

# More Aristotelian than Aristotle. Duns Scotus on Cognizing Singulars

Lukáš Novák —

Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague

Faculty of Theology, University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice

lukas.novak@skaut.org

## 1. Two metaphilosophical mindsets

Sense (or sensory) perception has been contrasted against rational cognition since the beginnings of philosophy – one might even be inclined to believe that such a distinction is necessarily woven into the very notion of philosophy as a *rational* attempt to get beyond *appearances* to the heart of reality. This almost inevitable association of reason, the νοῦς or λόγος, with that which truly is, τὸ ἐόν – whereas, on the other hand, mere appearances are the object of the senses – can be found as early as in Parmenides. Although the ancient and modern interpretations of his fragmentarily preserved poem known as *On Nature* vary considerably,<sup>1</sup> especially as regards the degree of reality or unreality of the world of plurality and change described in the mostly non-extant cosmological part of the poem, they agree in viewing Parmenides as distinguishing between the realm of rational cognition and that of ordinary experience, of which the former is clearly regarded, in some sense or other, as superior or more real. The strong association of intellectual knowledge with genuine reality in Parmenides can be documented by one of his most famous sayings, “τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστὶν τε καὶ εἶναι” – literally, “it is indeed the same, to think and to be”. However, at this early point of instruction it is hardly to be expected that Parmenides’s goddess would preach to him some kind of obscure idealistic monism or panpsychism that would seek simply to ontologically identify being, εἶναι, and thinking, νοεῖν. Rather, the phrase might be taken (and is often so translated) as saying something like

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g. Palmer, J., Parmenides. In: Zalta, Edward N. (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016 Edition). [retrieved 12 March 2017] At <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/parmenides/>; or Matson, W. I., Zeno Moves. In: Preuss, A. (ed.), *Before Plato. Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy VI*. Albany, State University of New York Press 2001, pp. 87–108.

“thinking and being have the same scope”, or “the thinkable is the same as the real”.

Through these ideas, Parmenides can be seen as a representative, if not the father, of one especially strong metaphilosophical conviction which I will call *metaphilosophical Platonism*, a conviction that has thenceforward been part and parcel of what one might call “philosophical consciousness”, or maybe even “philosophical conscience”. It can be expressed with a simple maxim: never believe appearances, they can fool you; use your rational faculty to find out the true matter of fact. This maxim is the source of all “critical” philosophy, which likes to distance itself from the naïveté of the common, unphilosophical man;<sup>2</sup> the source of all philosophical revisionism, of all philosophers’ attempts to “correct” the alleged errors of common sense, etc. And quite often this metaphilosophical stance is, by its adherents, even regarded as the *only* truly philosophical stance.

I call this metaphilosophical paradigm of thought *Platonic* for the obvious reason that Plato seems to have been its most distinguished and influential proponent (albeit in a clear debt to Parmenides). Just recall the distinction between δόξα and ἐπιστήμη, corresponding to the distinct ontological levels of *genuine being*, or the realm of Forms accessible to reason, on the one hand and, on the other hand, the unstable, ever-changing world of that which merely partakes in being but never truly is – the realm of material things subject to sensory experience. Moreover, in Plato we find, for the first time, these two realms unambiguously associated with *universality* and *singularity* respectively: the Forms, the objects of λόγος, are universal, whereas the material things perceived by the senses are singular. Whitehead was right that in a certain sense the European philosophical tradition consists of a series of footnotes to Plato; and for that reason it is difficult for us, Plato’s heirs, to perceive the non-obviousness of the Platonic identification of the rational with the universal on the one hand, and of the sensory with the individual on the other. It is one of the purposes of this paper to help to regain a sense for the non-self-evidence – which is not to say falsity – of this view.

It is easy to see the motivation for general metaphilosophical Platonism: it can be seen as a natural response to the philosopher’s experience with error. Philosophy was born as a conscious and systematic quest for truth; but our bitter experience is that the success of such an undertaking is by no means granted. A philosopher is susceptible to error, and as soon as he becomes

---

2 Cf. Plato’s use of “οἱ πολλοί” in *Crito* (Plato, *Crito* 44c–d. Ed. I. Burnet. In: *Platonis Opera*, t. 1. Oxford 1900), and other passages denigrating the common view – like Plato, *Respublica* VII, 516e–517a. Ed. I. Burnet. In: *Platonis Opera*, t. 4. Oxford 1904; or Plato, *Phaedrus* 249c–e. Ed. I. Burnet. In: *Platonis Opera*, t. 2. Oxford 1902; recall the very term “naïve realism” etc.

aware of this condition (which, in a true philosopher, cannot take very long), he is motivated to search for the roots of all error and un-truth, so that he may avoid it. And given that philosophy is, by definition, a *rational* undertaking, he rarely ventures to identify *rationality* as the root of all error – or else philosophy would have to be given up as being futile. So, having made up his mind that rationality is, of its nature, truthful, i.e., reality-revealing, the philosopher naturally assigns deception to the other part of our cognitive make-up – the senses. This is, more or less, the traditional interpretation of the Parmenidean-Platonic mindset.

But Plato was not a mere developer and sophisticator of this basic Parmenidean pattern of thought, characterized by this unwavering confidence in rationality. As it happened, the unsophisticated Parmenidean approach in fact spawned the first serious crisis of rationality in the history of philosophy. In the thought of Parmenides, and even more so in Melissus and Zeno, the purportedly truthful, reality-revealing rationality strayed so far from what we might call the “common sense”, and, indeed, the common sensory experience, that the claim of such a λόγος to credence suddenly started to look quite absurd. In this situation, the sophists, differing so little in their means of argumentation from the method of Zeno, rejected the objective, reality-revealing valency of rationality and presented an entirely different interpretation of its nature and purpose. The philosophical project of Socrates and his pupil Plato was, in the first place, a *defence* of rationality as a means of access to objective reality; and such a defence, in the situation given, had to, at least to a certain extent, amount to a rehabilitation of rationality *as compatible with common sense*.

In other words: Plato’s epistemology and metaphysics *are* revisionist, but not *radically* revisionist. Plato is critical of “common sense”, the level of δόξα, but he does not reject it as worthless. He does not dismiss the realm of sensory experience as thoroughly unreal: he merely claims that it is not the *ultimate* reality, but a mere likeness or shadow of it, which has the capability to point back to its paradigm.

This “vindicative” aspect of Platonism or Socrateism became one of the most important sources of inspiration for Aristotle. What Aristotle learnt from Plato was first and foremost his anti-misology,<sup>3</sup> his insistence on the capability of human reason to reach out to objective reality. But he disagreed with Plato’s view of what true objective reality was. The ultimate reason for that seems to have been that Aristotle did not share Plato’s metaphilosophy. He was not a metaphilosophical Platonist at all; rather, a contrary mindset found in him the first pronounced exemplification in the history of philos-

---

3 Cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 89c–90e. Ed. I. Burnet. In: *Platonis Opera*, t. 1., op. cit.

ophy – let me call it *metaphilosophical Aristotelianism*. While the driving principle of “Platonic” philosophies is distrust of everything pre-philosophical, superficially obvious or “matter of course”, for the “Aristotelian” approach to philosophy the common-sense, pre-philosophical understanding of reality is the best starting point and a permanent corrective of any deeper philosophical enquiry.

The distinction I am making here is similar to the one proposed by P. F. Strawson in his famous essay *Individuals*, where he distinguishes between *descriptive* and *revisionary* metaphysics.<sup>4</sup> However, for Strawson, metaphysics is not concerned with anything beyond our *conceptual scheme*: and it is descriptive or revisionist to the extent that it (a) either merely describes it, or (b) attempts to change it. But at least until Kant, metaphysics can hardly be said to relate to conceptual schemes. Both Plato and Aristotle were concerned about *reality* in the first place, and so both were prepared to revise their conceptual representations of it. Thus, the distinction between metaphilosophical Platonism and metaphilosophical Aristotelianism does not consist in the Platonist’s determination to replace our current conceptual scheme with a better one and in the Aristotelian’s aim to merely describe it. Rather, it consists in a different assessment of the cognitive value of common sense, measured by its capability to reveal the nature of reality *an sich*. The Aristotelian’s determination is, just like that of the Platonist, to unveil the hidden nature of things; but, unlike the Platonist, the Aristotelian regards pre-philosophical preconceptions about that hidden nature as very relevant for the quest for a correct account.

