Filosofia Unisinos
9(1):64-83, jan/abr 2008
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Duns Scotus's Theory of Common Natures

Teoria da natureza comum de Duns Scotus

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ABSTRACT: This paper looks at some of Duns Scotus's innovations in the theory of common nature. Scotus criticized the dominant scholastic theory of universals, according to which natures are of themselves individual but are somehow correctly conceived by the mind as universal, and developed a more clearly realist theory by appropriating and developing Avicenna's theory. I discuss Scotus's arguments for this lesser unity, and look at how the lesser unity is accounted for in his metaphysics. I also discuss Scotus's formal distinction and his account of the relationship between conceptual thought and reality. I try to show that good sense can be made of Scotus's theory, and that the rather extravagant metaphysics that it involves might be justified, given how much explanatory work the theory can do.

Key words: Duns Scotus, universals, common nature, formal distinction.

RESUMO: Este artigo analisa algumas das inovações de Duns Scotus na teoria da natureza comum. Scotus criticou a teoria dos universais dominante, de acordo com a qual naturezas são individuais em si próprias mas são concebidas pela mente como universais, e desenvolveu uma teoria mais claramente realista a partir da teoria de Avicena. Analiso os argumentos de Scotus para esta mínima unidade e a forma como a mínima unidade é destacada em sua metafísica. Também trato da distinção formal de Scotus e sua relação entre pensamento conceitual e a realidade. O artigo tenta mostrar que o bom senso pode surgir a partir da teoria de Scotus e que a metafísica extravagante que ela implica pode ser justificada, devido aos esclarecimentos que a teoria pode fazer.

Palavras-chave: Duns Scotus, universais, natureza comum, distinção formal.

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Duns Scotus and his Predecessors on Universals

Duns Scotus's theory of common natures is a development of a position which has come to be known as 'moderate realism'. On the traditional moderate realist view, universality is a feature of natures as they are conceived by the mind; universality is not a feature of the extra-mental world. Natures in themselves are taken to be individual, and universals are regarded as concepts somehow constructed by the mind, based on cognition of the (individual) natures. This was the dominant position on universals among the high mediaeval Scholastics. This account of universals originated with Alexander of Aphrodisias' interpretation of Aristotle, and was transmitted to the Latin world by Boethius.

Like many of his contemporaries, Scotus was greatly influenced by a reworking of this theory by the eleventh century Persian philosopher Avicenna. Avicenna also held that universality was accidental to the nature as such, being an attribute of the nature, as it exists in the mind. Where he departed from his predecessors was in also denying that the nature was of itself *individual*; individuality, as well as universality, is accidental to the nature as such.

The starting point for the problem of universals is the obvious fact that many of the classifications we make are non-arbitrary; for instance, classifications such as 'is human', 'is an animal', or 'is white'. We classify things according to their shared properties; it seems preposterous that they might just be a creation of the mind. The question arises, 'what basis is there for the non-arbitrariness of classification?'

On Alexander's view, members of a species must share *one* nature, in some sense. But human nature, for instance, cannot be *numerically one* because then it could not exist in different things. Alexander wrote in his *quaestiones,* 2.28, 78, 18-20: "But genus taken as genus is not a thing that underlies (*pragma ti hupokeimenon*), but a mere name, and it possesses the [property of] being common in its being thought of, not in some reality (*hupostasis*)" (*in* Sorabji, 2004, p. 152). Each human being has his or her own individual nature. 'Human nature' is *common* only as it exists in the mind; that is, only when it is abstracted from individuals. Universals, then, are considered to be purely mental entities. But does this universality have a *basis* in reality? If it does not, is it then a mere creation of the mind – something invented by us that tells us nothing about the world itself? If all natures in the extra-mental world are really individual, are we not mistaken in the way we think about the world? But the fact that universals are mind-dependent does not imply that universality is *itself* wholly a creation of the mind; there must be a real basis for universality in the extra-mental world.

The problem with this position is that natures as they exist in the world do not have any real unity that grounds their membership of a species, and so it leaves the source of the objectivity of classification unexplained. We are left with an inadequate account of how the universal "man" that we abstract from Socrates is the same as that abstracted from Plato. All we have is the fact that we do perceive a commonness in nature between distinct individuals, without an adequate account of how this perceived commonness might constitute knowledge about the world.

In order to provide a basis for the relation between the world (which is made up of individuals) and the conceptual order, Avicenna posited entities of a third type which are neither universal nor individual, these are common natures. On his theory, as the nature exists in the mind it is universal, and as it exists in extra-mental reality it is individual. But as it is *of itself* the nature is neither individual nor universal; it is indifferent to both ways of existing. The nature "humanity" as it exists of itself contains only what is included in its definition (singularity and universality are not included in this definition). Although natures never actually exist other than in

individuals or in minds, the nature as it is of itself (i.e., considered without the accidental features of universality or particularity) does exist. Of itself it has a *lesser* kind of being. Given that natures are lacking in unity, they cannot properly be said to exist. But, nevertheless, natures of themselves have quidditative being, which is prior to existential being, being in reality, either in individuals or in the mind. Of themselves, then, natures have a lesser being but lack any unity.

Mediaeval philosophers of the Latin tradition held that Avicenna's common natures, with their lesser being, did not pre-exist their real instances, and most modern commentators have followed that line. Therefore, talk of lesser being is generally interpreted as meaning "of itself undetermined" (i.e., undetermined to one or other manner of real existence), and incapable of independent existence. Avicenna's own writings seem to show, however, that he was committed to shadowy "possible beings" (natures that can have full existence "added" to them), and which have some form of being prior to being instantiated in individuals or existing as objects of thought (Avicenna, 2005). Duns Scotus certainly did not believe that natures of themselves had a lesser being in this quasi-platonic sense, and while he attributed a less than numerical unity to the nature, and a corresponding quidditative being, this should not be interpreted as implying a diminished degree of being. Scotus held that "being" is to be taken univocally in all cases. On his view, there are no hierarchies of being real. The quidditative being is, then, just as real as any other being, and is not at all diminished.

According to Avicenna, the nature as it exists in the object is, then, the same nature that exists in the mind, and it is this *common* nature that is predicated of different individuals. This is meant to guarantee the objectivity of our judgements of classification. As it is of itself, the humanity of Socrates does not differ from the humanity of Plato; but nor do they have any unity either, because while Avicenna attributed a lesser-being to the nature considered in itself, he did not attribute to it any unity. But if the common nature has no unity of itself, then we will still lack an objective grounding for attributing the same nature to Socrates and to Plato. In Martin Tweedale's words: "If that priority of the nature is to be preserved, the nature cannot, prior to abstraction, merely be the multiplicity of its instances" (Tweedale, 1993, p. 89).

