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Ockham's Horror of the Universal: An Assessment of his View of Individuality

The aim of this paper is to properly assess Ockham's view of individual being, from the historical as well as from the doctrinal point of view. Regarding the doctrinal assessment, the present author will not refrain from using a phantom sketch, which, admittedly, will prove more useful to clarify what definitely was not Ockham's doctrine than to identify the Venerable Inceptor's real philosophical visage.

So much for this paper's *finis propinquus*. Its *finis remotus* is of at least equal importance: to honour the author's fellow-septuagenarian, an exemplary medievalist whose merits go far beyond those regarding our common favourite author, his renowned compatriot *Petrus Hispanus Portugalensis*.

1. Greek Thought, from Chaos to Logos

The French positivist Auguste Comte (1798-1857), who regarded the history of philosophy as that of the vicissitudes of rational thought, distinguished three stages of thinking: the theological, the metaphysical, and the positivistic. Even without strictly adhering to the Comtean approach, one may say that in the sixth century B.C., the Greeks attempted to replace mythological-religious beliefs about nature by rational explanations. In doing so, they were guided by

their fundamental faith — akin to the faith, for that matter, rationalism has in the power and effectiveness of human reason — that the world is ultimately well-structured in a rational, or better still, an intelligible way, and that the human mind is the highest cognitive authority. As a matter of fact, reason is the most reliable judge of our world because the latter has the same 'logical' structure as the human mind (logos). True enough, the myths had also supplied explanations for what is going on in the world, but the gods who play the pivotal role in mythical explanations acted of their own accord, and therefore arbitrarily. Thus the explanations always had an open ending.

Ever since the appearance of the great Presocratic thinkers Heraclitus (c.540-c.470 B.C.) and Parmenides (c.450 B.C.), Greek philosophy was dominated by the belief that the sensorial world is somehow deceptive and at first sight even resists to the logos in its being chaotic to some extent. To be sure, the world of experience as such is taken for granted by the Greek thinkers, but its explanation calls for an ontological principle that, *qua* 'True Being' transcends the level of the sensorial.

The notion of True Being is most evident in Plato's theory of Forms, which are the imperishable archetypes of the world of appearances. Whoever wishes to know and understand this world should set his eyes on the domain of the Forms. The being of each and every individual entity derives from their Universal Being. Thus, the pre-eminence of the Universal should govern our knowledge about all that is as well. However, individual being does not willingly yield to this idea.

2. The individual's resistance to universal thought

Indeed, the philosophy of Parmenides is the first impressive monument of the universalistic way of thought. True Being is the unbegotten, imperishable, indivisible, and homogeneous One. But even Parmenides was forced to take the sensorial world seriously in one way or another. He saves it from the abyss of absolute non-being by regarding it as a faulty version of the One True Being. [1]

[1] See DE RIJK 1983b, esp. 51-53.

In Plato's (425-347 B.C.) thought, the problem of 'individuality vis-à-vis universality' led to a fundamental crisis. In his later dialogues, the Master himself presents intricate arguments against his own metaphysics, which all concern the ontic status of the sensorial world, that is the way in which Universal Being actually acts in the outside world (of «the things there are»), which is basically perishable and subject to matter (in Plato's words 'what is-not'). He proposes a novel metaphysics: «What is and the All consists of what is changeless *and* what is in change, both together.» (*Sophist*, 249 C--D) and explains the activity of the transcendent Forms *in* this world *through* their representatives, the immanent forms. [2] By doing so, Plato believes he has settled the problem of matter and individuality in a satisfactory way.

Again and again, matter and individuality went on to baffle the philosopher, mainly under the label 'problem of the universals'. Many ages later on, the Franciscan monk Roger Bacon (*d.* 1292) was to exasperately remark that whoever is in search of true knowledge should not keep harping on Universal Being, but pay attention to individual being instead. His arguments seem to hit the mark. In procreation, individuals bring forth individuals; universal natures have no part in it. We eat concrete, tangible pieces of bread, not any kind of universal nature 'bread'. As for clothing and other domestic matters, things are not different. Even if we twin our eyes to higher forms of being, we will also find evidence of the superiority of individual being. God created the world for the sake of individuals, not for some 'universal man'. Likewise, both Incarnation and Redemption concern individual human beings, and the future beatific vision too is only meant for him. In sum, one sole individual being is more valuable than all universals together, he exclaims: «unum individuum excellit omnia universalia de mundo». [3]

Among his contemporaries, Bacon was known to be a quarrelsome and obstinate character. He succeeded in scandalizing them by pronouncing celebrities such as Albert the Great to be featherbrains. He rules out all his opponents in one blow: the whole vulgus of philo-

[2] See DE RIJK 1986, esp. 103-86.

[3] Roger BACON, *Communia naturalia* Book I cap. 7.

sophers interprets Aristotle as unprofessional laymen («imperiti»).[4] His advice reads: if those who wallow in the greatness of Universal Being ask what the hell the principle of individuation might be, then ask them in return what might be the principle of universality. The universal is the real problem, not the individual.

