

UNIVERSALITY AND IMMATERIALITY

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SUMMARY: 1. «*Sensus est singularium, intellectus autem universalium*». 2. *Some Subtle Objections to a Simple Solution*. 3. *Some Nominalist Objections*. 4. *Universality and Immateriality*. 5. *Sutton's Defense of Aquinas*. 6. *Aquinas vs. Buridan on Singularity, Materiality, Indifference and Universality*. 7. *Conclusion*.

1. «SENSUS EST SINGULARIUM, INTELLECTUS AUTEM UNIVERSALIUM»

SUPPOSE I am reading this paper at a conference to you and others in the audience. As I am reading this paper, I am looking at the sheet in front of me to see the words printed on it. If you have a copy of it in front of you and you are following my reading, you are reading the same words as I do, which is clear from the fact that if I were to stop and I asked you to continue, you would be able to pick up exactly where I left off.

But how can you possibly see the words I am reading? After all, I am looking at them here, right under my nose, holding the sheets they are printed on like a shrewd poker player would his cards, so you cannot possibly see a single word I am reading.

Well, you might say that you can see the words printed on your copy, and they are the same as the ones I see printed on my copy.

But how can the words you see possibly be the same as the words I see, given that you cannot see the ones I have on the sheet in my hand, while you do see the ones printed on the sheet in your hand?

In response, you might come up with the educated distinction between type-words and token-words, and say that although we see different token-words, we see the same type-words.

However, to simple-minded philosophers, like most of us, down-to-earth-Aristotelians tend to be, this reply would not really make much sense. If you call a "token word" any of the words I see here printed on my sheet with my bodily eyes and any of the words you see printed on your sheet with your bodily eyes, then I just don't see what other words there are to be seen, namely, other than the words we can see with these two pairs of eyes. So, I really don't have a clue as to where I should look with this pair of eyes to see the

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alleged “type-words” we are both supposed to see, while we cannot see the so-called “token-words” on the sheets of each other.

At this point, you might want to point out that one of those “down-to-earth Aristotelians” I invoked, namely, Aquinas, seems to be squarely on your side. Aquinas in numerous places famously declared that «the senses are of the singulars, whereas the intellect is of the universals».¹ So, whereas with our bodily eyes we can only see the singular token-words, nothing prevents us from intellectually seeing the universal type-words.

Being a humble admirer of Aquinas, I would not object to this solution, provided we agree on precisely how we should understand it. For if the point of the solution is supposed to be that in our ontology we should distinguish two kinds of objects, namely, singular things and universal things, and correspondingly in our epistemology we are supposed to acknowledge two types of vision, one bodily and another intellectual, each attuned to each of the two kinds of objects just distinguished in our ontology, respectively, then I would deny that this could be Aquinas’ solution. After all, his anti-Platonism would not allow anything like the alleged universal objects in our ontology.

Furthermore, if the difference between singular and universal representations were the difference in their objects, then even the so-called universal representations would be representing their objects in a singular manner, even if their objects were related universally to all their instances, as their exemplars or other sort of causes, just like the portrait of a monarch is a singular representation of this particular man, even if he is related in a universal manner to all his subjects as their ruler. For as far as its mode of representation is concerned, the portrait of the monarch would be just as singular as the portraits of any of his peasants (well, if the latter were ever invited to pose for a portrait). So, Aquinas would say that when we are talking about the intellectual cognition of universals, this should not be taken to be construed as our having some sort of intellectual vision attuned to a kind of objects invisible to our bodily eyes, and only visible to our intellect, because they are some super-sensory, universal objects; rather, all this means is that *the same* singular objects we can see with our bodily eyes *in a singular manner*, in their singularity, we can also comprehend intellectually, *in a universal manner*, abstracting from their singularity.

2. SOME SUBTLE OBJECTIONS TO A SIMPLE SOLUTION

Well, all this may seem to be fine and agreeable to the simple-minded Aristotelians we tend to call Thomists, however, we know that there are and there were some not so simple-minded, indeed, very sophisticated and subtle Aris-

¹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 85 a. 3 co.

totelians, such as the Subtle Doctor himself, who would still take issue with this simple solution on at least two counts.

