

Singular Beings and Universal Natures

Introduction: “The Problem of Universals”

Scientific knowledge has to be universal. If all we could learn in a chemistry class was that the piece of sodium our chemistry teacher put in a cup of water reacted with that body of water, then thereby we could only have gained knowledge of a single episode, but not the *scientific* knowledge this episode was supposed to illustrate, namely, that sodium reacts with water, meaning *any* piece of sodium, with *any* body of water, *wherever*, and *whenever* they get in contact. Again, when we learned some geometrical proof, say the proof of the Pythagorean Theorem, this process involved using some diagram, showing a particular right triangle. But part of the learning process was also to learn that the proof did not concern only that particular right triangle in the diagram, but *all* possible right triangles, *wherever*, and *whenever* they are constructed.

Clearly, the understanding and knowledge of such universal truths, which are called universal because they concern universally *all* singulars of a given kind, is not possible without having some sort of awareness of all those singulars. Therefore, if this sort of awareness were not possible, then universal knowledge, that is, scientific knowledge would not be possible. Accordingly, philosophers who are after this sort of knowledge have to be able to provide an account of how this sort of awareness of a potentially infinite number of singulars is possible, despite the fact that in our sensory experience we are clearly presented only with a limited number of them.

Plato’s account in terms of his theory of Forms and recollection, as Plato himself had realized, and pointed out most famously in his *Parmenides*, did not stand up to scrutiny in its original, naïve form.¹ But Plato’s self-criticism was only a brief prelude to the barrage of critical arguments coming from his best student, Aristotle, and his innumerable followers over centuries. Indeed, it is remarkable, especially in the face of such persistent critique, what a strong appeal Plato’s approach continued to hold throughout the Middle Ages. But it is precisely this appeal that explains why Boethius, the most important mediator of the ancient Greek problem of universals to the Latin middle ages, concluded his detailed criticism of the Platonic conception with the following, somewhat puzzling remark:

... Plato thinks that genera and species and the rest are not only understood as universals, but also exist and subsist apart from bodies. Aristotle, however, thinks that they are understood as incorporeal and universal, but subsist in sensibles. I did not regard it as appropriate to decide between their views. For that belongs to a higher philosophy. But we have carefully followed out Aristotle’s view here, not because we would recommend it the

¹ See Wedberg, A.: “Plato’s Theory of Ideas”, in: Vlastos, G. (ed.) *Plato I*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978.

most, but because this book [Porphyry's *Isagoge*²], is written about the *Categories*, of which Aristotle is the author.³

However, our puzzlement will easily be dispelled, if we first consider the grounds for Boethius' rejection of a naïve Platonic theory, and then his reasons for retaining a more sophisticated conception which is in fact compatible not only with Aristotelian philosophical principles, but also with Christian theological considerations.

Aristotelianism vs. Platonism in Boethius' Treatment of the Porphyrian Problem of Universals

By the term 'universal' in its broadest sense we are supposed to understand something that is common to many things (*unum commune multis* – “one common to many” – according to a common medieval formula). However, something can be common to many things in several, rather different senses. For example, we can talk about a common goal because it is targeted by several people individually, or a common task because it is undertaken by many people together, or a common household because it is shared by several members of the same family at the same time, or a common heritage, because it is handed down to several people through several generations. It is not in any of these senses that a universal in the intended sense is supposed to be common to many things. Boethius, in his discussion of the five kinds of universals distinguished by Porphyry (genus, species, difference, property, and accident),⁴ first of all clarifies the intended sense in which these universals are said to be common to several things.

A universal in the intended sense would have to be common to several particulars

1. in its entirety, and not only in part
2. simultaneously, and not in a temporal succession, and
3. it should constitute the substance of its particulars⁵

² The *Isagoge* (literally, “Introduction”) is Porphyry's introduction to Aristotle's *Categories*. The Neo-Platonic Greek philosopher, the editor of Plotinus' *Enneads*, and a vehement philosophical critic of Christianity, wrote this elementary, introductory logical work with the expressed intention of avoiding the puzzling issues of the ontological status of universals, which he wanted to leave to considerations of “a higher philosophy” (Porphyry's phrase, as translated by him into Latin, is deliberately echoed in this passage by Boethius). Yet, his work proved to be the main catalyst of medieval debates of precisely these issues.

³ Spade, P. V., (tr.), *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals: Porphyry, Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Ockham*, Hackett: Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1994 (henceforth: *Five Texts*), p. 25.

⁴ See *Five Texts*, pp. 1-19.

⁵ As Paul Spade has pointed out in his careful analysis of Boethius' argument (Spade, P. V., *Boethius against Universals: The Arguments in the Second Commentary on Porphyry*, 1996, URL = <http://www.pvspade.com/Logic/docs/boethius.pdf>), this characterization of what a universal is derives from Porphyry's commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*. See *Exposition of Aristotle's Categories by Question and Answer* (on Aristotle, *Categories*, 1, 1 a 1-2), in *Porphyrii Isagoge et In Aristotelis Categorias*

But Boethius’ subsequent argumentation shows that nothing can be a really existing universal entity in this sense, for assuming the real existence of an entity characterized in this way would lead to inconsistency.

The key ideas of Boethius’ reasoning can be reconstructed in the following manner. Let us take two distinct individuals, say, Plato and Socrates, sharing a common nature, namely, humanity. Humanity, according to the requirements listed above, would have to constitute totally and simultaneously the substance of Socrates and the substance of Plato. But the substance of Socrates cannot be numerically the same thing as the substance of Plato, for to have numerically one substance means to have one and the same act of substantial being, that is, to be one being, one entity. But Socrates and Plato are two distinct entities. Therefore, they cannot have humanity constituting their substance as numerically one and the same entity. But then, if their common humanity is not numerically one entity, then it is not a really existing being at all, for, as Boethius puts it “everything that exists exists for the reason that it is one”.⁶

So, if a universal cannot exist as numerically one entity, then perhaps it rather exists as a multitude of several entities? Boethius rejects this suggestion as well, on the basis of an ingenious argument leading to an infinite regress, which can be reconstructed in the following way. Let us take again Socrates and Plato. We had to posit a universal humanity to account for what is common to them. But it turned out that the universal humanity shared by both cannot be a single, numerically one entity. Therefore, we assumed that it may be several entities. But those several entities also have to agree in something on account of which they are all humanity, just as Socrates and Plato agreed in being human. So if the reason for positing a universal is to account for some agreement of a number of particulars, then just as we had to posit a universal humanity to account for the agreement of Socrates and Plato in being human, so too, since the humanity of Socrates and Plato turned out to be a number of entities agreeing in being humanity, we also have to posit a universal to account for the agreement of these entities. So, let us call this new universal, for want of a better word, ‘super-humanity’. But this, again, cannot be some numerically one entity, for the same reason that humanity could not be some numerically one entity. Therefore, if it exists at all, it has to be a multitude of entities, all agreeing in being ‘super-humanity’, which, then, for the same reason gives rise to another universal, a ‘super-super-humanity’, and so on to infinity, which is absurd.⁷

commentarium, Adolfus Busse, ed., (“Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca,” vol. IV.1; Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1887), p. 62 lines 17–33.

⁶ *Five Texts*, p. 22.

⁷ Perhaps, I should note here that Boethius himself formulates his argument with reference to a genus as it is multiplied in its species, as opposed to my reconstruction here that refers to the multiplication of a species in its individuals. I think this just reinforces the general applicability of Boethius’ reasoning.

But then, since a universal is either in the mind or in reality, but whatever is in reality is either one entity or at least a multitude of such entities, and a universal cannot be in reality in either of these ways, Boethius concludes that it has to be in the mind.

However, Boethius argues further, it appears that a universal cannot exist in the mind either. For the universal existing in the mind is some universal understanding of a thing outside the mind. Now, this universal understanding is either disposed in the same way as the thing is, or differently. If it is disposed in the same way, then the thing also has to be universal. But then we end up with the previous problems of really existing universals. On the other hand, if the understanding is disposed differently than the thing, then it is false, for “what is understood otherwise than the thing is is false”.⁸ But then, universals in the understanding would have to be false representations of their things; therefore, no universal knowledge would be possible; whereas we posited universals in the first place to account for the possibility of universal knowledge.

In his final answer, Boethius solves this problem in a way that proved to be paradigmatic for the Aristotelian tradition of the middle ages.⁹ In the first place, he observes that the principle “what is understood otherwise than the thing is is false” can be understood in two different ways. For in one sense it states something obviously true, namely, that if the thing is understood *to be* otherwise than it is, then it is obviously understood falsely. But in another sense this principle need not be true at all, namely, in the sense in which it would claim that if the way the thing is understood is not the same as the way in which the thing is, then the understanding is false. For of course it is possible that something exists one way and yet it is represented in some other way, *without*, however, being represented *to be* in another way. For example, it is certainly possible to represent the temporal sequence of the tones of a melody by means of a spatial sequence of notes in a music score, so what exists as a temporal sequence of tones is represented otherwise, by a spatial sequence of notes, yet this representation is not false, for it does not represent the temporal sequence of tones *to be* a spatial sequence of notes. But then, in the same way, just because a singular thing is understood in a universal manner, it does not follow that it is represented falsely, as long as it is not thought *to be* in a universal manner.

In particular, when the understanding understands singular things with respect to features they share, but without their individuating conditions (i.e., without whatever features they have that set them apart), then these singulars are understood in a universal manner. However, despite the fact that none of these singulars *can be* without their individuating conditions, this universal understanding does not have to be false, for they are not understood *to be* without these individuating conditions. They are simply understood without these individuating conditions; that is to say, they are understood in terms of what they share, while disregarding what is peculiar to each. In this way, the

⁸ *Five Texts*, p. 23 (21).

