

BURIDAN'S SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS*

1. The Failure of Realism

Thus it is pointless to hold that there are universals distinct from singulars if everything can be preserved without them—and indeed it can, as will be apparent. . .¹



BURIDAN issues this promissory note at the end of his critique of realist attempts to solve the problem of universals.² He began his negative case by attacking platonist theories, that is, theories identifying the universal as a separated form really distinct from the individuals it characterizes.³ His next target was so-called moderate realist theories, which identify the universal as a form that is really distinct but not separate from the individuals it characterizes.⁴ Finally, he turns to Scotist theories, which identify the universal as a form that is only formally distinct from the individuals it characterizes, neither really distinct nor separable from them.⁵ Buridan's discussion therefore follows a pattern similar to that found in William of Ockham, where the arguments against

* All translations are mine. See the Bibliography for abbreviations, editions, and references; when citing Latin texts I use classical orthography and occasionally alter the given punctuation and capitalization. For complete details on each of Buridan's works see Michael [1985].

¹ *QM* 7.16 fol. 51vb: "Et ideo frustra ponerentur talia uniuersalia distincta a singularibus si omnia sine illis possint saluari; et tamen possunt, quod apparebit. . ." See also *DUI* p. 2 q. 1 152.16–19 (eighth argument): "In natura non est ponenda pluralitas sine necessitate nec per consequens distinctio, cum distinctio non sit sine pluralitate; sed nulla necessitas est quod uniuersale sit praeter animam distinctum ab individuus praeter animam."

² See Ghisalberti [1975], De Rijk [1992], and King [1994b] for detailed analysis of Buridan's critique of realism as found in *QM*. There is as yet no discussion in the literature of *DUI* or the unpublished *Quaestiones super Isagogen*.

³ *QM* 7.15.

⁴ This position is anonymous in *QM* 7.16 but attributed to Walter Burleigh in *DUI* p. 2 q. 1. Buridan explicitly refers to Burleigh at 138.17 ("Gualterus in sua Expositione super primum Physicorum") as the author of eight of the twenty-five (!) arguments he recounts in favor of the claim that the universal exists outside the soul with a being distinct from that of individuals ("praeter animam secundum esse distinctum ab individuus": 138.4–5).

⁵ *DUI* p. 2 q. 2. Buridan doesn't explicitly refer to Scotus (unlike Burleigh), and he

one view are assumed in the critique of the next, cascading from more to less extreme versions of realism.⁶ And indeed they reach the same negative conclusion: realism about universals, in any version, is bankrupt. What moral should be drawn? Buridan is explicit:⁷

First of all, we should note—as is sufficiently clear from what has been said—that whatever exists outside the soul does so in reality as an individual, that is, distinct from all else (whether belonging to its species or to others), such that it is nothing at all in reality apart from individual things and is not distinct from them.

Everything is individual. More exactly, every being capable of existing *per se* is individual. There are no non-individual entities in the world, whether existing independently or as metaphysical constituents either of things or in things. (Individuals are individual all the way down.) Hence no real principle or cause of individuality, other than the individual itself, is required.

Individuality is a basic feature of the world. In its train comes distinctness: “Every thing exists as singular such that it is diverse from any other thing.”⁸ Even closely related individuals systematically differ from one another.⁹

Individuals belonging to the same species, such as Socrates and Plato, differ substantially. That is, they differ by their substances, by their matter as well as by their forms, due to the fact that Socrates’s form isn’t Plato’s form and Socrates’s matter isn’t Plato’s matter.

Buridan’s world is therefore a world of individuals, each capable of existing

doesn’t mention the formal distinction. He does talk about whether the unity of the universal is less than numerical unity, citing arguments from Scotus’s *Ordinatio* 2 d. 3p. 1 q. 1 nn. 10–28. Most of Buridan’s objections are devoted to showing that its unity is specific unity, and hence not a matter for metaphysical concern.

⁶ William of Ockham, *Ordinatio* 1 d. 2 qq. 4–8.

⁷ *DUI* p. 2 q. 1 153.9–13: “Ad cuius euidenciam sciendum est primo quod, ut satis potest ex dictis apparere, quicquid praeter animam existit in re ipsum existit indiuidualiter, scilicet distinctum ab omnibus aliis tam suae speciei quam aliarum, ita quod ibi nihil est omnino praeter res quae indiuidualiter existunt nec est distinctum ab eis.”

⁸ *QSP* 1.07 fol. 8rb: “Immo omnis res singulariter existit ita ut sit diuersa ab unaquaque aliarum rerum.” See King [1994b] §3 for an account of Buridan’s theory of individuality.

⁹ *QM* 7.17 fol. 52va: “Dicendum est quod indiuidua eiusdem speciei, ut Socrates et Plato, differunt substantialiter, scilicet per suas substantias tam per formas quam per materias ex eo quod nec forma Socratis est forma Platonis nec materia Socratis est materia Platonis.”

per se and distinct from all else. They come in four kinds. First, there are substances: God and angels (who subsist *per se*) on the one hand, and less exalted traditional primary substances (such as Socrates and Plato, cats, and the like) composed of form and matter on the other. Second, at least some substantial forms—only one per composite; Buridan defends the unicity of substantial form¹⁰—can exist in separation from matter, namely human souls, and hence are themselves individual. Third, prime matter, which for Buridan is of itself a being, is capable of existing *per se* through divine power; as such it is an individual, though normally it exists in act only in combination with some form and as such is not individual.¹¹ Fourth, Buridan argues that real accidents may exist without inhering in any substance, at least by divine power, as in the case of the Eucharist; as such they are individuals.¹²

Whatever the merits or demerits of Buridan's list—I won't examine them here—the thesis that everything is individual only underlines Buridan's difficulty in making good on his promise that everything the realists did by postulating real universals in the world can be done without them. For if everything is individual, how does generality get into the world at all? The very convictions that led Buridan to argue against realism seem to undercut his attempt to work out a consistent non-realist alternative. But work one out he must if he is to have a solution to the problem of universals.