I suggest that Aristotle did not regard Plato’s defence of the capabilities of human rationality as successful for these metaphilosophical reasons. Plato, after Parmenides, shaped his account of what true reality is according to his understanding of what rationality is. Aristotle objected that what true reality is is pre-philosophically given: it is the world of material individual things, subject to change, which we are all acquainted with. A philosopher may well be able to unveil deeper and perhaps more fundamental levels of reality, but he is in no position to legislate *a priori* that what is given as reality to us is not in fact truly real.

Aristotle’s subscription to the Socratean and Platonic project of rehabilitating human rationality thus assumed a quite un-Platonic shape. And Aristotle did not stop at that, but extrapolated this principle to cover not just human reason, but also the senses – *both* reason *and* the senses, according to

---

4 Strawson, P. F., *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. London, Methuen 1959, p. 9: *Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure.*

Aristotle, relate to genuine reality. On the other hand, despite this profound difference, Aristotle did not abandon the principles of his teacher altogether. Most significantly, he did not abandon the notion that a certain duality of objects corresponds to the duality of reason vs. senses. Aristotle's relation to Plato is often described by the metaphor of Aristotle taking Plato's ideas and immersing them in the particulars. This is quite right: Aristotle did not *identify* the world of ideas with the world of particulars: he just *immersed* the former in the latter. For him, it was still a matter of course that “the intellect relates to universals, whereas the senses relate to particulars”.<sup>5</sup> Although there is one single common reality (rather than the Platonic hierarchy of levels), the two cognitive faculties do not share the same object. Matter, which in Platonism seems to be responsible for the “non-ideality” and “less-than-reality” of material things, seems to play an analogical role in Aristotle: it individuates the forms, to the effect that when reason wants to grasp them according to their universal nature, it has to “pull them out” of the matter, perform the Aristotelian ἀφαίρεσις. That means that, for Aristotle, forms – the successors of Plato's ideas – can still be grasped by the intellect only insofar as they are (or become) separated from the realm of material particulars. It seems, therefore, that Aristotle's account is not free from certain inner tension: on the one hand, Aristotle set out to save reason's capacity to grasp what is truly real – which, according to him, are first and foremost material particulars. On the other hand, he ended up with a theory according to which reason can only grasp something insofar as it is *not* material and *not* particular. Apparently, the project had not been brought to completion.

The insufficiency of Aristotle's solution manifested itself in the Aristotelian tradition by the so-called “problem of universals”. There were various attempts to solve it, but it seems that until the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the aforementioned duality or division of labour between the intellect and the senses was seldom taken into question.<sup>6</sup> For example, it was still well and

5 Cf. Aristotelés, *Analytica posteriora* I, 31, 87b37–39. Ed. I. Bekker. In: *Aristotelis Opera*, t. 1. Berlin 1831: Αισθάνεσθαι μὲν γὰρ ἀνάγκη καθ' ἕκαστον, ἢ δ' ἐπιστήμη τὸ τὸ καθόλου γνωρίζειν ἔστιν. See also *Auctoritates Aristotelis*. Ed. J. Hamesse. In: Hamesse, J., *Les Auctoritates Aristotelis. Un florilège médiéval: Étude historique et édition critique*. Louvain, Publications universitaires–Paris, Béatrice-Nauwelaert 1974, p. 319: *Sensus est singularium, scientia vero universalium*.

6 For a standard account of the development of the views on intellectual cognition of individuals between 1225 and 1325 see Bérubé, C., *La connaissance de l'individuel au moyen âge*. Montréal–Paris, Presses de l'Université de Montréal–Presses universitaires de France 1964; for a clear and succinct overview see King, P., *Thinking About Things: Singular Thought in the Middle Ages*. In: Klima, G. (ed.), *Intentionality, Cognition, and Mental Representation in Medieval Philosophy*. New York, Fordham University Press 2015, pp. 104–121.

alive in Aquinas, as evinced by numerous passages,<sup>7</sup> and even in the Augustinian *Doctor sollemnis* Henry of Ghent.<sup>8</sup> In the rest of my paper I would like to explain how radically, despite appearances, Duns Scotus departs from this traditional conception, and then offer an interpretation of how this departure is to be understood in the context of the two rival metaphilosophical approaches described so far.

## 2. Duns Scotus on modes of intellecting singulars

Now the originality of Scotus does not consist simply in that he ascribed the capability to grasp singulars to the intellect. For one thing, Scotus was not the first to advocate the possibility of intellecting singulars – many of his immediate predecessors in the Franciscan line of thought, such as Peter John Olivi, Richard of Mediavilla or Vital du Four, did actually defend various incarnations of this position.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, many of these pre-Scotistic thinkers were arguably *more* radical in ascribing the capacity of individual cognition to the intellect than Scotus. Scotus's originality is of a more subtle kind.

Scotus did not regard the traditional maxim “*sensus est singularium, intellectus vero universalium*” as exactly wrong, but rather as misguided and confused – as will soon be made clear. And from a certain point of view, his position heads in exactly the opposite direction than that of the Old Franciscan masters: rather than grant the capability of grasping singularity

---

7 Cf. Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* II, 66, 3: *Sensus non est cognoscitivus nisi singularium: cognoscit enim omnis sensitiva potentia per species individuales, cum recipiat species rerum in organis corporalibus. Intellectus autem est cognoscitivus universalium, ut per experimentum patet. Differt igitur intellectus a sensu. Aquinas, Summa theologiae I, q. 86, a. 1, co.: [S]ingulari in rebus materialibus intellectus noster directe et primo cognoscere non potest. [...] Indirecte autem, et quasi per quandam reflexionem, potest cognoscere singulare, quia [...] etiam postquam species intelligibiles abstraxit, non potest secundum eas actu intelligere nisi convertendo se ad phantasmata, in quibus species intelligibiles intelligit [...]. Sic igitur ipsum universale per speciem intelligibilem directe intelligit; indirecte autem singularia, quorum sunt phantasmata. Et hoc modo format hanc propositionem, ‘Socrates est homo’. On “indirect intellection” of individuals in Aquinas cf. Bérubé, C., *La connaissance de l’individuel au moyen âge*, op. cit., p. 13: *L’Aquinat estime que cette connaissance universelle constitue, par son lien avec la connaissance sensible directe du singulier, une intellection indirecte. A notre avis, cette innovation dans la terminologie n’implique pas une doctrine essentiellement différente [viz. from the doctrine of non-intellection of the individual]. Elle marque seulement un déplacement d’accent [...] L’individualité reste opaque à l’intellect mais la nature de l’individu lui est transparente.**

8 Henricus Gandavensis, *Quodlibet* IV, q. 21, co.: *Directe ergo et per se intellectus noster non cognoscit nisi universale abstractum a singulari. Indirecte autem et quasi quadam reflexione[,] convertendo se ad phantasmata in quibus sunt formae[,] sub ratione singularis [cognoscit].*

9 See Bérubé, C., *La connaissance de l’individuel au moyen âge*, op. cit., pp. 92–133; for an overview in English of the positions of Roger Bacon and Olivi see Denery II, D. G., *Seeing and Being Seen in the Later Medieval World: Optics, Theology and Religious Life*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2005, pp. 120–124.

to the intellect, he denies it to the senses as well! Indeed, Scotus argues persuasively that the very singularity or individuality of things clearly is *not* perceived *whether* by the senses *or* by the intellect – or else we would be able to *perceive*, for example, which of two qualitatively perfectly similar objects is which.<sup>10</sup>

