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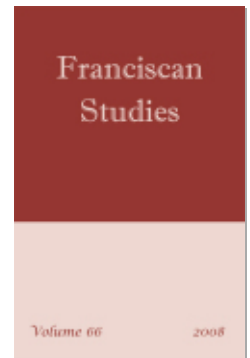
Scotus on the Objects of Cognitive Acts

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SCOTUS ON THE OBJECTS OF COGNITIVE ACTS

Scotus attached great importance to the question, “What are our cognitive acts about?” I see my neighbor’s dog, I taste some wine, I think of my friend Mary. In all these instances, I single out some items in the world as the *objects* of my cognitive acts. But what do I pick out when I focus on something as an object? Specifically, do I pick out individuals or some replicable features common to more than one individual? This question is of obvious philosophical interest, and it is from the philosophical perspective that I will consider Scotus’s answer to it in this paper. But one should not forget that there is also a theological side to this problem. As was obvious to Scotus and his contemporaries, one of the big issues here is the object of the beatific vision. What do the blessed contemplate in Heaven? Divinity in general or God’s essence in His singularity?

According to the standard Aristotelian position, we should make a distinction between two kinds of cognitive acts, i.e. sensory acts and intellective acts. Our sensory acts (i.e. seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching) are about individual qualities in the world. By contrast, our intellective acts (i.e. our acts of thinking) are about universal entities, whether concepts in the mind or replicable features of the world. In this paper, I will consider Scotus’s reaction to this tradition.¹ I will argue that Scotus’s position on this topic was characterized by two basic moves.

¹ Scotus’s position on intellective cognition has been extensively studied, in particular with regard to intuitive cognition. See in particular S. Day, *Intuitive Cognition: A Key to the Later Scholastics* (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1947), 114-23; C. Bérubé, *La connaissance de l’individuel au Moyen Age* (Montréal-Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1964), 134-224; S.D. Dumont, “The Scientific Character of Theology and the Origin of Duns Scotus’ Distinction between Intuitive and Abstractive Cognition,” *Speculum* 64 (1989): 579-99; A.B. Wolter, “Memory and Intuition; A Focal Debate in Fourteenth Century Cognitive Psychology,” *Franciscan Studies* 53 (1993): 175-230; R. Pasnau, “Cognition,” in T. Williams (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus* (Cambridge:

Scotus's first move was his commitment to the view that it is impossible for us to err with regard to the identity of the *per se* objects of our cognitive powers and acts. Because of his commitment to this view, as encapsulated in what I will call "Scotus's principle," Scotus reached the conclusion that the objects of all our cognitive acts are not individuals but common natures. In this life, we are directly acquainted only with replicable features. Granted, those features are actually present in individuals. Also, we do know that those features are present in individuals. But this is not part of what we are directly acquainted with, i.e. this is not part of the content of our cognitive acts. Rather, this is the result of an inference we can draw thanks to what we know about the metaphysical structure of the world.

Scotus's second move was his use of the distinction between, on the one hand, the state of our cognitive powers in our current condition and, on the other hand, what pertains necessarily to them. In the current condition, our intellect is bound to depend on the senses in order to acquire information about the extramental world. This posits a strong limitation on what we can know in this life. Scotus, however, maintained that the intellect's dependence on sense is contingent. In the next life, the intellect's independence from the senses will be restored. In the light of the distinction between what is contingent and what is not in our current situation, Scotus came to qualify his conclusion concerning the objects of our cognitive powers and acts. With regard to our sensory acts, he maintained that they are necessarily about natures and not individuals. With regard to our intellectual acts, however, he came to think that they are only contingently not about individuals. There is nothing in the nature of individual things

Cambridge University Press, 2002), 284-311, esp. 296-300; P. King, "Thinking about Things: Singular Thought in the Middle Ages," in G. Klima (ed.), *Intentionality, Cognition, and Representation in Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming). Scotus's position on sensitive cognition has been almost neglected, with the exception of the remarks in Bérubé, *La connaissance*, 161-65, where the issue is described as "a rather embarrassing problem" ("un problème plutôt embarrassant") for Scotus. In this paper, I will consider both intellectual and sensitive cognition, as I think it profitable to keep the two issues together.

or of our intellect that prevents our intellect from grasping the individuals. That our intellect is currently unable to do so is an admittedly lamentable but temporary situation, possibly to be explained as a consequence of the Fall. In the next life, we will be able to grasp individual things intellectually. Consequently, Scotus ultimately reversed the traditional Aristotelian view that sensory acts are about individual things while intellectual acts are about universals. According to Scotus, sensory acts are necessarily about non-individual items, whereas intellectual acts may and indeed will be about individual things.

This paper is divided into three parts. First, I present the Aristotelian view current in Scotus's time about the object of our cognitive acts as well as Scotus's first attempts to deal with this issue, specifically concerning the question of the object of our sensory acts. Second, I turn to Scotus's solution to this problem as based on his adoption of what I will call "Scotus's principle," according to which it is impossible for us to err with regard to the identity of the *per se* objects of our cognitive acts. Third, I consider Scotus's distinction between the cognitive limitations that pertain necessarily to our nature and those that are merely contingent on our current situation. In this third and last part, I also take into account the role that intuitive cognition plays in our current situation.

I

So let us consider the question, "What are our cognitive acts about?" as it was approached at the end of the thirteenth century, when Scotus started dealing with the issue. There is, of course, a straightforward answer to this question—our cognitive acts are about individual things. My act of seeing my neighbor's dog is about my neighbor's dog. Similarly, my act of tasting some wine has as its object the particular sample of wine I am drinking and my thinking of my friend Mary is directed at my friend Mary. As simple and appealing as this answer may sound, a thirteenth-century thinker would have had at least two complaints about it. The first complaint would have been that the question here does not concern

the things we cognize as they are in themselves. Rather, the question concerns what is grasped of those things by our cognitive acts. So it is certainly true that, when I see my neighbor's dog, what I see is an individual thing, i.e. my neighbor's dog. But the question here is whether this is part of the content of that cognitive act at all. When I see my dog's neighbor, do I grasp that it is that particular dog that I am seeing? Or do I grasp that I am seeing an individual dog at all? This issue is reflected in the meaning of the term "object," which, roughly speaking, meant the thing grasped by an act as considered with regard to the specific account or description under which it is grasped. The second complaint would have been that a fundamental distinction must be drawn between two kinds of cognitive powers and, accordingly, two kinds of cognitive acts. Human beings were typically thought to have cognitive access to the world in two ways, i.e. through sense and through intellect. It was the standard Aristotelian position that our sensory acts are indeed directed at individuals. Specifically, these individuals are individual sensible qualities such as an individual instance of color, e.g. the patch of red I am looking at right now, or an individual instance of taste, e.g. the smoothness of the wine I drank yesterday. So when I see the color of my shirt, my act of seeing is actually about that individual instance of color. As it was said, that individual instance of color is the *per se* object of my act of seeing. Similarly, when I taste a glass of wine, my act of tasting is directed at that individual instance of smoothness as at its *per se* object.² In this regard, the defenders of this Aristotelian position were committed to two distinct claims. On the one hand, they wanted to say that our sensory acts are acts *of* or *about* individual qualities. On the other hand, they also wanted to say that a particular sensory act is necessarily about not just any individual quality, but about *that* particular quality. My act of seeing this patch of red would be a different act if it were directed at another patch of red. So

² Aristotle, *De an.*, II, 5, 417b22 (for the claim that actual sensation is of particulars); II, 6-11 (on the object of each sense); *Cat.* 8, 9a35-b7 and *De gen. et cor.* II, 2, 329b19 (on sensible qualities).

there is a necessary connection between a particular sensory act and the particular individual quality it is about.

Things were thought to be different with regard to the acts of thinking, however. According to an often repeated claim rooted in the sayings of Aristotle and Boethius, sense is of individuals whereas intellect is of universals.³ This claim was taken to spell out the difference between sense and intellect in terms of their objects. Whereas our acts of sensing are about individuals, our acts of thinking are about universal aspects of the world. When I see and hear, I see an individual color and I hear an individual sound. But when I think, I typically think of universal features or aspects of reality (we may be willing to call them “properties”) such as *humanity*, *redness*, *smoothness* and so on. It is a notoriously difficult problem to determine the exact ontological status of these universal features. For the moment, however, we can remain noncommittal with regard to this issue.