2. The Psychological Underpinnings of Nominalism

The challenge facing Buridan, then, is to show how “everything can be preserved” in a world of individuals without appealing to any non-individual entities. His strategy is to argue that generality, not found in the world, is present only in the mind. He therefore recasts the question in psychological terms:¹³

Since there are no universals outside the soul distinct from singulars, and yet every thing exists singularly, how does it come about that things are sometimes understood universally?

¹⁰ *QM* 7.14.

¹¹ *QSP* 1.20.

¹² *QM* 5.08 Which accidents are real? Buridan countenances qualities such as whiteness; motions; perhaps magnitude or quantity; relations that are founded on real accidents; and the inseparable “added disposition” in virtue of which an accident informs a subject.

¹³ *QSP* 1.07 fol. 8va: “Ista quaestio continet dubitationes ualde difficiles. Una est cum non sint uniuersalia praeter animam distincta a singularibus, sed, quia omnis res existit singulariter, unde prouenit quod res aliquando intelliguntur uniuersaliter?”

Buridan's answer to the question formulated this way is that generality stems from the fact that the mind is fundamentally representational.¹⁴

Thus if we want to give a single reason (though not a sufficient one) why the intellect can understand universally even though the things understood neither exist universally nor are universals, I declare this to be the reason: Things are understood not because they are in the intellect but because likenesses that represent them are in the intellect.

The plausibility of Buridan's strategy here is due, at least in part, to the fact that concepts are able to represent a plurality of things while remaining individual in themselves. This dual ontological aspect allows Buridan to appeal only to individuals in his account of generality, namely individual concepts, while nevertheless providing a foundation for generality in their representative features. Of course, this dual aspect is not unique to mental items (a statue in the park may be singular in itself while representing many people), nor do all mental items have it (complexive mental concepts are nonrepresentative). But concepts are also distinctive in another way: they are components of two systematic bodies of theory, a second 'dual aspect' that makes them especially useful as an explanatory foundation for Buridan's solution to the problem of universals. On the one hand, concepts are psychological entities. They are literally the elements of thought: *thinking of φ* just is *having a concept of φ* , which manages to be 'about' φ in virtue of 'naturally resembling' it.¹⁵ Concepts are the primary building-blocks of the intellect. We acquire them from our interaction with the world, and an adequate psychological theory will detail the process of concept-acquisition, in light of the operation of other mental faculties (such as sense-perception). Since the basic conceptual apparatus of all humans is the same, psychology can be a universal natural science. On the other hand, concepts also have a semantic dimension. In particular, universal concepts in the intellect also

¹⁴ QDA (3) 3.08 237–243: “Si ergo uolumus assignare unam causam, licet non sufficientem, quare intellectus potest intelligere uniuersaliter, quamuis res intellectae nec uniuersaliter existant nec uniuersales sint, ego dico quod haec est causa: quia res intelliguntur non propter hoc quod ipsae sint in intellectu, sed quia species earum, quae sunt similitudines repraesentiuae earum, sunt in intellectu.” (Buridan notes that this isn't a sufficient reason because there can be concepts that represent only a single thing. Representationality is not in itself a guarantee of generality.) See also QSP 1.07 fol. 8vb: “Dico ergo, sicut mihi uidetur, quod una causa est in hoc quod intellectus intelligit uniuersaliter, licet existat singulariter, et res intellecta singulariter, et intentio etiam singulariter. Et ratio huius est quia res intelliguntur non per hoc quod sunt apud intellectum, sed per suam similitudinem existentem apud intellectum.”

¹⁵ QM 6.12 fol. 41vb.

function as common names in Mental Language (subject to certain qualifications); since Mental is an ideal language, concepts will be normatively governed and have semantic features that can be considered independently of their psychological properties.¹⁶ Buridan is thus able to switch between the psychological and semantic features of concepts depending on the requirements of the case at hand. Whether we should call Buridan a 'conceptualist' (since universals are representatively general concepts in the intellect) or a 'nominalist' (since universals are common names in Mental Language) is moot: one and the same item, a representatively general concept, has a role in psychology as a mental item and in semantics as a common name.

On the semantic side, general concepts are plausibly identified as universals. A concept that is representative of many functions as a common name, and is thereby 'predicable of many'—the many subjects it represents as a concept, that is. Hence it can appear in true Mental sentences as the predicate-term successively conjoined to different individual concepts acting as singular subject-terms; it can be used in such sentences to refer to (*supponere pro*) extra-mental items as well as signifying them via natural likeness. In short, the generality of language makes it reasonable to think that we could take concepts to be universals. If Buridan can credibly argue that there are general concepts filling the requisite semantic roles, much of his solution to the problem of universals will be in place.

To that end, Buridan proposes three psychological theses: (1) intellective cognition depends on sensitive cognition; (2) sensitive cognition is always singular; (3) intellective cognition can be singular and it can be universal. The payoff comes in (3), since universal intellective cognition is the key to the problem of universals, but Buridan's endorsement of (1) and (2) make (3) problematic. If intellective cognition depends on sensitive cognition, and the latter is always singular, where does generality enter the psychological realm? A closer look at each thesis is in order.