Third, I say that no cognitive faculty, be it intellectual or sensitive, can cognize particulars according to their proper singularity. For a faculty cognizing some object in such a proper aspect would be able to recognize and distinguish it from others, even if it disregarded all the other aspects. But if we keep just the proper singularities of two singular objects while removing all other aspects, we cannot distinguish them whether with our senses or with our intellect. An example: suppose two white things are presented to the sight, or two singular objects to the intellect, such that they are, as a matter of fact, essentially distinct, but have exactly similar accidents: the same place (like two bodies in the same place or two [superimposed] rays in a medium), exactly the same shape, size, colour, etc. In such a circumstance, neither the intellect nor the sense will be able to tell them apart.<sup>11</sup>

10 Scotus's *Quaestiones super secundum et tertium De anima* [abbrev. QDA], quoted below, were once regarded as spurious and so disregarded by authors like Bérubé and Honnefelder (cf. Honnefelder, L., *Ens inquantum ens: der Begriff des Seienden als solchen als Gegenstand der Metaphysik nach der Lehre des Johannes Duns Scotus*. Münster, Aschendorff 1979, p. 229, note 246). The editors of the recent critical edition, however, argue convincingly that doubts about the authenticity of this work are unsubstantiated. The authenticity has been further confirmed by the (so far unpublished) research of the editors of Scotus's *Reportatio*, as reported by Cross, Richard, *Duns Scotus's Theory of Cognition*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2014, p. 2, note 1, on the basis of personal communication by Stephen Dumont (Dumont also claims that their research points to a rather late dating of the QDA, viz. as late as 1298–1299, which would make them roughly contemporary with the *Lectura* (the editors suggest a dating to early 1290s, see OPh V: 143\*). Unlike many earlier interpreters (listed in Honnefelder, *ibid.*), I think (and I hope this paper will show why) that there is no serious inconsistency between the QDA and the “canonical” works of Scotus on the present topic, especially the *Quaestiones super libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis* [abbrev. QM]. I will therefore use this work freely (as Cross did in his book). Cf. note 53.

11 QDA q. 22, n. 26–27 (OPh V: 233–234): *Tertio, dico quod nulla potentia nostra, nec intellectiva nec sensitiva, potest cognoscere singulare sub propria ratione singularitatis. Quia potentia cognoscens aliquod obiectum sub propria ratione potest ipsum cognoscere et ab aliis distinguere, circumscripto quocumque alio non habente illam rationem; sed manente propria ratione singularitatis, amotis aliis, non possumus distinguere inter duo singularia, nec per sensum nec per intellectum; igitur etc. [...] Exemplum: si ponantur visui duo alba vel intellectui duo singularia quaecumque quae in rei veritate essent distincta essentialiter, si tamen haberent omnino consimilia accidentia ut locum – utpote duo corpora in eodem loco vel duo radii in medio illorum – et haberent figuram omnino consimilem et magnitudinem et colorem et sic de aliis, nec intellectus nec sensus inter ea*



To paraphrase Scotus's example: Suppose you are acquainted with Peter and Paul who are identical twins. Can you *see* which one is which? Of course, you can tell them apart if there is some minimal qualitative difference – a freckle or so –, but this is a *universal* trait, not a *singular* one, indefinitely replicable at least in principle (you can well imagine *both* of the twins having *exactly similar* freckles). So Scotus concludes, surprisingly, that *neither* the senses *nor* the intellect is able to grasp the “*propria ratio singularitatis*” – i.e., this particular singularity as such, the unique individuating feature proper exclusively to *this* particular thing.

Scotus struggled to offer an adequate explanation of the fact. He never denied that individual differences are intelligible *in themselves*, arguing that individuality involves some perfection, an addition of some “entity” to the common nature, and that there is no entity without intelligibility.<sup>12</sup> (After all, God certainly *does* know singulars down to their unique singularities.) Several texts reflect his view that singularity, although intelligible in itself, is incapable of exerting an *assimilative action* on our cognitive faculties.<sup>13</sup> In a late interpolation to q. 15 of the *QM VII*,<sup>14</sup> Scotus nonetheless develops (in two corrective steps) a position according to which the problem is not on

---

distingueret. Cf. a parallel passage in Scotus's *QM VII*, q. 15, n. 20 f. (*OPH IV*: 301f). For a detailed analysis (criticised below) see Honnefelder, L., *Ens in quantum ens*, op. cit., pp. 241–252.

- 12 QDA, q. 22, n. 17 (*OPH V*: 231): *Singulare est a nobis intelligibile secundum se, quia intelligibilitas sequitur entitatem. Quod igitur secundum se non dimittit de ratione entis, nec intelligibilitatis; sed singulare secundum se non dimittit de ratione entis, immo est actu perfectum. QM VII, q. 15, n. 14 (OPH IV: 298): Intelligibilitas absolute sequitur entitatem [...] Singulare totam entitatem quidditativam superiorum includit, et ultra hoc, gradum ultimae actualitatis et unitatis [...], quae unitas non demittit, sed addit ad entitatem et unitatem, et ita ad intelligibilitatem.*
- 13 QDA, q. 22, n. 27 (*OPH V*: 235): *Cuius causa est principium agendi-assimilandi, quia agens intendit assimilare patiens sibi, et hoc specialiter est verum in cognitione quae fit per assimilationem; sed principium assimilandi non est singulare ut singulare, immo magis distinguendi (quia in singularitate [singularia] differunt), sed magis natura communis [est principium assimilandi] in qua singularia conveniunt; igitur singulare ut singulare non est principium agendi nec in sensu nec in intellectu. QM VII, q. 15, n. 22 (OPH IV: 302): Nulla potentia cognoscitiva in nobis cognoscit rem secundum absolutam suam cognoscibilitatem, in quantum scilicet est in se manifesta, sed solum in quantum est motiva potentiae. Quia cognitivae hic [in via] moventur ab obiectis; natura autem non movet secundum gradum singularitatis. Tum quia iste gradus non est principium actionis, sed limitativus principiorum actionis; tum [...] quia non est principium assimilandi, sed natura tantum, et idem est principium agendi et assimilandi. Cf. Ord. III, d. 14, q. 4, n. 123 (Vat. IX: 473–474): [I]sta negatio cognitionis singularium non inest nobis quia repugnat intellectui nostro, – conosceremus 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 patria autem non erit talis connexio; et ideo cum erimus beati, hoc ut hoc intelligeretur sicut est in se.*
- 14 *QM VII*, q. 15, n. 24–30 (*OPH IV*: 302–305).



the part of singularity at all, but purely on the part of the imperfection of our intellect.<sup>15</sup> But whatever the correct explanation of that fact may be, Scotus is adamant that the proper singularity of any given particular is hidden from us *in via*.

However, to say that we cannot grasp the proper *ratio* of singularity is not to say that we cannot grasp *singulars* qua such. Quite the opposite: Scotus insists that we not only can perceive singulars with our senses (which is quite unsurprising), but that we also can grasp them with our intellect – even in “this state”, affected by the disastrous effects of Original Sin.<sup>16</sup> By “grasping singulars” Scotus means at least three things:<sup>17</sup>

(1) We are capable of grasping one single thing and of distinguishing it from any other existing thing by means of what would nowadays be called a *definite description*: a combination of accidental features rich enough to pick up uniquely this particular thing.<sup>18</sup> This is the only way we can intellectually grasp a *determinate* individual, i.e., an individual qua distinct from any

15 QM VII, q. 15, n. 25 (OPH IV: 303): *Ideo dicitur corrigendo, quod omnis entitas actualis cuiuscumque rationis est ratio agendi in intellectum actione intelligibilis, quia sic actus et intelligibile convertuntur.* QM VII, q. 15, n. 28 (OPH IV: 304). *Et tunc corrigitur, quod omnis entitas actualis est ratio agendi immediate in intellectum, qui capax est.*

16 QDA, q. 22, n. 20 (OPH V: 232): *Secundo, dico quod singulare est a nobis intelligibile pro statu isto.* QM VII, q. 15, a. 1, n. 14 (OPH IV: 298).

17 In QDA, q. 22 Scotus treats the three alternatives described below twice: once accommodated to the assumption that no *species intelligibilis* is needed (n. 34–35, OPH V: 237), once assuming its existence (n. 36, OPH V: 237); in n. 37 he summarizes the two accounts as follows: *quod autem in tali ordine fiat cognitio intellectus patet per praedicta, quia scilicet ars et cognitio intellectualis imitatur naturam. Dictum autem est quod natura primo intendit individuum vagum; secundum naturam in ipso; tertium, individuum signatum, quod est terminus generationis; igitur talis erit modus intelligendi, sive species ponatur in intellectu sive non.* Cf. also note 23.