Duns Scotus accepted the Avicennian view that the common nature as it exists in reality is individual, and as it exists in the mind is universal. According to Scotus, the nature of itself has less than numerical unity. The common nature *of itself* is indifferent to either mode of existence. Scotus argued that some things do have natures or essences in common, prior to any cognitive activity. Quoting Scotus:

> For although it [i.e., the nature] is never really *without* some one of these features [i.e., particularity and universality], yet it is not any of them *of itself*, but is naturally prior to all of them. In accordance with this natural priority, the [quiddity or] what-the-thing-is is the per se object of the intellect and is per se, as such, considered by the metaphysician and expressed by the definition (Duns Scotus, 1994, *Ordinatio* II, d.3, p.1, q.1, n.32 p. 63).

While the common nature does not exist independently of the things of which it is a part, it is, nevertheless, *prior* to those things; e.g., human nature is ontologically prior to Socrates. And the common nature also has a being proper to itself, Scotus called this 'quidditative being' or 'essential being'.

Common nature humanity is ontologically prior to any particular individual human being, because there is a relation of dependence whereby an individual human depends for his or her existence on the existence of human nature, whereas the common nature humanity does not depend on any one human for its existence.

This does not, however, imply that human nature existed temporally prior to the existence of individual humans. This also implies an explanatory priority, we appeal to human nature to explain certain similarities between Socrates and Plato. Scotus called this ontological and explanatory priority natural priority.

> Just as a nature, according to its being, is not *of itself* universal but rather universality is *accidental* to the nature according to its primary aspect according to which it is an object, so too in the external thing where the nature is together with singularity, the nature is not *of itself* determined to singularity but is naturally prior to the aspect that contracts it to that singularity [i.e., the individuating principle or 'haecceity'.] And insofar as it is naturally prior to that contracting aspect, it is not incompatible with it to be without that contracting aspect (Duns Scotus, 1994, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p.1, q.1, n. 34, p. 64).

According to Scotus, what distinguishes two things that share a common nature is that each has an individuating principle, "haecceity" *(haecceitas)* or "thisness", which is peculiar to it. This haecceity and the common nature it contracts (i.e., "narrows down", i.e., makes individual) are formally distinct. This is not a *real* distinction in Scotus's sense, meaning that at least one of the two could exist without the other, but neither is it merely a mental distinction (which is purely a creation of the mind). Rather, *a* and *b* are formally distinct prior to the operation of the mind; the *haecceity* and the *common nature* in Socrates are really identical, i.e., they are not separable; but one can be conceived of without the other, and this distinction is also mirrored in reality.

Natures and Individuation

Duns Scotus's discussion of common natures takes place in the context of his refutation of a form of nominalism according to which natures are individual of themselves and common only in thought. Scotus posed the question: "Is a material substance individual or singular from itself, that is from its nature?" (Duns Scotus, 1994, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. 1.q. 1, n. 1, p. 57). What does it mean for something to be an individual? Something is an individual if it is impossible that there be several instances of it. Duns Scotus took "individuality" to be equivalent to "indivisibility into subjective parts". The mediaevals tended to speak of natures being *divided* into the particulars having that nature; these instances of the nature are the subjective parts of the nature. The divine nature which the persons of the Trinity share was regarded as being numerically one and so is not divided in this way. Scotus therefore thought of the divine nature as being a universal (Cross, 2005, p. 165-170, 2003, p. 43-63). Created natures were said to be divisible into "subjective parts", or instances. So "humanity" or human nature is divisible into subjective parts, individual instances of the nature (e.g., Socrates, Plato, etc.), whereas an individual human being is incapable of being so divided; there cannot be several instances of Socrates. In the *Lectura* version of Scotus's questions on individuation, the first question reads: "Is a material substance of its very nature numerically one, incapable of division into several individuals [i.e., instances of itself]?" (Duns Scotus, 2005, *Lectura* II, d. 3, q. 1, n. 1). What, then, makes an individual resistant to having instances, to being divided into subjective parts?

The first position considered by Duns Scotus was that individual things are of themselves individual. A thing's nature is individual of itself. "Only through an operation of the intellect does it take on the character of a universal" (Duns Scotus, 2005, *Lectura* II, d. 3, q. 1, n. 6).

Numerical Unity and Less than numerical unity

Avicenna held that the nature of itself has a lesser, or diminished, being but no unity of itself, because he believed that the only unity was numerical unity (Avicenna, 2005, v. 1.; Owens, 1957, p. 2-4). This option was not open to Scotus, who accepted the equation of the transcendentals *Being* and *Unity*, a view that came to the Scholastics from Augustine of Hippo, and was fairly universally accepted in Latin philosophy by the twelfth century. So if something exists then we must be able to attribute unity to it. And because Aquinas also limited unity to numerical unity, and denied that nature had (numerical) unity of itself, and given that being and unity are equivalent, Aquinas denied that nature had any being of itself (Aquinas, 1965, III). Duns Scotus, then, believed that the common nature had a real less than numerical unity, and had corresponding being. Is the being that corresponds to the lesser unity a lesser form of being, like that found in Avicenna's account of common nature? It is not. Scotus believed that being is a univocal concept, and does not come in degrees of intensity. The being attributed to God is the same as that attributed to beings in the created world. So while Scotus gave a special name to the common nature's being — he called it quidditative being or essential being — this does not mean that it is a lesser being, or is somehow less real. So while unity is subject to degrees, being is not, and all the types of unity are equally real. Scotus argued that unless we admit real unities other than numerical unity, we will not be able to give an account of the fact that there can be many men but only one Socrates. Were it not the case that various grades of less than numerical unity could be discerned within individuals, in addition to numerical unity, we would be unable to have objective knowledge of the world. If all unities were numerical unities all things would be equally distinct, because all distinctness would amount to being numerically different (Duns Scotus, 1994, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, n. 23, 1998, *Questions on the Metaphysics* VII, q. 18, n. 4). Science is based on knowledge of the essences of things; plants and animals, for instance, can be categorized according to their varying degrees of similarity. Unless (prior to thought) there were real unities less than numerical unity, Scotus argued, we could not account for the degrees of distinctness that we discern in the world. Scotus is unique in scholastic thought in postulating less than numerical unities in his metaphysics.

In the first of his six questions on individuation, Scotus argued against the view that holds that a thing's nature is of itself numerically one and, therefore, the nature of the thing suffices to explain the thing's individuality. Scotus presented two arguments against the view, arguing that the nature must have a unity that is less than numerical unity.