Thomas Aquinas was a typical exponent of this position. Following Aristotle, he claimed that our sensory acts are about individuals, i.e. individual sensible qualities such as this particular color, that particular smoothness, etc.⁴ By contrast, our intellectual acts are about universals. Whereas the individuals our sensory acts are about are outside the mind (*extra animam*), the universals our intellectual acts are about are in the mind (*in anima*). But this does not mean

³ Aristotle, *Phys.* I, 5, 189a5-8; *De an.* II, 5, 417b21-23; *An. Post.* I, 31, 87b37-39; *An. Post.* II, 19, 100a17-b1; Boethius, *In Isagogen Porphyrii Commentaria (editio secunda)*, ed. S. Brandt (Wien and Leipzig: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1906), 167; Boethius, *Philos. Consol.* V, prosa 6 (CCSL 94, 104; PL 63, 862). See also J. Hamesse, *Les Auctoritates Aristotelis. Un florilège médiéval. Étude historique et édition critique* (Louvain and Paris: Peeters, 1974), 294, n. 89: *Omne quod sensibus patet, si ad rationem referas, universale est, si ad sensum, particulare est. Unde universale est dum intelligitur, particulare autem dum sentitur* (from *Phil. Consol.* V, prosa 6); *ibid.*, 319, n. 93: *Sensus est singularium, scientia vero universalium* (from *An. Post.* I, 31, 87b37-39).

⁴ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 78, a. 3, ad 2 (on sensible qualities as the proper object of sense); *ST I*, q. 85, a. 1 (on individuals as the objects of senses). See Bérubé, *La connaissance*, 49. On sense objects in Aquinas, see R. Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 180-89.

that there is no relationship between the objects of our intellectual acts and the real features of the world. For Aquinas held that the concepts in our mind represent real features of the world.⁵ As it happens, Aquinas noticed that there is an ambiguity in the term ‘universal’. On the one hand, we mean by ‘universal’ a mental concept by which we represent something in the world. On the other hand, we mean by ‘universal’ the common nature that is represented by our universal concepts. Our intellectual cognitive acts are not about concepts in our minds (“universal” in the first sense), but about real features in the world (“universal” in the second sense), even though the ontological status of those features is far from being clear. (This will be one of the aspects that Scotus tried to clarify).⁶ But the details of Aquinas’s position are not relevant here. What should be stressed is that Aquinas explained the difference between the objects of sensory and intellectual acts as a consequence of the different way of working of the senses and the intellect, respectively. The senses take in the material aspects of something, such as its color and smell, by way of material organs (eyes, nose, etc.), which are physically modified by the sensible qualities whose likenesses are impressed in them.⁷ By contrast, the intellect does not make

⁵ See for example *ST* I, q. 85, a. 2, *resp.* and *ad* 2. There is much debate about Aquinas’s doctrine of representation and about how to interpret Aquinas’s claim that “what is understood is in the one who understands by way of its likeness.” For a recent treatment, see J.E. Brower and S. Brower-Toland, “Aquinas on Mental Representation: Concepts and Intentionality,” *The Philosophical Review* 117 (2008): 193-243.

⁶ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 29, a. 5: ... *de universali dupliciter contingit loqui: uno modo, secundum quod subest intentioni universalitatis; alio autem modo, de natura cui talis intentio attribuitur: alia est enim consideratio hominis universalis, et alia hominis in eo quod homo.* See also *ST* I, q. 85, a. 2, *ad* 2; *ST* I, q. 85, a. 3, *ad* 1; *Sent. de anima*, I, 1, (Leon. XLV.1, 7); *Sent. libri de anima*, II, 12 (Leon. XLV.1, 115-16); *Exp. in Metaph.*, VII, lect. 13, n. 1570 (Turin and Rome: Marietti, 1967).

⁷ There is much controversy over the details of Aquinas’s account. See R. Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 31-62; J.P. O’Callaghan, “Aquinas, Cognitive Theory, and Analogy: Apropos of Robert Pasnau’s ‘Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages’,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76 (2002): 451-82; R. Pasnau, “What Is Cognition? A Reply to

use of organs and the information it takes in is not material, even though that information is at least initially conveyed through material media (i.e. when it is present at the sensory level). The work of the intellect is precisely to abstract this immaterial information from the material media in which it is originally encoded. In turn, Aquinas thought that the different way sense and intellect work is ultimately due to their respective natures. Whereas the senses are essentially material and linked to bodily functions, the intellect is not. Since Aquinas also held that what makes a thing particular is its matter, this difference between sense and intellect explains why the sense power and its acts are *of* particulars, i.e. about individuals, whereas the intellect and its acts are *of* universals, i.e. about universals:

It is important to know [...] that a sense is a power in a corporeal organ. Intellect, on the other hand, is an immaterial power that is not the act of any corporeal organ. But each and every thing is received in another according to the mode of the recipient. And every cognition is produced by the cognized thing's somehow being in the one cognizing—namely, in virtue of a likeness. For what is actually cognizing is the very thing actually cognized. The senses, therefore, must corporeally receive a likeness of the thing being sensed. Intellect, in contrast, incorporeally and immaterially receives a likeness of what it cognizes. But in the case of corporeal and material things, the individuation of a common nature is the product of corporeal matter contained under determinate dimensions. A universal, on the other hand, exists through abstraction from this kind of matter and from the individuating material conditions. Therefore it is clear that a thing's likeness, received in the senses, represents that thing as it is singular. A likeness received in intellect, on the other hand, represents that thing as the defining character (*rationem*) of a universal nature. That

is why the senses have cognition of singular things, whereas intellect has cognition of universals. And it is these latter that the sciences (*scientiae*) are concerned with. (Trans. Pasnau, 199-200).⁸

Accordingly, the fact that the senses are about individuals and the intellect is about universals depend on their respective natures and, ultimately, on human nature itself. Since human beings are necessarily constituted of body and soul and since the senses operate by way of impression of bodily organs whereas the intellect operates in an immaterial way, it follows that the senses are necessarily about individuals and the intellect is necessarily about universals. This just depends on the way we are.⁹

There is an obvious problem with this account of the objects of our cognitive powers and acts. Specifically concerning the object of intellectual acts, we do seem to be able to think about individuals, after all. When I think of my friend Mary, I am not thinking about a human being in general. Nor am I thinking about an individual human being, no matter which.

⁸ Aquinas, *Sent. libri de anima*, II, 12 (Leon., XLV.1, 115): *Sciendum est igitur ... quod sensus est uirtus in organo corporali, intellectus uero est uirtus immaterialis que non est actus alicuius organi corporalis. Vnumquodque autem recipitur in aliquo per modum "ipsius et non per modum" sui. Cognitio autem omnis fit per hoc quod cognitum est aliquo modo in cognoscente, scilicet secundum similitudinem: nam cognoscens in actu est ipsum cognitum in actu. Oportet igitur quod sensus corporaliter recipiat similitudinem rei que sentitur, intellectus autem recipit similitudinem eius quod intelligitur incorporaliter et immaterialiter. Indiuiduatio autem nature communis in rebus corporalibus et materialibus est ex materia corporali sub determinatis dimensionibus contenta; uniuersale autem est per abstractionem ab huiusmodi materia et materialibus condicionibus indiuiduantibus. Manifestum est igitur quod similitudo rei recepta in sensu representat rem secundum quod est singularis, recepta autem in intellectu representat rem secundum rationem uniuersalis nature. Et inde est quod sensus cognoscit singularia, intellectus uero uniuersalia; et horum sunt scientie.* English translation in Thomas Aquinas, *A Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*. Trans. Robert Pasnau (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 199-200.

⁹ See also Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 84, a. 7; q. 85, a. 1. See Pasnau, *Aquinas on Human Nature*, 284-95.

My thought is about that particular human being, Mary. But according to Aquinas, the intellect, left to itself, is unable to reach an individual. No matter how many conceptual qualifications I add, I can never pin down my friend Mary. I may qualify my concept of human being by adding that of being tall, fair, generous, and so on. But each of these characteristics is replicable and can at least in principle be found in a different individual, as Aquinas well knew.¹⁰

Aquinas, however, was perfectly willing to admit that we are able to think about individuals. Only, he argued that when we do so, our intellect cannot rely exclusively on its own concepts. In order to grasp individual things, our intellect must make use of images. Images may be considered as a refined version of the impressions that sensible qualities leave on our senses. As such, the production of images pertains to the sensory power, not to the intellect. It may be questionable whether Aquinas managed to explain in detail how this works.¹¹ But at least the following is clear: for Aquinas, our thinking about individuals must make use of images, not merely of concepts. So when I think of my friend Mary, I am able to do so because I can narrow down my concept of a human being not just by adding more specific concepts; I must also connect my concept of human being to the images I have of the sensible features of my friend Mary, such as the color of her eyes, the sound of her voice, etc. Only when I connect these concrete images of particular qualities to my thought of humanity (or *human being*) am I able to think about my friend Mary, and only then is my thought latched onto that particular individual, Mary.¹²

¹⁰ Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de anima*, q. 20 (Leon. XXIV, 171): *Set hoc non sufficit ad ueram singularem cognitionem. Manifestum est enim quod quantumcumque adunentur aliqua uniuersalia, nunquam ex eis perficitur singulare; sicut si dicam hominem album, musicum, et quantumcumque huiusmodi addidero, nondum erit singulare: possibile est enim omnia hec adunata pluribus conuenire.* See also *De ver.*, q. 2, a. 5 (Leon. XXII.1, 62); *Quodl.* VII, q. 1, a. 3 (Leon. XXV.1, 13).