3. Buridan's First Psychological Thesis

The dependence in Buridan's claim that intellective cognition depends on sensitive cognition is causal: the intellect requires input from sense to function. (This is not to spell out how it functions, of course.) *Nihil in*

¹⁶ See King [1985] for an account of Mental Language and its features as a 'logically ideal' language. I now no longer think this picture of Mental can be sustained. Buridan did not think that concepts could simultaneously be elements in a descriptively adequate psychology and constituents of a normative ideal language, and he was right to think not. See the analysis given in King [forthcoming]. Nothing in the discussion here rides on the nature of Mental, though, so we can bypass the point for now.

intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu: there is nothing in the intellect not previously in the senses, as the Aristotelian maxim has it. Buridan treats the claim as sufficiently obvious to use as a minor premiss and not to need further proof.¹⁷ This is remarkable in light of the fact that William of Ockham denied it. In the first conclusion of his *Reportatio* 2 qq. 13–14, Ockham maintains that “. . . given a sufficient agent and patient in proximity, the effect can be postulated without anything else.”¹⁸ It is the nature of the sensitive and intellective souls that an object is both sensed and understood when it is present. For Ockham, sensitive cognition and intellective cognition are no more than independent distinct effects of the same cause, the former its proximate effect and the latter its remote effect; the intellect depends only on the proximity of the cause, not on the prior operation of the senses.¹⁹ Buridan, however, endorses the general consensus that intellect depends on the senses. Its appeal isn't simply in its popularity, though. We can readily construct an argument for Buridan's first thesis, as follows. First, the analysis of the functioning of the sensitive soul applies equally to humans and the brute animals, who by definition lack intellective souls. Second, the intellective soul is immaterial (held on the grounds of faith if nothing else); that means it is not the form of any given sense-organ, or, to put the same point another way, the intellect has no means whereby to pick up information about the world. Hence any material processed by the intellect must already be in the soul, and the only way for it to get there is through the senses. Ockham is left postulating a causal claim (external objects have effects on the intellect) without having any mechanism for the cause to bring about the effect. Buridan's first thesis seems clearly preferable.

Buridan's Second Psychological Thesis

Given that intellective cognition depends on sensitive cognition, we need

¹⁷ QSP 1.07 fol. 8va: “Et de hoc ponitur prima conclusio communiter concessa, scilicet quod necesse est hominem cognoscere prius esse singulariter quam uniuersaliter, quia necesse est hominem prius cognoscere aliquid cognitione sensitua quam intellectiua; et tamen nos supponimus quod cognitione sensitua nihil cognoscatur nisi singulariter; ergo etc.” He also cites (1) at fol. 9vb: “Cum ergo dictum sit quod cognitio intellectiua dependet ex sensitua. . .”

¹⁸ *Reportatio* 2 qq. 13–14 (OTh 5 268.7–9): posito actiuo sufficienti et passiuo et ipsis approximatis, potest poni effectus sine omni alio.

¹⁹ See King [1994a] for an account of why Ockham was driven to this counterintuitive claim, as well as a discussion of the general problem of transduction in mediæval philosophy of mind.

to determine, first, whether we can sense things universally (for sensitive cognition might be the means whereby we deal with individuals universally),²⁰ and second, what intellective cognition gets from sensitive cognition to work with. It turns out that both questions have a single answer, summed up in Buridan's second psychological thesis: sensitive cognition is always singular.²¹ Therefore, we always sense things as singulars and never as universals. The deliverances of the senses to the intellect must thereby be singular, since this is the only kind of information sensitive cognition can provide.

Now unlike (1), Buridan finds (2) in need of argument. This is surprising, since we might be inclined to grant (2) directly. After all, isn't it just a mediæval version of the claim that we perceive only individuals? What realist, however committed, has thought that we perceive universals? Furthermore, even if we aren't inclined to grant (2) out of hand, we might think it follows directly from the fact that the sensitive soul is material and extended—a claim Buridan puts as follows:²²

It seemed to some thinkers that sense doesn't have the nature for cognizing [its objects] universally, but rather singularly, in virtue of the fact that it has extension and a determinate location in a bodily organ.

Yet Buridan rejects the inference from the sensitive soul's materiality to its singular cognition (as he indeed will reject the parallel inference from the intellect's immateriality to its universal cognition). His grounds for so doing also challenge our ready modern acquiescence to (2): (a) the indefiniteness of intentional activity; (b) problems with discernibility.

As regards (a): The sensitive appetite is just as material and extended as sensitive cognition. Yet sensitive appetite is not targeted at individuals. A thirsty horse wants some water, but no particular water more than any other. This holds generally: natural agents acting as causes seem not to single out individuals *qua* individuals. Fire heats up any wood in the range

²⁰ Buridan calls this first question very difficult in *QDA* (3) 3.08 153–155: “Ista quaestio implicat in se plures maximas difficultates: scilicet utrum sensus possit sentire uniuersaliter uel solum singulariter...”

²¹ See the end of *QSP* 1.07 fol. 8va as cited in note 12 above. Buridan thinks that Aristotle endorses (2) in *De anima* 3.07 431^b1–20, which he summarizes in *QDA* (1) 1.04 196.82–83 as follows: “Sicut patet tertio huius: dicitur enim ibi quod sensus est singularium.”

²² *QDA* (3) 3.08 167–170: “Visum fuit aliquibus quod sensus, ex eo quod habet extensionem et situm determinatum in organo corporeo, non habet naturam cognoscendi uniuersaliter sed singulariter.” See also *QSP* 1.07 fol. 8va.

of its causal activity; it is not restricted to acting only on some particular piece of wood. The inference from materiality to singularity fails in these cases; why think it holds in the case of sensitive cognition?²³

As regards (b): Our perceptual abilities do not seem to put us in touch with individuals. After all, Buridan notes, we cannot tell the difference between qualitatively indistinguishable substances unless we perceive them relative to one another; nor can we tell whether a given object is the same or different from one we saw previously, even for items that are merely similar rather than indistinguishable. Such failures of discernibility suggest that sensitive cognition does not in fact succeed at reaching to the individual rather to some qualitatively more general level.²⁴

Now (a) and (b) show that (2) needs argument. Yet Buridan cannot appeal to either the materiality of the sensitive soul in guaranteeing the singularity of sensitive cognition, or to the intrinsic singularity of sense-cognition. Deprived of the standard resources for defending (2), he offers instead an alternative original account of what it is to perceive something as singular.²⁵