Roger Bacon himself did not present an impressive theory on the metaphysical status of individual being himself. All the same, he caused quite a commotion. On the other hand, his ideas fitted in well with the common revaluation and upgrading of the individual of those days, or rather, the feelings of reluctance towards the 'universal'. We may think of the emergent nations, the increasing importance of vernacular languages, and the sweeping changes one can observe in the views of the juridical and social position of the individual, especially in the secular order.[5]

3. The individual's paradoxical role in knowledge

Before we continue our journey through the Middle Ages, a few words about the strange role the individual has in the process of gathering knowledge. On the one hand, individual being is what true knowledge and philosophy are all about. What is more, individual being as occurring in our daily world is what we must learn to live with. On the other hand, in our attempts to get a deeper, 'universally obtaining' understanding of the individual, it cannot help loosing its most characteristic feature, its individuality. Obviously in its own interest, the rational approach of things, which focusses on universal similarities between particular entities is bound to abstract from whatever is strictly individual as of minor importance. From the rational point of view, the domain of the individual has something of a chaos about it, for each and every individual is unique and thus must give up its own self in order to be susceptible of universal knowledge. Whoever is out to make order out of chaos can only do so at the expense of the strictly-individual.

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[4] *Ibid.*, cap. 8

[5] See DE LAGARDE 1958: I, 159ff.; 203ff., and II, 134-7; 261.

Should we say now that the individual is the very cause of chaos? Or, to put it differently, that things are chaotic in themselves and that the human mind has no other option than to put up with it? Or should we rather assume, instead, that in themselves things are welstructured and that it is only our mind which fails to recognize the structures. Many philosophers, especially during Antiquity and the Middle Ages, took that «realistic» position. They were convinced that although the world is not in a perfect state, its being well-organized is an objective fact.

Yet a third position is possible. One may go along with the philosophers just referred to in rejecting the view that chaos is due to things there are, but refuse, on the other hand, to base their being well-structured on any putative structure found in the things themselves, and instead, ascribe both the initial, pre-cognitive chaos and the subsequent cognitive order to the human mind. The following «conceptualistic» picture [6] arises then:

— all things existing in the outside world are unrelated individual beings; one should regard them as belonging to an undifferentiated domain of being

— it is the human mind that, owing to its own rational approach, perceives a chaos, which, subsequently, it must try to overcome by introducing its own apparatus of 'reasoning and structurizing'.

To my mind, the historian of philosophy can perceive the philosophical developments occurring from the fourteenth century onwards as (more or less unsuccessful) attempts to maintain some «realistic» perspective by clearing away all obstacles that could tempt people to lapse into «conceptualism». What the present author particularly has in mind is the fact that time and again, the individual not only appears as a catalyst of, but at the same time as an obstacle to human reasoning. A very fascinating specimen of this resistance of the individual may be found in the development of the views concerning the status of 'individual being' from the thirteenth century onwards.

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[6] This view is argued for in DE RIJK 1979 and 1985: 33-64.

4. Individuality vs. Universality

Ever since the emergence of philosophical thought, individual being has behaved itself simultaneously as a challenge and a obstacle. Even Plato uses his doctrine of the imperishable, universal Forms to rationally explain and give proper insight into *this* perishable, world of appearances of ours. Indeed, the theory of Forms is intended to supply an ontological foundation for this sublunary world and to provide moral values for our life in this world. This concern is perhaps most evident in Plato's *Republic*. In this work, Plato not only enunciates his practical doctrines on the state and (political) education, but also sets out to give them a proper metaphysical foundation. This work comprises, therefore, the clearest theoretical exposition of the theory of Forms, the 'allegory of the cave' and the 'divided line' in particular (at VII, 514 Aff. and VI, 509 Dff., respectively). The same philosopher of the transcendent values did not disdain to carry out a quite earthly political experiment in Sicily. In the final analysis, even the philosopher of the Universal is concerned about individual being as occurring in our world of appearances.

The unavoidable mix of focussing on both universality and individuality is also apparent in Aristotle. In opposition against Plato, Aristotle emphasizes the superiority of individual being; to him, there is no need to postulate universal being as occurring in a transcendent domain. However, the common Greek ideal of true knowledge (epistêmê) forced him to assume that there can only be true knowledge if its object is the universal essence of the thing *qua* cleared from any individuality by the process of abstraction. Still, Aristotle remains, rather paradoxically, the champion of vindicating the predominant position of individual being.[7] Surely Roger Bacon has a point when he says that Aristotle cannot make up his mind on this score.

During the thirteenth century, the Aristotelian outlook is no longer unchallenged. In this view, what holds for two individual trees, viz. that they only differ in matter, also holds for two human beings. In other words, our very distinctive individuality, which makes us a

[7] For Aristotle's theory of demonstrative knowledge, especially in the *Posterior Analytics* see DE RIJK 1995, && 1-2.5.

unique personality, is entirely based upon matter, which for the Greek (for Aristotle as well as for Plato), is an inferior entity, even a non--being, somehow. It cannot come as a surprise, therefore, that during the time in which people in many respects started upgrading the status of the individual, the Aristotelian outlook, which was so devoted to the universal as the only foundation of true knowledge, became indigestible.