⁹ The solution recurs, in ever more refined forms, e.g., in Abelard (*Five Texts*, p. 48), John of Salisbury (*Metalogicon*, bk. 2, c. 20, 877c7-878a9), and Aquinas (ST1, q. 85, a. 1, ad 1-um).

understanding is able to separate in thought what cannot be separated in reality without any falsity. For thinking of what the singulars share separately from what is peculiar to each is not thinking it *to be* separately, but just thinking of something and not thinking of something else, i.e., thinking of something *in abstraction from* something else.

So, according to Boethius’ Aristotelian solution, universals are in the mind in the sense that the mind is able to represent singulars in a universal manner, by representing them in abstraction from their individuating conditions. In this way, Boethius does not have to subscribe to really existing universal entities that would have to be common substantial constituents of several distinct singulars, yet he can consistently account for the human mind’s ability to think of singular entities in a universal manner by forming universal concepts in the process of abstraction.¹⁰

Nevertheless, although this seems to be a good solution to the problem presented by Boethius, as his above-quoted remark indicates, he does not think that this Aristotelian solution provides us with everything we need to know about universals. Indeed, with that remark Boethius simply indicated his commitment to what can be described as the venerable tradition of “mainstream Neo-Platonism” of his time, trying to reconcile Aristotle with Plato in a unified system of thought.¹¹

Universals as Divine Ideas

The most important representative of this “mainstream Neo-Platonism” mediating the ancient Neo-Platonic philosophical tradition to the Christianity of the Medieval Latin West besides Boethius was St. Augustine. The idea of a fundamental concordance between the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, resulting in one coherent philosophical system, is most characteristically expressed by Augustine at the end of his *Against the Academicians*, where he concludes his survey of the history of the Platonic school with the following remark:

... there is, in my opinion, one system of really true philosophy. It has finally emerged after many centuries, and many controversies, because there have been acute and

¹⁰ Note that Berkeley’s famous criticism of the Lockean conception of abstraction does not apply here, for abstraction in this sense, as selective intellectual attention, was admitted even by Berkeley in a significant insertion in the second edition of the *Introduction* to his *Principles*. See George Berkeley: *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Hackett: Indianapolis, 1982, p. 16.

¹¹ The tradition goes back to Philo of Alexandria, and the Alexandrian school of Ammonius Saccas, and was most powerfully presented by Porphyry, and his teacher, Plotinus. An excellent, detailed discussion of the treatment of universals by ancient Greek and medieval Arab Neo-Platonists and their influence on the Latin West is provided by Libera, A. de, *La querelle des universaux: De Platon à la fin du Moyen Age*, Éditions du Seuil: Paris, 1996. To be sure, in medieval Western philosophy not everybody was impressed by the idea of a basic concordance between Plato and Aristotle. John of Salisbury in the 12th century remarked: “Bernard of Chartres and his students worked hard to reconcile Aristotle and Plato. But in my judgment they arrived late, so they strove in vain to reconcile two dead men, who could have reconciled as long as they were alive, but disagreed.” John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon*, bk. 2, c. 17, 875d22-25.

clever men who taught in their disputations that Aristotle and Plato agree with each other, although they did so in such a way that to the unskilled and inattentive they seemed to disagree.¹²

Indeed, according to Augustine, the resulting philosophical system reconciles not only Plato and Aristotle on the issue of universals, but also both of them with the tenets of Christianity. For it does not regard the universal Forms as mind-independent entities, in the way Plato conceived of Forms, but as objects existing in a mind, in the way Aristotle conceived of universals; yet, according to this conception, the Forms or Ideas still serve as the universal models of their singulars, insofar as they are the universal exemplars of creation, existing in the divine mind. In a passage often referred to by medieval authors in this connection, Augustine introduces the idea in the following manner:

[...] in Latin we can call the Ideas “forms” or “species”, in order to appear to translate word for word. But if we call them “reasons”, we depart to be sure from a proper translation - for reasons are called “logoi” in Greek, not Ideas - but nevertheless, whoever wants to use this word will not be in conflict with the fact. For Ideas are certain principal, stable and immutable forms or reasons of things. They are not themselves formed, and hence they are eternal and always stand in the same relations, and they are contained in the divine understanding.¹³

In this way, Platonic Forms are not universal beings existing in a universal manner, but their universality is due to a universal manner of understanding. As we could see from Boethius’ solution, placing universals in the mind avoids the inconsistencies arising from a “naïve” Platonic conception. Nevertheless, this conception can still do justice to the Platonic intuition that what accounts for the necessary, universal features of the ephemeral particulars of the visible world is the presence of some universal exemplars in the source of their being; for existing in the *divine* mind, the divine ideas serve as the universal archetypes of creation, by which God pre-conceives His creation in eternity. Indeed, this is also the reason why we can have a kind of knowledge that is more certain than any knowledge we can gain from sensory experience, provided we are allowed a glimpse at these ideas themselves. As Augustine continues:

And although they neither arise nor perish, nevertheless everything that is able to arise and perish, and everything that does arise and perish, is said to be formed in accordance with them. Now it is denied that the soul can look upon them, unless it is a rational one, [and even then it can do so] only by that part of itself by which it surpasses [other things] - that is, by its mind and reason, as if by a certain “face”, or by an inner and intelligible

¹² Augustine: *Against the Academicians*, Hackett: Indianapolis, 1995, p. 91. Peter King, the translator of this volume, also adds here a very useful note to Cicero, who makes basically the same point. Another important Roman source of the Neo-Platonist doctrine for medieval philosophy was Seneca. (Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, *Loeb classical library: Latin authors*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1962-1967)

¹³ *On Eighty-Three Different Questions*, q. 46, 2, translated from *Sancti Aurelii Augustini De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*, Mutzenbecher, A., ed., (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, vol. 44a; Turnholt: Brepols, 1975), tr. P. V. Spade, in Spade, P. V., 1985, *A Survey of Medieval Philosophy*, Version 2.0, URL = <http://www.pvspade.com/Logic/docs/Survey 2 Interim.pdf>, (henceforth: *Survey*), 1985, p. 383.

“eye”. To be sure, not each and every rational soul in itself, but [only] the one that is holy and pure, that [is the one that] is claimed to be fit for such a vision, that is, the one that keeps that very eye, by which these things are seen, healthy and pure and fair and like the things it means to see. What devout man imbued with true religion, even though he is not yet able to see these things, nevertheless dares to deny, or for that matter fails to profess, that all things that exist, that is, whatever things are contained in their own genus with a certain nature of their own, so that that they might exist, are begotten by God their author, and that by that same author everything that lives is alive, and that the entire safe preservation and the very order of things, by which changing things repeat their temporal courses according to a fixed regimen, are held together and governed by the laws of a supreme God? If this is established and granted, who dares to say that God has set up all things in an irrational manner? Now if it is not correct to say or believe this, it remains that all things are set up by reason, and a man not by the same reason as a horse - for that is absurd to suppose. Therefore, single things are created with their own reasons. But where are we to think these reasons exist, if not in the mind of the creator? For he did not look outside himself, to anything placed [there], in order to set up what he set up. To think that is sacrilege. But if these reasons of all things to be created and [already] created are contained in the divine mind, and [if] there cannot be anything in the divine mind that is not eternal and unchangeable, and [if] Plato calls these principal reasons of things “Ideas”, [then] not only are there Ideas but they are true, because they are eternal and [always] stay the same way, and [are] unchangeable. And whatever exists comes to exist, however it exists, by participation in them. But among the things set up by God, the rational soul surpasses all [others], and is closest to God when it is pure. And to the extent that it clings to God in charity, to that extent, drenched in a certain way and lit up by that intelligible light, it discerns these reasons, not by bodily eyes but by that principal [part] of it by which it surpasses [everything else], that is, by its intelligence. By this vision it becomes most blessed. These reasons, as was said, whether it is right to call them Ideas or forms or species or reasons, many are permitted to call [them] whatever they want, but [only] to a very few [is it permitted] to see what is true.¹⁴

Augustine’s conception, therefore, saves Plato’s original intuitions, yet without their inconsistencies, while it also combines his philosophical insights with Christianity. This does not mean, however, that this conception does not generate some problems of its own.

Illumination vs. Abstraction

One major issue generated by Augustine’s conception was the theological-ontological problem of the reconcilability of the multiplicity of divine ideas with divine simplicity. Divine ideas are not creatures (for they are the “models” of creation, existing before all creation in the divine mind), and whatever is not a creature is God, therefore, ideas have to be God. But how can several divine ideas, distinct among themselves, be one and the same, simple, indivisible divine essence?¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ I discuss Aquinas’s solution to the problem and provide some further references here: Klima, G.: “The Medieval Problem of Universals”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2001 Edition, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2001/entries/universals-medieval>

Another major issue, more pertinent to the topic of this article, was the epistemological problem of the accessibility and role of divine ideas in human intellectual cognition.

As we can see from the previous quote, Augustine makes recognition of truth dependent on divine illumination, a sort of irradiation of the intelligible light of divine ideas, which is accessible only to the few who are “holy and pure”. But this seems to go against at least

1. the experience that there are knowledgeable non-believers or pagans
2. the Aristotelian insight that we can have infallible comprehension of the first principles of scientific demonstrations for which we only need the intellectual concepts that we can acquire naturally, from experience by abstraction,¹⁶ and
3. the philosophical-theological consideration that if human reason, man’s natural faculty for acquiring truth were not sufficient for performing its natural function, then human nature would be naturally defective in its noblest part, precisely in which it was created after the image of God.

In fact, these are only some of the problems explicitly raised and considered by medieval Augustinians, such as St. Bonaventure, Matthew of Aquasparta, or Henry of Ghent, which prompted their ever more refined accounts of the role of illumination in human cognition.