²³ QSP 1.07 fol. 8va-b: “Tertio quia appetitus sensitivus ita est extensus et materialis sicut sensus, et tamen equus et canis per famem et sitim appetunt modo uniuersali, non enim hanc aquam uel auenam magis quam illam sed quamlibet indifferenter; ideo quodcumque eis portetur, bibunt ipsum uel comedunt. Et est intentio posita uel appetitus ignis ad calefaciendum est modo uniuersali, non determinate ad hoc lignum sed ad quodlibet calefactibile indifferenter, licet actus calefaciendi determinetur ad certum singulare. Et ita potentia uisiva est modo uniuersali ad uidendum.” Cfr. QDA (3) 3.08 223–232: “Et iterum apparet quia uirtus materialis et extensa fertur bene in obiectum suum modo uniuersali, nam appetitus equi secundum famem aut situm non est singulariter ad hanc auenam uel ad hanc aquam, sed ad quamlibet indifferenter; unde quamcumque primitus inueniret illam caperet. Et intentio naturalis uel appetitus ignis ad calefaciendum non se habet modo singulari ad hoc calefactibile uel ad illud, sed ad quodlibet indifferenter quod ipse posset calefacere; ideo quodcumque sibi praesentetur, calefaceret ipsum; ergo etc.”

²⁴ See for example *DUI* p. 2 q. 1 153.14–29; QSP 1.07 fol. 8vb; QDA (3) 3.08 263–274. There is a particularly clear instance at *QM* 7.17 fol. 52va-b: “Si essent duo lapides omnino similes in figura, in magnitudine, in colore, et sic de aliis, et successiue apportarentur in tua praesentia, tu nullam uiam haberes ad iudicandum utrum secundus apportatus esset ille idem qui primus apportatus fuit an alter. Et ita etiam de hominibus si omnino essent similes in figura magnitudine et colore et sic de aliis accidentibus; immo etiam hoc non solum ueritatem habet de substantiis immo etiam de accidentibus: si enim essent albedines consimiles in gradu et essent in subiectis consimilibus in figura magnitudine et caetera, tu non haberes uiam cognoscendi utrum esset eadem albedo an alia quae tibi prius et posterius praesentaretur.”

²⁵ QSP 1.07 fol. 8vb–9ra: “Dicam ergo, sicut magis uideri debet septimo *Metaphysicae*, quod ex eo aliquid* percipitur singulariter quod percipitur per modum existentis in

Let me therefore state that something is perceived singularly in virtue of the fact that it is perceived as existing within the prospect of the person cognizing it. . .

We should be careful to avoid two misconceptions. First, Buridan is not merely saying that an object has to be present in the perceiver's sensory field to cause a perception. True enough, but this is only a necessary condition for singular cognition. Second, Buridan is not begging the question by assuming that sensitive cognition, triggered by the presence of the object in the perceiver's sensory field, must be singular. His point is somewhat more delicate: the singularity of perception is a function of the object's presence in the perceiver's sensory field. That is, the singularity of sensitive cognition does not stem from its inherent nature or from some characteristic feature of the object, but from the circumstances in which it occurs. Very roughly, singularity is due to the here-and-now conjunction of perceptible general features that make up an object. Buridan explains this carefully for the internal as well as the external senses:²⁶

prospectu cognoscentis. (Ideo enim Deus omnia percipit distinctissime ac si perciperet ea singulariter: omnia clara sunt quia in prospectu eius.)" [*Reading *aliquid* for *aliud*.] The same account is given in *QDA* (3) 3.08 298–303: "Ad soluendum illas dubitationes, debemus ex septimo Metaphysicae uidere modum percipiendi rem singulariter: scilicet quia oportet eam percipere per modum existentis in prospectu cognoscentis. (Ideo enim deus quasi per modum singularem cognoscit omnia distinctissime et determinate, scilicet quia omnia habet perfecte in prospectu suo per se.)"

²⁶ *QDA* (3) 3.08 304–326: "Sensus ergo exterior quia cognoscit sensibile per modum existentis in prospectu suo secundum certum situm, licet aliquando false iudicat de situ propter reflexiones speciorum, ideo cognoscit ipsum singulariter uel consignate, scilicet quod hoc uel illud. Quamuis ergo sensus exterior cognoscat Socratem uel albedinem uel album, tamen hoc non est nisi secundum speciem confuse repraesentatem cum substantia et albedine et magnitudine et situ secundum quem apparet in prospectu cognoscentis. Et ille sensus non potest distinguere illam confusionem: scilicet non potest abstrahere species substantiae et albedinis et magnitudinis et situs ab inuicem, ideo non potest percipere albedinem uel substantiam uel album nisi per modum existentis in prospectu eius. Ideo non potest cognoscere praedicta nisi singulariter. Item etsi sensus communis a sensu exteriori recipiet species cum tali confusione, et non potest distinguere confusionem, ipse de necessitate apprehendit modo singulari. Unde in somniis iudicamus quod apparet nobis esse hoc uel illud, et esse hic uel ibi, ita etiam etsi in uirtute memoratiua, species fiat a sensu cum tali confusione situs, cognitio memoratiua fiet in nobis per modum singularem, licet cum praeteritione iudicemus quod erat hoc uel illud, hic uel ibi." See also the parallel account in *QSP* 1.07 fol. 9ra: "Sensus autem exterior obiectum suum apprehendit confuse, cum magnitudine et situ ad ipsum tamquam apparens in prospectu eius, aut longe aut prope, aut ad dexteram aut ad sinistram; ideo percipit obiectum suum singulariter tanquam demonstratum hic uel ibi. Sensus autem interior non potest speciem obiecti ut colorum uel soni ab huiusmodi confusione absoluere et abstrahere; ideo in somno per phantasiam et sen-

Therefore, because external sense cognizes what is sensible in the way that something exists within its prospect in a definite location, even if sometimes it does make a false judgment about its location (due to the reflection of appearances), it cognizes it singularly and distinctly, namely as *this* or as *that*.

Although external sense cognizes Socrates or whiteness or a white item, then, this nevertheless occurs only in an appearance representing [the object] as fused together with the substance, the whiteness, the size, and the location according to which it appears within the prospect of the cognizer. Now sense cannot itself untangle that type of fusion, that is, it cannot abstract the appearance of substance and of whiteness and of size and of location from one another; hence it can only perceive the whiteness or the substance or the white item the way that something exists within its prospectus, and so it can only cognize the aforementioned [objects] singularly.