18 QDA, q. 22, n. 34–35 (OPH V: 236–237): [T]ertio, reflectendo considerationem naturae ad circumstantias signatas ad ipsam, per illas determinando individuum signatum, possumus intelligere utpote quia est hic et nunc et cum tali figura et magnitudine et colore et ceteris. Descriptio autem talis quam possumus habere in via de singulari, vel conceptus quicumque, non repugnat contradictorie [alteri] [...]. Dictus autem modus intelligendi singulare non est simplex, [...] sed compositus ex conceptibus multarum circumstantiarum universali conceptui additarum. Et hoc patet experimento: sicut enim res intelligimus, sic eas significamus et aliis exprimimus; sed conceptum singularis signati nullo modo exprimimus quam praedicto nec alios aliter scimus docere. I have changed the strained punctuation of the first sentence in the critical edition – as printed, it reads: *Tertio, reflectendo considerationem naturae ad circumstantias signatas ad ipsam (per illas determinando) individuum signatum possumus intelligere, utpote quia est hic et nunc et cum tali figura et magnitudine et colore et ceteris.* (The editors are apparently trying to force the explicit statement that *possumus intelligere individuum signatum* out of the text, but that is unnecessary, given the clear context.) Cf. QM VII, q. 15, n. 32 (OPH IV: 306): [N]on tantum sunt aliqua secundae intentionis condiciones singularis experimentia, 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*

other actual individual.<sup>19</sup> Still, such an “individual concept” applies merely *contingently* to a given individual, precisely because it inevitably fails to include in its comprehension the only feature that is *necessarily* proper to *this particular* individual: the individual difference or “proper singularity” (“*propria ratio singularitatis*”).

(2) We are capable of grasping a “*singulare vagum*”:<sup>20</sup> that is, we grasp something qua an individual of a certain nature (for example, “a man”), but an *unspecified* one. That is, in this way we grasp an individual qua *an* individual, but not qua *this* individual: we somehow succeed in grasping *a* singularity, but without being able to tell *which one*.<sup>21</sup>

(3) Significantly, under the header of “*modi intelligendi singulare*”<sup>22</sup> Scotus includes also the normal *universal* intellection of the (common) nature qua abstracted from the singularity.<sup>23</sup> We will return to the significance of this move below.

According to Scotus, these three ways of grasping individuals come in a certain order, which is different from that given above: we grasp the *singulare vagum* first (2), then we can abstract the common nature from it (3), and finally we may add some identifying descriptions to the concept so as

---

*conceptu numquam intelligimus singulare distincte.*” I have added the inverted commas around “ens”, “homo”, and “homo albus”.

19 As Cross (*Duns Scotus’s Theory of Cognition*, op. cit.), rightly points out in many places, this still does not amount to a *de re* cognition of the respective individual, i.e., to a cognition capable of distinguishing it from any other *possible* individual (as there are, presumably, infinitely many exactly similar possible individuals). Cross, however, seems to imply that this also precludes forming *de re* propositions (cf. *ibid.*, p. 46). I don’t see how that is the case: the fact that we cannot have *de re* knowledge of Peter that he is sitting (but merely *de dicto* knowledge that the particular satisfying just now the description associated with Peter is sitting) does not of itself preclude the possibility of our referring rigidly to whoever is satisfying the description just now and forming a *de re* proposition about that person. The impossibility of *epistemic de re* rapport with particulars does not seem to preclude the possibility of *semantic de re* rapport with them (viz. the Kripkean rigid reference).

20 The notion originates from Porphyry’s *Isagoge* and was later elaborated by Avicenna (and others), cf. Avicenna Latinus, *Liber primus naturalium: Tractatus primus de causis et principiis naturalium* 1. Ed. Riet, p. 12, l. 31 f. Scotus’s present exposition clearly echoes this Avicennian passage.

21 QDA, q. 22, n. 34 (OPh V: 236–237): [Si non ponimus speciem in intellectu sed tantum in phantasia,] [...] species in phantasia primo repraesentat singulare vagum in quod primo fertur cognitio intellectus (et hoc patet, quia aliquando primo intelligimus aliquod singulare, ignorando in qua specie est).” *Ibid.* n. 36 (OPh V: 238): “Si vero ponamus speciem in intellectu, [...] sic primo repraesentat naturam in supposito vago, quia illud se primo offert intellectui [...]” See also below note 53.

22 Cf. QDA, q. 22, n. 34 (OPh V: 234): Quarto dicendum, quoad modum intelligendi singulare...

23 *Ibid.*: [Species in phantasia, si non ponimus speciem in intellectu,] secundo repraesentat naturam absolute (quando scilicet intellectus fertur in naturam non considerando eius singularitatem [...])

to narrow it down to exactly one individual (1).<sup>24</sup> In other words: it is true that the intellect cannot grasp the essential individual difference as such and so has to emulate uniqueness of representation by means of an intersection of universals. On the other hand, the intellect is *not* prisoner to the realm of universals,<sup>25</sup> nor is its access to particulars merely secondary (like the Thomistic–Henrician *reflexio super phantasmata*<sup>26</sup>). Quite the other way around: the intellect is aware *from the very start* that it is cognizing *something singular* (despite the fact that it cannot focus on any particular singularity as such).<sup>27</sup> What is secondary is not its rapport with the particulars, but its *universal* knowledge – and even that is still understood as universal knowledge *of particulars*.

### 3. Is singular intellectual cognition necessarily intuitive?

I will return shortly to the significance of this point; but before I do, I have to address one aspect of Scotus's teaching on the intellection of singulars that has so far remained obscure: namely the relation of this teaching as presented in his questions on the *Metaphysics* and on the *De anima* to his notorious distinction between abstractive and intuitive cognition. In recent interpretations of Scotus's theory of intellecting singulars this distinction usually plays a crucial role: often the question of the possibility of *singular* intellectual cognition in Scotus is either identified with or reduced to that of the possibility of *intuitive* intellectual cognition.<sup>28</sup> But so far I have been able to reconstruct Scotus's defence of intellecting singulars *without* any

24 See note 17. Cf. QM VI, q. 1, n. 94 (OPh IV: 35–36): *Hic nota ordinem intellectus nostri in intelligendo: quomodo confusum sensibile primo intelligit et in eo impercepte [or 'imperfecte', according to ms. G and Wadding/Vivès] communissima; deinde illa communissima percipit et distincta notitiá; deinde particularia distincte.*

25 This is basically the thesis of Pini, G., Scotus on the Objects of Cognitive Acts. *Franciscan Studies* 66, 2008, pp. 281–315; see esp. p. 303: [I]t 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. A criticism of his position can be found in Cross, R., *Duns Scotus's Theory of Cognition*, op. cit., pp. 20–22; and a position similar to Cross is defended by King, P., *Thinking About Things*, op. cit., esp. p. 112. I agree with Cross and King; more on this below (cf. note 57).

26 See above notes 7 and 8.

27 Cf. QM VII, q. 15, n. 17 (OPh IV: 299): *Singulare [...] includit complete quidquid est intelligibilitatis in quocumque superiori. Non est ergo natum intelligi singulare ut pars inclusa in primo intellecto, sed tantum ut primum intellectum in quo alia quaecumque superiora per se intelliguntur.*

28 Cf. Bérubé, C., *La connaissance de l'individuel au moyen âge*, op. cit.; and Honnefelder, L., *Ens in quantum ens*, op. cit.; in Czech and Slovak also Sousedík, S., *Jan Duns Scotus: doctor subtilis a jeho českí žáci*. Praha, Vyšehrad 1989, esp. pp. 50–52; Chabada, M., *Ján Duns Scotus: vybrané kapitoly z jeho epistemológie a metafyziky*. Bratislava, Vydavateľstvo UK 2007, esp. pp. 36–39; Cross, R., *Duns Scotus's Theory of Cognition*, op. cit., p. 74 f., establishes the existence of abstractive intellection of singulars in Scotus.

recourse to, or defence of, intuitive intellectual cognition. That suggests that the presumed connection is in no way absolute.