In the name of the pure cognitive ideal, the thirteenth-century Aristotelians did not give in that easily. Of course, they readily admitted that there is such a thing as individuality, no matter if we are speaking of trees, stones or human beings. As a matter of fact, we can easily acquire cognition about this individuality through the senses. But their opponents are not satisfied with such an answer, arguing that it is not the general role of matter as such that they are interested in, but rather the role of matter in as far as matter causes *this* individual [x] to differ from *that* individual [y]. This is very unfortunate, the Aristotelians are forced to reply, for particular individuality cannot be truly known by the intellect.

The paradox has now become evident. On the one hand, individual being has the privileged metaphysical position; on the other, individuality is not susceptible of being known by our highest cognitive faculty. The theological objection, already mentioned, adds to the dilemma. For what option does the philosopher have in this issue, which in fact was a hot topic amongst and between members of the Artes--faculty and that of the theologians? There was quite a lot of animosity between the two faculties, to begin with. The Artes-faculty provided access to almost all the other faculties. The faculty of theology, however, regarded itself as the proper teacher of all true knowledge («ma-ter scientiarum») and, as such, the keeper of truth *par excellence,* of the veritas catholica, to be sure.

In the polemic between the two faculties concerning the value of pagan science, the theologians managed to introduce an effective argument. Their colleagues of the Artes-faculty might have parroted the heathen Master that the individual as such cannot possibly be known by the intellect, but the Lord God, who, as a pure Spirit, has intellectual knowledge only, «trieth the hearts and reins» (*Ps.* 7: 9)and

says «Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands.» (*Is.* 49: 16).

Under the influence of St. Augustine, the Franciscans were relatively unaffected by Aristotelian thought. We should not be surprised, therefore, that the doctrine about the so-called intuitive knowledge («cognitio intuitiva») — the non-abstractive, intellectual knowledge, that is — of individuality, had its origin in Franciscan circles. There the Aristotelian ideal of universal, purely abstractive knowledge is under severe criticism. Not only is the individual upgraded, but simultaneously the notion of 'necessity', upon which the Antique ideal of epistêmê basically rests, is jeopardized.

Let us now outline the doctrinal developments concerning the knowability of individual being qua individual.[8]

5. Intellectual cognition of the individual in Thomas Aquinas

Even though Thomas Aquinas acknowledges that the intellect must be aware of individuality, he does not break with the Aristotelian tradition. The material, individual thing is composed of form and matter. In the cognitive process, the intellect abstracts from the sensorial image the form, thus producing a non-material image («species»). For example, one catches sight of a stone; the senses form the material image 'stone'; the intellect removes from that sensorial image all the material, space — and time — dependent features and peculiar 'appurtenances', thus acquiring knowledge of what it is that makes this individual stone precisely this stone, in other words, the essence 'stone' or 'stoneness' ('lapiditas'), using an appellation Arabian philosophers, Avicenna (980-1037) in particular, had introduced. As was remarked earlier, the intellect is unable to know the individuality of this stone owing to which it differs from other stones; indeed, the 'stoneness' intuited by the intellect is the same for every single stone. Thomas' teacher, Albert the Great adheres to this view very strictly. Thomas, however, definitely realizes that thus the human mind («anima intellectiva») is not able to have true knowledge

[8] The best thematic study on the subject is Bérubé 1964. The somewhat older study by Day 1947 is still worth consulting.

whatsoever of a thing's typically individual pecularities, since they are all removed in the process of abstraction.

This is an unsatisfactory state of affairs, Thomas admits. [9] For example, the astronomer can acquire knowledge about all regularities of the firmament, but not knowledge of *this* individual sun-eclipse taking place at this particular moment. Thomas claims that the latter knowledge is acquired in a universal , abstractive way,which renders it an endlessly repeatable one, thus losing its very uniqueness. Also he who kmows Socrates to be white, or the son of Sophroniscus, is not yet up to knowing him in his genuine individuality.

As for the senses, the situation is different. They are better equipped for the job, because they have an immediate contact with the material things in their individuality and, thus, know the sensible forms («formae sensibiles») to be united with this particular matter. The senses' material way of acquiring knowledge and the objects' material way of being are connatural.

Thomas encroaches the Aristotelian system by claiming that the senses have cognition of the individual as such, and immediately so, whereas the intellect comes to know it only indirectly. Aquinas' ideas are the following. The intellect has no knowledge of the individual directly, but through a certain reflection; that is to say, man reflects upon his own previous sensorial act, and within that reflection, he comes across the material cognitive image; this process is called *conversio ad phantasma*. So this material phantasma represents *this* stone, *this* tree, and so on, *qua* individual beings. The knowledge the soul thus has of the phantasma involves a genuine contact with the individual thing, similar to the one we have when seeing our mirror-image.[10] The immediate abstractive knowledge of the universal 'stoneness' and the indirect intellectual knowledge of its individuality are acquired in virtue of one and the same cognitive act. [11]

In Thomas' view, this kind of cognition is most characteristic of the human condition. Properly speaking, knowledge is notacquired by

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[9] *S. Th.* I q. 14, art. 11.