Again, although the [internal] common sense receives appearances from the external sense with this type of fusion and cannot untangle that fusion, it of necessity apprehends in a singular manner. Accordingly, in dreams we judge that something appears to us to be this or that, or to be here or there. Likewise, when an appearance fused together with location comes about from [external] sense in the [internal] power of memory, a 'memorative cognition' occurs in us in a singular manner (though we judge with pastness that [its object] *was* this or that, here or there).

Sensitive cognition is above all the representation of a manifold: a buzzing and blooming confusion wherein the various deliverances of the senses are literally fused together (*confusa*): size, shape, color, and the like are all part of the appearance (*species*), indexed to a definite time and place—even if we happen to be wrong about the place, as Buridan notes. It is the mark of the senses to present us with a jumble of impressions fused together in the here-and-now: singular sensitive cognition. And as for the external senses, for instance vision, so too for the internal senses, for instance common sense (which unifies the deliverances of the external senses) or memory: their singular action derives from the singularity of external sensitive cognition. Like the external senses, the internal senses cannot untangle the fused sensory impressions that confront it. (As we'll see, only

sum communem apparet totum ita esse in prospectu sensus secundum determinatum situm sicut in uigilia; ideo etiam sensus interior non percipit nisi singulariter. Immo etiam in memorando, memoramur rem cum situ tamquam fuerit in prospecto nostro praesentata sensui secundum determinatum situm."

the intellect is capable of performing the necessary 'abstraction'.) Hence sense is necessarily singular; it lacks the requisite mechanism to transform its input into something appropriately general. The psychological legacy of sensitive cognition is the inexpressibly rich singular concept, intrinsically complex and the building-block of mental life.²⁷

Two features of Buridan's account of perception are worth mentioning briefly. First, we only possess singular concepts of those individuals we have directly encountered; we know all others only by description rather than by acquaintance.²⁸ Second, Buridan is a 'descriptionalist' regarding mental acts. All cases of perception are intensional, since there is always an associated concept under which we perceive items; this may be more or less precise (*singulare uagum*), or it may be fully determinate; the relations among such concepts, especially in the account of the origins of cognition in sense, are highly complex.²⁹

Buridan's response to (a) and (b) is straightforward. On the one hand, he agrees with (a) that the materiality of sense is not the ground of the

²⁷ Buridan explicitly says that such singular concepts deriving from sense are complex, *QDA* (1) 1.04 195.64–66: "Dico quod talis conceptus quodammodo est complexus, quia est cum tali circumstantia quod non solum per ipsum concipitur res, sed etiam per ipsum concipitur rem esse talis figurae uel talis coloris." He even goes so far as to claim that individuals have an infinite number of properties and that we can therefore never grasp an individual perfectly: *QDA* (1) 1.05 204.90–205.19.

²⁸ This claim causes trouble for Buridan's semantics, since what appear to be logically singular terms cannot in fact correspond to singular concepts: 'Aristotle' (if you have never met Aristotle), definite descriptions, and the like. The names of individuals with which one has never come into direct contact, Buridan holds, are not strictly discrete terms but rather disguised descriptions: "to others who have not seen [Plato or Aristotle], those names are not singular, nor do they have singular concepts corresponding to them simply" (*QDA* (3) 3.08); we who have never come into direct contact with Aristotle "do not conceive him as different from other men except by a given circumlocution, such as "a great philosopher and teacher of Alexander and student of Plato, who wrote books of philosophy which we read, etc." (*QSP* 1.07), which would equally signify and supposit for another individual if there were one having engaged in these activities. Put another way, the fact that 'Aristotle' supposits only for Aristotle is not a matter of semantics but depends on the contingent historical fact that no other individual happens to fit the description, and so cannot be a discrete term. The same point may be made about descriptions generally, including definite descriptions: "the expression 'the son of Sophroniscus' is not, strictly speaking, singular, since 'the son of Sophroniscus' is immediately apt to fit more than one if Sophroniscus produces another son" (*QDA* (3) 3.08). See further Perreiah [1972] and King [1994] on the semantics of singular terms and descriptions.

²⁹ This is the topic of *QSP* 1.07, *QDA* (3) 3.08, and *QM* 7.20. See further Miller [1985] and van der Lecq [1993].

singularity of sensitive cognition, and so bypasses its challenge.³⁰ On the other hand, he agrees with (b) that sensitive cognition involves the grasp of general qualitative features. But there is a difference between perceiving individuals (the object of perception is individual) and being able to identify the individuals so perceived; failures of discernibility turn on the latter, not the former. Sensitive cognition can be thoroughly singular without guaranteeing that we can re-identify individuals previously sensed. Hence (2), the claim that sensitive cognition is always singular, is secure.

5. Buridan's Third Psychological Thesis

Finally, Buridan holds that intellective cognition can be universal and it can be singular. Yet as noted above, if intellective cognition depends on sensitive cognition, and the latter is always singular, how is universal intellective cognition possible?

Begin with singular intellective cognition, which Buridan notes some thinkers call 'intuitive'.³¹ He carefully discusses and argues against the view that intellective cognition must be universal precisely because the intellect is a separable and immaterial entity, and also against Aquinas's view that universal intellective cognition is primary and that singulars are only known indirectly through reflection on the phantasm.³² His positive case is simple:³³

³⁰ There are still questions about how to analyze the particular cases mentioned under (a). Briefly, Buridan holds that desires are just as particular as perceptions, with the twist that the intentional nature of desire introduces a kind of opacity (intentionality produces intensionality): the horse wants some-water-or-other, which cannot be identified with any particular water, but is such that any particular water satisfies it. Natural causal agents can be analyzed in a similar fashion.

³¹ *QM* 7.20 fol. 54va: "Et sic finaliter uidetur mihi esse dicendum quod nullus est conceptus singularis nisi sit conceptus rei per modum existentis in praesentia et in prospectu cognoscentis tamquam illa res appareat cognoscenti sicut demonstratione signata, et illum modum cognoscendi uocant aliqui intuitiuum."

