) the distinction between two senses of the word "composite" and (iv) that between two senses of the word "species." We are already familiar with distinction (i).³⁵ Distinction (iii) is the distinction between universal and individual composites of matter and form we have alluded to several times: individual composites of matter and form are actually existing, concrete individuals, whilst universal composites are universals composed of the type of matter and form which characterise a certain species.³⁶ Interestingly, in his solution Scotus raises the question as to whether the primary bearer of an essence is the individual or the universal composite.³⁷ The answer is that it is universal composites and not individual ones that are the primary bearers of essences. Scotus's answer should be understood against the background of an issue Aristotle discusses in Ch. 6 of *Met.* VII, i.e. the question of whether a thing is identical with its own essence.³⁸ The issue is complicated and I do not intend to go into it now. What is important for our present purposes is that Scotus takes the view that what counts as the primary bearer of an essence should be identical with such an essence. Thus, individual composites of matter and form cannot be the primary bearers of an essence, in that

³⁵ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., n. 35.

³⁶ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., n. 36.

³⁷ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., nn. 38-39.

³⁸ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., n. 39.

they are not identical with their own essence. Of course, individual composites can be properly said *to have* an essence, but they are not identical with the essence they have, in that they possess individual material features which fall outside the essence of the species to which they belong. Universal composites of matter and form, by contrast, are the primary bearers of an essence. For the essence of a sensible substance is nothing but a universal composite of matter and form, i.e. a composite of universal form and matter, and so universal composites just are the essence they have.

Scotus further distinguishes between two senses of the word “species”: in one sense “species” means “form” and is opposed to “matter,” whilst in another it means “species” and is opposed to “individual.”³⁹ The aim of Scotus’s distinction (iv) is twofold. First of all, since the essence pertains to the species and is also a universal composite of matter and form, Scotus is looking for the sense of “species” that allows a species too to be a composite of matter and form. The second sense of “species” in distinction (iv) serves the purpose, because in this sense a species contains common matter and is opposed to the individual, which contains, instead, individual matter. Moreover, Scotus’s distinction serves to explain away those texts where Aristotle seems simply to contrast form with matter leaving no room for a distinction between individual and common matter. Since the word employed in the Latin translation of Aristotle, i.e. *species*, is ambiguous and means both “species” and “form,” Aristotle’s texts can be re-interpreted as referring to the species in the sense of a universal composite of matter and form, and not to form. Thus, on this reading the contrast Aristotle has in mind is not that between form and matter, but rather that between species, which contains common matter in addition to form, and individual matter.

In conclusion, distinctions (i), (iii) and (iv) are designed to justify the claim that the essence of sensible substances

³⁹ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., n. 37. For such two senses of the word “species” see also Aquinas, *Exp. Met.*, Lib. VII, lect. 9, n. 1473; lect. 10, n. 1482.

contains common matter and hence is a universal composite of matter and form.

The most difficult part of Scotus's solution is distinction (ii), i.e. the distinction between *per se* and accidental matter. What exactly does Scotus mean by such a distinction? And how does it relate to the distinction between common and individual matter? My view is the following: whilst all cases of individual matter are also cases of accidental matter, not all cases of universal or common matter are also cases of *per se* matter. Let us check my hypothesis against Scotus's text.

Scotus's characterisation of the distinction between *per se* and accidental matter can be summarised as follows: the *per se* matter of a species includes only the conditions that pertain to matter in so far as it is part of the essence of the species; accidental matter, by contrast, includes some accidental conditions, i.e. some conditions that are external to matter in so far as it is part of the essence.⁴⁰ Scotus adds that "accidental" in the expression "accidental conditions" can be taken in different senses, which all indicate instances of accidental matter: (1) either in a broad sense, as is the case with existence, i.e. with the matter of individual composites of matter and form; (2) or in a proper sense. The proper sense includes two cases: (2.1) that in which what is accidental is necessary, as in the case of the semicircles which are the (accidental) matter of the circle, and (2.2) that in which what is accidental is not necessary, as in the case of the wax letters which are the matter of a syllable written on wax.⁴¹

Scotus's explanation is particularly difficult. Therefore, I shall first try to explain the main line of Scotus's argument as it emerges from the text. Then, I shall expand on what Scotus actually says in order to make clear the relation between accidental matter on the one hand and *per se* and common matter on the other.

The first distinction which needs clarifying is that between a broad and a proper sense of accidental matter. Scotus says that the *per se* matter of an object is the matter that pertains to the essence of such an object. Thus, the *per se* matter of a

⁴⁰ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., n. 35.