[10] *In IV Sent.* dist. 50, q. 1, art. 3; *De veritate*, q. 2, art. 6.

[11] *S. Th.* I, q. 85, art. 1; elsewhere (*ibid.*, q. 87, art. 3, ad 1), however, Thomas mentions two acts.

the humam intellect nor by the senses alone, but rather by man as a whole [12] coming into contact with the outside world. Being a unity of form and matter himself, man is truly able to get in touch with individual being, which likewise is something composed of form and matter.

Thomas' solution to the problem appears to be a reasonable alternative. His compromise has a sound anthropological basis in human nature, which is compromised as well by the concurrence of form and matter. However, Thomas could not derive great pleasure from his innovation. All hell was let loose. Dogmatic Aristotelians, such as Siger of Brabant (c. 1230-1283) blamed Thomas for making a real mess of the problem. For like it or not, the 'stoneness' of this stone does not belong to it any more than it does to whichever other stone. [13] In the process of abstraction, the intellect radically removes all materiality and thus every bit of its individuality. According to Siger, Aquinas' manoeuvre is pointless and, on top of that, it substantially conflicts with the teachings of the Stagirite.

For the rest, the most malignous attack on Thomas came from the camp of the anti-Arisotelians, particularly the Franciscans. Even long before Thomas came up with his solution, Roger Bacon had ridiculed the Aristotelianism of Albert the Great, a man who was in high renown among his contemporaries. And now, following in Bacon's footsteps,his fellow friars went on to expose the basic inadequacy of Aristotle's philosophy.

The controversy is widely spreading. It is for one thing the disaccord between the philosophy of the heathen Aristotle and the Catholic doctrine as handed down by the 'platonizing' St. Augustine. Moreover, in sociological terms, it also reflects the battle between the Artes-faculty and that of theology. Finally, the vehement feelings of animosity between the Black and the Grey Friars played an important role in the debate.

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[12] Thomas uses the expressions 'anima humana' and 'substantia humana'; *Quodl.* 9, art. 7c.

[13] *Quaestiones in III De anima* found in Ms Oxford Merton College 292, f. 364[rb]; cfr. BÉRUBÉ 1958: 79-80.

We know of at least six documents on this matter, which are in fact more like lampoons than pamphlets. Their writers were really going at it. First, a wrathful Franciscan, William de la Mare wrote a severe «correction» on the «extremely dangerous» doctrine of the Dominican Thomas Aquinas. In the Dominicans' replies («Correctoria»), William's Correctorium» is continually referred to as «corruptorium». They seem to have dipped their pens in gall. Did the loquacious Franciscan brother, they ask themselves, ever read Thomas' works properly? Did it never occur to this blinded dogmatist that Thomas actually breaks a lance for the intellective knowledge of the individual *qua* individual? Or does he lack the indispensable wit to perceive what Brother Thomas had in mind? Although they had a rather low opinion of their opponents' powers of discrimination, Aquinas' defenders took great pains to explain them his views. In vain, for that matter, for as early as in 1277 Thomas was condemned for his doctrinal novelties.

The historian cannot believe his eyes. The attacks launched upon Thomas seem really preposterous. Probably de la Mare had read Thomas diagonally. Besides, his comments are perfect examples of ill-nature. He must have gone about the text with his eyes closed (speaking of 'pia fraus'). Just the title of the Dominicans' counter--attacks («Correctorium Corruptorii») was probably a sufficient reason fot the Franciscan monks to come rushing forward to eagerly defend brother de la Mare. In their Franciscan mortification and disengagement, they apparently preferred writing to reading.

6. The Franciscans' approach

Let us try now to figure out what epistemology, in particular regarding individual being, the Franciscans themselves had in mind. First and foremost, Franciscan philosophy shows a number of varieties of considerable importance. They have one thing in common, however. To them, the human intellect has immediate access to individual being, by means of an intuitive cognitive act, which does not make use of the universal-directed process of abstraction. For the Franciscans, the universal is no longer of higher importance than the

individual. We shall concentrate on two notable philosophers, Vital du Four and William of Ockham.