¹¹ See the doubts expressed in King, "Thinking about Things."

¹² See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 86, a. 1; I, q. 84, a. 7; *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 65; *De Ver.*, q. 2, a. 6 (Leon. XXII.1, 65-67). See King, "Thinking about Things." For an analysis of the texts where Aquinas held this view, see

So Aquinas did hold that we can think about individuals, but he maintained that in order to do so we cannot rely merely on our intellect and its concepts. We must also make use of images coming from the senses. Only in this way do our thoughts become thoughts of individuals. According to Aquinas's formula, the universal (e.g., the concept of human being in general) is the *per se* object of the intellect, whereas the individual (e.g., my friend Mary) is the object of the intellect merely *per accidens*.¹³ The intellect grasps the individual not by way of its own concepts, but thanks to another cognitive power, i.e. sense and imagination. My thoughts are about a particular individual if and only if I supplement them with some particular image directly linked with the sensible features of that individual. If that were not the case, my thought would not be of an individual such as Mary. As a matter of fact, Aquinas held that my thought would not be a thought of an individual at all. It would be a universal thought, which could be applied to several individuals.

As is well known, Aquinas's account soon became an object of controversy. The arguments its critics insisted on were mainly theological. The claim that we can think of individuals only by making use of images was considered extremely problematic. If this were the case, it would become very difficult to account for two sorts of situations. First, only material beings have imagination. But then, how could we account for the knowledge that immaterial beings such as God and angels have of individuals? Second, images are only of material beings. But then, how could we account for the beatific vision, in which an immaterial being, i.e. God, is intellectually cognized by the blessed as an individual? Aquinas and his followers were aware of these two problems and tried to address them.¹⁴ All the same, several Franciscan think-

G. Klubertanz, "St. Thomas and the Knowledge of the Singular," *The New Scholasticism* 26 (1952), 135-66; Bérubé, *La connaissance*, 51-64.

¹³ Aquinas, *De Ver.*, q. 2, a. 6 (Leon. XII.1, 66): *Sed per accidens continet quod intellectus noster singulare cognoscit*.

¹⁴ See Bérubé, *La connaissance*, 82-91; King, "Thinking about Things." See in particular William de la Mare, *Correctorium*, art. 2, in P. Glorieux, *Le Correctorium Corruptorii 'Quare'* (Paris, 1927), 12-14: *Item, quaestione 14, articulo II, in responsione primi argumenti dicit quod intellectus nos-*

ers maintained that, in order to account for these two cases, Aquinas's position had to be supplemented. They claimed that not all intellective acts are about universals; some of them may be about individuals as well. The details of this position varied, but generally it was held that an intellective act can be directed *per se* at an individual because individuals can leave an impression in the intellect itself—as it was said, there are intelligible species of individuals as well as of universals.¹⁵ Here, however, I would like to set aside this part of the story. Rather, I would like to consider some specifically philosophical problems of the position I have presented. It is here that Scotus entered the stage.

First of all, there is the problem of the ontological status of the object of our intellective acts. We have seen that Aquinas maintained that our intellective acts grasp universals. He had also noticed that there is an ambiguity in the term “universal.” On the one hand, “universal” means a concept in our mind. On the other hand, “universal” means what this concept represents, i.e. a real feature in the world. Scotus agreed with all this, but he argued that this cannot be the whole story. For we should further inquire about the ontological status of that real feature represented by our universal concepts. Take for example a biologist's act of thinking about the necessary features that pertain to horses. Roughly speaking, this is what the concept of horseness is. As we have

ter non cognoscit singularia; quia intellectus noster abstrahit speciem intelligibilem a principiis individuantes; unde species intelligibilis nostri intellectus non potest esse similitudo principiorum individuantes. Haec de Thoma. Hoc praebet occasionem errandi, quia secundum hoc animae separatae et Angeli Christum in patria intellectuali cognitione non cognoscerent [...]. Already in the 1230s, William of Auvergne had criticized Aristotle's doctrine on the same grounds. See R. de Vaux, *Notes et textes sur l'avicennisme latin* (Paris: Vrin, 1934), 34-35; P.-M. de Contenson, “Avicennisme latin et vision de Dieu au début du XIII^e siècle,” *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 34 (1959), 29-97; Bérubé, *La connaissance*, 83-84.

¹⁵ See Matthew of Aquasparta, *Quaestiones disputatae de fide et de cognitione*, q. 4 (Quaracchi, 1957), 274-91. On the position of Franciscans before Scotus on the cognition of individual things, see Bérubé, *La connaissance*, 92-133; J.E. Lynch, *The Theory of Knowledge of Vital du Four* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute, 1972), 27-60.

seen, in a sense this concept is in the mind of the biologist who thinks about the necessary features of horses. In another sense, however, this concept picks out some real features of horses in the world—their nature or essence. It is because of this essence that some properties pertain to horses necessarily. These necessary properties pertain to horses whether the biologist thinks of them or not. In other terms, horses constitute a natural kind not because we sort them out together. As matter of fact, it's our classification that depends on the way horses are, not the other way around. So Scotus concluded that we must posit in reality some real feature that corresponds to our universal concepts, and this real feature has its own identity independently of our act of thinking about it and identifying it. As a consequence, the object of our intellective acts is not the universal in our mind, but a real feature outside our mind, which is at least potentially replicable—in my example of the biologist thinking about horseness, this is the common nature, horseness.¹⁶

So far, Scotus's position on the object of our cognitive acts is not in contrast with Aquinas's Aristotelian position. It merely supplements it with some explanation about the status of the natures that are the objects of our intellective acts. It is when we turn to Scotus's position on the objects of our sensory acts that things become more interesting.

As is the case with respect to many other topics, Scotus's final position on the objects of our sensory powers and acts is the result of a development that we may witness in some detail in his *Questions on the Metaphysics*. Here I would like to indicate only a few aspects of this development. Scotus gave serious consideration to the standard interpretation of the Aristotelian claim that sense is about individuals whereas intellect is about universals. After all, this claim provides a

¹⁶ *Ord.* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, nn. 7-40 (Vat. VII, 394-408); *Lect.* II, d. 3, 1, q. 1, nn. 8-36 (Vat. XVIII, 231-39); *Quaest. in Metaph.*, VII, q. 18, nn. 38-43 (OPh IV, 347-48). See P. King, "Duns Scotus on the Common Nature and the Individual Differentia," *Philosophical Topics*, 20 (1992), 51-76; T.B. Noone, "Universals and Individuation," in Williams (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, pp. 100-28; G. Pini, "Scotus on Universals: A Reconsideration," *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 18 (2007), 395-409.

convenient way of distinguishing between sense and intellect in terms of their respective objects, so it is easy to understand that Scotus was reluctant to give it up.¹⁷ Soon, however, the Aristotelian claim turned out to be very difficult to defend. Scotus was particularly concerned with the issue of the unity of the objects of our sensory powers. If senses are about individual qualities, how can we account for the unity of the object of each sense? We do not just sense individual colors or tastes, but colors of a certain type (for example, white or red) and tastes of a certain type (for example, dry or smooth). We compare and classify the sensible qualities we perceive. Ultimately, we classify all the sensible qualities of a certain kind under the label “color” (i.e. the object of sight), and the same is true for the objects of the other four senses. So it seems that our senses after all do not have scattered individual qualities as their objects. Rather, our senses seem to be about generic qualities such as “color.” According to Scotus, this implies that there must to be something in reality to account for our sorting out individual sensible qualities under these generic labels. So we should conclude that the objects of our sensory powers are not individuals, but the natures that constitute those individuals as individuals of a certain kind.¹⁸

But if this is the case, Scotus faced two difficulties. First, sense and intellect turn out to have the same object, as both of them are directed at replicable features of reality (i.e. com-

¹⁷ See in particular *Quaest. super Metaph.*, I, q. 6, n. 1 (OPh, III, 135) and *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 15, n. 2 (OPh IV, 293), where Aristotle’s claim is quoted as an argument *quod non*.

¹⁸ *Quaest. super Metaph.*, I, q. 6, n. 22 (OPh III, 140-41): *Dico igitur aliter ad argumentum quod unitas obiecti sensus non est aliqua unitas universalis in actu, sed est aliquid unum aliqua unitate priore—scilicet reali—a qua movetur intellectus ad causandum aliquid commune abstractum ab hoc singulari et illo eiusdem speciei magis quam diversarum. Aliter universale esset fictio solum. Circumscripto enim intellectu, istud album magis convenit cum alio quam cum aliquo alterius generis. Unde dico quod istud unum reale praecedens actum intellectus est unum in multis, non tamen de multis. Sed fit unum de multis per intellectum, et tunc est universale; prius non. Quia ex I Posteriorum, ambae condiciones requiruntur ad universale.* See also *ibid.*, nn. 26-29 (OPh IV, 142-43).

mon natures).¹⁹ Second, the claim that sense has common natures as its objects implies that sense cognizes quiddities, not individuals.²⁰ Both claims are in stark contrast with the Aristotelian doctrine that sense is of the singular—a doctrine that Scotus was understandably reluctant to reject, as it provided a clear way to distinguish between sense and intellect in terms of their respective objects.