Augustine’s philosophical argument for divine illumination in his *On Free Choice of the Will*, following the pattern of Plato’s similar argument in his *Phaedo*,¹⁷ may be interpreted as requiring illumination in intellectual cognition in general, as a precondition of the acquisition, or rather (re)activation, of any intellectual concept whatsoever. For the gist of the argument is that we can intellectually recognize the imperfections of objects of a certain kind in our experience (for example, objects that are not perfectly equal, or objects that are not absolutely one, since they are many in their parts), only if we already have the concepts of what would be the perfect instances of the same kind (i.e., if we understand what it would be like for objects to be perfectly equal or perfectly one). But since these perfect instances are not given in experience, it seems to follow that we can only have these concepts from a source other than sense experience. Therefore, if this reasoning applies to any kind of object, falling under any of our intellectual concepts, it might seem that our intellectual cognition in general must have a non-sensory, supernatural source.

¹⁶ Cf. Aristotle: *Posterior Analytics*, ii, 19, 100a15-b17, *Nicomachean Ethics*, vi, 6, 1140b31-1141a8.

¹⁷ Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, tr. T. Williams, Hackett: Indianapolis, 1993, II, 8; cf. *Phaedo*, 73c-75c, in Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (eds.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982

But precisely in view of the above-mentioned difficulties stemming from such an unrestricted requirement of illumination in intellectual cognition in general, medieval Augustinians argued that Augustine must not be interpreted as positing such a strong general requirement.

For example, Matthew of Aquasparta, recapitulating St. Bonaventure, writes as follows:

“Plato and his followers stated that the entire essence of cognition comes forth from the archetypal or intelligible world, and from the ideal reasons; and they stated that the eternal light contributes to certain cognition in its evidentness as the *entire* and *sole* reason for cognition, as Augustine in many places recites, in particular in bk. viii. c. 7 of *The City of God*: ‘The light of minds for the cognition of everything is God himself, who created everything’.

But this position is entirely mistaken. For although it appears to secure the way of wisdom, it destroys the way of knowledge. – Furthermore, if that light were the *entire* and *sole* reason for cognition, then the cognition of things in the Word would not differ from their cognition in their proper kind, neither would the cognition of reason differ from the cognition of revelation, nor philosophical cognition from prophetic cognition, nor cognition by nature from cognition by grace.

The other position was apparently that of Aristotle, who claimed that the entire essence of cognition is caused and comes from below, through the senses, memory, and experience, [working together] with the natural light of our active intellect, which abstracts the species from phantasms and makes them actually understood. And for this reason he did not claim that the eternal is light necessary for cognition, indeed, he never spoke about it. And this opinion of his is obvious in bk. 2 of the *Posterior Analytics*. [...]

But this position seems to be very deficient. For although it builds the way of knowledge, it totally destroys the way of wisdom. [...]

Therefore, I take it that one should maintain an intermediate position without prejudice, by stating that our cognition is caused both from below and from above, from external things as well as the ideal reasons.

[...] God has provided our mind with some intellectual light, by means of which it would abstract the species of objects from the sensibles, by purifying them and extracting their quiddities, which are the *per se* objects of the intellect. [...] But this light is not sufficient, for it is defective, and is mixed with obscurity, unless it is joined and connected to the eternal light, which is the perfect and sufficient reason for cognition, and the intellect attains and somehow touches it by its upper part.

However the intellect attains that light or those eternal reasons as the reason for cognition not as *sole* reason, for then, as has been said, cognition in the Word would not differ from cognition in proper kind, nor the cognition of wisdom would differ from the cognition of knowledge. Nor does it attain them as the *entire* reason, for then it would not need the species and similitudes of things; but this is false, for the Philosopher says, and experience teaches, that if someone loses a sense, then he loses that knowledge of things which comes from that sense.¹⁸

¹⁸ Bonaventure, *et al.*, *De Humanae Cognitionis Ratione: anecdota quaedam Seraphici Doctoris Sancti Bonaventurae et nonnularum eius discipulorum*, Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi): St. Bonaventure, 1883 (henceforth: DHCR), pp. 94-96.

In this way, taking the intermediate position between Platonism and Aristotelianism pure and simple, Matthew interprets Augustine's Platonism as being compatible with the Aristotelian view, crediting the Aristotelian position with accounting for the specific empirical content of our intellectual concepts, while crediting the Platonic view with accounting for their certainty in grasping the natures of things. Still it may not appear quite clear exactly what the contribution of the eternal light is, indeed, whether it is necessary at all. After all, if by abstraction we manage to gain those intellectual concepts that represent the natures of things, what else is needed to have a grasp of those natures?

Henry of Ghent, in his detailed account of the issue, provides an interesting answer to this question. Henry first distinguishes cognition of a true thing from the cognition of the truth of the thing. Since any really existing thing is truly what it is (even if it may on occasion *appear* something else), any cognition of any really existing thing is the cognition of a true thing. But cognition of a true thing may occur without the cognition of its truth, since the latter is the cognition that the thing adequately corresponds to its exemplar in the human or divine mind. For example, if I draw a circle, when a cat sees it, then it sees the real true thing as it is presented to it. Yet the cat is simply unable to *judge* whether it is a true circle in the sense that it really is what it is supposed to be, namely, a locus of points equidistant from a given point. By contrast, a human being is able to *judge* the truth of this thing, insofar as he or she would be able to tell that my drawing is not really and truly a circle, but is at best a good approximation of what a true circle would be.

Now, in intellectual cognition, just as in the sensory cognition of things, when the intellect simply apprehends a true thing, then it still does not have to judge the truth of a the thing, even though it may have a true apprehension, adequately representing the thing. But the cognition of the truth of the thing only occurs in a *judgment*, when the intellect judges the adequacy of the thing to its exemplar.

But since a thing can be compared to two sorts of exemplar, namely, to the exemplar in the human mind, and to the exemplar in the divine mind, the cognition of the truth of a thing is twofold, relative to these two exemplars. The exemplar of the human mind, according to Henry, is nothing but the Aristotelian abstract concept of the thing, whereby the thing is simply apprehended in a universal manner, and hence its truth is judged relative to this concept, when the intellect judges that the thing in question falls under this concept or not. As Henry writes:

[...] attending to the exemplar gained from the thing as the reason for its cognition in the cognizer, the truth of the thing can indeed be recognized, by forming a concept of the thing that conforms to that exemplar; and it is in this way that Aristotle asserted that man gains knowledge and cognition of the truth from purely natural sources about changeable natural things, and that this exemplar is acquired from things by means of the senses, as from the first principle of art and science. [...] So, by means of the universal notion in us that we have acquired from the several species of animals we are able to realize concerning any thing that comes our way whether it is an animal or not, and by means of

the specific notion of donkey we realize concerning any thing that comes our way whether it is a donkey or not.¹⁹

But this sort of cognition of the truth of a thing, although it is intellectual, universal cognition, is far from being the infallible knowledge we are seeking. As Henry argues further:

But by this sort of acquired exemplar in us we do not have the entirely certain and infallible cognition of truth. Indeed, this is entirely impossible for three reasons, the first of which is taken from the thing from which this exemplar is abstracted, the second from the soul, in which this exemplar is received, and the third from the exemplar itself that is received in the soul about the thing.

The first reason is that this exemplar, since it is abstracted from changeable things, has to share in the nature of changeability. Therefore, since physical things are more changeable than mathematical objects, this is why the Philosopher claimed that we have a greater certainty of knowledge about mathematical objects than about physical things by means of their universal species. And this is why Augustine, discussing this cause of the uncertainty of the knowledge of natural things in q. 9 of his “Eighty-Three Different Questions”, says that from the bodily senses one should not expect the pure truth [*syncera veritas*] ... The second reason is that the human soul, since it is changeable and susceptible to error, cannot be rectified to save it from swerving into error by anything that is just as changeable as itself, or even more; therefore, any exemplar that it receives from natural things is necessarily just as changeable as itself, or even more, since it is of an inferior nature, whence it cannot rectify the soul so that it would persist in the infallible truth. ... The third reason is that this sort of exemplar, since it is the intention and species of the sensible thing abstracted from the phantasm, is similar to the false as well as to the true [thing], so that on its account these cannot be distinguished. For it is by means of the same images of sensible things that in dreams and madness we judge these images to be the things, and in sane awareness we judge the things themselves. But the pure truth can only be perceived by discerning it from falsehood. Therefore, by means of such an exemplar it is impossible to have certain knowledge, and certain cognition of the truth. And so if we are to have certain knowledge of the truth, then we have to turn our mind away from the senses and sensible things, and from every intention, no matter how universal and abstracted from sensible things, to the unchangeable truth existing above the mind [...].²⁰

So, Henry first distinguished between the cognition of a true thing and the intellectual cognition of the truth of a thing, and then, concerning the cognition of the truth of the thing, he distinguished between the cognition of truth by means of a concept abstracted from the thing and “the pure truth” [*veritas syncera vel liquida*], which he says cannot be obtained by means of such abstracted concepts.

But then the question naturally arises: what is this “pure truth”, and how can it be obtained, if at all? Since cognition of the pure truth involves comparison of objects not to

¹⁹ Henry of Ghent, *Summae quaestionum ordinariorum theologi recepto praeconio solennis Henrici a Gandavo*, (Parisiis In aedibus Jodoci Badii Ascensii 1520), Franciscan Institute: New York, 1953, (henceforth HQO), a. 1, q. 2, fol. 5 E-F.

²⁰ *ibid.* fol. 5. F

their acquired exemplar in the human mind, but to their eternal exemplar in the divine mind, in the *ideal* case it would consist in some sort of direct insight into the divine ideas, enabling the person who has this access to see everything in its true form, as “God meant it to be”, and also see how it fails to live up to its idea due to its defects. So it would be like the direct intuition of two objects, one sensible, another intelligible, on the basis of which one could also immediately judge how closely the former approaches the latter. But this sort of direct intuition of the divine ideas is only the share of angels and the souls of the blessed in beatific vision; it is generally not granted in this life, except in rare, miraculous cases, in rapture, or prophetic vision.