⁴¹ Cf. Scotus, *Q. In Met.*, Lib. VII, q. 16 ecc., n. 35.

cat will be its common matter, i.e. the kind of matter cats are made of. However, when the essence of a cat exists it exists as a particular cat with individual conditions and properties it does not share with other cats. Hence, the accidental matter of a cat will be the individual matter which accompanies the existence of a cat as a concrete specimen. Broadly speaking, therefore, the contrast between *per se* and accidental matter is simply the contrast between the matter pertaining to the essence and that accompanying the existence of an object possessing such an essence. And since the concrete existence of an object is always the existence of an individual, in the broad sense (1) the contrast between *per se* and accidental matter turns out to be the opposition between the matter of the species and that of the individual. Accidental matter, however, can also be taken in a more proper sense (2). What Scotus has in mind, I think, is the case in which we do not contrast the common matter of an object with its individual matter in general, i.e. the matter which accompanies the concrete existence of an object, but rather with the single individual parts into which an object can be divided, i.e. the single parts of the individual matter of an object. Scotus singles out two cases: (2.1) that in which the parts into which an object is divided are parts without which the object cannot exist, and (2.2) the case in which such parts are parts without which an object can still exist. As an example of the first case, Scotus considers the semicircles. The semicircles are parts without which a circle cannot exist, because every circle is composed of semicircles. However, since they are parts of the individual circles they still fall outside the essence of the circle in general and so fall within the scope of accidental matter. As an example of the second case, by contrast, Scotus makes reference to the letters of a syllable written on wax, e.g. to the letters “b” and “a” of the syllable “ba” written on a wax tablet. The wax letters are clearly not part of the essence of the syllable “ba,” not only because they are individual letters, i.e. parts of a particular example of the syllable “ba,” but also because they are *wax* letters. Since the syllable “ba” could also be written on a different kind of material, the *wax* letters are non-necessary to the existence of the syllable “ba.”

For the syllable “ba” could exist without its letters being written on wax.

If my reconstruction of Scotus’s argument is correct, it clearly follows from it that all cases of individual matter (whether we take individual matter as a whole or as the single parts of the individual matter of an object) are also cases of accidental matter. Does it also follow that all cases of common matter are also cases of *per se* matter? My view is that this follows in the case of sensible substances, but not in that of mathematical objects. Let me explain my point. In Sections 1 and 2, I said that both Scotus and Aquinas accept Aristotle’s claim in *Met.*, VI, 1 that, unlike physical objects, mathematical and geometrical objects are defined without making reference to *sensible* matter. For mathematical objects can exist in different types of sensible matter and hence no type of sensible matter in particular pertains to their essence. This does not mean, however, for Aquinas and Scotus, that the essence of mathematical objects is just form. For there is a kind of matter mathematical objects are essentially composed of, i.e. intelligible matter. In other words, even if geometrical objects are not essentially composed of any kind of sensible material, they must nonetheless be objects extended in space. And such a notion of an abstract space in which mathematical objects are extended is what is captured by the idea that they essentially possess intelligible matter. Moreover, since two geometrical objects can have exactly the same form, for instance the form of a circle, but occupy different portions of space, it seems that we must distinguish between common intelligible matter (extension in general) and individual intelligible matter (the particular portion of space an individual geometrical object possesses) – a distinction which is perfectly parallel to that between common and individual sensible matter. What are the consequences of such distinctions for the essence and definition of mathematical objects? Predictably, the essence and definition of mathematical objects contains common intelligible matter, but not individual intelligible matter: the essence of a circle contains extension or space in general, for circles are essentially objects extended in space, but does not contain the particular portions of space occupied

by one particular circle or another. Nor do mathematical objects contain, of course, sensible matter, be it common or individual.

Let me try to apply, in conclusion, Scotus's distinction between *per se* and accidental matter to the case of mathematical objects. The *per se* matter of mathematical objects will be their common intelligible matter. All other kinds of matter will be, by contrast, only accidental matter. This is clear in the case of individual intelligible matter. Neither the individual matter of a circle taken as a whole nor the single parts of an individual circle enter into the essence and definition of the circle in general. More interesting is the case of sensible matter, which can be explained by means of an example. Take an individual wooden circle. Clearly, the individual parts of a wooden circle, e.g. the individual wooden semicircles or sections, are not parts of the essence of the circle taken as a geometrical object: the essence of the circle must not contain this or that section of a particular wooden circle. Thus, individual sensible matter is not part of the essence of a geometrical object. But neither can *common* sensible matter be taken to be part of the essence of a geometrical object. For the common sensible matter of a wooden circle, i.e. wood in general, does not enter into the essence of the circle taken as a geometrical object, for the simple reason that circles can be realised in materials other than wood. Since sensible substances are made of sensible matter alone and not also of intelligible matter, in their case common matter and *per se* matter simply coincide. Since, by contrast, mathematical objects admit of two levels of matter, sensible and intelligible matter, in their case there is some common matter, i.e. sensible common matter, which is accidental and not *per se* matter, and some other common matter, i.e. intelligible common matter, which is also the *per se* matter of such objects. Thus, common matter and *per se* matter do not amount the same thing in all cases, even though they do so in the crucial case of sensible substances.

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