The first argument relies on the fact that our knowledge of the world involves applying universal concepts to things in the world (Duns Scotus, 1994, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, n. 7, 2005, *Lectura* II, d. 3, q. 1, n. 8). Whatever unity a nature has is independent of the intellect, and prior to any act of intellect. Given that the object of the intellect is prior to the act of understanding the object, if the object of the intellect is singular of itself and the nature is grasped by the intellect as universal, then the nature is misapprehended by the intellect. "[…] The intellect understanding that object under the aspect of universal understands it under an aspect opposite to the object's very notion" (Duns Scotus, 1994, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, t. 1, q. 1, n. 7). If the natures of things were really individual of themselves, then conceiving of natures as universal or general in character would be a radical misconception of the world. An individual stone is numerically one, however, if "stone-nature" were numerically one we would be mistaken in conceiving of "stone-nature" as a universal concept,

applicable to many different individuals. Our universal concepts systematically misrepresent the world, and the possibility of objective, scientific knowledge of the world would appear to be ruled out. Scotus's point here is that if our universal ideas do not have some basis in reality then they are pure figments, revealing to us nothing about the world. The real correlates of our universal concepts cannot be individuals, because individuality is strictly opposed to universality. However, the real correlates of universal concepts need not themselves be universal, as long as they are not *opposed* to universality, as individuality is. If I conceive of the concept "man" as a universal, applicable to many, I am mistaken in conceiving of it in a manner opposite to the way it really is (i.e., singular). But my concept "man" is universal whereas the nature itself is not universal but is common; isn't this also contrary to how it is in reality, and, therefore, am I not still mistaken in my understanding? No, the common nature is neither universal nor singular of itself; it is not of itself *opposed* to universality and singularity but indifferent to them. So I can detect a commonness among natures by means of universal concepts.

The second argument against the idea that natures are numerical unities is based on the fact that individuals differ from natures in that natures can have multiple instances whereas individuals cannot (Duns Scotus, 1994, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, n. 8, 2005, *Lectura*, II, d. 3, q. 1, n. 9). Scotus argued that the nature cannot be responsible for an individual's individuality, because the unity that we can attribute to a nature (whereby several things can exhibit the same nature) is less than the unity of the individual.

A given stone is an individual, a *"this"*, in Scotus's terminology. The individual stone has numerical unity, and numerical unity is opposed to multiplicity; i.e., there cannot be several instances of a numerical unity, so there cannot be several of "this stone".

The unity of stone-nature, if it were numerical unity, would be opposed to multiplicity – there could not be several stones, several instances of the stone-nature. Therefore, stone-nature has a less than numerical unity.

> […] Nothing is of itself one by a unity greater than the unity proper to it, because it is not inconsistent with a lesser [i.e., specific] unity that there should be [more than one, whereas such] a multitude would be opposed to a greater [i.e., individual] unity […] (Duns Scotus, 1998, *Questions on the Metaphysics* VII, q.13, n. 61)[2].

According to Scotus, unity comes in degrees. The unity that unites members of a genus is less than the unity that unites the members of a species, and the unity that unites the members of a species is itself less than the *numerical* unity that an individual substance has. The specific unity, by which Socrates and Plato belong to the same species, man, is less than the unity whereby this individual is an individual. The greatest degree of unity, according to Scotus, is that of the individual, which (unlike species and genera) is not divisible into subjective parts, each of which is an instance of it. Only individuals are one in a full and proper sense. Scotus usually distinguished three types of unity, individual unity, specific unity, and generic unity. But he also attributed a special unity to the universal, given that universals are real; this is a form of numerical unity, the unity of an individual concept that can be applied to a multiplicity.

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[2] The *Lectura* version of this argument reads: " […] a lesser unity is consistent with the opposite of a greater unity; therefore a numerical unity multitude, the opposite of a greater unity, is consistent or compatible with a unity that is less than numerical unity; now the same thing is not consistent with the opposite of itself; therefore, this unity less than numerical unity is not itself a numerical unity" (Duns Scotus, 2005, *Lectura*, II, d. 3, q. 1, n. 10).

According to other moderate realists who held that the only kind of unity is numerical unity, generic unity and specific unity cannot be *real* unities. They still maintained that there was a truth to the matter of whether or not a thing was a member of a certain genus or species, but, because they denied less than numerical unities, they would not allow that prior to consideration by the mind two distinct things could have the same nature. All real entities were therefore taken to be individuals. However, according to Duns Scotus, unless there is real unity among members of a genus (prior to consideration by the mind), saying that two things are members of a certain genus will not furnish us with any information about reality.

The unity the nature has is less than the numerical unity of the thing (e.g., the individual stone). The thing is not capable of having several instances, whereas the nature is. Therefore, the nature is not of itself singular and is not responsible for the individuality of the thing. We can discern distinct types of unity within one substance, numerical unity (the unity appropriate to something that is an individual thing) and less than numerical unity (the unity appropriate to something that is repeatable or capable of multiplicity – a thing's nature or accidental properties). According to the various true concepts that a substance falls under, (stone, "*this* stone", etc.) an appropriate degree of unity can be assigned. The less than numerical unity of nature is a *real* unity, in the sense that it is not fabricated by the mind, this means that the nature is not just a set of instances, but has a being proper to itself.

Some Presuppositions of Duns Scotus's Theory of Common Nature

I believe that Duns Scotus's theory takes the distinctive form it does in part due to some presuppositions on his part. I shall mention three central presuppositions which might usefully be kept in mind when looking at Scotus's theory: (i) that Scotus operated within a framework of constituent ontology, (ii) that he held some form of truth-maker principle, and (iii) that his account of mind-world relation was what Allan Wolter called "Isomorphic". All three terms are clearly highly anachronistic, but I use them to draw out central aspects of Scotus's metaphysical thinking.

Constituent Ontology

In common with the mediaevals in general, Duns Scotus accepted what has come to be known in recent literature as a *"constituent ontology"*. That is, he believed that an exhaustive account of what a thing is can be given purely in terms of its internal constituents. Nicholas Wolterstorff contrasts this with the dominant framework of twentieth century metaphysics which he calls *"relation ontology"* (Wolterstorff, 1991, p. 540-541). According to Wolterstorff:

> It has become habitual for us twentieth century philosophers, when thinking of essences, to think of things as *having* essences, and to think of these essences as certain properties or sets of properties. An essence is thus for us an abstract entity. For a medieval, I suggest, an essence or nature was just as concrete as that of which it is the nature […]. Naturally the medieval will speak of something *having* a certain nature. But the *having* here is to be understood as *having as one of its constituents*. Very much of the difference between medieval and contemporary ontology hangs on these two very different construals of "having". Whereas for the medievals, *having an essence* was, having an essence as one of its constituents, for us, having an essence is, *having an essence* as one of its properties, exemplifying it (Wolterstorff, 1991, p. 541-542).

Truth-Makers

Scotus accepted a form of truth-maker principle[3]. A "truth-maker" is whatever it is that makes a proposition true. The general idea is that if a proposition is true then there is something that makes it true. A truth-maker is some positive entity that explains why a proposition is true. The term "truth-maker" is a product of the twentieth century, but the principle is common in realist metaphysics. In the modern discussion, truth-makers are generally taken to be facts or states of affairs. Things, in the loosest sense of the term, were the primary "truth-makers" among the scholastics. The important idea in thinking about truth-makers is that, if a proposition is true, there must be some "ontological ground"[4] in virtue of which it is true. In Scotus's thought the "truth-makers" tend to be the internal constituents of things. On Scotus's view, there must be something positive in the thing in virtue of which it is similar to or different from another individual.