6.1. Vital du Four O.F.M.

The Southern French Franciscan monk Vital du Four (d. 1327) is not very well known. Some time between 1289 and 1297, he wrote a work on the problem of intellective cognition of individual being, in which he defends the position that through the senses, man immediately reaches individual things in the outside world. (For that matter, this is the common idea, since Aristotle). On top of that, he maintains that our intellect has immediate knowledge of the sensorial act and thus knows the actuality of the individual being involved. For example, in seeing a stone at this time and this place, the soul has immediate awareness of the sensorial act, and therefore, or better still, therein it is aware of the actual existence of the stone. [14]

We have to acknowledge, to begin with, that Vital's epistemology bears no resemblance to any epistomological views we have come to know since Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Rather, the problem is tackled within a cognitive framework of the «realistic» type. Psychologically speaking, however, it is significant that Vital did not believe the intellect has an immediate, intuitive contact with individual things existing in the outside world. For him, the only contact the intellect has with individual being consists within the sensorial representation, which is certainly an immediate, non-abstractive sort of contact — Vital does not use the term 'intuitive' in this connection —, but nevertheless only an incidental one («per accidens»). The intellect, in fact, entirely owes its reaching the individual to the fact that the sensorial act, which is itself immediately known to the intellect, *per se* brings the concrete individual being 'inside'. [15]

Incidentally, Vital du Four and his adherents do not seem, at first glance at least, to be very convincing in introducing such an awkward notion as 'mediate immediateness'. This discrepancy disappears, however, once we realize that, although in Medieval usage 'in-

[14] See BÉRUBÉ 1964: 119; 121 ff.

[15] *Quaestio* I, 3 ed. DÉLORME, p. 181 (in DÉLORME 1927: 151-337).

tuitive cognition' stands for 'immediate cognition', nonetheless the label 'immediate' only refers to the absence of any process of abtraction. To put it differently, all knowledge that comes about independently of universal, abstractive cognition — which was so abhorred in this connection for its distortional effect — was regarded as immediate cognition, which, by definition, brings the object 'inside'.

In order to put Vital's doctrine in the right historical perspective, let us compare him to his fellow friar, John Duns Scotus (1266--1308). Scotus, too is of the opinion that our intellect has immediate, intuitive cognition of the individual. He is also anxious to show that the immanence of the intellective act of cognition does not exclude the intellect having an immediate contact with the outside world. In other·words, Scotus maintains that the intellect legitimely transcends its own cognitive acts and does not keep the subject locked up in his own mind. [16] In his view, all direct intellective knowledge «terminates», i.e. finds its ultimate object, [17] within the mind itself. Any further-reaching conclusions can be laid down by reasoning ('arguitive') only.

Camille Bérubé has good reasons to draw our attention to a number of weak points of Vital's doctrine about intuitive cognition and to oppose it with the wider metaphysical perspective Duns Scotus presents. However, I tend to think that, although Bérubé has noticed something remarkable about Vital's view, he fails to take this into account in his assessment of Vital's doctrine. What I have in mind is remarkable, indeed bewildering. Let me explain. For years there had been a violent struggle concerning man's cognitive powers. The big quesion is whether our intellect can have knowledge of the individual *qua* individual, in other words, whether it can have knowledge of what makes one individual differ from any other one, no matter if it isa human being, a stone, a tree or whatever; *or* does the intellect have the power to impose structure upon the world by means of universalization, but is unable to penetrate the depths of genuine individuality? To put it briefly, can individuality be properly defined?

[16] *Quodlibet*, q. 13.

[17] 'Terminare' is the technical expression for finishing the cognitive act; it contains both the connotation of 'bringing to an end' and that of 'bringing to completion'.

Well, just watch his dealing with this problem. First, he introduces the distinction concerning the notion of individual ('singulare', 'individuum'), a very important one, to his mind. It refers either to a thing as it actually exists (actualis rei existentia), he says, or to something entirely different, viz, the essence of individuality. [18] Well, Vital claims that he of course takes it in the former sense. But, surely, the caustic debate was precisely about the 'essence of individuality', not the mere existence of things in the outside world. So when Vital claims that our intellect has immediate (non-abstractive, that is) knowledge of the concretum (albeit within the sensorial act), he means to say that the intellect has knowledge of the individual's existence in the outside world. Interesting enough, indeed, but up till now *this* had not been the issue.

By this move, the existence of things come to the fore, whereas, earlier, one was rather interested in the 'how' of their individuality. Yet, without being perceived by the contemporary thinkers, an even more noticeable shift had taken place. In the domain of individual being,trees and stones are now making way for the individual par excellence, the human individual, or more specifically, the human mind. To be sure, Vital is quite unaware of any innovation on his part, and is not very consistent either. Time and again, he brings up the existent 'something' as a 'so-and-so being' (e.g. as 'hoc album', 'this white thing'). Thus, even though Vital is no longer focussed on the essence of individual being *qua* individual, but rather the existence of the individual only, he still keeps claiming that this existent thing presents itself including its indiividual characteristics. In this connection he stresses that nature does not bring forth any two specifically identical things, e.g two stones, having the same mode and intensity of being. [19] Most fortunately, Vital does not succeed to completely eliminate the problem of the essence of individuality as such. To express this in modern terms, judging from

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[18] His phrasing is rather diffuse: «secundum quod dicit [viz. the term 'singulare'] gradum distinctum naturalem unius individui a gradu naturae alterius individui eiusdem speciei». Others, such as Aquinas, Scotus and Ockham use the expression 'sub (propria) ratione singularitatis'.