Therefore, if there is to be any non-miraculous recognition of this pure truth in this life, then it has to occur differently. Henry argues that even if we do not have a direct intuition of divine ideas as the objects cognized (whereby their particulars are *recognized* as more or less approximating them), we do have the cognition of the quiddities of things as the objects cognized by reason of some indirect cognition of their ideas. The reason for this, Henry says, is the following:

...for our concept to be true by the pure truth, the soul, insofar as it is informed by it, has to be similar to the truth of the thing outside, since truth is a certain adequacy of the thing and the intellect. And so, as Augustine says in bk. 2 of *On Free Choice of the Will*, since the soul by itself is liable to slip from truth into falsity, whence by itself it is not informed by the truth of any thing, although it can be informed by it, but nothing can inform itself, for nothing can give what it does not have; therefore, it is necessary that it be informed of the pure truth of a thing by something else. But this cannot be done by the exemplar received from the thing itself, as has been shown earlier [in the previously quoted passage – GK]. It is necessary, therefore, that it be informed by the exemplar of the unchangeable truth, as Augustine intends in the same place. And this is why he says in *On True Religion* that just as by its truth are true those that are true, so too by its similitude are similar those that are similar. It is necessary, therefore, that the unchangeable truth impress itself into our concept, and that it transform our concept to its own character, and that in this way it inform our mind with the expressed truth of the thing by the same similitude that the thing itself has in the first truth.²¹

So, when we have the cognition of the pure truth of a thing, then we cannot have it in terms of the concept acquired from the thing, yet, since we cannot have it from a direct intuition of the divine exemplar either, the way we can have it is that the acquired concept primarily impressed on our mind will be further clarified, but no longer by a similarity of the thing, but by the similarity of the divine exemplar itself. Henry’s point seems to be that given that the external thing itself is already just a (more or less defective) copy of the exemplar, the (more or less defective) copy of this copy can only be improved by means of the original exemplar, just as a copy of a poor repro of some original picture can only be improved by retouching the copy not on the basis of the poor repro, but on the basis of the original. But since the external thing is fashioned after its divine idea, the “retouching” of the concept in terms of the original idea does yield a

²¹ HQO a. 1, q. 2, fol. 7, I.

better representation of the thing; indeed, so much better that on the basis of this “retouched” concept we are even able to judge just how well the thing realizes its kind.

For example, when I simply have the initial simple concept of circle abstracted from circular objects I have seen, that concept is good enough for me to tell circular objects apart from non-circular ones. But with this simple, unanalyzed concept in mind, I may still not be able to say what a true circle is supposed to be, and accordingly, exactly how and to what extent the more or less circular objects I see fail or meet this standard. However, when I come to understand that a circle is a locus of points equidistant from a given point, I will realize by means of a clear and distinct concept what it was that I originally conceived in a vague and confused manner in my original concept of circle.²²

To be sure, I do not come to this definition of circle by looking up to the heaven of Ideas; in fact, I may just be instructed about it by my geometry teacher. But what is *not* given to me by my geometry teacher is the *understanding* of the fact that what is expressed by the definition is indeed what I originally rather vaguely conceived by my concept abstracted from visible circles. This “flash” of understanding, when I realize that it is *necessary* for anything that *truly* matches the concept of a circle to be such as described in the definition, would be an instance of receiving illumination without any particular, miraculous revelation.²³

However, even if in this light Henry’s distinctions between the two kinds of truths and the corresponding differences of concepts make good sense, and even if we accept that the concepts primarily accepted from sensible objects need to be further worked on in order to provide us with true, clear understanding of the natures of things, it is not clear that this further work cannot be done by the natural faculties of our mind, assuming only

²² The allusion to Descartes (with the phrase “clear and distinct”) is intended. For Descartes’ “Augustinian roots” see Menn, S.: *Descartes and Augustine*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). It is worth noting here that Henry’s distinction between these two sorts of concepts provides an interesting solution to what in modern philosophy is usually referred to as “the paradox of analysis”. The paradox consists in the puzzling phenomenon that correct conceptual analyses can be informative. For example, ‘circle’ is correctly analyzed as ‘locus of points equidistant from a given point’. Still, a person may have the concept of ‘circle’, and the concept of ‘circle’ is nothing but the concept of ‘locus of points equidistant from a given point’, yet the person may genuinely learn something when first instructed about this analysis. Henry would say that although the simple concept of ‘circle’ and its analysis do express the same concept, the simple concept *without its analysis* is just an initial, vague impression of visible circles on the mind, which does not enable one to recognize the pure truth of what a circle is, whereas *with the analysis* the same concept will enable the mind to deliver sound judgment on the pure truth of the thing, in the form of *a priori* geometrical principles and conclusions.

²³ This is also what is happening in the Platonic dialogues, where the interlocutors first start out with all confidence in having some definite conception of the subject matter of the discussion, but when it comes to the point of having to provide an essential definition of the subject, they all end up in confusion and embarrassment, apparently lacking the definite concept they thought they had, after which they start seeking “illumination” or “recollection” throughout the discussion, to reach the understanding they realized they lacked.

the general influence of God in sustaining its natural operations, but without performing any direct and specific “retouching” of our concepts “from above”. Using our previous analogy of the acquired concept as the copy of a poor repro of an original, we may say that if we have a number of different poor, fuzzy repros that are defective in a number of different ways, then in a long and complex process of collating them, we might still be able discern the underlying pattern of the original, and thus produce a copy that is actually closer to the original than any of the direct repros, without ever being allowed a glimpse of the original.

In fact, this was precisely the way Aristotelian theologians, such as Aquinas, interpreted Augustine’s conception of illumination, reducing God’s role to providing us with the intelligible light not by directly operating on any of our concepts in particular, but providing the mind with “a certain likeness of the uncreated light, obtained through participation”,²⁴ namely, the agent intellect.

Matthew of Aquasparta quite faithfully describes this view, associating it with the Aristotelian position he rejects:

Some people engaged in ‘philosophizing’ [*quidam philosophantes*] follow this position, although not entirely, when they assert that that light is the general cause of certain cognition, but is not attained, and its special influence is not necessary in natural cognition; but the light of the agent intellect is sufficient together with the species and similitudes of things abstracted and received from the things; for otherwise the operation of [our] nature would be rendered vacuous, our intellect would understand only by coincidence, and our cognition would not be natural, but supernatural. And what Augustine says, namely, that everything is seen in and through that light, is not to be understood as if the intellect would somehow attain that light, nor as if that light would have some specific influence on it, but in such a way that the eternal God naturally endowed us with intellectual light, in which we naturally cognize and see all cognizable things that are within the scope of reason.²⁵

Although Matthew vehemently rejects this position as going against Augustine’s original intention (“which is unacceptable, since he is a prominent teacher, whom catholic teachers and especially theologians ought to follow” – as Matthew says), this view, in ever more refined versions, gained more and more ground toward the end of the 13th century, adopted not only by Aquinas and his followers, but also by his major opponents, namely, Scotus and his followers.²⁶

In general, even if Platonism had a tremendous influence throughout the Middle Ages (and beyond), in the form of the interconnected doctrines of divine ideas, participation,

²⁴ ST1, q. 84, a. 5c

²⁵ DHCR, p. 95.

²⁶ For more on this issue see Pasnau, R.: “Divine Illumination”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (Winter 1999 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win1999/entries/illumination/>

and illumination, it was set against the background of a general Aristotelian consensus,²⁷ especially after Abelard’s time (early 12th century), which asserted that the mundane universals of the species and genera of material beings exist as such *in the human mind*, resulting from the mind’s abstractive activity.

Universal Concepts, Inherent Natures, and the Common Nature

This general Aristotelian approach, while it explained universality of human cognition without invoking any supernatural resources, also generated a number of further questions of its own. For on this approach it is natural to ask exactly what the abstracted universals in the mind are, what it is for them to exist in the mind, how they are related to their particulars, what their real foundation in those particulars is, what their role is in the constitution of our universal knowledge, and how they contribute to the encoding and communication of this knowledge in the various human languages. Indeed, already Abelard raised some of these questions in the following form:

1. What is the *common cause* in accordance with which a common name is imposed?
2. What is the understanding’s *common conception* of the likeness of things?
3. Is a word called “common” on account of the common cause things agree in, or on account of the common conception, or on account of both together?²⁸

These questions explicitly bring a new aspect to bear on the bundle of originally primarily ontological, epistemological, and theological questions constituting the problem of universals, namely, a *semantic* aspect.

On the Aristotelian conception of universals as universal *predicables*,²⁹ our common terms are universals in a way, since they are clearly predicable of many things. But the universality of our words is certainly not due to the physical qualities of our articulate sounds, or of the various written marks indicating them, but to their representative function. So, to give an account of the universality of our universal words, we have to be able to tell in virtue of what they have this universal representative function, that is to say, we have to be able to assign a *common cause* by the recognition of which in terms of a *common concept* we can give a *common name* to a *potential infinity of individuals* belonging to the same kind.

Abelard’s responses to his own questions already marked out the main elements of the ever more sophisticated picture of the relationships between our common words, common concepts, and the multitudes of singulars they represent, which was to emerge in

²⁷ As John of Salisbury writes: “...everybody follows Aristotle” (*...omnes Aristotelem profitentur*). *Metalogicon*, bk. 2, c. 19, 877a18.

²⁸ *Five Texts*, p. 41 (88)

²⁹ Cf.: “By ‘universal’ I mean what is apt to be predicated of many, by ‘singular’ what is not.” Aristotle: *On Interpretation*, 7, 17a39-40.

the next century.³⁰ However, Abelard’s particular responses themselves did not have a lasting influence, partly due to the influx of the newly rediscovered works of Aristotle along with their Arabic commentaries from the second half of the 12th century.³¹

The most important influence in this period from our point of view came from Avicenna’s doctrine distinguishing the absolute consideration of a universal nature from what applies to the same nature in the subject in which it exists. The distinction is neatly summarized in the following passage.