In the first place, the Subtle Doctor would not swallow without further ado the apparently simple claim that our bodily senses cognize singulars in their singularity.

In the second place, he would not simply swallow that anything there is in extra-mental reality would have to be some singular, numerically one entity, which would be the only kind of real thing that can causally affect other things, as the objects affecting our senses are supposed to be.

From Scotus' barrage of arguments for these claims, I would only consider here one for its peculiar significance in later discussions of the relevant issues, which I will call "the argument from the indifference of causal efficacy".² The argument is based on the simple, plausible observation that even if, apparently, it is always singular causes that produce singular effects, the singularity of each is causally irrelevant: what primarily determines causal efficacy is the agent's and the patient's specific kind. After all, if there is a fire in my kitchen, I do not have to find the only, single, designated bucket of water in the world that alone is capable of putting out *this* fire; on the contrary, just *any* bucket of water will do.

Indeed, pursuing this point further, Scotus could even insist that what is really effective in such a causal relation is not a singular at all: it's not *this* bucket of water or *that* bucket of water; rather, it is just *water*, whether in this bucket or in that bucket, indifferently. To be sure, water is only meted out in buckets or droplets or rivers or oceans, that is to say, in singular bodies of water, no matter how big or how small or in what shape or when and where. But what matters in the causality of any of these bodies of water is that they all act insofar as they are *water*, indifferently, regardless of their individual differences in size, shape, or spatio-temporal location.

In fact, the agent acting in any water sample is just water itself, this one kind of substance, which is one and the same substance in all these individual samples. Of course, this one substance does not have the same kind of unity that any single droplet of it does, but it is unified enough to have its "less-than-numerical unity", which enables it to act in the same way in all its singular samples *indifferently*.

Furthermore, this ontological scenario, admitting common, universal substances having their own "less-than-numerical unity", has a further, epistemic consequence, going directly against one of the key points of Aquinas' simple solution to our foregoing predicament about reading the same words on different sheets of paper.

After all, if any efficient cause of the same kind can produce numerically the same effect, just as any bucket of water can put out my kitchen fire, then

² DUNS SCOTUS, *Ord.* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, n. 19.

the same should apply to the causality of sensible objects acting on our senses: just any qualitatively identical patch of color may cause in my eye the same act of vision, or to use Scotus' own example, I could not tell one sunbeam hitting my eyes from another, even if, due to the motion of the sun, it is a different one that hits my eyes at any moment than the one that hit them before.³

Actually, Scotus' *epistemic* argument, on top of the *ontological* argument "from the indifference of causal efficacy" relies on a further principle, besides the intuition that just any singular cause of the same kind can produce numerically the same effect of a given kind, namely, what Giorgio Pini has called *Scotus' principle*.⁴ According to this principle, the *per se* proper object of a cognitive power is supposed to be discerned unmistakably by that power, so that it cannot be mistaken by this power for another, no matter how similar object of the same power, for what is *per se* cognized is directly cognized without error even if all other, potentially distinctive circumstances (such as spatio-temporal location, etc.) are removed from it.

Now, adding this principle to our considerations, it may seem that contrary to Aquinas' apparently plausible story about the bewildering case of our ability to read the same words on different sheets, we cannot really see any singulars in their singularity at all. After all, if the words under my nose were so rapidly replaced by similar ones that I couldn't notice the change (as it would happen, for instance, if they were projected there by a rapid sequence of freeze-frames, as on a movie screen), then I would not be able to tell that the words I see now are not the same as the ones I saw a moment ago, just as with Scotus' sunbeams (or the freeze-frames of the movie). But then, not being able to discern one from the other, Scotus' principle would tell us that the *per se* proper objects of my sight are not the singular words I see here and now, but rather the universal acting in and through these different singulars, affecting my eyes indifferently with regard to their singularity.

Indeed, in view of *Scotus' principle*, we could only cognize singulars in their singularity only if we had some cognition of their individual difference, their haecceity, which would enable us to unmistakably recognize them under any circumstances, which is clearly not the case, as the possibility of supernatural token-swapping as well as ordinary magic tricks demonstrate. So, it would seem that, *pace* Aquinas, there is no way we cognize singulars by our senses.