Scotus took into account several possible solutions to these difficulties. With regard to the first problem, he first considered the possibility that the intellect is about the universal concepts whereas the senses are about the common natures that these concepts represent. But then he ultimately conceded that both sense and intellect are about the same object, i.e. the quiddity or common nature, not the individual.²¹ With regard to the second problem, Scotus ultimately held the view that the sense does cognize quiddities, not individuals. So the difference between sense and intellect must be accounted for not in terms of different objects but in terms of what they make us know about a certain object. At least initially, Scotus held that sense knowledge is knowledge by acquaintance whereas intellective knowledge is knowledge by way of definition. So both sense and intellect are cognitions of the same thing, but only the intellect makes us know what that the thing is.²²

¹⁹ Ibid., n. 30 (OPh III, 143): *Contra: tunc sequitur quod idem secundum eandem per se rationem sit obiectum sensus et intellectus. Quia secundum istam rationem quae est quidditas tantum, est per se intelligibile, et—per te—per se sensibile.*

²⁰ Ibid., n. 31 (OPh III, 143): *Item, tunc sensus erit per se cognoscitivus quidditatis et non singularis, quod videtur contra literam infra, quae dicit quod sensibus 'sunt cognitiones singularium maxime propriae.' Quomodo? Non quia soli sensus sunt illorum, per te; nec quia illorum solorum per se, per te.*

²¹ Ibid., n. 39 (OPh III, 144): *Aliter dicitur quod intellectus agens non causat universale; sed intellectus possibilis, considerans istam quidditatem illimitatam, causat in eo universale, it quod universale non est per se obiectum intellectus, sed consequitur etiam actionem primam intellectus possibilis; ita quod quidditas secundum se, sicut est obiectum sensus—secundum praecedentem responsionem—ita etiam et intellectus.*

²² Ibid., nn. 43–44 (OPh III, 145–46): *Ad aliud dicitur non esse inconveniens quod inferatur [scil., quod sensus erit per se cognoscitivus quidditatis et*

So far, Scotus had considered what our sensory and intellectual powers are about. He concluded that they are about the same sorts of things, i.e. replicable features in reality—the so-called “common natures.” What about the objects of our sensory acts? Scotus argued that our sensory acts are about common natures as well. But he added that these natures are always “under singularity” (*sub singularitate*). Scotus’s point here seems to be that, even though what we sense is a replicable feature, that replicable feature can be sensed only if it exists in an individual, just as a color can be seen only if it exists in a certain quantity. Just as we see the color red only if red exists in some extended body (even though red and the extension of that body are two items ontologically distinct), in the same way we sense a common nature only if that common nature exists in an individual.²³ But then, what about the individual itself? Is it ever sensed? It seems that our senses only pick out replicable qualities. But if the individual is not sensed, should we say that singularity can be grasped, if it can be grasped at all, only by the intellect? Scotus is not yet ready to embrace this claim, and understandably so, for it seems to run counter to the traditional Aristotelian position that sense is of the singular whereas intellect is of the universal. Accordingly, Scotus concluded this complicated passage with his typical reminder that the problem was still open and that he had to come back to this issue to consider it more thoroughly: *Stude*.²⁴

non singularis] [...] *Tamen sensus tantum sentit illud quod est color; intellectus cognoscit quiditatem definiendo et attribuendo definitionem definito, dicendo ‘hoc est tale quid’, et sic videtur cognoscere quiditatem, non tantum quid.* This position, however, seems to be in contrast with Scotus’s claim that we can have intellectual intuitive cognition, which is knowledge by acquaintance.

²³ Ibid., n. 46 (Oph III, 46-47): *Ex quo concluditur quod nullum unum singulare est primum obiectum potentiae, sed aliquid unum in multis singularibus, quod est quodammodo universale, sicut prius expositum est. Licet autem quodlibet sentire sit tantum circa singulare, non tamen ut circa primum obiectum, sed circa illud unum in singulari. Aliter non idem obiectum potentiae et actus eius. Sed non est circa illud unum nisi sub singularitate, sicut non videtur color nisi in quantitate.*

²⁴ Ibid., n. 47 (Oph III, 147): *Contra: si sensus non sentit obiectum sine singularitate, quomodo se habet singularitas ad obiectum ut ad col-*

II

Scotus did come back to this issue, both in other sections of his *Questions on the Metaphysics* and in his theological writings. This time he took a new approach. Scotus's new treatment was based on the insight that it is impossible for us to err with regard to the identity of the *per se* objects of our cognitive powers and acts. This insight lay at the heart of the principle that implicitly guided Scotus's new attempts to determine what the objects of our cognitive powers and acts were. I will call it "Scotus's principle":

(SP) Something cannot be a *per se* object of a cognitive power unless that cognitive power is able to distinguish that thing from any other item of the same kind once all other items belonging to different kinds have been removed.

We cannot sense something or think about something if we can make a mistake with regard to the identity of that thing. For example, let us take a patch of color, say white. Suppose that I focus on the color of that patch in isolation from all the items that come with it but belong to different kinds, such as its extension (i.e. how big that patch is), location (i.e. where that patch is located), etc. I focus just on that color *in itself*. Suppose that at this point you distract my attention and substitute the original patch I was focusing on with a new patch. Suppose now that, when I return my attention to the patch of color, I am unable to tell the difference between the original patch and the new patch, so that I mistakenly judge that the patch I am looking at now is the same patch I was looking at before you distracted me. In that case, we should conclude that I am unable to distinguish the original patch from the new patch. According to Scotus's principle, we should also conclude that the object of my act of seeing—even before you distracted me—is not the original

orem? Numquid est per se sensibile, licet non proprium, sicut quantitas? Numquid singularitas est tantum per se intelligibile? Stude.

white patch, for it is possible for me to be mistaken with regard to its identity, as your substitution showed.

On the face of it, this principle seems highly questionable. For it seems that what I was seeing before you distracted me *was* the original white patch, even though I may be unable to distinguish it from the new patch. I think, however, that this objection depends on some confusion about what Scotus means by “object.” But before turning to this point, let us consider if something can be said in support of Scotus’s principle.

Scotus never formulated this principle in explicit terms, but he assumed a version of it as the major premise of his argument to establish that neither our sensory nor our intellectual acts are about individuals.²⁵ Also, he never gave any argument in its support. He probably considered this principle as immediately entailed by the thesis of the infallibility of a cognitive power with regard to its proper objects—a thesis commonly assumed as fundamental by Aristotelians and by Scotus himself.²⁶ The gist of this thesis is that our cognitive powers—with the important restrictive condition that they should be in the proper condition—grant us knowledge of their objects. Scotus interpreted this claim as saying specifically that our cognitive powers and acts give us *discriminating* knowledge about their objects. This red patch is the object of my act of sight only if I am able to distinguish it, by that very act, from any other thing, including any other

²⁵ *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 15, n. 20 (OPh IV, 301). See also *Ord.* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, n. 21 (Vat. VII, 399).

²⁶ Aristotle, *De anima*, III, 3, 428a11-12; 428b19 (with regard to the objects of the senses). Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 17, a. 3: *Sicut autem sensus informatur directe a similitudine propriorum sensibilium, ita intellectus informatur similitudine quidditatis rei. Unde circa quod quid est intellectus non decipitur: sicut neque sensus circa sensibilia propria.* See also *CG* I, 58; *Sent.* I, d. 19, 5, 1 ad 7; *CG* I, 59; *ST* I, 58, 5. And *ST*, I, 85, 6; *De Ver.* 1, a. 12. See Scotus, *Ord.* I, d. 3, p. 1, q. 4, n. 253 (Vat. III, 154): *Ista veritas quiescit in intellectu, quod ‘potentia non errat circa obiectum proportionatum, nisi indisposita’ ...* On this claim, see N. Kretzmann, “Infallibility, Error, and Ignorance,” in R. Bosley and M. Tweedale (eds.), *Aristotle and His Medieval Interpreters. Canadian Journal of Philosophy, Suppl.* Vol. 17 (Calgary, 1991), 159-94, esp. 185-94; Pasnau, *Aquinas on Human Nature*, 188-89 and 324-25; E. Stump, *Aquinas* (London, 2003), 147.

red patch, no matter how similar it may be to the patch I am seeing. Similarly, my friend Mary is the object of my act of thinking only if I am able to distinguish her, by way of that act of thought, from any other thing. If I can make any mistake with regard to her identity, I am not thinking about Mary but about something different.