Horsehood, to be sure, has a definition that does not demand universality. Rather it is that to which universality happens. Hence horsehood itself is nothing but horsehood only. For in itself it is neither many nor one, neither is it existent in these sensibles nor in the soul, neither is it any of these things potentially or actually in such a way that this is contained under the definition of horsehood. Rather [in itself it consists] of what is horsehood only.³²

In his little treatise *On Being and Essence*, Aquinas explains the distinction in greater detail in the following words:

A nature, however, or essence ...can be considered in two ways. First, we can consider it according to its proper notion, and this is its absolute consideration; and in this way nothing is true of it except what pertains to it as such; whence if anything else is attributed to it, that will yield a false attribution. ...In the other way [an essence] is considered as it exists in this or that [individual]; and in this way something is predicated of it *per accidens* [non-essentially], on account of that in which it exists, as when we say that a man is white because Socrates is white, although this does not pertain to man as such.

A nature considered in this way, however, has two sorts of existence. It exists in singulars on the one hand, and in the soul on the other, and from each of these [sorts of existence] it acquires accidents. In the singulars, furthermore, the essence has several [acts of] existence according to the multiplicity of singulars. Nevertheless, if we consider the essence in the first, or absolute, sense, none of these pertain to it. For it is false to say that the essence of man, considered absolutely, has existence in this singular, because if existence in this singular pertained to man insofar as he is man, man would never exist, except as this singular. Similarly, if it pertained to man insofar as he is man not to exist in this singular, then the essence would never exist in the singular. But it is true to say that man, but not insofar as he is man, may be in this singular or in that one, or else in the soul. Therefore, the nature of man considered absolutely abstracts from every existence,

³⁰ For Abelard’s discussion, see *Five Texts*, pp. 26-56. I provide an analysis of some of Abelard’s answers and arguments as well as further references in TMPU.

³¹ For detailed accounts of the recovery of the entire Aristotelian corpus by, and its influence on, the Latin West see Dod, B.G.: “Aristoteles latinus”, and Lohr, C.H.: “The medieval interpretation of Aristotle”, in Kretzmann, N., Kenny, A., and Pinborg, J. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1982, pp. 45-99.

³² Avicenna, *Metaphysica*, S. Van Riet (ed.), 2 vols., E. Peeters: Louvain, and E. J. Brill: Leiden, 1977, 1980, V, 1, in vol. II, p. 228 lines 31-36; 1508 ed., fol. 86va; tr. by Spade, P.V., in *Survey*, c. 21, p. 461.

though it does not exclude any. And the nature thus considered is what is predicated of each individual.³³

What is most striking in this passage is the way Aquinas is talking about *the same* nature existing in different things, as well as abstracting from existing in anything. To be sure, on this basis it is clear that the sameness in question cannot be the numerical unity of one entity having one act of existence, since it is precisely such acts of existence that *the same* nature abstracts from in its absolute consideration.³⁴ Therefore, the sameness of the same nature in this passage is some less-than-numerical unity of something that is *not strictly the same*, but *recognizably the same* in multiple instances, as the sameness of the same type-word realized in multiple token-words, or the sameness of a book existing in multiple copies, or in general, the sameness of some common information content carried by several copies, possibly in various media. Sameness of this kind is the sameness of indistinctness. It is this notion of sameness that is operative in counting items as distinct only when they are distinct in kind. For example, the number of publications of an author is the number of his different published writings, and not the number of the different copies of one and the same work. The same work is just one work on the list, but this one work may exist in multiple copies, indeed, in different editions, encoded in different media (say, paper, CD, e-book, or internet web site), and may have radically different accidental attributes in those different “incarnations”. Yet, this does not mean that there exists some one “universal book” over and above its singular realizations in these different media. On the contrary, we can talk about this *one book* as one and the same work only by abstracting from its different realizations, in different forms of existence in those various media.

In exactly the same manner, the same nature is realized in several individual entities, which are distinct in their individual existence, and so they realize numerically distinct instances of the same nature. This is precisely the reason why recognizing the same nature in these distinct individuals allows us to make valid generalizations and predictions about them, insofar as they realize instances of the same nature: just as we do not have to read all copies of the same book in order to know the contents of the next copy we may happen on, so we do not have to experience all individuals of the same nature in order to know what the next individual of the same nature will have to be like insofar as it realizes this nature. Indeed, just as we do not have to be able to “read the author’s mind” in order to get to know the book, so we do not have to be able to read the mind of the Author of Nature, in order that we can get to know the nature of things, for all we need is to learn how “to read” the singulars in our experience to discern the

³³ *On Being and Essence*, c. 2.

³⁴ For more on Aquinas’ conception of the relationship between not notions of unity and being, see Klima, G.: “Aquinas on One and Many”, *Documenti e Studi sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale*, 11(2000), pp. 195-215.

“common message”, the universal nature, informing them all, uniformly, yet in their distinct singularity.³⁵

Therefore, the *same nature* is not *the same* in the same way as the *same individual* having this nature is the same as long as it exists. For that *same nature*, insofar as it is *regarded as the same*, does not even exist at all; it is said to be the same only insofar as it is *recognizable as the same*, if we disregard everything that distinguishes its instances in several singulars.³⁶ But then whoever does recognize the same universal nature of, say, triangularity, whether in a diagram on the blackboard or in the side of a pyramid, will know about these objects whatever *has to* apply to them in virtue of being triangular, and to the extent that they are triangular.

So, this conception seems to provide a satisfactory account of the possibility of universal knowledge both without the ontological complications of naïve Platonism and without the epistemological complications of illuminationism: since the abstractive intellect has the natural ability to recognize the same nature in its several instances, and also has the ability to perfect this cognition on the basis of further experiences and thought, in possession of this recognition it will also be able to apply the results of this recognition to instances it had never experienced before.

But this solution immediately gives rise to a further question. Aquinas said that the common nature according to its absolute consideration abstracts both from being in the singulars and from being in the mind. But, apparently, precisely according to this consideration it has to be in the mind, for it can be recognized as common *only* when the mind considers it in abstraction from its individuating conditions in the singulars. So how can we say that it abstracts from being in the mind, for which reason it cannot be said to be in the mind, when it can be abstract, and hence a universal, only if it is in the mind?

Here we should carefully distinguish between what we can say about *the same nature as such*, and what we can say about *the same nature on account of its conditions* as it exists in this or that subject.³⁷ Again, using the analogy of a book, we can certainly consistently say that the same book in its printed edition was 200 pages whereas in its electronic edition it had no pagination at all; still, this certainly does not entail that since the book in itself has no pagination, and the book does not have pagination in its electronic form; therefore, the book in itself has to exist in its electronic form. For just as pagination in a particular edition does not belong to the book as such, because the same book may have

³⁵ Note that “reading the singulars” here is not a mere metaphor: this is precisely what geneticists are quite literally doing in the process of gene sequencing, for instance, in the human genome project.

³⁶ Perhaps, it is worth noting here that whoever would want to deny such a *recognizable sameness* in several singulars would have to deny that he is able to recognize the same subject and predicate in an affirmation and a negation; so such a person would not be able to contradict us, since a contradiction requires precisely affirming and denying the same predicate of the same subject.

³⁷ Cf. Cajetan, *Commentary on Being and Essence*, tr. L.J. Kendzierski, F.C. Wade, Marquette Univ. Press: Milwaukee, 1964 (henceforth: Cajetan (1964)), pp. 155-156.

different paginations in different editions, so the lack of pagination in the electronic form does not belong to the book as such, for precisely the same reason. What we can say about the book as such pertains to it on account of its content alone, regardless of what may carry this content. But we may say different, indeed, even contrary things about the same book, depending on the conditions of the actual realization of its content, in this or that carrier of this content.

In the same way, we can truly attribute to the common nature as such only such features that pertain to it on account of what it contains in itself, regardless of what may realize it. But to this common nature as such it does not pertain that it is in this or in that individual, nor that it is in this mind or that mind, or in any mind whatsoever. Nevertheless, it is only insofar as it is in the mind that it is *recognized as the same nature*, on account of the mind’s abstraction. Therefore, that it is abstract and is actually recognized as the same in its many instances is something that belongs to the same nature only on account of being conceived by the abstractive mind. This is the reason why the nature is called a *universal concept*, insofar as it is in the mind. But, it is *only* under this aspect that it is properly called a universal. As Aquinas remarks:

When we speak about an abstract universal, we imply two things, namely the nature of the thing itself, and abstraction or universality. So the nature itself to which it is accidental that it is thought of, or that it is abstracted, or that the intention of universality applies to it, exists only in the singulars, but the nature’s being abstracted or its being thought of or the intention of universality is in the intellect. And we can see this by the similar situation in perception. For sight sees the color of an apple without its smell. Thus, if it is asked: Where is the color that is seen without the smell?—it is obvious that it is nowhere else, but in the apple. But that it is perceived without the smell happens to apply to it [*accidit ei*] on account of sight, insofar as in sight there is a similitude of color but not of smell. Similarly, humanity that is thought of exists only in this or in that man; but that humanity is apprehended without its individuating conditions, which is nothing but for it to be being abstracted, which confers on it the attribute of universality, is an accidental feature of humanity [*accidit humanitati*] in virtue of its being perceived by the intellect, in which there is a similitude of the nature of the species but not of the individuating principles.³⁸

So, although *the universal nature*, namely, *that which is predicable of several singulars*, is nothing but the common nature as such, considered absolutely, still, *that it is predicable of several singulars* pertains to the same nature, not according to its absolute consideration, but only on account of being conceived by the abstractive intellect, that is, insofar as it is a concept of the mind. So, talking about the common nature as such, and not insofar as it exists in the mind, we cannot say that it is a universal, but talking about it insofar as it exists in the mind, we can say that it is a universal.³⁹

³⁸ ST1 q. 85, a. 2, ad 2.