Of course, there could be much more to be said about Scotus' conception (and, in fact, those things have been presented in detail in the recent Scotus literature, by scholars such as Tim Noone and Giorgio Pini), however, being at the moment concerned only with the idea of indifference in efficient cau-

³ DUNS SCOTUS, *Ord.* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, nn. 20-21.

⁴ G. PINI, *Scotus on the Objects of Cognitive Acts*, «Franciscan Studies», 66 (2008), pp. 281-315.

sality and universality in mental representation, this much should suffice for us to see just how differently the same idea can function in a radically different conceptual framework, such as the nominalism of Ockham and Buridan, apparently undermining even more of Aquinas' simple story about singular sensory, and universal intellectual cognition.

3. SOME NOMINALIST OBJECTIONS

As has recently been pointed out on many occasions by many scholars working on medieval theories of cognition, Ockham also had his own version of an "indifference argument"⁵ in his epistemology, although with a very different role in his very different account of cognition. In a famous passage, Ockham also argues on the same grounds as Scotus, namely, on the basis of our senses' inability to distinctly represent qualitatively identical, yet distinct individuals if they are rapidly exchanged in our sensory field, for the conclusion that our senses do not represent singulars in their singularity, *insofar as the qualitative content of sensory representation is concerned*. However, from this, Ockham would not conclude that our senses do not cognize singulars as such; rather, he concludes that what provides the singularity of our sensations is not embedded in their qualitative content at all, instead, it is the totally external circumstance that this sensation is actually caused by this singular, which triggers the entire cognitive process.

Of course, this would cause problems in explaining cases of apparently singular cognitive acts that are no longer in actual causal contact with their objects, such as memories, dreams or imaginations of individuals. So, Buridan, who otherwise follows Ockham's lead on so many other issues, parts company with him on this one, and insists that we do have genuine singular representations of singulars *qua* singulars even in their absence: all is needed for singular cognition is that the cognitive act should represent its singular object *sicut in prospectu cognoscentis*, as if it were in view of the cognitive subject.

Against Scotus' worries about the recognition of qualitatively identical, yet distinct singulars, Buridan carefully distinguishes singular *cognition* from singular *recognition*, and says that the former is perfectly possible without the latter.⁶ After all, even if I have two qualitatively identical eggs in front of me and God or some other sufficiently skillful trickster swaps them, in fact, several times in such a rapid succession that I cannot possibly follow, I will never mistake one for the other, saying that the one on my left side is the same as the one on my right side, although I may not know whether the one that is now on my left side is the same as the one that started out on that side or it is the other.

⁵ W. OCKHAM, *Quodlibeta* I, q. 13.

⁶ Cfr. G. KLIMA, *John Buridan*, Oxford University Press, New York 2008, pp. 74-83.

Thus, Buridan basically somewhat loosens Scotus' unduly strict requirement for singular cognition: for singular cognition it is not necessary to recognize singulars unmistakably, without any additional, potentially distinctive circumstance (such as spatio-temporal location); it is sufficient if they are actually distinguishable *in prospectu cognoscentis*. To be sure, we must not forget that Scotus' strict requirement concerned the *per se*, proper objects of our cognitive powers and their acts, however, he still did not hesitate to jump from his principles to the conclusion that we do not really sense singulars, we sense the universals that are in any of the singulars of the same kind.

In any case, Buridan's concession that there is something in sense perception that is distinctive enough (namely, location *in prospectu cognoscentis*) for actual singular cognition would seem to bring his account much closer to Aquinas', than to either Scotus' or to Ockham's. However, Buridan did not remain uninfluenced by the latter's ideas of indifference. For when it comes to explaining universal, conceptual representation, he provides, almost in the same breath, an abstractionist account and Ockham's indifference account concerning universality. On the one hand, in line with Aquinas' abstractionism, he insists that it is only the intellect that can form universal concepts, by abstracting from, say, the distinctive location of *this* whiteness of *this* egg and of *that* whiteness of *that* egg. On the other hand, he also says that at the end of the process, what remains, stripped of all its distinctive information content will be indifferently representative of all whitenesses, and thus it will be a universal representation.⁷