This principle has an obvious advantage. It provides Scotus with a clear criterion to rule out possible candidates for the role of the *per se* object of our cognitive powers and acts. In order to determine that something is not what our cognitive acts are directed at, Scotus did not have to rely on any costly and possibly contentious metaphysical assumption. Specifically, Scotus attacked Aquinas's argument that our senses are of singulars and our intellect is of universals because our senses, being essentially connected with the body, work in a material way, whereas our intellect, being immaterial, works in an immaterial way. Aquinas's argument assumed that we can infer the nature of the object of our cognitive powers from the nature and way of working of our cognitive powers. But this inference is wrong, according to Scotus, because it is not necessary for a cognitive power and its object to be assimilated according to their way of being. The relationship between a cognitive power and its object is an intentional relationship that does not require any real identity with regard to the way something is.²⁷

Since we cannot count on a correspondence between the way a cognitive power is and works and the way its object is, it is fortunate that we can rely on another criterion to narrow down our search for the proper objects of cognitive powers and acts. We can at least rule out wrong candidates thanks to the assumption that each power and act must be able to distinguish its object from any other thing. Scotus observed that we are clearly unable to distinguish an individual sensory quality from any other sensible quality of the same kind. If two white patches overlap, I am unable to tell which is which. So it is possible for me to make a mistake with regard to the identity of this particular white patch. This is also true with regard to the identity of any individual sensible quality as

²⁷ *Ord.* I, d. 3, p. 1, q. 3, nn. 120-22 (Vat. III, 74-75).

well as with regard to any individual shown to the intellect. If all temporal differences and all other accidents are taken away and only the individual is left, our intellect is unable to distinguish that individual from another one very similar to it.²⁸ If one objects that we can distinguish numerically different qualities because of their location in space, Scotus responds that spatial position is not part of the essence of a quality. But according to Scotus's principle, if something is the *per se* object of a cognitive power/act, then that power must be able to distinguish that thing from everything else once all other items belonging to different categories have been removed. Thus, Scotus concluded that individuals are not the objects of our sensory acts. It may be the case that, as a matter of fact, I am able to distinguish this individual quality from another quality very similar to it thanks to some small difference, say a different degree of intensity in color. But this difference is not part of the essence of that individual quality. So it is logically possible for that individual quality to exist without that difference in intensity. Therefore, it is logically possible for us to be unable to distinguish that individual quality from another one very similar to it.²⁹

Scotus has an interesting argument to show that this is the case.³⁰ Suppose you are looking at a sunbeam. According to the astronomical and optical theory current in Scotus's time, that sunbeam is actually constituted of many sunbeams, *s1*, *s2*, *s3* ..., which strike the surface of the Earth at a different angle as the sun moves in its trajectory in the sky. Now we are unable to distinguish *s1* from *s2* and from *s3*. As a matter of fact, we perceive just one sunbeam when there are actually several numerically distinct sunbeams. Accordingly, our sight is unable to distinguish an individual item such as a sunbeam from another one sufficiently similar to it. From

²⁸ *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 15, n. 20 (OPh IV, 301). See also *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, 13, n. 157 (OPh IV, 271).

²⁹ *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 15, n. 21 (OPh IV, 302). As to the difference in location, God could locate the same thing in two places at the same time. See *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 13, n. 168 (OPh IV, 275).

³⁰ This argument is similar to Evans's famous thought experiment of the two indistinguishable steel balls. See Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 90.

this fact and from Scotus's principle, it follows that what I see by my act of seeing is not an individual sunbeam.³¹ One can object that at least I can count these sunbeams, so that I may be unable to distinguish them qualitatively but I can at least say that there are two different sunbeams (presumably, according to the different angles at which they strike the Earth). But Scotus answered that our sight is unable to count different sunbeams if the time they last is sufficiently short. Things can be counted if they can already be identified as different in some respect, not the other way around.³²

Scotus concluded that our sensory powers and acts are not about individuals. Rather, it is common natures, i.e. replicable features of the world, that are the objects of our sensory powers and acts. Scotus drew the same conclusion about the object of our intellectual acts. All our cognitive acts, whether sensory or intellectual, are directed at common natures:

[...] a power knowing some object *per se* under some account, will know it *per se* even when everything else is removed and only that object remains. Now this is not the case with our intellect or our sense as regards the individual *per se*; therefore, etc.—Proof of the first part of the minor: the most distinct intellection of the individual seems to be of some concept which the intellect knows distinctly; but positing such precisely, and removing [all] time differences and the various degrees of intensity as well as all other accidents befalling such an intention, it does not seem that our intellect knows how to distinguish or differentiate this intention from the intention of any other individual of the same species that may be shown to it; there-

³¹ See *Ord.* II, d. 3, p. 1, n. 21: [...] *nullus sensus distinguit hunc radium solis differre numeraliter ab alio radio, cum tamen sint diversi proper motum solis ...* See also *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 15, n. 20 (OPh IV, 301): *Quomodo etiam visus discernit diversitatem solarium radorum, qui tamen a quibusdam ponuntur continue variari?*

³² *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 13 (OPh IV, 169): *Ad illud de numero, oportet glossare. Certum enim est, si semper sunt novi radii solis in medio ita quod nullus durat ibi diu, quod visus noster istum numerum non cognoscit. Intelligendum ergo numero dissimilium.*

fore, etc.—Proof of the second part of the minor by the same [argument]: this whiteness may be put in the same place with that whiteness, and this remains this and that remains that, because this is not this by the fact that it is in this place. Does the sense discern that in the same place there are two whitenesses, if they are equally intense? It does not. Also, how does vision discern the difference between the rays of the sun, which however some assume are continually varied? (Trans. Etzkorn and Wolter modified, II, 259).³³

Some years earlier—but the dates unfortunately are not precisely established—the Franciscan Vital du Four had given a very similar argument to show that neither the senses nor the intellect can distinguish between two very similar individuals. From this, he had concluded that neither the

³³ *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 15, n. 20 (OPh IV, 301): [...] *potentia cognoscens per se aliquod obiectum sub aliqua ratione, circumscripto quocumque alio, illo remanente, cognoscet illud per se; non sic est de intellectu, nec de sensu nostro respectu singularis; ergo etc.*—*Probatio primae partis minoris: distinctissima intellectio singularis videtur esse alicuius intentionis quam intellectus distincte cognoscit; sed posita illa praecise, amota differentia temporis, amoto alio et alio gradu intentionis, et sic de omnibus accidentibus illi intentioni, non videtur quod intellectus sciat distinguere vel discernere—si ostendatur sibi—a quacumque alia intentione singulari eiusdem speciei; ergo etc.* *Probatio secundae partis minoris per idem: haec albedo ponatur simul in loco cum illa albedine, manet ergo haec et haec, illa et illa, quia haec non est haec per hoc esse. Numquid sensus discernit in eodem loco duas esse albedines numero, si sint aequae intensae? Non. Quomodo etiam visus discernit diversitatem solarium radiorum, qui tamen a quibusdam ponuntur continue variari?* The same argument is hinted at in an addition to *Quaest. super Metaph.*, I, q. 6, n. 35 (OPh III, 144): *Item, tunc non erraret sensus distinguendo hoc ab alio.* See also *Ord.* I, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1-2 (Vat. III, 21): *Praeterea, si intellectus intelligeret singularia sub propriis rationibus, quamvis conceptus duorum eiusdem speciei essent simillimi [...] adhuc intellectus bene distingueret inter tales conceptus singularium.* The English translation has been taken, with some modifications, from *Questions on the Metaphysics of Aristotle* by John Duns Scotus. Trans. Girard J. Etzkorn and Allan B. Wolter (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1997), II, 259. See also *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 13, n. 158 (OPh IV, 271), where Scotus made a similar point about the individual differentia rather than the individual thing.

senses not the intellect can grasp what distinguishes two individuals, even though the intellect can conclude by way of reasoning that two individuals are different.³⁴ Similarly, Scotus himself had remarked that both sense and intellect can be mistaken with regard to the identity of two very similar individuals—with the interesting exception of the intellectual cognition that we have of our own soul and of its acts. But our intellect can be mistaken about the identity even of our own body, as God could substitute our body with another one, without any interruption of our act of thinking about our body. From this, Scotus concluded that the individual differentia is unknown to us in this life.³⁵ But from this argument both Vital du Four and Scotus had concluded merely that our sensory and intellectual acts fail to pick out that by which one individual is different from another of the same species. Scotus's commitment to what I have called "Scotus's

³⁴ See F.M. Delorme, "Le cardinal Vital du Four. Huit questions disputées sur le problème de la connaissance," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 2 (1927), 164: *Si autem [scil., singulare] accipiatur secundo modo [scil., ut dicit gradum distinctum naturalem unius individui a gradu naturae alterius individui eiusdem speciei], dico quod sensus non cognoscit nec apprehendit. Si enim proponas duo alba vel duo calida, vel duo gustabilia multum similia, sensus eorum differentiam non apprehendet, immo iudicabit ea aequaliter participare naturam illam, eo quod non apprehendit nisi differentias magnas et notabiles. Intellectus autem quasi syllogizando concludit quod natura se explicat in agendo, quod omnia individua naturaliter producta individuo modo et singulari participant naturam speciei, et etiam duo poma in una arbore nunquam habent eundem aspectum ad coelum.* See Bérubé, *La connaissance*, 114; Lynch, *The Theory of Knowledge*, 39. Vital du Four disputed his questions on cognition some time between 1289 and 1297.