Let me note first that the distinction between abstractive and intuitive cognition is consistently defined by Scotus in terms of abstraction from *existence* and *actual presence*,<sup>29</sup> never in terms of abstraction from *singularity*:

There is one kind of cognition that essentially relates to something existing, such that it grasps its object according to its proper actual existence. An example of this is the vision of a colour, or, in general, any perception by the external senses. And there is also another kind of cognition: that of an object not qua existing in itself, but either the object does not exist, or if it does, it is not cognized qua such. An example – imagining a colour: for it happens that we imagine something when it does not exist, just like when it does exist. And the same distinction can be demonstrated to hold for intellectual cognition.<sup>30</sup>

This quotation alone makes it clear that not all singular cognition – insofar as singular cognition is possible at all – is intuitive: since imagination (Scotus's recurrent example of abstractive cognition) is no less singular than sensation. Furthermore, Scotus *explicitly confirms* the possibility of singular but abstractive *intellectual* cognition:

There are two kinds of intellection: viz. quidditative intellection, the one that abstracts from existence, and the other that is called “vision” and concerns an existing thing qua such. And although the former usually concerns universals, it can primarily relate to something singular; and whenever it does, it takes the singular as its primary object. For a singular thing does not of necessity

---

29 I leave aside the “imperfect intuition”, sometimes mentioned by Scotus (cf. *Ord.* III, dist. 14, q. 3, n. 111 and 115 (Vat. IX: 467 and 469)), requiring a mere *past* or (even more confusingly) *future presence*. I take it that an imperfect intuition is not an intuition, just like an imperfect circle is not a circle. See Cross, R., *Duns Scotus's Theory of Cognition*, op. cit., p. 62; Bérubé, C., *La connaissance de l'individuel au moyen âge*, op. cit., p. 184.

30 *Quodl.* 13, n. 8 (Vivès XXV: 521): *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: ut imaginatio coloris, quia contingit imaginari rem quando non existit sicut quando existit. Consimilis distinctio probari potest in cognitione intellectiva.* For a reliable systematic treatment of intuitive cognition in Scotus see Cross, R., *Duns Scotus's Theory of Cognition*, op. cit., esp. 43–63. Scotus's most important texts are the following: *Quodl.* 6; *Quodl.* 7; *Quodl.* 13; *Quodl.* 14; and *Ord.* II, d. 3, p. 2, q. 2.

involve existence but is abstracted from it, just like a universal. The latter kind of intellection concerns “the whole all at once”, that is, the singular qua existing.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, since any intuitive cognition is “*simul totius*”, i.e., it grasps its object in its entirety and without abstracting from whatever belongs to it, it inevitably *somehow* includes its singularity as well as its common nature and existence. But from that it does not follow that intuitive cognition is the *only* way how to grasp something singular! And given Scotus’s often repeated principle that any cognitive perfection that belongs to a lower faculty (internal or external sense) must also belong to a higher faculty (the intellect),<sup>32</sup> it seems that if there is abstractive sensory cognition of singulars, *abstractive intellectual cognition of singulars must be also possible*, at least in principle.

If this implication is taken seriously, it may explain why the possibility of *singular* (as opposed to *intuitive*) intellection is defended *independently* of the assumption that there is intellectual intuition both in the *Questions on De anima* and in the *Questions on Metaphysics* (the only two extensive treatments of the possibility in Scotus’s oeuvre). In the exposition in the *QDA*, intuitive cognition is not even mentioned: it may well be that these questions actually *predate* Scotus’s adoption of this doctrine<sup>33</sup> – but then Scotus’s defence of the possibility of intellectual cognition of singulars (despite our acknowledged incapability of cognizing singularity as such *in statu viae*) also predates his theory of intuitive cognition, and so is in fact independent of it! The *QM* as originally written<sup>34</sup> do mention intuitive intellection, but only to argue that the singular is “*primo intelligibile*” in relation to *both* kinds of intellection, intuitive *and* abstractive;<sup>35</sup> and the final exposition of the way

31 QM VII, q. 15, n. 18 (OPH IV: 300): *De tertio, intellectio duplex: una quiditativa, quae abstrahit ab existentia; alia, quae dicitur uisio, quae est existentis ut existens. Prima, licet sit communiter respectu universalium, tamen potest esse primo respectu singularis. Et quodcumque est singularis, est eius primo. Non enim singulare ex se determinatur ad existentiam, sed abstrahit, sicut et uniuersale. Intellectio secunda est simul totius, id est, singularis in quantum existens.*

32 Cf. e.g. Quodl. 6, n. 8 (Vivès XXV: 243): [...] *omnis perfectio cognitionis absolute, quae potest competere potentiae cognitivae sensitivae, potest eminenter competere potentiae cognitivae intellectivae [...];* Ord. IV, q. 3, n. 137 (Vat. XIV: 181): [...] *perfectior et superior cognoscitiva in eodem cognoscit illud quod inferior [...]*

33 See note 10.

34 On the later interpolation (see note 42) where Scotus discusses intuitive intellection in some detail see below.

35 QM VII, q. 15, n. 13 and 18 (OPH IV: 289–300): *De primo articulo primo videndum est, quomodo singulare sit per se intelligibile. Secundo, quomodo est ‘primo intelligibile’. Tertio, quomodo dicitur sumptum sic ‘primum intelligibile’ respectu duplicis intellectionis. [...] Ad tertium, intellectio duplex [...]* (see note 30 for the continuation of the quotation).

in which we actually grasp singulars does not make any use of it, agreeing in general outlines with the “intuition-free” treatment of the *QDA*.<sup>36</sup> So it must be acknowledged that Scotus conceived, at least originally, his defence of the intellectual cognition of singulars *independently* of his theory of intellectual intuition.<sup>37</sup>

This is something that interpreters often misrepresent or conceal. Bérubé wants Scotus (in contrast to his Franciscan predecessors) to understand direct intellectual cognition of singulars as exclusively *intuitive*. Therefore, he must disregard the *QDA* as spurious, identifying their doctrine as an ill-advised amalgamation of Scotus’s genuine theory and that of Vital du Four.<sup>38</sup> He cannot set aside the *QM*, however, and so he relegates their treatment to a separate chapter in his book and presents it as defending a mere “indirect intellection” of singulars (“l’intellection indirecte Scotiste”) – an unsatisfactory step backward from the contemporary Franciscan “direct intellection” theories that needs to be supplemented with Scotus’s brilliant theory of intuition.<sup>39</sup> However, the term “indirect intellection” is Bérubé’s own: Scotus never uses it to describe his own position. Instead, he explicitly *rejects* the Thomistic–Henrician theory of the paradigmatically indirect *reflexio super phantasmata*<sup>40</sup> and in his own account insists that there are not only

36 Cf. above, notes 18–23.

37 King, P., *Thinking About Things*, op. cit., pp. 113–114, argues for the opposite (Scotus clearly intended *intellective intuitive cognition to be addressed to the issue of singular thought* [...], p. 113); but he claims that Scotus’s motivation was not *epistemological* (viz. to provide grounding for contingent truths) but *psychological* (viz. to explain how singular thought is possible at all); and he notes Duhem’s observation that Scotus was first moved to consider intellectual intuition in connection with his worries about the possibility of the Beatific Vision. My suggestion goes in the same direction as King’s but further: it seems to me that Scotus came to defend intellectual intuition for psychological reasons indeed, but not in order to explain the *singularity* of Beatific Vision (and other instances of intellectual intuition), but to explain its immediate, *face-to-face* character: that it is indeed a *vision* (*Quodl.*, q. 13, n. 8 (Vivès XXV: 521): [...] *alioquin posset aliquis esse beatus in obiecto, esto [...] ipsum non esset existens* [...]), i.e., the only kind of cognition that *acquaints* us with its object and so guarantees its actual *reality* for us. Cf. Cross, R., *Duns Scotus’s Theory of Cognition*, op. cit., pp. 45 and 47, citing *Ord.* IV, d. 45, n. q. 2, n. 65 (Vat. XIV: 157–158). In the context of late medieval Franciscan thought, the possibility of singular cognition was not a problem; it is evident that we have singular thoughts all the time. The possibility of *intellective vision*, however, is not evident at all: Scotus originally believed it to be impossible *in via* *QM* II, q. 2–3, n. 81 (OPh III: 225): [...] *in intellectu, notitia visionis vel intuitiva [...] non est possibilis in via* [...] – this is rejected in a later addition, *ibid.*, n. 111 f., p. 231 f.), and even late in his career still considered it to be “not as evidently experienced by us as abstractive cognition” (*Quodl.* 6, n. 8 (Vivès XXV: 243): [...] *quem tamen non ita certitudinaliter experimur in nobis* [...])