³² *QSP* 1.07 and *QDA* (3) 3.08.

³³ *QSP* 1.07 fol. 9ra-b : "Et ex his apparet mihi quod determinari potest quaestio principalis dicendo quod prius intellectus cognoscit res singulariter quam uniuersaliter propter hoc quod sensus non cognoscit eas nisi singulariter, siue sit sensus exterior uel interior, scilicet cum illa confusione situs et per modum existentis in prospectu cognoscentis; ideo etc. Sic sensus cum huiusmodi confusione repraesentat intellectui obiectum sensibile. Et sicut obiectum primo repraesentat intellectui, sic intellectus primo intelligit rem. Ergo cum huiusmodi confusione intellectus potest cognoscere rem, et sic singulariter. Et hoc etiam apparet ex dictis, scilicet quod abstrahendo etc., intellectus intelligit uniuersaliter. Et iterum, cum repraesentatio ex parte sensus

The principal question can be settled by saying that the intellect cognizes things as singular before it does as universal, because sense, whether internal or external, only cognizes them as singular, namely as fused together with location and as existing within the prospect of the knower; therefore, *etc.* Sense thus represents a sensible object to the intellect with this sort of fusion. And just as sense primarily represents the object to the intellect, so too does the intellect primarily understand the thing. Therefore, the intellect is able to cognize the thing with this kind of fusion, and so as singular. (This is also apparent from the what has been said, namely that by abstracting and so on the intellect understands as universal.) Furthermore, since the representation on the part of sense is in a singular manner, if the intellect were not to understand as singular on the basis of a representation of this sort, then we can't explain how it can understand as singular afterwards.

The intellect has to begin with singular cognition, since that is the nature of the material passed along to it from sensitive cognition: "...we understand singularly before we do universally, since a representation fused together with size and location and other features occurs in the intellect before the intellect can untangle and abstract from that fused [representation]."³⁴ Singular intellectual cognition is thus prior to all other forms of intellectual cognition.

The process whereby singular intellectual cognition is transformed into universal intellectual cognition Buridan calls 'abstraction' (perhaps involving other psychological mechanisms we need not explore here).³⁵ He de-

sit modo singulari, si intellectus ex huiusmodi repraesentatione non intelligat singulariter, non poterit postea dici quomodo possit intelligere singulariter."

³⁴ *QDA* (3) 3.08 411–415: "Dicendum est enim quod prius intelligimus singulariter quam uniuersaliter, quia prius fit in intellectu representatio confusa cum magnitudine et situ et aliis, quam intellectus posset distinguere et abstrahere illam confusionem." See likewise *QDA* (1) 1.04 196.00–06: "Dico quod conceptus talis causatur ex conceptibus primo modo dictis: unde prius concipitur homo cum talibus circumstantiis quam sine talibus circumstantiis. Et secundum hoc, si conceptus primo modo dictus dicatur singularis, et conceptus secundo modo dictus dicatur universalis, tunc necesse est, antequam intellectus habeat conceptum universalem, quod prius habuit conceptum singularem correspondentem illi conceptui universali."

³⁵ For example, Buridan declares in *QDA* (1) 1.04 that universal intellectual cognition depends 'causatively' on the phantasm (196.85–89), and in *QDA* (3) 3.15 he argues, against Ockham among others, that the *species intelligibilis* is necessary for intellectual cognition in general. An adequate account of Buridan's philosophy of mind should spell out exactly how these elements enter into intellectual cognition.

scribes the process as follows:³⁶

I declare that when the intellect receives from the phantasm the appearance or understanding of Socrates as fused together with size and location, making the thing appear in the way something exists within the prospect of the cognizer, the intellect understands him in a singular manner. If the intellect can untangle that fusion and abstract the concept of substance or of whiteness from the concept of location, so that the thing is no longer perceived in the way something exists within the prospect of the cognizer, then it will be a common concept. Accordingly, once the concept of Socrates has been drawn out abstractly from the concepts of whiteness and of location and of other accidents or extraneous features, it will then no more represent Socrates than Plato: it will be a common concept, one from which the name 'man' is derived.

Abstraction is the process of isolating a feature from the others with which it is fused, in particular from its indexical features, such as location. Since these features are in themselves general, the feature that is isolated from the others and freed from its individualizing conditions will therefore be general. The intellect learns how to untangle the various features that are present in the singular intellectual concept by recognizing that the accompanying features may vary: a stone may appear first here and then there; it may be at one time white and another black; and so on, until eventually the intellect is able to prescind from these accidental features, thereby producing a universal intellectual cognition.³⁷

The psychological process of abstraction sketched in these remarks, what-

³⁶ *QDA* (3) 3.08 391–403: “Dico quod cum intellectus a phantasmate recipit speciem uel intellectionem Socratis cum tali confusione magnitudinis et situs, facientem apparere rem per modum existentis in prospectu cognoscentis, intellectus intelligit illum modo singulari. Si intellectus potest illam confusionem distinguere et abstrahere conceptum substantiae uel albedinis a conceptu situs, ut non amplius res percipiatur per modum existentis in prospectu cognoscentis, tunc erit conceptus communis. Unde cum elicitus fuerit conceptus Socratis abstracte a conceptibus albedinis et situs et aliorum accidentium uel extraneorum, ille iam non magis representabit Socratem quam Platonem, et erit conceptus communis a quo sumitur hoc nomen ‘homo’.”