Isomorphism between Conceptual Thought and Reality

The truth-maker criterion demands that if something is true then there must be something positive that makes it so. Extending this principle, Scotus held that any true or irreducible concept, i.e., one that applies correctly to the world, must have a correlate in the real world – something real that corresponds to the concept, and is the real basis for that concept. Conceptual thought mirrors reality directly, if it did not how could we claim to have any objective scientific knowledge of the world? If our concepts do not *correspond* to reality, they misrepresent reality to us. And if our concepts do reveal to us anything about the world, there must be something in the world that corresponds to our concept. As Allan Wolter puts Scotus's view,

> The one essential point he [Scotus] returns to again and again is that howsoever we may choose to conceive the thing, if our concepts reflect something about the latter, there must be something positive in that thing which corresponds thereto, and this positive entity or reality is not something that thing has only because we happen to be thinking about it (Wolter, 1962, p. 47).

Allan Wolter describes the relationship between conceptual thought and the world in Duns Scotus as "isomorphic" (Wolter, 1962, p.44), because Scotus held that the conceptual order directly mirrors reality. A metaphor borrowed from mathematics, an isomorphism is a structure-preserving one-to-one correspondence. Wolter in fact describes the thought-reality relation among realist Scholastics in general as "isomorphic", in that conceptual thought is seen as reflecting metaphysical reality in some sense. However, it is in Scotus alone that it is *strictly* isomorphic, where we can really say that individual *concepts* map onto reality one-to-one in such a way that the structure of reality is mirrored by conceptual thought.

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[3] The truth-maker theory is associated with the thought of such contemporary philosophers as D. M. Armstrong, Kevin Mulligan, Barry Smith, Peter Simons and Stephen Mumford. Its roots in twentieth century philosophy are to be found in Bertrand Russell, Edmund Husserl, and Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* (Armstrong, 2004).
[4] A term used in this context by Gustav Bergmann (*in* Armstrong, 1989, p. 88-89).

The Metaphysics of Common Nature

Having established that natures are not of themselves individual, but have a unity less than numerical unity, Duns Scotus went on to give a more detailed characterization of the metaphysics of the nature and its less than numerical unity, "the elusive ground of resemblance" (Matteo, 1985, p. 87).

Scotus's arguments have established that natures are not of themselves individual, but, according to Scotus, neither are natures universal of themselves. Borrowing Avicenna's dictum "Equinity is only equinity" (Duns Scotus, 1994, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, n. 31), Scotus argued that, prior to existence in individuals or in the mind, natures are of themselves neither universal nor particular. According to Duns Scotus, individual existence and mental existence (as universal) are modes of the nature's being. What mode a nature has does not, however, alter its intelligible content.

> Equinity is only equinity. Of itself it is neither one nor several, neither universal nor particular. I understand: It [i.e., the nature] is not from itself one by numerical unity, or several by the plurality opposite to that unity. It is neither actually universal – that is, in the way something is universal insofar as it is an object of the intellect – nor particular of itself (Duns Scotus, 1994, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. 1, q.1, n.31).

The commonness enjoyed by the nature is what explains similarities among things. However, this commonness is not the same as universality. Unlike the universal, the common nature is "divided" into subjective parts, so the nature is not exactly the same in each of the individuals that have that nature. How does this common nature ground the objectivity of similarity, causation and so on, if it is nothing more than a set of individuals mysteriously bound together by a mysterious less than numerical unity? What does this commonness amount to? The commonness of the nature is described by Scotus in terms of the nature's indifference to existing in this or that individual, as the nature of an individual other than the individual whose nature it actually is.

> […] if we are speaking of reality, the humanity that is in Socrates is not the humanity which is in Plato, and it is a real difference stemming from the individual differences unitatively contained in each which are inseparable here [in Socrates] and there [in Plato]. But if we exclude the difference here and there, in such a way that the nature is not thought of as having in itself the maximal unity, but only that lesser unity, which is characteristic of what is common, in this way [Socrates'] humanity is not divided from the humanity of Plato by a numerical division, nor by any other difference, because it is clearly not specific (Duns Scotus, 1998, *Questions on the Metaphysics of Aristotle* VII, q. 13, n.144).

> […] This common something is not common in such a way that it is predicable of many, although it is common in such a way that it is not incompatible with it to be in something other than what it is in (Duns Scotus, 1994, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. 1, q.1, n. 39).

One immediate conceptual problem with accepting the existence of common natures is that it is neither universal nor particular. This contradicts the near ubiquitous view of philosophers who admit the reality of individuals and universals, that the classifications "universal" and "individual" are exhaustive of all reality. The exhaustiveness of the individual-universal distinction might seem so obvious as not to require justification. Being neither universal nor particular, the common nature seems to occupy a metaphysical no-mans-land. According to Peter King, we should not be unduly worried, it just means that a common nature is not the kind of thing

that can exist *on its own*, that is, independently of individuals and minds. According to King, "the uncontracted nature [i.e., the common nature as it exists of itself] does not meet the metaphysical requirements for real existence. […] The uncontracted nature, as such, is neither one nor many. Hence it is necessarily non-existent as such […]" (King, 1992, p. 54). But should we be satisfied with King's assurance that there is really nothing to worry about? We might ask how something that is neither particular nor universal could be explanatorily basic in the way required of it by Scotus. One could argue that the common nature should still not be admitted into the realm of real things, even in combination with the contracting principle. It is not just that common natures are such that they could not exist on their own (as a Platonic entity for instance), the point is that nothing of this kind could exist at all, either independently or in composition with anything else.

Is the extra complication of common natures (incomplete universals) superfluous to a theory of universals, or is it perhaps designed to do work for which other theories might be ill-equipped? I believe that a case can be made for the explanatory usefulness of common natures. Here Duns Scotus was drawing a distinction between natures as instances in things (and as concepts) and the nature as something that can really be common to several distinct individuals, and that provides an objective basis for facts of similarity, degrees of diversity, causation, etc. We can distinguish between the "humanity" which Socrates and Plato share, and Socrates' own humanity. Socrates' humanity is an *instance* of human nature. This existence of the instance of human nature that is Socrates' humanity involves the existence of Socrates' himself. The nature as it exists in the individual Socrates is itself individual, though (even as contracted) it also has a quidditative being that has a lesser unity. Without Socrates, Socrates' humanity would cease to exist. And Socrates' humanity is not identical to Plato's. The common nature is ontologically prior to its subjective parts or instances, what Scotus calls "naturally prior". The common nature "humanity" is naturally prior to Socrates, in that Socrates' existence implies the existence of human nature, whereas the opposite does not hold. The nature as it exists in the individual is prior to the individuating principle that contracts it to individuality. This priority is explained by appealing to the common nature's less than numerical unity, and the lesser unity is itself cashed out in terms of the common nature's indifference to existing in another individual.