But, furthermore, besides his apparent "abstractionism-combined-with-indifferentism" (if I'm allowed this coinage for present purposes) concerning intellectual concepts, Buridan also uses Ockham's "indifferentism" to debunk one of Aquinas' most promising arguments for the immateriality of the intellect, which rests precisely on the principle discussed at the beginning of this paper, namely, the principle that the senses represent singulars, whereas the intellect, and only the intellect represents universals. For Buridan argues that even the obviously material cognitive and appetitive powers of brute animals should somehow have universal cognition of singulars, insofar as their cognitive and appetitive acts seem to be directed not at particular singulars, but indifferently at any singulars of a given kind. This is clear from the fact that if a horse is thirsty, it would seek out just any bucket of water to quench its thirst indifferently, and not this or that particular bucket of water, just as I would grab any bucket of water to put out my kitchen fire.⁸

⁷ J. BURIDAN, *Quaestiones in De Anima*, lb. 3, q. 8.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

4. UNIVERSALITY AND IMMATERIALITY

However, if this is true, a philosophically very significant claim of Aquinas' account seems to be fatally undermined, namely, the claim that the senses represent singulars in their singularity precisely on account of their materiality. For if brute animals, whose cognitive acts nobody ever doubted to be material, are capable of some sort of universal representation, then here we have a clear counterinstance to the validity of Aquinas' alleged implication, namely, that the materiality of sensory representation entails its singularity.

On the other hand, if it turns out that this entailment still can be saved somehow, it would seem that we have a fairly straightforward proof for the immateriality of the intellect: for if the materiality of a cognitive act entails its singularity, then, by contraposition, its non-singularity entails its immateriality; and so, if an intellectual concept is a universal, whence non-singular representation of its objects, then it cannot be material; *ergo*, being an act or form of its subject, namely, the intellect, its subject cannot be material either, which means that the intellect is immaterial, from which it is just a further small step to conclude that it is immortal.⁹

So, in the end, this is what is at stake: the provability of the natural immortality of the human soul. This is why it is worth taking a further look to see whether all these objections, coming from rather different directions to Aquinas' account, do indeed hold water.

5. SUTTON'S DEFENSE OF AQUINAS

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, against Scotus and Ockham, Aquinas' best ally is Buridan. But what Buridan still may have against Aquinas seems to be answerable on the basis of an early defender of his doctrine against Scotus, Henry of Ghent and many others, an Oxford Dominican of the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries, Thomas Sutton (ca. 1250-1315).

As I have already mentioned, Buridan's relaxing the requirements of actual singular cognition relative to Scotus' excessively strict requirement of infallible recognition is definitely the first step toward re-establishing singular sensory cognition against Scotus' indifference argument. Buridan's second step against Ockham, on the other hand, re-establishes singular sensory cognition even in the absence of an actual causal connection between sensory act and its object. What does the trick for Buridan is his recognition of the importance of the distinctive role of spatio-temporal location of even qualitatively identical singulars *in prospectu cognoscentis*.

⁹ THOMAS AQUINAS, 2SN, d. 19, q. 1. a. 1.

What he does not concede to Aquinas, however, is that this distinctive content of our sensory experience, which can render sensory representation genuinely singular, necessarily follows upon the materiality of the reception of sensory information of our sense organs. His main reason for this is that even given the obvious materiality of sensory representation in brute animals, there seems to be some universal cognition involved in their operations, insofar as their desires and consequent actions can concern indifferently a certain kind of singulars (although, of course, Buridan rejects the hasty Scotus-Burleigh jump from this indifference to positing a universal entity as the direct object of such operations and desires).