³⁷ See *QSP* 1.07 fol. 9ra: “Sed iterum considerandum est quod intellectus—qui supra sensum est uirtus multo potentior et nobilior—potest distinguere huius confusionem, cum enim perceperimus quod iste lapis modo est hic, modo illic; modo albus, modo niger; sciemus quod hic lapis non determinat sibi quod sit hic uel illic, albus aut niger. Ideo intellectus poterit abstrahere speciem uel notitiam lapidis a specie uel notitia huius situs uel alterius: et sic intelligitur lapis: uel quantum ad hoc intelligendo de esse hic uel illic, et tunc indifferenter omnis lapis intelligitur conceptu communi non magis hic quam ille.”

ever we may think of its merits, is designed to explain how universal intellectual cognition can occur; it supports (3) by showing how such a cognition can be generated within the mind. Yet whether it succeeds is a delicate question. The process as described surely produces one cognition from another: from the rich singular intellectual cognition a single feature is drawn out and treated in isolation, freed from its combination and fusion with other features. Whether the cognition thereby produced is non-singular, though, is another matter. The account of abstraction given here depends on the claim that a given feature is intrinsically general, or at least when set free from its individualizing conditions it is general. Now there is nothing question-begging in Buridan's claim that mental items are general, either intrinsically or under certain conditions. But there isn't much explanatory in it either. What does the generality of a mental item, already conceded to be an individual quality inhering in an individual intellectual soul, amount to?

Buridan's answer is that mental items are general in virtue of being representational. The intellectual cognition produced by abstraction is thus universal by representing many items, or, more accurately, by representing many distinct individuals indifferently.³⁸

If an appearance of man in the imagination is stripped or divested of all extraneous features (or of all appearances of extraneous features), it will not determinately represent Socrates or Plato but instead indifferently represent either of them or other men. Thus the intellect doesn't understand this man determinately through the appearance but indifferently understands this man or that one or another: this is to understand man by a universal understanding.

Representation can take at least two forms, namely determinate representation and indifferent representation; on the semantic side this corresponds to the distinction between proper names and other kinds of names (which may apply to more than one individual). Yet without an account of how representation takes place, this is no more than suggestive; what is it for a representation to be determinate or indifferent? (For that matter, what is it for a name to be proper or not?) Buridan adopts a traditional view of representation as a form of resemblance. Concepts represent things by

³⁸ *DUI* p. 2 q. 1 155.29–35: “Si species hominis fuerit in phantasia et denudetur seu praescindatur ab omnibus extraneis seu a specibus extraneorum, [quod] ipsa non repraesentabit determinate Socratem uel Platonem, sed indifferenter quemlibet ipsorum aut aliorum hominum; et ita intellectus non intelligeret per illam speciem hunc hominem determinate, sed indifferenter hunc uel illum uel alium. Et hoc est intelligere hominem uniuersali intellectione.”

resembling them:³⁹

Hence it follows from the fact that representation occurs through likeness that what was representative of one item will be indifferently representative of them all (unless something happens alongside to prevent it, as will be discussed later). We ultimately conclude from this that whenever the appearance—the likeness—of Socrates was in the intellect and abstracted from the appearances of extraneous features, it will no more be a representation of Socrates than it is of Plato or of other men; nor does the intellect understand Socrates through it any more than it does other men. Instead, it thus understands all men indifferently through it by means of a single concept, namely the one from which we derive the name ‘man’. And this is to understand universally.

A concept produced by abstraction is equally a likeness of many items, and so indifferently represents them all. Of course, we have to grant that a mental item (a particular quality inhering in the intellect) can in some full-blooded way be said to resemble an external item, but that is as much a problem for singular as universal intellectual cognition. If we swallow that camel, then what of the gnat: mental items simultaneously resembling many really distinct external objects? Why not?

One reason for hesitation is that the notion of ‘resemblance’ has some theoretical baggage built into it that may not be warranted. Saying that one thing resembles or is a likeness of another is a success-verb or an achievement-verb: it cannot try to resemble but fail to do so. (It makes little sense to say that *X* only seems to resemble *Y* but in fact really doesn’t.) How can we say whether a given mental item resembles Socrates and Plato but does not resemble a horse? Worse yet, resemblance seems to be a matter of degree: Socrates and Plato resemble one another more than Socrates resembles a horse. However, the boundaries of resemblance in any given case seem extremely context-dependent. Yet even if we put these worries aside, there is a deeper issue at stake, one having to do with the legitimacy of appealing to resemblance or likeness. Even if we grant that mental items

³⁹ *QDA* (3) 3.08 279–290: “Ideo consequitur ex quo repraesentatio fit per similitudinem quod illud quod erat repraesentatiuum unius erit indifferenter repraesentatiuum aliorum, nisi aliud concurrat quod obstat, sicut dicitur post. Ex hoc finaliter inferitur quod cum species (et similitudo) Socratis fuerit apud intellectum et fuerit abstracta a speciebus extraneorum, illa non magis erit repraesentatio Socratis quam Platonis et aliorum hominum; nec intellectus per eam magis intelliget Socratem quam alios homines. Immo sic per eam omnes homines indifferenter intelliget uno conceptu, scilicet a quo sumitur hoc nomen ‘homo’. Et hoc est intelligere uniuersaliter.”

can resemble non-mental items, how can non-individual items (likenesses) resemble individual items? In short, won't any universal intellectual cognition misrepresent the way the world is, precisely in virtue of its generality?⁴⁰

Buridan's response is to explain how resemblance works to secure representative generality. It turns out that the legitimacy of universal intellectual cognition rides on their real agreement of things:⁴¹

Now if it were the case that there are many items similar to one another, then anything similar to one of them, with respect to the feature in which they are similar, is similar to any one of them. Hence if all asses have in reality an agreement and likeness with one another, when the intelligible appearance represents some ass in the intellect by means of a likeness, it must simultaneously represent any given ass indifferently (unless something prevents it, as will be discussed later). An intention becomes universal in this way.

Thus mental representation takes place through the presence of an item in the intellect that is a likeness of any member of a class of objectively similar items. Since thinking of φ is just to have the concept of φ in the mind, an intellectual cognition that is a likeness of any one of $\varphi_1, \dots, \varphi_n$ will thereby be a case of thinking of all of them. In short, the legitimacy of a universal concept is a matter of the real relations of agreement or likeness among things it is about: it will resemble any of them in virtue of resembling one of them, in accordance with the axiom Buridan enunciates at the beginning, since the objective agreement among things secures its resemblance to the rest.