38 Bérubé, C., *La connaissance de l’individuel au moyen âge*, op. cit., p. 224.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

40 *QM* VII, q. 15, n. 31 (OPh IV: 305). Bérubé misunderstands Scotus as *endorsing* the view, which Scotus only briefly mentions as unsatisfactory. Scotus’s dissatisfaction with the Thomistic theory is evident from q. 14, where he discussed in detail but after listing a series of objections against it decided to abandon the question altogether and make a fresh start, resulting in the

*second intention* terms expressing singularity (like “singular” or “supposit”), but also *first intention* terms of such kind (“individual”, “numerically one”, “incommunicable”).<sup>41</sup> This is equivalent to acknowledging a *direct* intellection of singulars – still without any mention of *intuition* –, as first intentions apply *directly* to reality, whereas second intentions only apply directly to first intentions and as such represent a *reflexive* cognition that relates to reality merely *indirectly*.

Honnefelder’s strategy, even though he never criticizes Bérubé, is quite different: he presents the *QM* treatment as an answer to the “*Frage nach der intuitiven Erkenntnis des existenten Singulären*”<sup>42</sup> – i.e., takes it as explaining and defending *intuitive* intellectual cognition. But q. 15 of *QM VII* never asks such a question. The extended passage in which intuitive intellection is discussed is a later interpolation,<sup>43</sup> of which the purpose is to offer a better justification than originally given for Scotus’s thesis that singularity as such is incognoscible to us *in via*. For Scotus has grown dissatisfied with the premise from which he originally deduced this thesis – viz. the premise that singularity as such cannot act upon a cognitive power, because as such it does not function as a “principle of action”, but rather as a “limiting factor of a principle of action”.<sup>44</sup> Scotus objects to his younger self that if this argument were sound, it would make singular intellection impossible for any passive intellect, i.e. also for the angels – which cannot be admitted.<sup>45</sup> The ensuing discussion is an attempt to find such balanced principles that would

---

q. 15 (cf. the editors’ note 1 to q. 14, OPH IV: 281). A similar structure is found, in a simpler but more finished form, in the QDA, where too Scotus first states the Thomistic theory (n. 10–11, OPH V: 229–230), then rejects it (n. 12–16, OPH V: 230–231) and then presents his own solution to the question (n. 17f, OPH V: 231f). Bérubé, believing that Scotus endorses the *reflexio super phantasmata*, conflates it with Scotus’s genuine theory of descriptive cognition of the singular – cf. Bérubé, C., *La connaissance de l’individuel au moyen âge*, op. cit., p. 169: *Cette reflexio ad phantasmata est un acte par lequel l’intellect réunit, dans un concept unique, toutes les données de la connaissance sensible préalablement universalisées par l’intellect agent et exprimées par l’intellect possible en autant de concepts distincts. Ce est proprement [...] une determinatio rei singularis per conceptus universales.*

41 See note 18.

42 Honnefelder, L., *Ens in quantum ens*, op. cit., p. 241: “*Die Frage, was vom Gegenstand in seiner Existenz und Gegenwart im einzelnen intuitiv erkannt wird, ist damit noch nicht geklärt. Eine nähere [...] Antwort gibt Met VII q. 15 [...]*”

43 *QM VII*, q. 15, n. 24–30 (OPH IV: 302–305).

44 *QM VII*, q. 15, n. 22 (OPH IV: 302): [I]ste gradus [singularitatis] non est principium actionis, sed limitativus principiorum actionis. Cf. note 13.

45 *QM VII*, q. 15, n. 24 (OPH IV: 303): *Sed hoc, si esset verum, concluderet, quod angelus non intelligit singulare, ita quod singularitas sit modus intellecti, quia eius intellectus est passivus.* That means: an angelic intellect, just like ours (but, assumedly, unlike the divine intellect), cognizes by being acted upon by an object; therefore, if some object, albeit intelligible in itself, could not exert such an action, the angelic intellect could not cognize it.



still account for the unintelligibility of singularity for us humans *in via*, but without endangering its intelligibility for angels.

As for intuitive intellection, it is discussed in this context not as an “Antwort” to a “Frage”, but as an *undisputed fact* that needs to be taken into account in any exact delineation of the nature of the intelligibility/unintelligibility of singularity for us and for angels. Moreover, this fact is never played out as an immediate confirmation of singular intellectual cognition, as it perhaps might be expected. Quite the opposite: the *singularity* of intuition is being “bracketed” in the arguments, the focus being on its grasping the *existence* of its objects.<sup>46</sup> Even the long final paragraph of this interpolation,<sup>47</sup> rejecting any role of the active intellect in intellectual intuition, belongs to this context: viz. that of precisely delineating the possibility and requisites of immediate passive cognition for human and angelic intellects. And while it may be legitimate to mine a text for answers to questions the text never asks, in doing that one should not overlook the questions the text *does* ask and the answers it explicitly gives. In this case, one should not overlook

---

46 Most obviously in QM VII, q. 15, n. 27 (OPh IV: 303): *Contra: intellectus noster habet aliquam intellectionem, quae dicitur visio, quae potest esse naturae existentis sine visione singularitatis, sicut visus oculi videt. Ergo intellectus noster est immediate receptivus actionis a re; ergo a singulari.* Note well the structure of the reasoning: Scotus does not argue (nor does he want to argue here) that we have singular intellection because we have intuitive intellection. What the argument (an objection against a provisional conclusion) precisely needs to establish at this point is the intellect’s capability to be *immediately acted upon* by singulars. And this is not drawn as a trivial implication of the notion of intuitive cognition; the argument is constructed in a surprisingly complicated way: We have “intellectual vision”; that involves acquaintance with an existing nature, even if its *singularity* were, as such, not “seen”. Therefore, our intellect is capable of being immediately acted upon by a *thing* (because – this is an unstated premise – only an immediately acting object is required to actually exist at the moment of its action); and so (since everything that exists is singular – another unstated premise) the intended conclusion finally follows.

47 Honnefelder, L., *Ens in quantum ens*, op. cit., 246, note 291; quoting QM VII, q. 15, n. 30 (but from the Vivès ed.): *Ulterius, de intellectu agente potest dici quod non habet actionem circa [i]ntelligentiam, et ideo nulli obiecto coagit in intellectione visiva, quae est immediate in intelligentia [thus mss. CGKLM; intellectiva in OPh and Wadding/Vivès], non mediante specie in memoria: tunc enim non esset visio. Sed nec intellectus agens obiecto nato intelligi visive coagit ad speciem in memoria, quia illa fit ab illi mediante visione, et ita ab [i]ntelligentia, non ab intellectu agente. Itaque, cum omnis entitas, quae est actu in re, nata sit ab angelo videri, nulla requirit intellectum agentem. Nec in nobis natura quae nata est videri, et est actu in re, ut natura. Sed nec in nobis respectu singularis, quia si esset natum movere intellectum nostrum, esset ad visionem. Universale ut universale non est actu in re, et ita non est actu sub ratione talis intelligibilis nisi fiat in memoria, quia intelligentia praesupponit actu intelligibile; ergo non potest fieri in memoria ab intelligentia, sed tantum ab intellectu agente (non a re tantum, quia nec sic est indeterminata, nec nata est sola agere nisi in intelligentiam). Itaque in angelo et nobis tantum propter universale est intellectus agens.* I have slightly modified the punctuation and removed, as indicated by the brackets, the capricious capitalization of “intelligentia”. Clearly, all the occurrences of “intelligentia” in this passage just mean “the (passive) intellect” and not “an immaterial substance”. Honnefelder’s correct paraphrase (based on the uncapitalized Vivès ed.) reflects this.

that the text of *QM* VII, q. 15 asks how intellective cognition of singulars is possible, and its actual answer to this question does not mention intellectual intuition at all.<sup>48</sup>

I conclude that Scotus, at least originally,<sup>49</sup> defended the possibility of intellective cognition of singulars *without requiring it to be intuitive*. In other words, he admits for a *non-intuitive* intellection of singulars. How should one make sense of this position?