³⁵ *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 13, n. 158 (OPh IV, 271): ... *differentia individualis a nullo nota est in hac vita communiter. Cuius probatio est: quia tunc nota esset differentia eius ad quodcumque aliud, et ita non posset errare de quocumque alio sibi intellectualiter ostenso quin iudicaret illud esse aliud. Sed hoc est falsum de alio omnino simili nisi tantum de intelligendo se animam et suum actum forte, a quibus differre diceret quantumcumque similia sibi ostensa. De intelligendo tamen se compositum forte erraret quis, si subito Deus suum corpus annihilaret, et aliud suae animae uniret, manente anima in eadem intellectione non interrupta, sic quod anima quantum ad differentiam individualement se ipsa certissime novit 'hoc ens.'*

principle,” however, induced him to draw also a stronger (and more controversial) conclusion, i.e. that it is common natures and not individual things that are the objects of both sensory and intellectual acts. Not only can we not grasp that by which two individuals are distinguished; we do not even grasp individuals at all. So Scotus was committed not only to the relatively uncontroversial claim that I am unable to distinguish between the smoothness of two different wines, if they are very similar to each other. He even claimed that the smoothness I taste is not something individual at all.

As I have already mentioned, this claim, in itself surprising, seems to be just false. I may indeed be unable to distinguish the individual smoothness of the wine I drank yesterday from a very similar individual smoothness. But it still seems to be the case that what I tasted was an individual instance of smoothness and that it was *that* particular smoothness. The fact that I may fail to identify it correctly is irrelevant to the fact that my sensory act was about it. Similarly, suppose that, unbeknownst to me, my friend Mary has an identical twin, Ann. Suppose also that, again unbeknownst to me, Mary and Ann have been swapping places during my acquaintance with them. It does not follow that my thoughts are neither about Mary nor about Ann but about the features they have in common. Rather, it seems to follow that some of my thoughts are about Mary while others are about Ann, even though I may be ignorant of this.

As a consequence, there seems to be something deeply wrong with Scotus’s principle. Something *does* seem to be the object of a cognitive power/act even though that power/act is not able to distinguish that thing from any other thing very similar to it. Our cognitive acts *do* seem to be about individuals, even though we may be unable to distinguish one individual from the other.

One can try to defend Scotus’s position by distinguishing between two claims. First, there is the claim that our cognitive acts are not necessarily about this particular individual, say Mary, if that individual is very similar to another one, say Ann. All the same, our cognitive acts are about individuals, even though not necessarily about this or that individual. Second, there is the claim that our cognitive acts are not

about individuals at all but about some features common to individuals. Of course, one can concede that Scotus was committed to the first claim. Our cognitive acts do not necessarily grasp this or that particular individual, because we may be unable to tell one individual from another. At the same time, one can deny that Scotus was committed to the second and much more controversial claim, i.e. that our cognitive acts are not about individuals at all. It is true that our cognitive acts may not be necessarily about this or that particular individual. All the same, they are cognitive acts of individuals, not of common natures.³⁶

Scotus did take into consideration something like this position, at least with regard to the objects of the senses. At some point, he argued that the individual differentia is not sensed, but that what is sensed is nevertheless an individual thing.³⁷ However, he ultimately rejected this possibility, as we have seen.³⁸ It seems that there are at least two reasons for denying that Scotus's ultimate position was to accept the distinction between knowing an individual as an individual and knowing an individual as this particular individual. First, from the fact that our cognitive powers and acts cannot distinguish one individual from another, Scotus explicitly concluded that the objects of our cognitive acts are not individuals at all, but common natures.³⁹ Second, Scotus held that the individual difference is responsible both for making something into an individual (i.e. something that cannot be divided into subjective parts) and for making it the pat-

³⁶ This is King's point in his "Thinking about Things."

³⁷ *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 13, n. 172 (OPh IV, 277): *Singulare vero sentitur per se [...] albedo coniuncta differentiae individuali et sic est nata denominari a singularitate; non sic quod coniunctio sentiatur, nec ista differentia individualis, nec coniunctio sit ratio formalis sentiendi, sed modus quidam rationis formalis, sub quo modo est ratio sentiendi.*

³⁸ See also *ibid.*: *Contra: tantum albedo sentitur, cuicumque sit coniuncta; ergo ipsi, ut est sic nota, non repugnat dici de pluribus, sicut nec ipsi ut est intellecta; ergo universale ita sentitur sicut intelligitur.* Scotus subsequently objected to this, but then he rejected the objection.

³⁹ See the passages quote above, nn. 31 and 33.

icular individual it is.⁴⁰ As a consequence, if we fail to grasp the individual differentia of something, we fail to grasp both that by which something is a particular individual and that by which that thing is an individual at all. Now, as we have seen, Scotus argued that we grasp the individual differentia only of our own soul and of its acts. In all the other cases, we may infer that there must be an individual differentia—but this is not part of what we grasp when sensing and thinking about something. So we should conclude that in all other cases we do not grasp individuals at all.

Should we conclude that Scotus is committed to an implausible claim? I think that Scotus's position looks much less implausible once we consider what Scotus and his contemporaries meant by the term "object."⁴¹ There is no doubt that the thing I am seeing or tasting is, in itself, an individual quality. Similarly, there is no doubt that what I am thinking about is, in itself, an individual thing, say my friend Mary. But Scotus clearly held that, in this context, we are not talking about what things are in themselves. We are talking about what we grasp by our sensory and intellective acts. So we should distinguish between, on the one hand, what a thing is in itself and, on the other hand, the object of our cognitive powers and acts. A thing, in itself, is the result of the union between a common aspect (the common nature) and

⁴⁰ *Ord.* I, d. 3, p. 1, q. 4, n. 76 (Vat. VII, pp. 426-27): [...] *primo expono quid intelligo per individuationem sive unitatem numeralem sive singularitatem. Non quidem unitatem indeterminatam (qua quidlibet in specie, dicitur esse unum numero), sed unitatem signatam (ut 'hanc'),—ita quod, sicut prius dictum est quod individuum impossibile est dividi in partes subiectivas et quaeritur ratio illius impossibilitatis, ita dico quod individuum impossibile est non esse 'hoc' signatum hac singularitate, et quaeritur causa non singularitatis in communi sed 'huius' singularitatis in speciali, signatae, scilicet ut est 'haec' determinate.* See also *Ord.* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 4, n. 111 (Vat. VII, 446) and *Ord.* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 6, n. 165 (Vat. VII, 473).

⁴¹ In general on the term "object" in the Middle Ages, see L. Dewan, "Obiectum. Notes on the Invention of a Word," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 48 (1981): 37-96. As a rule, Scotus meant by "object" what terminates a power or an act as considered not in itself but with respect to its being related to that power or act.

an individual differentia.⁴² In reality, the common nature and the individual differentia cannot be separated. But when we are talking about what is grasped by our cognitive acts, the individual differentia is not part of the content of our acts.⁴³ Our cognitive acts only pick out the common nature, i.e. what in an individual is not repugnant to being replicated. The individual and the fact that this replicable feature is actually united to an individual differentia is not part of the content of our acts, according to Scotus. We may indeed know that the nature we are grasping is part of an individual. But this is a conclusion we reach by argument, not merely by focusing on the immediate content of our acts. Individuals are beyond the reach of our simple acts of grasping cognitive contents. To insist on the claim that our cognitive acts are directed at individuals would mean, for Scotus, to confuse the study of the objects of our cognitive acts with the study of what things are in themselves.

So we are left with Scotus's claim that all our cognitive acts are about common natures. Our cognitive acts do not grasp individuals. We stop at the most specific kind, the *species specialissima*, i.e. a nature that, no matter how specific, is still at least potentially replicable. For example, when I see a color and I taste some wine, what I see is a very specific hue of red and what I taste is a very specific sort of smoothness. But my sensory acts cannot reach the individual color and the individual smoothness. The object of my sensory acts is something replicable, no matter how specific. Similarly, when I think about my friend Mary, what I am actually thinking about is not Mary, but some features in Mary that in themselves are not repugnant to being found in other people, i.e. a common nature. Scotus explained that we can make our thoughts more and more specific in order to come as close as possible to individuals. So we add many qualifications to the concept of a specific nature. For example, to the specific

⁴² See for example *Ord.* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, n. 34 (Vat. III, 404).