³⁹ It is probably worth noting here that through such reduplicative constructions we can always consistently affirm and deny the same attribute of the same thing on account of what may or may not apply to the same thing under the different aspects specified in the reduplication. For example, it is true that G. W. Bush insofar as he is the president of the US has the right to order military action, but it is not true that he has this

To be sure, even if this response to our original problem may make good sense, it also clearly shows what sort of problems this conceptual framework is bound to generate. Speaking about the same nature possibly receiving contrary attributes in its several instances constantly runs the risk of inconsistency, unless we carefully keep track of what can be said of what according to what actual criteria of identity and distinctness. Accordingly, it is no wonder that authors working in this framework worked out further distinctions to distinguish the various instances of recognizably the same nature to keep track of what can and what cannot be said about it in these various instances under its different considerations.

For, of course, the same nature cannot be abstracted in the mind, unless it is in this or that particular mind, since there is no mind that is not this or that particular mind. So the same common nature, which is to be regarded as a universal insofar as it is considered as it exists in the abstractive mind in general, has to be a particular act of this mind or that mind, insofar as it is considered as it exists in this or that particular mind. As St. Thomas notes:

Although this nature understood in the intellect has the notion of a universal in relation to things outside the soul (because it is one likeness of them all), as the nature has existence in this intellect or in that one, it is a certain particular understood species.⁴⁰

This is the kind of consideration that explains the emergence of the late-medieval distinctions between *expressed* and *impressed species*,⁴¹ and *formal* and *objective concept* on the part of the intellect,⁴² to supplement the Avicennian distinction between *absolute* and *individualized nature* on the part of the represented thing.

But these distinctions can only serve to distinguish the various considerations of the *same nature* in its various instances, leaving the problems of the identity and distinctness of instances of *different natures* still open. Therefore, these distinctions necessarily had to be supplemented with further distinctions of varying strengths between instances of

right insofar as he is the son of an ex-president of the US. For Aquinas' and Cajetan's explanations of the same point concerning what can and cannot be predicated of the common nature, see the passages referred to in the next note.

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, c. 3; cf. also Cajetan (1964, pp. 155-164; 175-179).

⁴¹ The impressed species is the intelligible content abstracted by the agent intellect from sensory representations of singulars, the phantasms. This intelligible species, impressed by the agent intellect upon the potential intellect serves as the principle of the act of concept-formation of the latter, called *formatio*. The result of this act is the expressed species, which is nothing but the formal concept, the universal concept as it exists formally in this singular mind. Cajetan (1964, p. 163); Deely, J. - Powell, R. *Tractatus de Signis: The Semiotic of John Poinsot*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985 (henceforth: Poinsot (1985)), pp. 170, 255-268.

⁴² The objective concept is the representational content of the formal concept, the common nature of singulars insofar as it exists in the mind as its immediate, abstract, universal object. Suarez (1960, pp. 360-361). For a somewhat different interpretation of the same distinction, see also Cajetan (1964, pp. 67-71, 121-124)

different natures in the same carriers of these instances, as well as distinctions between these instances and the carriers of these instances themselves. In fact, we may say that the majority of the great metaphysical debates within this framework concerned precisely these issues, namely, what were the items distinguishable in this framework that *had to* be regarded as distinct, and according to what sorts of distinctions.

Ontological Alternatives of the *Via Antiqua*

In this framework, which can be characterized as the common *semantic* framework of the *via antiqua*,⁴³ the universal or common terms of spoken and written languages are common on account of being imposed on universal concepts of the human mind. The concepts themselves are universal on account of being obtained by the activity of the abstractive human mind from experiences of singulars, extracting the common information content of the same nature realized in several singulars.

This universal information content is common to all minds that form these concepts at all. The common intelligible content gained by these minds from their objects was referred to by late scholastic thinkers as the objective concept [*conceptus obiectivus*] to be distinguished from the formal concepts [*conceptus formales*]⁴⁴ of individual minds carrying this content. So, using this distinction, we may say that the universals of the human mind are these objective concepts, conceived by means of the formal concepts of individual human minds.

These universals, therefore, as the objective concepts of the mind, are to be classified as beings of reason [*entia rationis*], the being of which consists in their being conceived.⁴⁵ To be sure, they are not merely fictitious objects, for they are grounded in the nature of things, insofar as they carry the universal information content abstracted from the singulars. But the universal information content of the objective concept itself, considered not insofar as it is in the mind as its object, but in itself, disregarding whatever

⁴³ I spell out what I take to be the common semantic principles of the *via antiqua* as opposed to those of the *via moderna* in Klima, G. (1999) “Ockham’s Semantics and Ontology of the Categories”, Spade, P. V. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 118-142, and in Klima, G. (1999) “Buridan’s Logic and the Ontology of Modes”, in: Ebbesen, S. (ed.), *Medieval Analyses in Language and Cognition*, Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 1999, pp. 473-495.

⁴⁴ Obviously, once we have this distinction in hand, the question arises as to *which* of these concepts a word is imposed on, i.e., which one of these concepts is signified by the word in the mind. Cajetan’s answer is simple: “Nor should we think that when a term is said to signify a concept, that it signifies only one of the two, for the term *lion* signifies both concepts, although in diverse ways. It is the sign of the formal concept as a means, or that-by-which, and it is the sign of the objective concept as an ultimate, or that-which.” Cajetan (1964, p. 68) For a detailed discussion see Poinot (1985, pp. 344-351)

⁴⁵ Cf. Klima, G., “The Changing Role of *Entia Rationis* in Medieval Philosophy: A Comparative Study with a Reconstruction”, *Synthese* 96(1993), pp. 25-59; Schmidt, R.W., *The Domain of Logic according to Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1966.

may carry it, is distinguished from its carriers both in the singular minds and in the ultimate objects of these minds, the singular things, as the common nature of these things in its absolute consideration.

Therefore, precisely because it abstracts from all existence, the common nature as such cannot be regarded as existing on its own. So, it can only exist in its individualized instances in singulars, informing them, and giving them their recognizably common characteristics. It is on account of the real existence of these individualized instances in the singulars that the common nature can truly be predicated of the singulars, as long as they are actually informed by these individualized instances. As Peter of Spain in the most influential logic textbook of the 13th century argued:

In the proposition ‘Every man is an animal’ the term ‘man’ is taken to stand not only for every man, but also for every animal that is a man, and this is why there are here as many animalities as humanities, speaking from the point of view of physics [*naturaliter loquendo*]. For from the point of view of logic, and not from the point of view of physics [*secundum viam logicae, non naturae*], humanity is the same in any individual of *man*; just as *man* in general [*homo in communi*] is the same. Therefore, that it is *this* animality or *that* is on account of matter. For from the point of view of physics, my humanity is *per se* and is other than your humanity, just as my soul, on account of which my humanity is in me, is other than your soul, which causes your humanity in you.⁴⁶

Accordingly, we may say that a common term that immediately signifies a common concept, as a result of this signification, ultimately signifies the individualized natures of the singulars, although it signifies them in abstraction from their individuating conditions.

But a concrete common term is not imposed to stand for the individualized natures of the singulars, but the bearers of these natures, namely, the singulars themselves. This consideration gives rise to the need to distinguish further between what a term signifies and what it refers to, or using the common transcription of the medieval technical phrase, supposits for. In another very influential 13th-century textbook, the *Summa Lamberti*, we can read the following on this issue:

... the utterance primarily, *per se*, and immediately is the sign of the concept [*intellectus*] of the thing; but further, and ultimately [*mediate*] it is the sign of the thing. For [...] whatever is the sign of the sign is the sign of the significate; therefore, since the utterance is the sign of the concept, and the concept is the sign of the thing [...], the utterance, which is the sign of a sign, namely, of the concept, will be the sign of the significate, namely, of the thing, but immediately the sign of the concept, and ultimately the sign of the thing. Now signification is different from supposition, because [...] signification covers only the thing that the term was imposed to signify, but supposition covers not only the thing that the term signifies, but can also cover the supposita that are contained under that thing. For example, the signification of ‘man’ covers only *man*, and not those

⁴⁶ Peter of Spain: *Tractatus*, ed. L. M. de Rijk, Van Gorcum, Assen, 1972, pp. 87-88. For a detailed analysis of Peter’s argument and its significance in evaluating his “realism”, see Klima, G. (forthcoming 2002) “Peter of Spain, the author of the *Summulae*”, in: J. Gracia and T. Noone (eds.), *Blackwell’s Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, Blackwell Publishers.

contained under *man*: for ‘man’ signifies *man*, but neither Socrates, nor Plato. Yet, ‘man’ can supposit for Socrates, for Plato, and for *man*.

So the term ‘man’, by signifying the concept of man in the mind, signifies the nature conceived by this concept in abstraction from its individuating conditions in the singulars. But since this nature has real existence only in these singulars, the name can be used to refer to the bearers of the nature, the singular supposita themselves, although it can also be used to refer to the nature conceived in abstraction from the singulars. In the former case the term is said to have *personal supposition*, whereas in the latter it is said to have *simple supposition*. For example, in ‘A man is walking’, the term ‘man’ is used to refer to the singulars informed by human nature, whereas in ‘*Man* is a species’ it is used to stand for the nature it signifies, as conceived in abstraction from the singulars.⁴⁷

Given these *semantic* distinctions, between the immediate and ultimate *significata*, and the (several sorts of) *supposita* of terms, this conceptual framework naturally gives rise to the tasks of sorting out which semantic values of which terms should be regarded as distinct or identical, according to what criteria of identity and distinctness. Obviously, the issues were only further complicated by the variations in terminology, and the different criteria of identity and distinctness applied by different authors.