Unlike the Scholastics, who took natures and qualities to be entities of some sort and metaphysical parts of things, some modern philosophers speak of properties as "ways things are", e.g., D. M. Armstrong (1989, p. 96-98) and E. J. Lowe (2002, p. 140). Lowe writes: "The thought, then, is that properties are *ways things are*. That being so, however, it is natural to try to distinguish between a 'way' two or more *different* things may be and a 'way' just one thing is – a 'way' that is necessarily unique to just one thing (Lowe, 2002, p. 140)." If we apply a similar line of thought to Scotus's theory of natures, we can distinguish between the common nature, the nature as it exists of itself (undetermined to any particular individual existence), and the contracted nature, which is necessarily related to the individual whose nature it is.

Duns Scotus regarded common natures as "incomplete universals". In the Aristotelian system the existence of natures is essentially related to the existence of particulars which are instances of those natures. And given Scotus's view that natures are metaphysical parts of individuals, the common nature, i.e., the determinable nature or incomplete universal, must exist in individual things whose natures are, of course, determined to an individual existence. So the nature's individual being must coexist with the essential or quidditative being of the common nature. Being part of the individual, the common nature cannot be universal in the full sense of being actually predicable of a multitude. Merely common natures are not, of themselves, predicable of a multitude, but the theory does accommodate the distinction between

instances of a nature and the nature in general. The nature in Socrates and the nature in Plato are common in the sense that not only are they qualitatively alike (as would be the case if natures were of themselves individuals), but in the sense that the nature has a modal feature whereby the nature of each is not repugnant to being determined to an individual human other than the human to which it is determined. As Scotus put it, "it is not incompatible with it to be in something other than what it is in" (Duns Scotus, 1994, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, n. 39).

We are told that the common nature is "contracted" (literally, narrowed down) to an individual existence by a haecceity, a contracting entity or individuating principle. But what is the difference between the instantiation or exemplification relation of contemporary metaphysics and contraction? As instantiation of a universal is usually regarded as a relation that holds between a universal and an individuator of some sort, the universal itself is not affected in being instantiated. In contrast, on Scotus theory, the nature itself is modified in being individuated, it takes on the mode of individuality in being the nature of a certain individual. In what sense, then, do Socrates and Plato share a nature? Their nature is common; it has a less than numerical unity. The intelligible content of the nature (i.e., what corresponds to the definition of the nature or essence) is unaffected by the modification (i.e., by being contracted to individual existence or by being thought). So the nature's modification does not alter its essential indifference to existence in different modes and in other individuals. Community can rightly be regarded as a lesser form of universality.

The common nature "humanity" is not one in the sense of being *numerically one*; it has a lesser unity. But nor can it be a mere set of instances. To restate Martin Tweedale's remark, "If that priority of the nature is to be preserved, the nature cannot, prior to abstraction, merely be the multiplicity of its instances" (Tweedale, 1993, p. 89). The modal element in the commonness of nature, a nature's non-repugnance to being in some other individual, is meant to explain how the common nature is more than a mere set of instances. This is what "incomplete universality" is.

The fact that a nature is an individual instance is not incompatible with the nature (even in its contracted state) retaining some indifference to being the nature of an individual other than the individual it is in fact in. Even though the nature is tied up in the conditions of its individuality, it still has an aspect that transcends these individuating conditions and this is what explains its being really common (though not fully the same). The real aspect of the nature that transcends these trappings of actual existence (i.e., of individuality or conceptual universality) is expressed in terms of its being of itself neither individual nor universal. Natures are real constituents of the world, metaphysical parts of individuals, entities that can be contracted to individuality. All the various instances of human nature, i.e., human beings, have an aspect of their being that is in a sense capable of multiplicity, that is not determined to individuality or universality. Common natures stand in potentiality to being instances (i.e., natures are always possibly individual instances). This preserves the near ubiquitous mediaeval intuition that the created world is, in a sense, wholly populated with individuals. Real common natures cannot, then, be predicated of many, given that common natures are in potentiality to existing as individual. They are *incompletely* universal. Universals, on the other hand, are predicable of many, in that the universal concept can represent a multitude of individuals, but it cannot become any individual.

Scotus sought to preserve the intuition that the material world is populated by individuals, and yet is correctly conceived of by means of universal concepts. Natures can be considered as a whole (as in the nature "humanity") or as a parts (e.g., Socrates' nature). Scotus believed that in their actual individual instances, and as they exist in conceptual form, natures still have some form of indifference or

commonness, unaffected by the particular trappings of *actual* existence. But only as they are completely divested of their particular individual conditions, that is, as objects of thought, are the natures fully universal and actually predicable of a multitude. Natures are, on Scotus's view, real metaphysical parts of the things whose natures they are. I suggest that thinking of natures as neither universal nor particular of themselves might be one way of allowing that, while all natures actually exist either as individuals or as concepts, they are, nevertheless, in an incomplete though real enough sense universal.

Since nature has its own degree of unity, less than numerical unity, and given the equation of the transcendentals *Being* and *Unity*, nature also has a being proper to itself, quidditative being or essential being. However, common natures cannot exist except in individuals or minds. But even though it is never without one of the modes, universality or individuality, it still retains its quidditative being. The common nature is of itself prior to each of its instances, meaning that there is nothing in the nature itself that opposes being contracted by an individuating principle other than the principle that actually contracts it. The modes of existing as individual or as universal do not interfere with the commonness or indifference.

The Formal Distinction and the Thought-World Relation

The concept of the individual (e.g., Socrates) and the concept of the nature (e.g., man) are not identical. Scotus has shown that a nature has a lesser unity than the numerical unity of the individual. We naturally make a distinction between the nature (common features) and the individuality (non-repeatability) of an individual. But what basis in reality is there for this distinction? What in reality corresponds to our concepts of individual and nature?

The mediaeval problem of the "ontological status" of individuation, according to Jorge Gracia, can be summed up by two questions: "(1) whether there is some distinction in reality […] that corresponds to the distinction in thought […] between an individual's individuality and its nature, and (2) what the basis of the distinction is (Gracia, 1988, p. 118)".

According to Allan Wolter, scholastic philosophers in general held that there are three types of distinction (i) a real distinction between individuals in the world, (ii) a mental distinction that is purely an invention of the mind, and (iii) an intermediate distinction that is a product of the mind which, nevertheless, "has some kind of basis in the thing" (Wolter, 1965, p. 27). With regard to this third, intermediate distinction, the question is "what is the nature of this basis in reality?"