⁴³ *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 13, n. 176 (OPh IV, 278): [...] *si intellectus 'separari' realiter sic quod non coniungatur intellecto in re, falsum est [...] si in quantum ad actum cognoscendi, sic in sensu [scil., ut in intellectu], quia haecitas non sentitur.*

concept of human being I may add several features taken from sensible qualities, such as a certain hair color, a certain sound of voice, and so on. These additions are very helpful to make our thoughts more focused, so to speak. I may have the concept of somebody who has long hair, a certain tone of voice, who is gentle, clever, etc. If I add the concept *individual* to my list, it seems that I can finally have some concept of an individual—even though I can never pin down a particular individual. But the result of this operation is a complex concept, i.e. a description. So our intellect is not able, in this life, to grasp a particular individual, and, more generally, it is not even able to grasp any individual—no matter which—except in a roundabout way by using a complex descriptive concept.⁴⁴ All our concepts of individuals are as a matter of fact descriptions of natures to which we append the concept *singular* or *individual*. But that what we are thinking of is an individual is not part of the content of our immediate act of perceiving it. Rather, it is a piece of information that we add to that, which we originally grasp. We can add this piece of information, it seems, only because we reason that if what we are thinking of is an extramental item, it must exist in an individual way. But this is an inference that we can draw only by committing ourselves to a certain metaphysical view about how things are in the world. When we take into account all this information and we add it to the simple grasp

⁴⁴ *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 15, n. 32 (OPh IV, 305-06): *Aliter exponitur quod in phantasia confusum est substantia cum accidentibus, vel multa accidentia mutuo se contrahentia. Intellectus intelligendo universale, abstrahit quodcumque illorum. Intelligendo tandem ut intelligat singulare, scilicet naturam quae est haec, non in quantum haec, sed cum accidentibus propriis huic, componit subiectum cum accidentibus. Et ita terminus a quo et ad quem reflexionis est confusum, et in medio est distinctum. Unde dicitur quod non tantum sunt aliqua secundae intentionis condiciones singularis exprimentia, ut 'singulare,' 'suppositum' etc., sed etiam aliqua primae intentionis, ut 'individuum,' 'unum numero,' 'incommunicabile,' etc. Natura igitur intelligitur determinata istis, et est conceptus non simpliciter simplex, ut ens, nec etiam simplex quiditativus, ut homo, sed tantum quasi per accidens, ut homo albus, licet non ita per accidens. Et iste est determinatio conceptus ad quem devenimus in vita ista. Nam ad nihil devenimus cui, de ratione sua in quantum a nobis concipitur, contradictorie repugnet alteri inesse. Et sine tali conceptu numquam concipitur singulare distincte.*

that we have of the common features that are the actual objects of our thoughts, we obtain a complex description. Apart from that common description, we do not have any cognitive grasp of individuals:

And in this way, when I think of Adam, I do not understand the singular, because if he were shown to me intellectually, I would not know that it was he himself, but I would have a concept composed of ‘man’ and ‘singular,’ which is some common of second intention. And it is also this sort of composed concept that I have when I think of any singular.”⁴⁵ (Trans. Etzkorn and Wolter, modified, II, 237)

As I have shown, Scotus drew this conclusion because of his commitment to the view that we cannot err with regard to the identity of the *per se* objects of our cognitive acts, as this view is encapsulated in what I called “Scotus’s principle.” Since we can and do make mistakes with regard to the identity of individual things, even when our cognitive powers are working perfectly, Scotus concluded that we do not have cognitive access to individual things, neither by sense nor by intellect. What we have access to are replicable features—common natures. Accordingly, Scotus had to posit common natures in reality if he wanted to maintain both the principle that we cannot err with regard to the identity of the *per se* objects of our cognitive acts and that our cognitive acts pick out real aspects of the world and not merely their phenomenological impressions left in us. And this is what Scotus did. One of the arguments in support of the mind-independent unity of natures is indeed based on an appeal to the object of the senses.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 13, n. 165 (OPh IV, 273): *Et sic, cum intelligo Adam, non intelligo singulare, quia si ipse intellectualiter mihi ostenderetur, nescirem quod ipse esset, sed intelligo conceptum compositum ex homine et singulari, quod est quoddam commune secundae intentionis. Tamen etiam conceptum compositum habeo, intelligendo quodcumque singulare.* English translation (slightly modified) from *Questions on the Metaphysics of Aristotle* by John Duns Scotus, II, 237.

⁴⁶ See above, n. 33.

III

What Scotus said so far applies to the objects of both sensory and intellectual acts. As we have seen, Scotus held that, in our present condition, neither sensory nor intellectual acts pick out individuals. But now we can ask: does this limitation pertain necessarily to the human cognitive apparatus? Or is it just a contingent limitation which eventually can be remedied?

When dealing with this issue, Scotus distinguished between the case of the intellect and the case of the senses. With regard to the intellect, Scotus argued that there is nothing in an individual that in principle cannot be grasped by the intellect. Admittedly, our intellect, under current conditions, does not have a cognitive grasp of individuals. But this depends neither on the nature of things nor on the nature of our intellect. Our current limitation is contingent, and will be removed in the blessed state.⁴⁷ When the human intellect is able to realize all its potentialities, it will grasp the individual differentia and distinguish in an infallible way between individuals of the same kind, no matter how similar they are to each other.⁴⁸ According to Scotus, it is uncertain whether our current limitation is a punishment for the Fall or merely a consequence of the necessity to harmonize our sensory and intellectual faculties. But Scotus was certain that the current limitation is due to our intellect's dependence on the senses in order to grasp its object. When such a limitation is removed, our intellect will be able to pick out individual things in the world, and not just itself and its own acts.⁴⁹

Things are different with respect to our senses and sensory acts. Scotus maintained that inability to grasp individual things is a necessary feature of the senses. The senses are constitutionally focused on natures. They are not fine-grained enough to pick out individuals. *Haecceitas non sentitur*, Scotus says—and this is not just a contingent fact.⁵⁰ No matter

⁴⁷ *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 15, nn. 19-30 (OPh IV, 300-05).

⁴⁸ See below, n. 51.

⁴⁹ *Ord.* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 3, n. 187 (Vat. III, 113-14).

⁵⁰ *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 13, n. 176 (OPh IV, 278).

how developed our senses may have been in the state of innocence, they still missed the individual differentia, probably because for Scotus the individual differentia does not have anything to do with matter.⁵¹ It is just because the intellect is currently united with the senses that we are currently unable to grasp individual things by intellectual acts:

[...] this inability to cognize individuals does not pertain to us because it is repugnant to our intellect,—for in Heaven we will cognize individuals under their own proper aspects (such as ourselves and God as He is in Himself) by way of the same intellect that we currently have. Otherwise, we would not be blessed. But in the current situation, our intellect cognizes only what can generate an image, because it is immediately changed only by an image or what can be imagined. An individual entity, however, is not that on account of which an image can be generated; only a nature—which precedes that individual entity—is such a thing. For that individual entity cannot by its own nature move any cognitive power apart from the intellect; and it is due to the intellect's connection to imagination that now the individual entity cannot move our intellect. In Heaven, however, there will be no such connection. Therefore there, when we are blessed, this thing as this very thing will be understood as it is in itself. (My translation)⁵²

⁵¹ *Ord.* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 5-6, nn. 129-141 (Vat. VII, 458-63); *Lect.* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 5 (Vat. XVIII, 268-73).

⁵² *Ord.* III, d. 14, q. 4, n. 123 (Vat. IX, 473-74): [...] *ista negatio cognitionis singularium non inest nobis quia repugnat intellectui nostro,—conoscemus enim singularia sub propriis rationibus, in patria, sub eodem intellectu sub quo modo sumus (ut Deum sicuti est in se et nos ipsos), aliter nos non essemus beati; sed pro statu isto intellectus noster nihil cognoscit nisi quod potest gignere phantasma, quia non immutatur immediate nisi a phantasmate vel phantasiabili. Entitas autem singularis non est propria ratio gignendi phantasma, sed tantum entitas naturae praecedens illam entitatem singularem: illa enim entitas singularis non esset nata immediate movere aliquam potentiam cognitivam nisi intellectum; et quod nostrum nunc non moveat, est propter connexionem eius ad phantasiam. In*

Thus, Scotus came to hold the reverse of the standard Aristotelian position that sense is of the singular while intellect is of the universal. In the current situation, neither the senses nor the intellect grasp individual things—with the sole exception of our intellectual grasp of our own soul and of its acts as individuals. But whereas it is impossible for our sensory acts to ever reach individual things, our intellectual acts can and will be about individual things. That currently they are not is due to the intellect's contingent dependence on sense and imagination in order to reach its objects.