For example, as far as the immediate *significata* of common terms are concerned, already Abelard raised the question of whether the concept or mental image, which we may perhaps identify as the objective concept of later authors, should be identified with the act of thought, which we may identify as the formal concept, or perhaps a further act of the mind, called *formatio*, namely, the potential intellect’s act of forming the concept, using the (impressed) intelligible species as the principle of its action. Such distinctions were later on severely criticized by authors such as John Peter Olivi, or even more importantly, Walter Chatton, who argued for the elimination of intelligible species, and, in general, of any intermediaries between an act of the intellect and its ultimate objects, the singulars conceived in a universal manner.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ In general, in medieval logic (regardless of many disagreements over the details between individual authors), *personal supposition* (when a term is used to refer in a proposition to something of which it can truly be predicated with the mediation of the copula of the proposition in question) was commonly distinguished from *simple supposition* (when the term is used to refer to its *immediate significata*), and *material supposition* (when the term is used to refer to itself or other tokens of its type). For a brief, summary account of the medieval theories of the properties of terms, see Spade, P.V., “The Semantics of Terms”, in N. Kretzmann – A. Kenny – J. Pinborg, *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1982, pp. 188-196

⁴⁸ For Olivi, see Pasnau, R.: “Olivi, Peter John”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Fall 1999 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL=<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/olivi/>. For Chatton, and his importance in changing Ockham’s mind on the ontological status of universals, see Gedeon Gál, “Gualteri de Chatton et Guillelmi de Ockham controversia de natura conceptus universalis,” *Franciscan Studies* 27 (1967), pp. 191–212. See also the references in n. 62.

Furthermore, since terms in simple supposition supposit for their immediate significata, many discussions concerning universals in logical treatises were framed in the context of the discussion of simple supposition, discussing in particular those contexts in which we are forced to acknowledge that we are using our common terms to refer not to their personal supposita, but to their immediate significata, which then obviously raises the question of what those significata are.⁴⁹

But as far as the ultimate significata and personal supposita of common terms are concerned, their identity or distinctness also raised some typical metaphysical questions. Since the abstract counterparts of concrete common terms (as ‘humanity’ is the abstract counterpart of ‘man’) were construed as common terms suppositing for the ultimate significata of the concrete term in its singular supposita, the question of whether a thing is identical with or distinct from its nature was framed as an issue of the identity or distinctness of the supposita of corresponding concrete and abstract terms. This is why, for instance, the doctrine of divine simplicity, as opposed to creaturely complexity, could in this framework be conveyed by claims asserting that God is his own divinity, whereas a man is not his humanity.⁵⁰

Now the idea of this metaphysical complexity of the creatures stemmed from the consideration that what accounts for the specific unity of several individuals of the same species should be something other than what accounts for their numerical distinctness, namely, their principle of individuation. However, one singular entity in a species of several co-specific individuals has to contain both the principle of the specific unity of these individuals and its own principle of individuation. Therefore, this singular entity, being a composite at least of its specific nature and its principle of individuation, has to be distinct from its specific nature. At any rate, this is the situation with material substances, whose principle of individuation was commonly held to be their matter. However, based on this reasoning, immaterial substances, such as angels, could not be regarded as numerically distinct on account of their matter, but only on account of their form. But since form is the principle of specific unity, difference in form causes specific diversity. Therefore, on this basis, any two angels had to be regarded as different in

⁴⁹ This is amply illustrated already in the 12th-century logic tracts edited by L. M. De Rijk: *Logica Modernorum II-1: The Origin and Early Development of the Theory of Supposition*, Assen 1967. But the issue became particularly acute in the debates of Burleigh, Ockham, and Pseudo-Campsall. See Walter Burleigh: *De Puritate Artis Logicae Tractatus Longior with a revised edition of the Tractatus Brevior*, (ed. Ph. Boehner) St. Bonaventure, N.Y., 1955, c.3. pp.7-10; Ockham: *Summa Logicae*, St. Bonaventure N.Y., 1974, (hereafter SL), cc. 12, 14-15; Pseudo-Campsall, R.: *Logica Campsalle Anglicj, valde utilis et realis contra Ocham*, in: Synan, E.A.: *The Works of Richard Campsall*, Vol. 2. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1982 (henceforth: (Pseudo-Campsall, R., 1982)), pp. 351-365.

⁵⁰ As we shall see, this is in stark contrast with the *via moderna* conception, which identifies these semantic values already on the level of semantics.

species. This conclusion was explicitly drawn by Aquinas and others, but it was rejected by Augustinian theologians, and it was condemned in Paris in 1277.⁵¹

So, it is no wonder that authors such as Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus worked out alternative accounts of individuation, introducing not only different principles of individuation, such as the Scotists’ famous (or infamous) *haecceity*, but also different criteria of distinctness and identity, such as those grounding Henry of Ghent’s *intentional distinction*, or Scotus’s *formal distinction*,⁵² or even later Suarez’ *modal distinction*.⁵³

But even further problems arose from considering the identity or distinctness of the individualized natures signified by several common terms in one and the same individual. The metaphysical debate over the real distinction of essence and existence from this point of view is nothing but the issue whether the individualized common nature signified by the definition of a thing is the same as the act of being signified by the verb ‘is’ in the same thing. In fact, the famous problem of the plurality vs. unity of substantial forms may also be regarded as a dispute over whether the common natures signified by the substantial predicates on the Porphyrian tree in the category of substance are distinct or the same in the same individual.⁵⁴

Finally, there was the question of whether one has to regard all individualized common natures signified in the same individual by several predicates in the ten Aristotelian categories as distinct from one another. For example, the much debated issue of the identity or distinctness of relations and their foundations was in fact the question whether the significata of non-relational terms (such as those in the categories of substance, quantity, and quality) are to be regarded as distinct from the significata of relational terms, and if so, then according to what sort of distinction. For allowing a simple real

⁵¹ Cf. For an excellent, brief “textbook-treatment” of, and relevant excerpts from, the 1277 condemnations see “The Condemnation of 1277”, in Hyman, A.–Walsh, J.J., *Philosophy of the Middle Ages*, Hackett: Indianapolis, 1973, which also provides further scholarly references. For a thoroughgoing discussion, see Hissette, R., *Enquête sur les 219 articles condamnés à Paris le 7 Mars 1277*, “Philosophes médiévaux,” vol. 22; Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1977.

⁵² For Henry’s view, as opposed and criticized by the Thomist theologian Thomas of Sutton, see Klima, G. “Thomas of Sutton on the Nature of the Intellective Soul and the Thomistic Theory of Being”, Aertsen, J. *et al.* (eds.), *Nach der Verurteilung von 1277. Philosophie und Theologie an der Universität von Paris im letzten Viertel des 13. Jahrhunderts*, Studien und Texte (Miscellanea Mediaevalia 28), Berlin-New York 2000, pp. 436-455. For the same, as criticized by Duns Scotus, see *Five Texts*, pp. 69-71. For in-depth contemporary discussions of the problem of individuation in the Middle Ages, see Gracia, J., *Individuation in Scholasticism: The Later Middle Ages and the Counter Reformation (1150-1650)*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994. For a comprehensive account of the early history of the problem see, Gracia, J., *Introduction to the Problem of Individuation in the Early Middle Ages*, Analytica Series, München and Washington, DC: Philosophia Verlag and Catholic University of America Press, 1984; 2nd ed. 1988.

⁵³ Cf. Suarez, F., *On the Various Kinds of Distinctions (Disputationes metaphysicae, Disputatio VII, de variis distinctionum generibus)*, tr. intro. C. Vollert, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1947.

⁵⁴ Cf. Callus, D. A.: “Forms, Unicity and Plurality of” in: *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, McGraw-Hill: New York, 1967-79.

distinction between these significata would entail their separability at least by divine power, while allowing their simple real identity would seem to entail their absolute inseparability. But whereas on the former alternative it should be possible for God to create two equal sticks without their equality (whence the two equal sticks could not be said to be equal), on the latter alternative my becoming shorter than my son because he outgrows me would involve losing my height simply on account of losing my equality to him; neither of which seems to be a satisfactory alternative.⁵⁵

To be sure, these problems were not absolutely intractable, but their solution required an ever more sophisticated and ever more complex conceptual apparatus, involving hair-splitting distinctions, seemingly committing the participants of the debates to innumerable many, rather weird entities in their ontology, and apparently just as many subtle ways of talking past each other in their logic.

So, anyone who wanted to get rid of these complications had to go to the root of these problems, namely, to that semantic framework within which these problems naturally arose. This was precisely the tack taken by William Ockham, leading to the emergence of a radically new conceptual framework, opening up a new way of discussing philosophical, theological, and scientific problems: the *via moderna*.

The alternative semantics and epistemological dilemmas of the *via moderna*

As we could see, the *via antiqua* conception naturally leads to a need for distinctions between various semantic values of terms in all categories. Indeed, according to Ockham, the *via antiqua* conception would entail that

a column is to the right by to-the-rightness, God is creating by creation, is good by goodness, just by justice, mighty by might, an accident inheres by inherence, a subject is subjected by subjection, the apt is apt by aptitude, a chimera is nothing by nothingness, someone blind is blind by blindness, a body is mobile by mobility, and so on for other, innumerable cases.⁵⁶

But this stems precisely from the root (*radix*) of all errors, namely,

multiplying beings according to the multiplicity of terms... which, however, is erroneous and leads far away from the truth⁵⁷

⁵⁵ For a comprehensive discussion of the issues involved, see Henninger, M. 1989 *Relations: Medieval Theories 1250-1325*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1989. For a more recent treatment of the topic, focusing more closely on the semantic aspects of the problems, see Brower, J.: “Medieval Theories of Relations”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2001 Edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relations-medieval/>

⁵⁶ Ockham, W. *Summa Logicae*, Boehner, Ph. *et al.*, eds.: *Opera Philosophica*, vol. I., The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure, N.Y., 1974. part 1, c. 51, p. 169.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p.171.

To be sure, Ockham’s charges are not quite justified.⁵⁸ After all, several *via antiqua* authors *did* allow the identification of the semantic values of terms belonging to various categories, indeed, applying several, stricter and looser criteria of identity; so their “multiplication of beings” did not necessarily match the multiplicity of terms. Furthermore, since *via antiqua* authors also distinguished between various modes or senses of being, allowing various sorts of “diminished” kinds of being,⁵⁹ such as *beings of reason*, their ontological commitments were certainly not as unambiguous as Ockham would have us believe in this passage.⁶⁰

But Ockham’s intent was not just to get rid of the real or perhaps merely apparent unwanted ontological commitments of his opponents, but rather to simplify the entire conceptual apparatus together with its available, yet rather complicated ways of getting rid of such ontological commitments. Accordingly, Ockham based his program on a radical reinterpretation of the fundamental semantic relationships in his logical theory.⁶¹ The basic structure preserves the old Aristotelian “semantic triangle” connecting words, concepts, and things, but the way concepts relate our common words to singular things is vastly simplified.