[19] *Quaestio* I, 2, p. 164 ed. DÉLORME; *De rerum principio*, q. 8.

his firm starting-point, Vital seems to settle on a purely extensional approach. However, when elaborating his view, he shows many symptoms of his being an intensionalist after all. Generally speaking, the Medievals' use of the expression 'a thing's actual existence' ('actualis rei existentia') surely does not rule out their attention for its essence.

6.2. Ockham's extensional approach

Let us consider now the views of William of Ockham (c.1285--1247) on the problem of individuality. After Duns Scotus had been inventive enough to redirect the attention to the essence of individuality — which he takes as a particular form of being, the 'haecceitas', or the 'here-and-nowness' — his fellow friar Ockham rather vigorously returns to Vital's position to the extent that wherever possible, he approaches the problem of individuality in an extensional way. To be sure, he does so wherever he can, for given his general philosophical stand and abhorrence of abstract entities, one should certainly not bother Ockham with something elusive like the 'essence of individuality'. So when asked to determine what exactly is the object of cognition in the outside world, in other words what precisely triggers the intellective process of knowledge, Ockham definitely rejects Scotus' answer that, rather than the sensible essence ('quidditas sensibilis'), this should be the particular thing itself ('singulare'), quite independently of any process of abstraction, thus 'intuitively'. [20] Ockham explicitly denies that the intellect knows the individual in its individuality ('sub propria ratione singularitatis'). [21]

Whoever is familiar with Ockham's philosophy knows that he is not very keen on essentialism. Like Roger Bacon, he advises [22] his

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[20] *Ordinatio* I, dist. 3, q. 5, pp. 343-344 ed. BROWN. See also LEFF 1975: 62--77. — Admittedly, I have stressed the contradistinction 'extensional-intensional' abundantly, which may be seen as a foretaste of the phantom sketch I am going present later on (section 8).

[21] *Ordinatio* I, dist. 2, q. 6. For the specific, epistemological sense of 'ratio' in this connection see DE RIJK 1994, esp. 205ff.

[22] *Ordinatio* I, dist. 3, q. 8, p. 541, 2-9. See LEFF 1975: 119ff.

readers not to worry about silly questions like 'how is the universal individuated?', but instead to examine the real problem of how the singular or individual can become 'universal', and in what extremely limited sense. The assumption that universals exist as such is one of the first victims of Ockham's notorious razor, otherwise known as 'the principle of economy'. It reads: one should not provide explanations for things that, after the problem has been thoroughly analyzed, prove to be superfluous. He was allergic to anything that even faintly resembled Platonic, necessary entities. This allergy even made him give up something as innocent as his own fictum-theory. [23]

Ockham was surely inventive in ridding himself of superfluous entities. When searching a firm basis for true knowledge, he naturally refrained from introducing 'essences' as existing over and above the individual things. On the other hand he had to concede that a proposition such as 'man is mortal' ('homo est mortalis') is more than just an empirical statement about individual people actually existing at the time the statement is made. In Ockham's view, this proposition has nothing to do with the essence 'man' as put apart from the individual men, nor the (instances of) human nature immanent in the particulars. Such statements should be read as hypothetical ones, this way: 'if [x] is a man, [x] is mortal'. Thus one always deals with concrete entities. Thank goodness for that, Ockham could say, for otherwise you would be speaking about nothing.

7. The Franciscans' attack upon Aristotelian necessitarism

From what has been said above one can see that the opposition between the universal and the individual is regarded from the vewpoint of necessity *vs* contingency. For all Medieval philosophers, all theological and philosophical argument is governed by the following basic rule: God is almighty; nothing can escape his absolute power, except what is intrinsically contradictory, such as 'square circle', 'living dead', and so on. However, the Franciscans took this rule quite seriously. Let us see how seriously.

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[23] See LEFF 1975: 104ff.

The notions 'impossible', 'incompatible' or 'impossible to be simultaneously true' as involved in this rule all correspond to a specific conception of possibility, meaning 'anything that is not contradictory is possible'. So far there appears to be no problem. Actually, there is one, because the notion 'possible' is ambiguous. Suppose we say

[1] 'It is impossible for a person who is sitting to be standing', and

[2] 'It is possible for a person who is sitting to be standing'.

Each assumption can easily be argued for, as Aristotle has already pointed out. [24] One can assert that it is impossible for someone to be standing while he is sitting, and also maintain that it is possible for someone who is sitting to be standing, of course after rising, not to be sitting as well as standing simultaneously. No problem at all. However, the Franciscans claim that even while someone is sitting, his standing-at-the-same-time should not be regarded as impossible. If at a certain moment, t_1, both [p] and [not-p] are possible, then if [p] is actually the case at t_2, [not-p] cannot have become impossible all of a sudden, for [p] would be a neccessary state of affairs, then, which would rule out the assumed being possible of both [p] and [not-p]. Taking, with the Franciscans, the notion 'necessary' this way, your reading these lines here and now does not imply your existence as necessary, since your reading is entirely contingent.