#### 4. A distinguished voice

Many distinguished Scotists believed that Scotus indeed defended some kind of genuinely individual direct abstractive intellection by means of some kind of individual intelligible species, and their judgement should not been taken lightly. So e.g. the Prince of Scotists, Bartolomeo Mastri (1602–1673), together with his unduly neglected co-author Bonaventura Belluto (1600–1676),<sup>50</sup> rejected intellectual intuition of extramental particulars *in via*,<sup>51</sup> but defend abstractive intellection of singulars.<sup>52</sup> In this connection, the Baroque Scotists offer a crucial insight (which they credit to the Paduan Scotist Antonius Trombetta, 1436–1517):

It is worth noting what Trombetta says [...], viz. that it is one thing to say that a singular is grasped according to its singularity so that singularity is the very aspect under which it is being grasped,

48 Honnefelder disposes of the relevant passage of q. 15 in a parenthetical remark in footnote 291 (p. 246), merely observing that “in the following section of the question Scotus talks about the indirect abstractive cognition of singulars” and refers the reader to Bérubé.

49 It may be that as the theory of intuitive intellection emerged and gained prominence in Scotus’s thought, it eventually came to “absorb” his older conception of abstractive singular intellection. Whether and how this happened is not my concern here.

50 B. Mastrii et B. Belluti *Philosophiae cursus integer ad mentem Scoti*, t. III, De anima, disp. 6, q. 7, n. 202f (Venetiis, Pezzana 1727: 175 f.); cf. the criticism by Bérubé, C., *La connaissance de l’individuel au moyen âge*, op. cit., p. 207 f.

51 *Ibid.*, n. 203, (1727: 175b): *Quoad cognitionem intuitivam dicendum est quod licet singulare materiale, et sensibile, quod nimirum subest accidentibus hic, et nunc quantitati, qualitati, etc. hoc genere cognitionis non attingitur ab intellectu nostro pro statu isto, absolutè tamen attingi potest, imò de facto attingitur ab intellectu angelico, et humano soluto.*

52 *Ibid.*, n. 203 (1727: 175b): *Quo autem ad cognitionem abstractivam dicendum est, singulare materiale, et sensibile non solum absolutè loquendo esse per se, et directe intelligibile, sed etiam à nobis pro statu isto proprio, ac directo conceptu attingi, ac proinde per propriam speciem, licet (non) ita propriam, ut illud repraesentet sub propria ratione singularitatis.* The word “non”, clearly required for sense, is missing in the two editions I consulted (1727 and 1671), but is present in Bérubé’s quote from the 1678 edition (p. 207, note 3) and argued to be necessary by Heider, D., *Universals in Second Scholasticism*, Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company 2014, p. 255, note 844. Heider provides a detailed analysis and a defence of Mastri and Belluto’s position.

and quite another thing is to say that singularity is the grasped object, or part of the grasped object. In the first way, singularity is not conceived by us, because to conceive it thus would mean to conceive it distinctly and separately from another singularity and from the nature or quiddity to which it belongs. In the other way, however, singularity is well conceived, and grasped by us, since whenever an object is conceived adequately, whatever is really and essentially included in it is secondarily and by consequence conceived as well. But the whole singular is thus grasped as the object of one intellection, and so the singularity in it will also be conceived – albeit not so that it should be the mode of the grasped object or the aspect under which it is being grasped.<sup>53</sup>

Mastri and Belluto are essentially saying that to deny that singularity is grasped by us *as such, distinctly*, i.e., so as to allow us to distinguish it from any other reality, be it a common nature or another singularity, is not yet to say that it is not grasped at all; let alone to deny that *singulars* are grasped! So even when conceding that singularity as such is unknowable to us *in via*, there remains plenty of conceptual space not only for cognizing the singular, but even for the cognition of a singular *qua singular* (though not *qua this singular*): the “*singulare vagum*” from the *QDA*.<sup>54</sup>

---

53 Mastri, *ibid.*, n. 215 (1727: 178a): *Notandum est ex Tromb. cit. ar. 2. quod aliud est singulare intelligi sub ratione singularitatis, sic quod singularitas sit ratio intelligendi, aliud est, quod singularitas dicatur esse objectum intellectum, aut pars objecti intellecti, primo modo singularitas non concipitur à nobis, quia sic concipere singularitatem est concipere {ipsam} {ipsam} distinctè, et seorsum ab alia singularitate, et à sua natura, seu quidditate: secundo modo singularitas bene concipitur, et intelligitur à nobis, quia quando aliquod unum objectum concipitur ad(a)equatè, quicquid realiter, et essentialiter includitur in illo, secundario, et ex consequenti concipitur, sed totum singulare sic intelligitur, tanquam objectum adaequatum unius intellectionis, ergo etiam concipitur singularitas in ipso, non tamen sic, quod sit modus objecti intellect{u}, aut ratio intelligendi [...]* (Typos corrected according to the 1671 edition.)

54 Mastri and Belluto agree with me in not perceiving any real inconsistency between the QDA and QM accounts of intellection of individuals but cite them as parallel sources of essentially the same doctrine: cf. e.g. *ibid.* (1727: 178a), n. 214 in the beginning or n. 215 in the end. It is to be acknowledged, however, as an anonymous reviewer pointed out, that the term *singulare vagum* is unique to the QDA, which might suggest that Scotus later rejected the notion and the associated doctrine. I don't think this is the case, however. The notion of *singulare* (or *individuum vagum*, originating in Porphyry's *Isagoge*, is a well-established part of scholastic logical semantics, and so unlikely to be entirely abandoned by a scholastic author (cf. Ashworth, J., *Medieval Theories of Singular Terms*. In: Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition). [Retrieved 28 September 2017] At <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/singular-terms-medieval/>). Rather, what seems to me to have happened is the following: in the QDA, which is a rather didactic, introductory-level work (cf. the editors' introduction, § 4.A (OPH V: 139\*), Scotus modelled his exposition according to the standard Porphyrian account of singular terms; whereas later, in the QM, he approached the matter in a

## 5. Conclusion

For my main purpose it is not necessary to dwell upon the thesis that Scotus recognized a kind of abstractive cognition of singulars *qua singulars*: for I want to claim that according to Scotus we *do cognize that which is singular* by means of abstractive rational cognition, *whether that cognition be singular or universal*. Consider this potentially surprising passage, answering the question whether a universal is something in reality:

Regarding the second horn of the question, viz. whether it [the universal] is in reality, I respond: to be in the intellect in the first or second way means nothing else but to have a relation of reason to the intellect. But that which is in reality does indeed have such a relation; therefore that which is universal is in reality.<sup>55</sup>

At first sight (and without the context), this passage might be understood as making a kind of ultra-realist claim that universals do, as such, actually exist in reality. However, it would be a mistake to read Scotus in this way. This passage follows after Scotus's sophisticated analysis of the process of abstraction, where he makes it clear that, as Averroes had said, it is the abstracting intellect which "produces universality within things".<sup>56</sup> According to Scotus, anything that really exists or can exist is *singular*; there are no universals in reality.<sup>57</sup> So how can Scotus suddenly proclaim that *that which is universal is in reality*?