It is at this point, however, that Sutton can step in. In his careful defense of Aquinas' conception of designated matter being the principle of individuation, Sutton presents some pretty strong and plausible arguments as to why matter designated by quantity here and now *must* be the principle of individuation of material forms, and thus of material substance, and so why, in the end, the material representation of precisely this individuating factor necessarily would yield singular representation, as long as the representation itself is not rid of its own material conditions. Sutton's main reason for claiming that only matter designated by quantity can be the principle of individuation is that quantity is the only sort of entity that has *per se* distinct parts of the same formal character or *ratio*, which is clearly required for distinguishing singulars of the same species, for otherwise, if the singulars in question are distinct by forms, then their distinction is formal, yielding between them specific, rather than mere numerical difference. Thus, Sutton's starting point is that the only way singulars can be distinct within the same species is that they differ in their matter designated by *per se* different parts of quantity, for otherwise, a formal difference would yield not merely numerical, but also specific difference between them, as is the case, as Sutton argues following Aquinas, with all immaterial substances.¹⁰

However, in the case of material substances, whose forms can only exist or come to be in matter (which is what it means, after all, for them to be material), their forms can only gain individual existence in a determinate parcel of matter, *here* and *now*, which is receptive of the action of the agent capable of producing this form in this matter *here* and *now*. Thus, even if it is true that in principle just any bucket of water is capable of putting out my kitchen fire in New York, insofar as this is *fire* and that is *water*, nevertheless, it is still *not true* that a bucket of water in Shanghai can put out my kitchen fire in New York, for by the time it gets through security at JFK, my kitchen is long gone. (Clearly, the example is not Sutton's, but *mutatis mutandis*, his considerations apply).

¹⁰ T. SUTTON, *Quodlibeta*, I, 21.

Interestingly, Buridan would also agree with Sutton concerning the distinctive character of quantity and other accidents following upon it. However, he would not see any absurdity in the existence (at least by absolute divine power) of some material substance without any of these distinctive accidents, including quantity. Thus, he would notoriously argue in q. 7 of bk. 2 of his *Questions on Aristotle's De Anima* that such a substance would be just as homogeneous as are the elements. To be sure, it is rather puzzling how he thinks such a substance could have any parts, which the notion of homogeneity requires, once it is supernaturally stripped of quantity, but my concern here is not so much the consistency of Buridan's conception, as the tenability of Aquinas' implication, so let me set aside this issue for now.

In any case, the main difference between Sutton's and Buridan's conceptions seems to be that whereas for Buridan the distinctive accidental dispositions of material substances are merely contingently related to them (insofar as these substances could at least supernaturally exist without any of these dispositions), for Sutton individual existence of material forms requires by metaphysical necessity their reception in matter designated by some quantity *here and now*. In fact, Sutton at one point goes so far as to claim that without designated matter even God could not create numerically distinct human souls, although, of course, once those souls acquired individual existence in separate parcels of matter, they can even naturally continue their individual existence after their separation from that matter.¹¹

6. AQUINAS VS. BURIDAN ON SINGULARITY, MATERIALITY, INDIFFERENCE AND UNIVERSALITY

But regardless of such niceties concerning the *metaphysics* of singularity and individuation, as far as the *cognitive psychology* of singular representation is concerned, Buridan again seems to be with Sutton on Aquinas' side, at least *up to a certain point*.

Sutton's account of the singularity of causation is in perfect agreement with how Buridan rejects Burley's Scotus-inspired speculations about the indifference of causation with regard to singulars and thus the apparent plausibility of the agency of universals in and through singulars. And even in his account of sensory representation, Buridan would argue that quantity, being one of the *common sensibilia*, is represented by the species of proper sensibilia being received in different material parts of the different material sensory organs.¹²

However, perhaps, due to the further processing by the common sense of the information streaming in through the external senses, this information, ac-

¹¹ T. SUTTON, *Quaestiones Ordinariae*, q. 18, ad 21, ad 26.

¹² J. BURIDAN, *Quaestiones in De Anima*, lb. II, q. 13.

ording to Buridan, can already become indifferent to singulars, which would then account for the apparent universal cognition of singulars even by brute animals. Unfortunately, as far as I can tell, Buridan is not quite explicit on this issue. I just don't really see how he can hold this view in such a way as to genuinely support his criticism of Aquinas's argument for the immateriality of the intellect from its capability of universal representation. Because, despite all his differences from the Thomistic account concerning the metaphysics of individuation, Buridan goes a long way along with Aquinas in his account of singular, sensory representation.