Of course you will reply «But surely it is impossible for me to be reading and not-reading at the same time.» «That's your problem», the monk will answer, «at least as long as you are convinced it is something to worry about.» As a matter of fact, his focus of interest is different from yours. He persists in claiming — on account of the abovementioned basic assumption of God's absolute power ('potestas absoluta') — that something's being the case does not alter the fact that it is of a contingent nature. Of course you look at it differently, but that only means that you are looking in the wrong way. To him, you are somebody looking at the creatural domain through distorting spectacles which prevent you from perceiving its radi-

[24] *Soph. El.* 4, 166a23-32.

cally contingent nature. That is to say, things are as they are now, but they could have been non-existent, or different.

What is left, then, that can be regarded as of necessity? Actually nothing except the only necessary being, God. Whoever seeks security in the form of true knowledge (epistêmê) cannot bear to think of what effect this basic attitude might have on a man like Ockham, eagerly walking around with his razor. We have already seen what happened: the universal's objective existence, upon which all acquiring of true knowledge is based, had already lost ground; the universal, and consequently the certainty of human knowledge rest upon the way our mind goes about seeking knowledge, rather than the way things are in themselves. As for the individuals existing in the outside world, we are not able to know the true nature of its being an individual. On top of that, its proper nature as belonging to *this* individual [x], [y] *etc.* is contingent, and even its existence can only be inferred from its sensible qualities. What is worse, this inference lacks strict stringency, for there being such qualities does not necessarily imply that there should be an underlying substance. God is omnipotent, so He could have created certain phenomena without an underlying substance. Finally, our perception of our own mental activities does not strictly guarantee the existence of a perceiving soul in us.

Now what is the position of the individual in the context of his philosophy? Obviously, it is of a higher ontological rank than universal being, but this still does not tell us anything about its status. The fact that the Venerable Inceptor has not developed a definite opinion on this score presents an additional problem to the historian. His philosophy remained unfinished. Actually, during the last twenty years of his turbulent life, his activities were almost exclusively political. It may be useful, therefore, to assess Ockham's philosophy from the viewpoint of what I have put forward earlier as radical conceptualism.

8. Conclusion

In the foregoing lines I have characterized the fourteenth-century philosophical developments as attempts to maintain at least some

«realistic» perspective against «conceptualistic» tendencies that were more or less strongly suggested by the philosophers' critical attitudes towards naive «realistic» notions and positions. I would like to propose now to construct a kind of auxiliary phantom sketch put down by extrapolating, so to speak, some striking features found in a number of philosophical tenets that seem to be typical of what we call «Ockhamism». This phantom sketch might — perhaps unpleasantly, as phantom sketches usually do — remind you of what I have earlier presented as the «third way». [25]

The basis of our phantom sketch derives from Vital du Four's starting-point: we only know *that* a thing exists in the outside world, but *how* we think it to exist is mainly a matter of mental attitude. Surely, by picturing what is at stake in Vital's thought this way, he will suffer grievous wrongs, because Vital still kept feeling the need for an intensional account of the things' essences. However, we persist in regarding the extramental object to be something (some [x]) lacking any (essential and incidental) qualities, an [x] indeed that is nothing but an unavoidable postulate imposed upon us by the basic assumption that our perceptions are not just empty and illusory. This 'something' qualifies for an extensional approach only, so we take our [x] merely as a point of reference for our cognitive activities. As a matter of fact, we can only designate it with our fingers or deictic linguistic tools, which are, so to speak, the extensions of our fingers. Naturally, we cannot discuss this 'something' properly without assigning any quantities or qualities to it, but, all the same, this way of representing things including «their» quantitative and qualitative aspects (the objective side of our mental activities, that is) is entirely due to our mind's doing.

Let us now reconsider Ockham's analysis of the proposition, «Man is a rational animal» ('homo est animal rationale'). You will remember, Ockham attempts to get rid of all unwelcome side-effects by reducing this categorical proposition to a meagre implication, 'If [x] is a man, [x] is a rational animal'. But our sketch will force us to take the anaysis even further and read the sentence this way: 'If

[25] See above, our section three.

you are to call some [x] a man, then you are committed to predicate 'rational animal' of it as well. That's all. And you have to be aware that the implication does not go back to men *really being* rational animals, but just to our conceptual conventions (deriving from the *logical* side of Porphyry's Tree).

Well, Ockham definitely did not go about things in the way our phantom sketch forces us to do. He clearly persisted in taking 'being human' and 'being animal' as entities occurring as such in the outside world, so that our universal notions 'man', 'animal' and 'rational' do have some basis in outside reality. To be sure, Ockham rejected any platonic or (putatively) platonizing foundation of this universality. He is pressing ahead with his razor and removes all that appears superfluous.

However, why should Ockham save the assumption of the existence of some [x] as *including* a number of *objective* quantitative and qualitative properties from his razor? Let us face it, the 'razor' may seem to afford an attractive rule of thumb for plain thinking, but as a criterium for distinguishing between good and bad philosophizing it is meaningless. That goes for all principles of that kind. Just consider all the people whose closets are stuffed with junk. No less than their neat and tidy neighbours do they abide by the principle of throwing everything away that, *in their view*, is superfluous. The decisive question remains: what exactly*is* superfluous?