All the same, we may suspect that even in the current situation some acquaintance with individuals is required. Consider contingent judgments. I judge that the wine I am drinking is good. I judge that Mary is my friend. Or consider our desires and volitions—they do seem to be directed at individual things; accordingly, they also seem to require some knowledge of individuals.

Scotus had a solution. He did maintain that we do not have cognitive access to individuals in this life. We only know natures, i.e. what in an individual is not repugnant to being replicated. Similarly, it seems, our desires, decisions and cognitive acts are all directed at natures, not at individuals. This is the price that Scotus had to pay in order to maintain his commitment to the view that we cannot err with regard to the identity of the *per se* objects of cognition. All the same, Scotus contended that, even though we do not have cognition of individuals, we do grasp things as existing and pres-

patria autem non erit talis connexio; et ideo cum erimus beati, hoc ut hoc intelligeretur sicut est in se. Cf. Lect. III, n. 158: Sed tamen modo de facto intellectus noster non movetur ab illa singularitate, quia de facto intellectus noster non intelligit nisi quod potest phantasiari. Quae autem sit causa huius connexionis intellectus nostri modo cum phantasia, quod modo nihil possit intelligere nisi per conversionem ad phantasmata, dubium est,—et de hoc dictum est in I libro. Sicut autem illa singularitas qua natura est 'haec', non est nata movere sensum vel phantasiam, quia solum 'natura quae est in pluribus' movet sensum et phantasiam, quae praecedit istam singularitatem, quia illud est primum obiectum visus et non illa singularitas, sicut dictum est in II libro; unde illa singularitas non est ratio movendi phantasiam,—et ideo nec intellectum nostrum pro statu isto; sed tamen movebit per se quando intellectus noster non impediatur.

ent. And it is this kind of access to things—as opposed to access to individual things—that we currently need in order to form contingent judgments. Specifically, Scotus held that our acts of sensing are always of something as existing—even though this something is a replicable feature. When I taste the smoothness of the wine I am drinking, I do not grasp this particular smoothness, but I do grasp some smoothness as present and existing. In this respect, sensing is different from imagining. Both sensation and imagination are of replicable features. But I can imagine something even when that thing does not exist and is not present to my sensory faculty. By contrast, all sensory acts grasp things as existing and present to the sensory faculty.⁵³ This is what Scotus called “intuitive cognition,” i.e. cognition of something existent and present as existent. Intuitive cognition is directed at the individual only if by “individual” we mean, in a somewhat improper way, something existent—what Aristotle calls *simul totum*.⁵⁴ All our sensory acts are acts of intuitive cognition. It is more controversial whether Scotus admitted of intuitive *intellective* cognition in this life. It seems that he finally did,

⁵³ *Quaest. super Metaph.*, II, q. 2-3, n. 80 (OPh III, 224): *Notandum quod in sensu est una cognitio intuitiva, primo propria; alia primo et per se propria per speciem, sed non intuitiva [...] Exemplum de primo: visus videt colorem. De secundo: phantasia imaginatur colorem.* See also *ibid.*, n. 109 (OPh III, 230-31); *Quodl.*, q. 13, n. 8 (Vivès XXV, 321): *Aliqua ergo cognitio est per se existentis, sicut quae attingit obiectum in sua propria existentia actuali. Exemplum de visione coloris, et communiter in sensatione sensus exterioris. Aliqua etiam est cognitio obiecti, non ut existentis in se, sed vel obiectum non existit, vel saltem illa cognitio non est eius, ut actualiter existentis. Exemplum, imaginatio coloris, quia contingit imaginari rem, quando non existit, sicut quando existit.*

⁵⁴ *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 15, n. 36 (OPh IV, 307): *Sed quomodo est sensus singularis determinate magis quam intellectus?—Reponsio: sensus ‘simul totius’ est, et ideo actus sensus non est abstractivus ab existentia; intellectio autem abstrahitur.* The distinction between the two meanings of “singular,” i.e. as something existing and as something individual, had already been drawn by Vital du Four. See Delorme, “Le cardinal du Four,” 163-64; Lynch, *The Theory of Knowledge*, 39. Scotus’s passages on intuitive cognition are collected in Day, *Intuitive Cognition*; Bérubé, *La connaissance*, 178-202.

as intellective acts of intuitive cognition are required in order to account for our capacity to make contingent judgments.⁵⁵

So the perception that something exists at the present time is part of the content of a specific class of cognitive acts, i.e. acts of intuitive cognition. But Scotus also seemed to think that our intellect, in this life, can grasp something as existing and present to itself only by relying on some information coming from the senses.⁵⁶ For example, when I think of my friend Mary not just in abstract but as existing at the present time, i.e. when her existence is part of what I am thinking about, as when I make the judgment "Mary is intelligent," I have to supplement the object of my thought with some information coming from the senses, e.g. from seeing the color of her hair and listening to the sound of her voice. So the sense does prevent our intellect from grasping individual things in this life, but it also provides us with an extremely important access to something as existent.

Thus, according to my interpretation, Scotus distinguished between intuitive cognition and cognition of individuals, and this distinction plays an important role in his thought. Whereas we do not currently have cognition of individuals, we do have intuitive cognition, at least at the sensory level and probably also at the intellectual level, thanks to some help coming from the senses. Some interpreters have indeed maintained that Scotus's intuitive cognition is cognition of individuals.⁵⁷ But this does not seem to be the case. Scotus explicitly claimed that sensory acts are instances of intuitive cognition, but he also argued, as we have seen, that sensory acts are about natures, not individuals. So it must be possible to have intuitive cognition of natures, at least at the sensory level.⁵⁸ What is more, Scotus explicitly claimed

⁵⁵ See *Ord.* III, d. 14, q. 3, n. 113 (Vat. IX, 46869); *Lect.* III, d. 14, q. 3, nn. 145-146 (Vat. XX, 351). Scotus denied that we have intellective intuitive cognition in this life in *Quaest. super Metaph.*, II, q. 2-3, n. 81 (OPH III, 225).

⁵⁶ See *Ord.* III, d. 14, q. 3, n. 17 (Vat. IX, 470).

⁵⁷ See Day, *Intuitive Cognition*, 114-23; King, "Thinking about Things."

⁵⁸ Scotus also distinguished between individuality and existence and claimed that intuitive cognition is of a nature as existing but not of a na-

that both abstractive and intuitive cognition can be *either* of individuals *or* of natures:

[...] cognition is twofold, namely abstractive and intuitive [...],—and by way of both cognitions it is possible to cognize both the nature as it is prior to individuality and the nature as it is this [particular nature].⁵⁹
(My translation)

So my acts of seeing and tasting are not directed at this particular white and this particular smoothness, respectively. They are about common natures grasped as existing, i.e. a certain hue of white and a certain sort of smoothness as present to my senses. Of course, that hue of white and that sort of smoothness do exist in individuals. They do not exist in the world just as natures. Also, we do know that such a nature is united with a certain individual differentia. But this is not what is directly perceived in my acts of cognition—not even of my acts of intuitive cognition. That such a nature is united to an individual differentia is not a piece of information that we can get from the mere analysis of the content of our cognitive acts of grasping simple contents. Rather, it is the conclusion of a metaphysical argument.⁶⁰

As a consequence, we are currently in a somewhat lamentable situation of not being able to sense or think of individuals—apart from our soul and the acts of our soul. But we are able to sense and think of extramental natures as existing. And this seems to be what really matters. I may regret that in the current situation I cannot have a cognitive grasp of my friend Mary as an individual, as I may be mistaken in all my acts of identifying Mary and as a consequence all my thoughts about her are actually about some replicable fea-

ture as individual, at least in this life. See *Quaest. super Metaph.*, VII, q. 15, nn. 25-28.

⁵⁹ *Ord.* III, d. 14, q. 3, n. 107 (Vat. IX, 465): [...] *duplex est cognitio, scilicet abstractiva et intuitiva [...],—et utraque cognitione potest cognosci tam natura ut ‘prior est singularitate’ quam natura ut ‘haec’*.

⁶⁰ These are the arguments that Scotus provides in *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, nn. 7-40 (Vat. VII, 394-408) and *Lect.* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, nn. 8-36 (Vat. XVIII, 231-39).

tures present in my friend Mary, not about Mary as this individual or even as an individual at all. I may indeed conclude that Mary must be an individual, since she exists and I know that, if something exists, it must be constituted of a nature and an individual differentia. But this is not part of what I directly perceive in my act of thinking of Mary. Rather, it is the result of an inference. All the same, what matters is that the nature I am thinking about does exist and that I am able to grasp that nature as existing. If that nature turns out not to be Mary at all is something that, ultimately, does not seem to make any difference to me. As a matter of fact, it cannot make any difference, as I am not in a position to find it out. Only in the next life will my cognitive acts be about individuals. Before that moment, I can find some comfort in the fact that the object of my thought is real and exists, even though her individuality escapes me.

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