Ockham’s universals, at least in his mature theory,⁶² are no longer the common natures “contracted” to individuals by some really or merely formally distinct principle of individuation, conceived in abstraction from these individuating principles by the mind, and hence existing as universals only in a “diminished” manner, as mere *beings of reason*, as the objects of the mind. Ockham’s universals are just our common terms and concepts. Our common terms, which are singular utterances or inscriptions, are common in virtue of being subordinated to our common concepts. Our common concepts, on the other hand, are just singular acts of our singular minds. Their universality consists simply in the universality of their representative function. For example, the common term ‘man’ is a spoken or written universal term of English, because it is subordinated to that concept

⁵⁸ I argue for this claim in detail in Klima, G. “Ockham’s Semantics and Metaphysics of the Categories”, in: Spade, P. V. , ed.: *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 118-142.

⁵⁹ See Armand Maurer, “*Ens diminutum*: A Note on Its Origin and Meaning,” *Mediaeval Studies* 12 (1950), pp. 216–222.

⁶⁰ Cf. Klima, G. “Ontological Alternatives vs. Alternative Semantics in Medieval Philosophy”, in: Bernard, J., ed.: *Logical Semiotics: S - European Journal for Semiotic Studies*, 3(1991), Vienna, pp. 587-618.

⁶¹ In Klima, G., “The Changing Role of *Entia Rationis* in Medieval Philosophy: A Comparative Study with a Reconstruction”, *Synthese* 96(1993), pp. 25-59, I characterize Ockham’s most fundamental move as a systematic type-lowering of the relation of signification of categorematic terms.

⁶² For a recent summary of the development of Ockham’s views on this matter see Pasnau, R., *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1997, pp. 277-289, esp. 278, n. 47, where the author provides further references to the existing secondary literature. A particularly illuminating account of Ockham’s early *fictum* theory is provided by Read, S.L., “The Objective Being of Ockham’s Ficta”, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 27(1977), pp.14-31.

of our minds by which we conceive of each and every man indifferently. Accordingly, there is no need to assume that there is anything in the individual humans, (really or just formally) distinct from these humans themselves, a common yet individualized nature waiting to be abstracted by the mind. All we need to assume is that two humans are more similar to each other than either of them to a brute animal, and all animals are more similar to each other than any of them to a plant, etc., and that the mind, being able to recognize this similarity, is able to represent the humans by means of a common specific concept, the animals by means of a common generic concept, all living things by means of a more general generic concept, etc. In this way, then, the common terms subordinated to these concepts need not signify some abstract common nature in the mind, and consequently its individualized instances in the singulars, for they directly signify the singulars themselves, just as they are directly conceived by the universally representative acts of the mind. So, what these common terms signify are just the singulars themselves, which are also the things supposed for by these terms when they are used in propositions. Accordingly, in this framework no subtle metaphysical arguments are needed to determine whether the significata and supposita of common terms are (really, formally, or merely conceptually) distinct in the different cases of various kinds of things: this issue is pre-determined here as a matter of semantics. The personal supposita of a common term are nothing but those significata of the term that the term is actually taken to stand for in the given propositional context, since the significata are just the singulars the term indifferently signifies by virtue of being subordinated to a concept indifferently representing, and hence naturally signifying, those singulars.

However, the way this indifferent representation is supposed to ground Ockham's semantic theory raises a fundamental question, challenging the viability of Ockham's semantic program on the level of exactly how this fundamental semantic relation between concepts and things is established.

The question is basically Abelard's first question: What is the common cause in accordance with which a common name is imposed? Or, rephrasing it somewhat more closely to Ockham's conception: What is it that accounts for the relation of natural signification between universal concepts of the mind and singular entities of extramental reality?⁶³

Now even without going into a detailed criticism of Ockham's proposed answers in terms of the similarity and causality of the singulars represented by these concepts,⁶⁴ it is clear that a legitimate answer has to be able to account for the possibility of our universal

⁶³ The following discussion of this question derives from my unpublished comments on Peter King's talk "The Failure of Ockham's Nominalism", presented at the Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Pittsburgh, PA, April 26, 1997. Peter King's paper and my comments are available online at URL = <http://www.fordham.edu/gsas/phil/klima/>

⁶⁴ For details see Adams, M.M., *William Ockham*, University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, IN, 1987, I, c.3, pp.121-133.

awareness of a potential infinity of singulars, based on our experience of a limited number of these singulars.

However, this seems to require at least that our concepts represent singulars belonging to the same kind in that respect in which these singulars should be similar to each other in order to belong to the same kind. Otherwise a concept could not represent all singulars of the same kind on the basis of acquaintance only with a limited number of them, since it has no direct causal contact with any of the “new” singulars, and its contact with the “old” ones cannot serve as the basis for representing the “new” ones, for it does not represent them in that respect in which the old ones are naturally connected to the “new” ones. But if it *does* represent these singulars in that respect in which they are similar insofar as they are members of the given kind, then, clearly, any “new” particular of the same kind will be represented by this concept in the same respect, so it will be represented by this concept despite the lack of a direct acquaintance with it, and so the concept can serve as the basis of induction over singulars of the kind in question. So a legitimate answer to Abelard’s question requires that concepts be treated as representing singulars only indirectly, in that respect in which the singulars are similar to each other.

But once this requirement is made explicit, it is easy to see exactly why Ockham’s account cannot meet it. For according to Ockham’s account, a universal concept naturally signifies its singular objects not indirectly, not in respect of what they are similar to each other, but directly, without specifying such a respect, yet, somehow indifferently. So, Ockham’s account is incompatible with the above-described requirement.

Therefore, it appears that in response to Abelard’s question the *via antiqua* can offer us a story which is simply unavailable to Ockham’s mature theory. Being the staunch nominalist he is, Ockham simply cannot afford the luxury of talking about *different instances of the same nature*, so he cannot say that concepts represent singulars with respect to their common nature. But his realist opponents can claim without further ado that concepts represent singulars indirectly, in that respect in which the singulars are similar to each other, namely, in respect of their common nature, because the concepts of individual human minds are just further instances of the same nature that informs these objects. To be sure, the nature informing these minds and the distinct singulars can only be formally, but not numerically the same nature. Also, since the mind informed by this nature does not become one of the singulars having this nature, but merely representative of them in respect of this nature, the nature has to have a different mode of being in the mind than in the singulars (as is the case with the common content of the printed and electronic versions of the same book). As a consequence, the realist account will have its own problems in explaining what it means for numerically distinct entities to be formally the same, and what it means for the same nature that informs the singulars to have a different mode of being in the mind. Still, the realist account is at least clearly able to give an answer to the fundamental question of what makes a particular act of a certain human mind related to a whole set of singulars despite the fact that a human mind typically cannot get into causal contact with all those singulars.

Therefore, it is no mere coincidence that Pseudo-Campsall explicitly states that Ockham’s division of terms into absolute and connotative is mistaken,⁶⁵ for even absolute terms have to signify whatever they signify in respect of something, namely, in respect of the common nature directly represented by the concept to which they are subordinated, contrary to what Ockham claims in his distinction. A similar point is raised also by a later realist, Domingo Soto.⁶⁶

Indeed, Soto’s case very clearly shows that the disagreement between realists and nominalists in general is not primarily ontological. For Soto retains the semantic distinction between that which an absolute term *materially signifies*, which he calls its material significate, and that *in respect of which* it signifies its material significate, namely, that which it *formally signifies*, and which, therefore, he calls its formal significate. Still, Soto denies any ontological distinction between the two,⁶⁷ and so, despite his “realistic” semantics, he ends up with the same ontology as the nominalist John Buridan. In fact, Soto’s and Buridan’s *common* ontological difference from Ockham is their common refusal to identify quantity with substance. So, they can endorse the same ontology, despite their different semantics. However, it is precisely their *semantic* difference that accounts for the fact that Soto’s theory is compatible with the above-mentioned requirement in answering Abelard’s question, whereas Buridan’s, just like Ockham’s, is not. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that when Buridan is vehemently arguing against some contemporary skeptics concerning our ability to acquire substantial concepts, in his epistemology to some old ways of talking about abstraction that he could not quite consistently afford in his semantics.⁶⁸

So, the nominalists’ *semantic* innovations, while they easily avoided the realists’ *ontological* problems, quite directly led to a number of new *epistemological* problems. At any rate, it seems to be clear that the emergence of the *via moderna* definitely helped in pushing the interest of subsequent generations of philosophers in the direction of epistemology, which became the major preoccupation of philosophers in the early modern period.

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⁶⁵ Pseudo-Campsall, R.(1982, c. 9)

⁶⁶ Soto, D. *Summulae, Svmmlarvm aeditio secunda*, Salmanticae: Excudebat Andreas a Portonariis, 1554, reprint, Georg Olms Verlag: Hildesheim, New York, 1980, lb. 1, c. 7.

⁶⁷ Soto, D. *In Porphyrii Isagogen, Aristotelis Categorias, librosque de Demonstratione, Commentaria*, Venice, ex officina Dominici Guarraei, et Io. Baptistae, fratrum, 1587, reprint Frankfurt: Minerva, 1967, c. 5, q.1.

⁶⁸ Cf. Buridan, J.: *Quaestiones super Octo Libros Physicorum Aristotelis* (QiP), Minerva: Frankfurt A.M., 1964 (Paris, 1590), lb. 1, q. 4; Thijssen, H.: “John Buridan and Nicholas of Autrecourt on Causality and Induction”, in *Traditio*, 43(1987), pp. 237-255.