Well, people who like Ockham surely do not use their razors like mad men have to explain *at what point* they put an end to their using the razor and *why*. Ockham nowhere provides us with such an explanation. It is the more striking, therefore, that sometimes he seems to show some awareness that his approach is somewhat arbitrary, rationally speaking, especially when he cannot make up his mind about certain things. I have already mentioned in our sections six and seven some fundamental doubts Ockham has about human knowledge in general and the intensional accessibility of what escapes his razor. To put it crudely, Ockham's philosophy hovers between something like our phamtom sketch — from which he surely would recoil — and an ontology that is already greatly purified by critical thought. Sometimes with cautious doubt, at other with all reservations due to

Catholic faith, Ockham manoeuvres himself quite a long way in the direction of our phantom sketch. Yet time and again he abruptly shrinks back, for he cannot really live, it would seem, with such an idea. It appears as if his thoughts now and then move him towards the phantom, in spite of himself; in spite of himself, as I said, and hence he continuously strides back, unexpectedly, at an arbitrarily chosen moment, it seems.

It is interesting to see how some of Ockham's contemporaries, such as Nicholas of Autrecourt and Pierre Auriol, show close affinity with the Venerable Inceptor on this account. [26] For that matter, our topic is an everlasting one, as may appear from the continuing story of Kant's «Ding-an-sich». [27] In point of fact, ever since Ockham and many of his contemporaries, we see philosophers wrestling with the problem of how to create a position for that which reason knows (or feels, or imagines) itself to stand up against, in a rational context. They have never succeeded so far and philosophy is not likely to ever finish the job either. Time and again, something indigestible remains, our supposed (or rather postulated) [x].

The history of philosophy since Kant has shown various attempts to assess the 'something' properly, in terms of a point of reference in the manifold ways we try to manage the world conceptually. Incidentally, such a 'point of reference' is in no way something

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[26] For Nicholas of Autrecourt see DE RIJK 1994b: passim.

[27] Elsewhere (DE RIJK 1983a: 25ff.) I have briefly discussed the various critical comments many philosophers after Kant, — who were unable to find their epistemological innocence again, for that matter — devoted to the enigmatic «Ding-an-sich» (F. H. Jacobi, G.E. Schulze, Salomon Maimon, J.F. Herbart, F. Bouterwerk, L. Feuerbach. W. V. Quine (born in 1904) and Nelson Goodman (born in 1906) are also interesting in this repect (see *ibid.*). As for Quine and Goodman, you may ask the same question we already asked Ockham: «Why does your fairless criticism come to an end as soon as it is faced with the everyday world?». For QUINE see e.g. his *Theories and Things*, esp. 1-23; p. 21: «... my unswering belief in external things, people, nerve endings, sticks, stones. [...] I believe also, if less firmly, in atoms, and electrons and in classes. Now how is all this robust realism to be reconciled with the barren scene that I have just been depicting? The answer is naturalism: the recognition that it is within science itself, and in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described.»

mysterious. Rather it is an inevitable sequel of the rational, conceptual procedure as such. The rational approach operates, by definition, so to speak, from diverse angles or frames of reference. [28] The number of possible angles is in principle unlimited, and one can only 'designate' (I deliberately do not say 'qualify') the object of cognition as 'indeterminate-in-itself'. Well, if speaking of an unlimited number of angles and frames of references is not a mysterious manner of speaking, but quite rational, why then would it be mysterious to postulate the object merely as *a* point of reference? *Mysterium non existit nisi in mente ignorantis.*

In my view, this approach of 'things there are' has the considerable advantage of formally allowing us a great freedom of thought, without putting its specific creativity under restraint. It may, by the same token, demonstrate with all due clarity the limits of conceptualization and rational knowledge. For whichever conceptual framework you choose, you shall always come up against a frontier. In attempting to conceptualize the 'something', one cannot help but stumble on indigestible side-effects and disturbing consequences. That is the price one has to pay in attempting to capture the 'something'.

Returning now to Ockham, we have to acknowledge that our phantom sketch reduces the philosopher Ockham to little more than his own shadow. However, in trying to identify his thought and philosophical involvement by means of the phantom sketch, we may, in some sense, hit the mark. He surely had the courage to rule out certain things from rational thought because to his mind, they were not susceptible of conceptualization and rational penetration, while not brushing them aside as non-existent or not worthwhile either. [29] To some extent, Ockham fought a battle against, if not the arrogance of reason, most surely its inflated ego. His *entia non sunt multiplicanda sine necessitate* was a logical tool, or better still a disputational rule, and did not aim to narrow the horizon of what *is*.

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[28] This has nothing to do with any crude relativism. The far-reaching role of what we call nowadays 'scope distinction' should be remembered, as well as what I have labeled 'categorisation'. See DE RIJK 1988; for the important role of scope distinction in Proclean metaphysics see DE RIJK 1992.

[29] For Ockham's attitude to metaphysics see DE RIJK 1987.

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