Henry of Ghent and the Intentional Distinction

Henry of Ghent explained that this intermediate distinction was an "intentional" or "virtual" distinction (Duns Scotus, 1998, *Questions on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, VII, VII, q. 19, n. 4, n. 22; Henry of Ghent, 1518, *Quodlibet* V, q. 6, *Disputationes quodlibeticae*, 1518, tom.1, fol 161rv; Wolter, 1962, p. 45-46). Natures are of themselves individual, and are universal only as conceived by the mind. In reality there is no genuine difference between an individual and its nature. However, one thing, which in reality displays no complexity, gives rise to distinct "intentions", or formal concepts, in the mind. For example, although there is no distinction in reality between Socrates and his humanity, I am so disposed as to form these two distinct concepts when considering Socrates. The distinction is not just fabricated

by the mind however, it arises because the object, which does not itself have any actual composition in its metaphysical make-up corresponding to the differing concepts we use to describe it, nevertheless, is naturally so disposed as to give rise to distinct concepts in our minds. In reality, prior to consideration by the mind, there is no such distinction in the thing. How then are we to explain the appearance of distinct "intentions" when there is seemingly nothing corresponding to them in reality that could cause them?

Duns Scotus discussed Henry's "intentional distinction" with reference to the concepts "genus" (e.g., animal) and "specific difference" (e.g., rational). These concepts clearly have different content, so what corresponds to these distinct concepts in an individual man?

> Some say that in the thing a difference of intention suffices. This does not assume any actual composition in the thing, only one that is potential, in the sense that the thing itself is suited by nature to produce diverse concepts of itself in the intellect, such that this difference is actual only in the intellect conceiving such. However, a conceptual [or mental] difference does not suffice, since this exists when the thing is suited by nature to produce but one concept, although this can be thought of in diverse ways (Duns Scotus, 1998, *Questions on the Metaphysics of Aristotle* VII, q. 19, n. 22).

What, then, is responsible for the formation of these distinct concepts? There are two possibilities here: (i) The undivided thing itself has the power to give rise to two distinct concepts in the mind. (ii) There is a disposition *in the mind* whereby one undivided thing gives rise to diverse concepts in a non-arbitrary or persistent way.

Neither alternative is palatable. If the concepts are due to powers in the individual thing to produce diverse concepts, the nature of this power needs to be explained. How the thing itself can be responsible for the formation of distinct concepts, while itself displaying no such distinction, seems mysterious. If, on the other hand, a natural disposition in the mind is responsible for the production of distinct concepts, then the distinct concepts reveal to us nothing about the world, and indeed mislead us about reality. While the distinct concepts (e.g., of an individual and its nature) are non-arbitrary in the sense that they arise *persistently,* and without effort on our part, they are nevertheless not true to the world. So the distinction between individual and nature seems to be one imposed by the mind onto the world. The intentional distinction, so described, is a mental distinction of sorts. It might be described as a mental distinction that is not purely an *invention* of the mind (i.e., it is non-arbitrary); it arises persistently, due to the way the mind naturally cognises the object, that is, due to a disposition of the mind to conceive two "intentions" where no such distinction exists on the side of reality. And the question still remains, why do we form two concepts from one thing? And, if the distinct concepts are *not* somehow caused by complexity in the object, how can we claim that, in having distinct concepts (of "individual" and "nature", for instance), we conceive of the world correctly?

According to Scotus, if, prior to an act of intellect, *x* and *y* are in every way identical, then we are mistaken if we believe they are in any way distinct. The intentional distinction, as it is framed by Henry of Ghent, can only be the result of a persistent misapprehension or misrepresentation of the thing on the part of the intellect. If Henry's interpretation is correct then we are mistaken in our beliefs about the world, i.e., we see a distinction where there really is none. The relata of the perceived distinction have no real correlates and therefore the distinction detected by the mind does not furnish us with any knowledge of the world.

> When one conceives of the genus either one conceives of something in the thing or not. And the same with the difference. If nothing, then these concepts seem to be fictitious,

> not real; neither does it suffice [to say] they are predicated 'in quid' of the species. If [in conceiving such, one does conceive] of something in the thing: either it is the same thing and then the concept will be the same; or it is something other, and then in the thing there will be some difference prior to the difference in concepts (Duns Scotus, 1998, *Questions on the Metaphysics of Aristotle* VII, q. 19, n. 24).

Duns Scotus's 'Formal Distinction'

Genus and difference are not "really distinct", meaning they cannot be separated in the thing, but neither are they the same, because they have different definitions; the concepts "genus" and "specific difference" have different content. Scotus posited a "Formal Distinction", an intermediate distinction between a *real distinction* (which involves at least one of the relata being able to exist in separation from the other, or at least the conceptual possibility of such separation), and a distinction of reason (which is purely a product of the mind, there being no corresponding distinction in the things conceived). According to Scotus, two individual humans are really distinct, Socrates' form is really distinct from his matter, and a substance is really distinct from its accidents. Scotus also believed that the three persons of the Trinity were really distinct, so the criterion of possible separability for entities being really distinct applies only to created things.

The formal distinction is a real distinction in the sense that the distinction is firmly grounded in reality, i.e., *A* and *B* are distinct in reality, prior to any activity of the mind. But it is not a "real distinction" in the sense Scotus used the term, because this implies that at least one of the two can exist if the other did not, at least in the case of contingent beings. So if *A* and *B* are really identical, that is, they are inseparable in reality, and yet the definitions of *A* and *B* do not coincide, *A* and *B* are formally distinct.

> There is another opinion, which […] postulates that to these concepts there corresponds somehow something in the things that is really diverse, so real in fact that, apart from every operation of either the agent or the possible intellect, and apart from all existence in the intellect as something presupposed or as concomitant, there is in the thing this difference (Duns Scotus, 1998, *Questions on the Metaphysics of Aristotle* VII, q. 19, n. 43).

For each real classification an object falls into there is a real correlate in the thing. We might argue that this ontology is intolerably generous, overpopulating the individual substance beyond reason. But the individual is not fragmented in any undesirable way. It is not that for each true classificatory term there is a *thing (res)* corresponding to it in the substance, rather, according to Scotus, there is a "reality" *("realitas")* or "formality" *("formalitas")* in the thing which corresponds to the concept. Scotus explained that the relationship between genus and difference is akin to that between a thing's nature and its haecceity (or individual difference). The nature is in a state of potentiality to the haecceity that contracts it, and they are formally distinct.

> […] But there is an intermediate unity and distinction in one and the same thing which has diverse perfections and diverse formal entities but in such a way that one formal reality does not include another; neither is it of itself formally the other [i.e., by identity as in the deity]. And therefore one formal reality is perfectible and determinable by another – such is the composition in a simple thing having a genus and difference (as in whiteness). For it has one formal reality from which the generic intention is taken, and this reality has nothing that includes the formal reality from which the difference is

> derived, any more indeed than if it were another thing entirely distinct from the other. Now the composition of specific nature and individual difference, through which that nature is contracted and determined, is of this sort (Duns Scotus, 2005*, Lectura* II, d. 3, q. 6, n. 178).