For what seems to be essential in the conception of both thinkers is that what enables singular sensory representation is the sensory representation of *common sensibilia*, in particular, quantity at a determinate spatio-temporal location, which for Aquinas is even the metaphysical principle of individuation, and in Sutton's exposition, the necessarily occurring condition in all material causation. The next step in Aquinas' reasoning, however, apparently endorsed by both Aquinas (along with Sutton) and Buridan is the claim that the representation of these individually distinctive *common sensibilia* takes place through the reception of *proper sensibilia* in different parts of the external sense organs, given that this is precisely what determines their causal relation in their singularity. For example, the visible species encoding the color of the egg on my left side will be received by *this* part of the retina of my eye, whereas the species coming from the other are received in *another* part.

To be sure, at this point one might object that the further transmission of the information carried by my optical nerves does not have to retain the spatial isomorphism that is apparently retained by the *camera obscura* structure of the eyes, so Buridan may be just right in parting ways with Aquinas just here.

However, I don't think Aquinas' point is the requirement of any sort of spatial isomorphism preserved by some geometrical projection. Rather, the point is that just any sort of material encoding of the information carried about the *proper sensibilia* will also necessarily encode, by virtue of its own materiality, i.e., spatio-temporality, the distinctive spatio-temporal information about the *proper sensibilia*, namely, their distribution *in prospectu cognoscentis* here and now.

But if this is indeed the case, then Aquinas may just be right. He is not committed to any sort of "content fallacy", i.e., to the blunder of inferring metaphysical features from representational features. He is merely claiming, in perfect accord with Sutton's analysis of the singularity of causation, and with Buridan's account of singular representation, that any material transcoding of the originally received information about the *proper sensibilia* in the material sensory organs will also preserve, by virtue of its materiality, the same distinctive, singular information that was encoded by the material features of these

organs in the first place. Thus, the materiality of natural, cognitive representation does entail its singularity by natural necessity, and so, the universality of mental representation should entail its immateriality by the same necessity.

7. CONCLUSION

To be sure, the foregoing considerations are still very sketchy and may not properly reflect actual historical connections and influences. All I wanted to show by this sketch was that Aquinas' Aristotelian account of singular cognition and his consequent abstractionist account of the origin of intellectual concepts can still hold its ground against later, competing medieval accounts, and that in these considerations, besides his self-professed defender, Thomas Sutton, Aquinas may find a strange ally in one of his later critics, namely, John Buridan. Furthermore, I also argued that despite Buridan's criticism inspired by the "indifferentist" ideas of others, Buridan himself may actually be committed to the crucial implication of Aquinas' argument he criticizes, provided we understand it along the lines of Sutton's interpretation of the necessary singularity of the causality of material agents, and along the lines of Aquinas' corresponding idea, shared by Buridan, concerning the representation of the numerically distinctive *common sensibilia* by some corresponding material conditions of the sensory organs themselves. For if the encoding of this distinctive information is a naturally necessary consequence of the spatio-temporal locality of material agency, then, as long as this sort of agency is at work in a chain of causes transmitting this information, the distinctive, singularizing code will be passed on, and the resulting material representation will have to be singular. But then, the contrapositive of this implication (namely, that if a representation is non-singular, then it must be immaterial), along with the claim that at least some intellectual representations are non-singular, clearly yields Aquinas' desired conclusion that the intellect is immaterial.

ABSTRACT: This paper argues that Aquinas' account of singular sensory and universal intellectual representation, crucial in one of his main arguments for the immateriality of the intellect, is reasonably defensible against such later critics as Scotus, Ockham and Buridan. As careful analysis of Buridan's own account shows, it undermines both Scotus' and Ockham's, while along with Sutton's plausible explication of the part of Aquinas' doctrine Buridan also subscribes to, it actually commits Buridan to the main implication of Aquinas' argument he criticized, namely, that the materiality of any cognitive representation implies its singularity (whence, by contraposition, the universality, i.e., the non-singularity of intellectual representation implies its immateriality).

KEYWORDS: Thomas Aquinas, Buridan, Ockham, immateriality, cognitive representation, Scotus, Sutton, universality.