The answer is very simple, and it is the point of Scotus's understanding of the relation between the universal and the individual. According to Scotus, universals and particulars are not two different kinds of objects (whether separated or immersed in each other) – unlike Plato, and, I should say, unlike Aristotle, Aquinas, and many others. The particulars are the *only* objects that there are, and they have no universal parts, principles or ingredients.<sup>58</sup> So whenever we cognize something real, we just cognize one or more particu-

---

more independent and speculative way, elaborating essentially the same doctrine but not feeling the need now to connect it explicitly to the schoolish Porphyrian terminology.

55 QM VII, q. 18, n. 58 (OPh IV: 354): *Quoad secundum membrum quaestionis, scilicet an sit in re, responsio: esse in intellectu primo modo vel secundo non est nisi habere relationem rationis ad intellectum. Illud autem, quod est in re, bene habet istam relationem; ergo illud quod est universale, est in re.*

56 Cf. QM VII, q. 18, n. 26 and 46 (OPh IV: 344 and 350).

57 QM VII, q. 15, n. 30 (OPh IV: 304–305); cf. Honnefelder, L., *Ens in quantum ens*, op. cit., p. 246, note 291.

58 The common nature, of course, is not universal in reality (although the selfsame common nature that is universal in thought is also out there in reality, individualized).

lars. But – and this is the fundamental insight –, we have the capability to grasp these particulars without at the same time grasping their particularity. Inasmuch as we do so, we are said to conceive a universal – but still, this conceived universal is nothing else but the selfsame particular existing in reality, conceived in a certain special, selective way. Universals are not a special sort of objects: they are particulars conceived in a special way.<sup>59</sup>

So, for Scotus, there is just one single realm of cognizable objects: the realm of things that do or can really exist – and all these things are individual. All our cognitive faculties relate to this single realm of objects (or, in case of the senses, to some of its sub-classes), but they do so in different ways.<sup>60</sup>

Notice how this approach differs from that of Aristotle or Aquinas: these “traditional” thinkers start with the old Platonic notion that there are two kinds of objects – universals and particulars – correlated with the two kinds of cognitive faculties – the intellect and the senses –, and then go on to solve, successfully or not, the associated problems, such as:

- How is the realm of universals connected with, or “immersed in”, that of the particulars?
- How can the intellect ever transcend the realm of universals proper to it and think of individuals – which it obviously does?

and so on.<sup>61</sup> And notice further how Scotus completely divorced his account of abstraction from the Aristotelian talk about forms being “pulled out of the

59 This is the ultimate reason why Bérubé’s (and Honnefelder’s, see note 47) labelling Scotus’s theory of non-intuitive intellective cognition of particulars through universals as “indirect” is misguided. For Scotus, when particulars are grasped by means of universals, they are grasped by means of *themselves*, i.e., *directly*, not indirectly as if through something else! And this is also the reason why Pini’s conclusion that according to Scotus we “do not grasp individuals at all”, given that the object of our cognitive acts is always the common nature, is out of place: even if Pini were right (and Mastri wrong) that singularity is never “part of the content of our cognitive acts” according to Scotus (Pini, Scotus on the Objects of Cognitive Acts, *op. cit.*, p. 282), it would not follow that *individuals* are not the objects of these acts. Scotus’s common natures are really identical with individuals, and so by conceiving common natures we *eo ipso* do conceive individuals.

60 Note that this radical change of perspective in Scotus is not immediately related to Scotus’s position on the realism–nominalism scale. The fact that for Scotus there is just one single type of cognizable objects, viz. the particulars, does not make him more (or less, for that matter) nominalist than, say, Aristotle or Aquinas. Scotus’s approach *does*, of course, set the stage for Ockham’s nominalism, but is, of itself, fully consistent with Scotus’s own strong realism involving formal distinctions, less-than-numerical unity of common natures, and so on. It is more a change in how the entire realism–nominalism scale is conceived than a shift along that scale.

61 Again, ascribing this kind of Platonic dualism with respect to universals and particulars to Aristotle and Aquinas is not to ascribe Platonic realism of universals to them. Aquinas, e.g., despite being a dualist in the described sense, is actually *less* realist than Scotus, at least according to the common wisdom. It might perhaps be argued that, ultimately, there is a certain tension between this Aquinas’s dualism and his anti-Platonism in the problem of universals (indeed,

matter". Scotus's abstraction is not the Aristotelian ἀφαίρεσις, it does not consist in separating one kind of objects from another. Universal cognition has nothing to do with de-materialization for him, with pulling the natively universal forms out of the individuating matter. Forms, like matter, are individual in reality<sup>62</sup> – as everything is – but, like anything that is individual, they can be grasped in a universal way, due to the abstractive powers of our intellect.

Scotus's emphasis on the importance of the individual is often, and naturally so, interpreted as an Augustinian trait in his thought. He had, after all, inherited it from the older Franciscan-Augustinian tradition. Without rejecting this usual way of reading Scotus as wrong, I would like to suggest another, perhaps complementary perspective.

In the first part of my paper I distinguished between two metaphilosophical approaches which I labelled "Platonic" and "Aristotelian". It seems to me that, in spite of the fact that Scotus's account radically departs from Aristotle in a certain respect, it can at the same time be seen as an actual completion of the Aristotelian metaphilosophical project. The driving force behind Aristotle's thought was his effort to rehabilitate our cognitive faculties as capable of reaching out to reality qua pre-philosophically given. In practice, however, he still upheld the old Platonic cleavage between the immaterial and intelligible level of reality on the one hand and the material world of common experience on the other. Duns Scotus seems to have been among the first thinkers to explicitly reject such a duality and to insist that the reality that is the object of intellectual scientific enquiry is, in a very strict sense, the very same reality we experience in our everyday life through our senses. In this way, Scotus may be seen as even more Aristotelian than Aristotle himself.<sup>63</sup>

---

it seems to me that such a tension clearly manifests itself in the crucial passages of *De ente et essentia*); but Aquinas himself clearly did not see things that way.

62 Ord. II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 5–6, n. 188 (Vat. VII: 483–484): *Non est igitur ista entitas [viz. differentia individualis] materia vel forma vel compositum, in quantum quodlibet istorum est natura, sed est ultima realitas entis quod est materia vel quod est forma vel quod est compositum [...]* Cf. Cross, R., *The Physics of Duns Scotus: The Scientific Context of a Theological Vision*. Oxford, Clarendon Press 1998, pp. 34–35.

63 This paper is a reworked and substantially enlarged version of a talk given at the conference *Issues of Perception between Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy*, Ostrava, 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> October 2016. My work on the topic has been supported by the University Centre for the Study of Ancient and Medieval Thought ("UNCE"), Charles University in Prague. I thank Světlá Hanke Jarošová for invaluable help with the final shape of the paper: she not only corrected my clumsy English but also suggested substantial improvement of the overall structure. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their critical remarks that helped me to refine the paper (although I could not agree with all of them). All remaining shortcomings are, of course, purely my responsibility.

**ABSTRACT**

At least from Plato and Aristotle onward the common wisdom of the entire philosophical tradition, hardly ever questioned, was that while universals are grasped by the intellect, individuals are perceived by the senses. Even in the “moderately realistic” Aristotelian-scholastic setting (perhaps best represented by Aquinas) where universals are situated “*in rebus*”, this axiom naturally generated the idea of two separated realms of objects of cognition – individuals and universals – whose ontological status, mutual relations, etc. would, in turn, be philosophically investigated. In my reading, Scotus does not share this common preconception at all; rather, he takes the position that ultimately there is only one single realm of cognized objects – the individuals or particulars. Thus, although it may be argued that his theory of cognition does not represent any radical departure from the moderate-realistic, Avicenna-inspired paradigm of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but rather a specific elaboration of it, a closer look reveals that Scotus takes an entirely new perspective on the problem and reinterprets the old approaches from a new standpoint. And yet, this new perspective can at the same time be understood as being merely a consistent completion of the anti-Parmenidean and anti-Platonic movement in philosophy initiated by Aristotle – namely that of epistemic rehabilitation of the world of ordinary particular things. Scotus’s epistemic thought can thus be described as simultaneously consistently traditional and revolutionary.

**Keywords:** singular intellection, abstractive cognition, intuitive cognition, Duns Scotus, Aristotelianism, Platonism, Augustinism