The concepts of genus, specific difference, and species apply truly to an individual, and therefore, on Scotus's view, they must have real correlates in the thing. They are inseparable from the substance in which they exist, yet they have different definitions which do not imply one another, and these differences in definition are mirrored in reality, they are not created by the mind. In the individual there are formalities corresponding to the distinct concepts. Because the distinction has a basis in reality, Scotus called the distinction the formal distinction *a parte rei* (on the side of reality).

The haecceity is formally distinct from the contracted nature, meaning that the two are inseparable though nevertheless distinct in reality. The haecceity is related to the common nature as actuality to potentiality, and so, as Scotus put it, the haecceity "is the ultimate reality of the form" (Duns Scotus, 1994, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 6, n. 180).

Before continuing I will give an example of the formal distinction. There is something in Aristotle's inner structure that makes it true that he is a man and there is something in Aristotle in virtue of which he is an animal. Clearly there are not two "things" in Aristotle grounding these truths, each corresponding to the concepts. Yet what makes Aristotle a man is not precisely what makes him an animal (for he shares the latter with Brunellus the donkey), and if it *were* the same thing then the terms "man" and "animal" could be used interchangeably. Yet what makes Aristotle human and what makes him an animal are not separable. The entities corresponding to the terms "animal" and "man", are what Scotus calls formalities and they are formally distinct. Aristotle and his human nature are, likewise, formally distinct (Duns Scotus, 2005, *Lectura* II, d. 3, q. 6, n. 178). The formal distinction gives an ontological basis to concepts that can be correctly applied to things. On Scotus's view the genus (such as "animal" or "colour") is determinable to a species (such as "man" or "white"), and the species itself determinable to individual existence (such as Socrates or "this white"). The formal distinction allowed Duns Scotus to include determinables, as well as determinate qualities and natures, among the metaphysical constituents of individuals, something that is by and large rejected by both modern philosophers and Scotus's contemporaries.

To the modern reader saying that *A* and *B* are really identical, while at the same time admitting that *A* and *B* are distinct (or have different properties), seems to be a contradiction. Duns Scotus's use of the term "identity" is quite different from that current in modern philosophy. I shall refer briefly to Antoine Vos's discussion of Duns Scotus's various uses of the term "identity" (Vos, 2006, p. 257-263). Let us take a simple example of the modern notion of identity: "Socrates is identical to Socrates". Even though it expresses a necessary truth, something's being identical to itself is not an instance of a real relation, according to Scotus, but of a "rational relation". In the case of two entities being *really* identical, there must be some distinction between the two relata, and they must be inseparable. This real identity, which admits distinctness between the relata, is not the "complete" identity we are used to. Real identity is compatible with formal non-identity, that is, formal distinctness. If *A* and *B* are formally identical, there is no distinction whatsoever between the two. Their definitions correspond and all distinctness between *A* and *B* has been ruled out.

If we admit an objective distinction between an individual and its nature, we must allow that such distinctness exists in reality, prior to any mental activity. If the

distinction we perceive does not mirror a distinction that exists in reality, then we cannot claim that the distinction reveals to us anything about the world. Scotus believed that the objectivity of our knowledge about the world could only be secured if the distinctions that clearly hold between our ideas of the world are reflections of distinctions that hold in the world. Given the tight relationship between thought and reality demanded by realist scholastic thinkers, the formal distinction would appear to be a requirement. The alternative is to offer a radically different account of the relationship between conceptual thought and reality. As Wolter says, "One can deny the isomorphism as Ockham does, but if you concede it as Aquinas and Henry do, it seems difficult to escape Scotus' conclusion" (Wolter, 1962, p. 23).

More Arguments for Common Natures

One of Scotus's principal arguments for natures having a less than numerical unity is that they must have a less than numerical unity if we are to provide a real basis for the relation of similarity. Scotus believed that the tradition that held natures to be individual of themselves, and that universality was a product of the mind, only applying to concepts, left the fact of similarity inadequately explained. If natures are individual of themselves, then if I consider the natures of Socrates and Plato, is the nature I abstract from each the *same* nature? When I form a universal concept derived from Plato's individual nature, and another universal concept from Socrates' nature, are they the same? Even if the concepts formed are qualitatively identical, all that tells us is that I happen to form indistinguishable concepts from both. Does this reveal to me any real commonness in the world? It seems not. And am I not mistaken in believing that Socrates and Plato have the same nature? The fact that they display similarity is still to be explained, and it is no explanation at all to say that I *perceive* such similarity. My perceiving a similarity is not a real basis for the objectivity of the judgement of similarity. My detecting a similarity, while at the same time insisting that prior to intellection there is no commonness between them, seems to imply that I am simply mistaken in my belief. If there is no commonness before I consider the two things, my thinking about them will not *make* them common. If my conception that Socrates and Plato are similar is to count as objective knowledge of reality, we must admit that, prior to any attention to them on my part, they must have something in common. The natures of Socrates and Plato are not numerically one however (because there are two of them), therefore, Scotus argued, there must be some less than numerical unity that serves as the objective foundation for the relation of similarity.

> In the chapter "On Relation" in V Metaphysics [ch. 15] the Philosopher says that the relations based on "oneness" are similarity, identity and equality. Now similarity is a real relationship, and as such it requires a real foundation, so there is something real at the basis of similarity – something really one that serves as the proximate foundation for the relation. (For if the foundation were only conceptually one, there would be no foundation unless it were produced by an act of the mind and thus the relation of similarity would be only a mental or conceptual relation. Hence if the relation of similarity is real, its foundation must be real). Now the oneness that serves as the foundation cannot be numerical unity, for nothing is similar to itself; therefore, the unity of this foundation must be both real and other than numerical unity (Duns Scotus, 2005, *Lectura* II, d. 3, q. 1, n. 21).

Scotus also argued that unless we allow that there are unities other than simple *numerical unity*, we cannot allow that there are real degrees of diversity in the world. Unless we admit real less than numerical unity, we cannot account for

the fact that some things are more alike than others. If any two things are more alike than they are like a third thing, then not all things are equally different from one another. All individuals are equally distinct qua individuals. If all differences were numerical differences there would only be one kind of difference and all differences would be of the same degree, that is, all things would be absolutely different from one another. But not all differences are numerical differences, therefore we can classify things as being more similar or less similar to a given thing. We accept these degrees of difference or diversity, and Scotus argued persuasively that we cannot consistently do so without admitting degrees of real unity as well. Duns Scotus reasoned as follows:

> If every real unity is numerical unity, therefore every real diversity is numerical diversity. The consequent is false. For numerical diversity, insofar as it is numerical, is equal. And so all things would be equally distinct. In that case, it follows that the intellect could not abstract something common from Socrates and Plato any more than it could from Socrates and a line. Every universal would be a pure figment of the intellect (Duns Scotus, 1994, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, n. 23, 1998, *Questions on the Metaphysics* VII, q.18, n.4).

The intuition here is clear enough: unless things really have natures in common then we have no basis for saying that two things are similar, and we would not be able to pick the odd one out from a group of objects. Scotus here relies on the fairly intuitive belief that unity and diversity are closely related. Scotus believed that for every type of real diversity a type of real unity is implied. So if all things are equally individual then all of the classifications performed by the mind are arbitrary, in the sense that (even if they are invariant) they do not represent reality. If we allow that all things are inherently singular we institute a radical breach between conceptual thought and reality. There would not, prior to thought, be any real classifications within reality, and all classification would be a fabrication of the mind.

Each substance is just as much an individual as any other, but unless we allow that there is a real unity less than numerical unity we cannot account for the fact that there are real similarities among things. So in order for things to belong to the same species or the same genus unities less than numerical unity must be posited.

The existence of real common natures is necessary to ground the objectivity of predication. Only the *complete* universal (as opposed to the *common nature* which Scotus referred to as the *incomplete* universal) has sufficient *"indifference"* to represent every individual falling under it. Universal concepts have a classificatory role in Scotus's theory and the common nature is the real basis for this classification. The common nature *cannot* be predicated of individuals because it cannot actually be identified with more than one individual in the way required for predication. But unless there is some nature in reality that can be really common to many individuals then the universal will be a figment, something invented by the mind. So real common natures are required to allow that we can make true predications.

Duns Scotus held that the common nature was the proper object of the intellect and of the senses, (i.e., the first object encountered in the process of cognition and sensation). Our knowledge is of what is common in things, i.e., their natures and qualities. Our experience is ordered according to various classifications and categories, and unless these reflect real divisions within reality, our classifications are wholly created by us, and we can claim no knowledge of the world.

> It [the common nature] does not primarily of itself have universality even when it does have being in the intellect. For though it is understood under universality (as under the mode of understanding it), nevertheless universality is not a part of its primary concept […]. Therefore, the first intellection is an intellection of the nature without there being

> any co-understood mode, either the mode it has in the intellect or the one it has outside the intellect. Although universality is the mode of understanding what is understood, that mode is not itself understood (Duns Scotus, 1994, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, n. 33).

In Scotus's view, the individual is not in itself intelligible *qua* individual. The intellect grasps things according to their common natures. We know the world by way of concepts (i.e., universals) but the object of the intellect is itself a part of world, that is, the common nature. Our intellectual knowledge is of the real commonalities among things (their common natures), these are mind-independent. So the object of the intellect is not a universal (i.e., a concept representing nature as it exists in the world) but is, rather, the common nature itself (a real entity really in common in the several things).

Scotus also held common natures to be the first object of the senses. The immediate objects of sense are the phenomenal characteristics of the material world; these are common natures. What is immediately presented to the senses is indifferent to existing in this or that thing (Duns Scotus, 1998, *Questions on the Metaphysics* VII, q. 18, n. 24). This is quite a departure from the Aristotelian view that it is particulars that are immediately presented to the senses.

Conclusion

Duns Scotus's project was highly ambitious. The principal aim of Scotus's theory of common natures is to provide a metaphysical foundation for our objective intellectual knowledge of the world. Scotus aimed towards a complete explanation of the relationship between the mind and the world, an explanation of our cognitive processes and of the underlying metaphysics that grounds the objectivity of our knowledge of the world. We might say that Scotus's theory of universals is the most realist account possible while still remaining "moderately realist"; only incomplete universals, or common natures, are postulated in things, full universality being restricted to concepts. As J.F. Ross put it, Duns Scotus "is apparently less moderate and more realist than St. Thomas, Avicenna, or Aristotle […]" (Ross, 1964, p. 11).

The realist or anti-conceptualist streak in Scotus's thought is clear. On the metaphysical side, Thomas Aquinas and Henry of Ghent do not depart much from Boethius' account of universals. Scotus's contribution to metaphysics was to show that if the metaphysics is inadequate there is nothing one can do on the conceptual level to make a theory work. What grounds the objectivity of our knowledge of the world must be the metaphysical structure of the world, we cannot put the weight on how we happen to think of the world.

Scotus argued that different grades of unity can be discerned between individuals, corresponding to the various grades of distinctness. So Socrates is more like Plato than he is like a mathematical line (Duns Scotus, 1994, *Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, n. 23, 1998, *Questions on the Metaphysics* VII, q. 18, n. 4). Socrates and Plato form a real unity, not a numerical unity (for then Socrates would be Plato), but a less than numerical unity. What accounts for this unity on the metaphysical side, on Scotus's view, is that both individuals share a common nature, an entity that itself has a less than numerical unity. But could Scotus not have accounted for the lesser unity that obtains between Socrates and Plato by allowing that Plato and Socrates are identical in nature, but have distinct individuating principles? Perhaps less than numerical unity is not obviously opposed to numerical unity in the way Scotus believed. However, it is central for Duns Scotus to regard individuation as the actualization of a potential, i.e., as a modification or modalization of the nature itself. According to Scotus, the lesser unity of the common nature is determinable

or contractible to the numerical unity of an individual. It can be argued that a complete universal could not be modalized in the way common nature can be. Given this analysis, perhaps we must attribute only a less than numerical unity to the common nature. To accept complete universals in created things Scotus would have to abandon his account of individuation as the actualization of a potentiality.

Another aspect of Duns Scotus's theory that might be regarded as controversial is his account of the relationship between thought and reality, which we might describe as a "naïve isomorphism". Scotus rejected the nominalist position that the structure of the world is much simpler than the structure of our thought about the world. Formalities are real metaphysical parts of things that correspond to and are the causes of concepts in our minds. The irreducible concepts and distinctions by which we conceive the world have real correlates in the world. The formal distinction allowed him to defend this "isomorphism" between thought and reality.

If we can show that the formal distinction is defensible, the way is partially open for accepting some form of isomorphism between thought and reality. We can conclude that Duns Scotus has at least shown that we do not obviously need to hold that the metaphysics of the world is radically at odds with our conceptual thought about the world. If the formal distinction is defensible we can ask: what reason is there to deny the isomorphism? Are there good reasons to embrace an ontology that does not share the richness of thought? Against the nominalist fashion of trying to "paraphrase away" various distinctions and apparent abstract reference, in order to show that a sparser metaphysics is adequate to account for the truth of what we say, we can ask what reason there is to deny the isomorphism if it is coherent. It may be that Duns Scotus has opened the way to taking conceptual thought to be a possible guide to metaphysical reality?

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