With this last move Buridan has, I think, made a plausible case that the mind is capable of producing within itself items that are representatively general. He has sketched a psychological mechanism that produces such an item and explicated its generality through its resemblance to at least one singular (presumably the one from which it was derived) and the objective relations of agreement that item has to others. Whether it is an adequate account will depend on exactly how its details are spelled out, to be sure,

⁴⁰ There is no parallel issue about the legitimacy of sensitive cognition, since it is always linked to a particular external object (the one causally responsible for the sensitive cognition) the sensed features are taken to characterize.

⁴¹ QSP 1.07 fol. 8vb: "Modo si sit ita quod sint multa inuicem similia, omne illud quod est simile uni eorum, quantum ad hoc in quo sunt similia, est simile unicuique aliorum. Ideo si omnes asini ex natura rei habent adinuicem conuenientiam et similitudinem, oportet quod quando species intelligibilis in intellectu repraesentabit per modum similitudinis aliquem asinum, ipsa simul indifferenter repraesentabit quemlibet asinum, nisi aliud obstat, de quo postea dicitur. Ideo sic fit uniuersalis intentio."

but that should not detract from Buridan's success in offering his account.

6. Real Agreement

From psychology, we have to return to metaphysics. For universal intellectual cognition is only legitimate to the extent it has some real basis in the world, as Buridan admits, since otherwise the universal concept would be fictitious.⁴² But what is there in reality to ground the universal concept if there are no non-individual entities in the world? What, in the end, is the 'agreement' among distinct individuals to which Buridan appeals?

It is clear that such agreement is an extra-mental feature of the world, namely a relation stemming from a thing's essence:⁴³

External things have agreement and likeness among themselves in virtue of their nature and essence.

According to Aristotle, there are three fundamental modes of unity: among substances, which is called 'sameness'; among qualities 'likeness'; among quantities 'equality' (*Met.* 5.15 1021^a10–14). We might reasonably expect Buridan to have this doctrine in mind and be focusing on certain kinds of relations among objects: 'agreement' as substantial sameness among individual substances, 'likeness' as the sameness of quality among individual substances.⁴⁴ Naturally, such relations have their opposites: diversity and

⁴² See *DUI* p.2 q.1 152.22–25: "Deinde probo tertiam conclusionem quod uniuersale pro subiecto est praeter animam quantum ad aliquid sui, quia uniuersale pro subiecto est illud super quod fundatur intentio uniuersalitatatis, sed ipsa uniuersalitatatis fundatur super rem extra; aliter uidetur quod esset ficta." A similar claim is made in *QM* 7.16 fol. 51rb: "Item oportet concedere quod conceptus uniuersales et singulares distinguuntur apud intellectum, et si non esset distinctio ex parte rei correspondens, illa distinctio apud intellectum esset falsa uel ficta, quod est inconueniens; ergo in re extra distinguuntur uniuersalia a singularibus."

⁴³ *QSP* 1.07 fol. 8vb: "Res autem extra ex natura et ex essentia sua habent inter se conuenientiam et similitudinem." (This remark immediately precedes the passage cited in note 41 above.)

⁴⁴ See *DDC* 245: "Sed conuenientia debet reduci ad illas relationes quas Aristoteles dicebat sumi secundum unum, cuiusmodi sunt: idem, aequale, et simile. Et e conuerso diuersitas debet reduci ad relationes sumptas secundum multa. Et hoc est ualde clarum." Note that there is a subtle point regarding likeness likely to be missed by modern readers. Strictly speaking, two qualities are alike, and we can speak of their likeness, but the same terminology was often used loosely (as here) to describe the relation between two substances each having the 'same' quality: the likeness of Socrates and Plato in virtue of Socrates's whiteness and Plato's whiteness. This will be important when Buridan turns to the ontology underlying relational statements. There is no comparable usage for agreement, of course, though there is for equality (which Buridan does not mention in his discussions).

dissimilarity, respectively. Buridan mentions the former while setting forth another aspect of agreement:⁴⁵

I declare that two individuals of the same species have essential distinctness and they have essential agreement... I say that Socrates and Plato wholly agree with one another of themselves by an essential agreement, and that they are wholly diverse from one another of themselves by an essential diversity.

Which distinct individuals are related by agreement? The suggestion here is that all individuals of a given species are. (They aren't identical, though, so they are all diverse from one another as well.) Furthermore, since the agreement and diversity stem from the essences of the individuals, they must agree or be diverse necessarily—that is, in virtue of what they are. How do we know that there is such real agreement among things? Buridan has a surprising answer: the fact that we can distinguish individuals of the same species only through accidental differences points to their underlying substantial agreement:⁴⁶

That there is [agreement among things] is clear, because, due to their agreement, you can have no way to perceive distinctness among things of the same species except through the diversity of extrane-

⁴⁵ *DUI* p. 2 q. 1 162.18–20 and 169.15–17: “Dico quod duo indiuidua eiusdem speciei habent distinctionem essentialem et habent conuenientiam essentialem... Dico quod Socrates et Plato seipsis totis conueniunt essentiali conuenientia et seipsis totis diuersi sunt essentialiter diuersitate.”

⁴⁶ *QSP* 1.07 fol. 8vb: “Quod ergo ita sit, patet, quia propter earum conuenientiam tu nullam uiam potes habere ad percipiendum distinctionem rerum eiusdem speciei, nisi propter diuersitatem extraneorum, aut quia simul uidentur extra inuicem situatiter. Verbi gratia, sint duo lapides omnino consimiles in magnitudine et figura et aliis accidentibus, et unus hodie tibi praesentetur et cras alius; tu non poteris scire de illo posteriori utrum sit ille idem quae tibi prius praesentabatur uel alius. Et similiter etiam est de accidentibus, quia si illi lapides sint albi secundum aequalem gradum intentionis et aequaliter magni et ambo sphaerici, et sint etiam similes quantum ad omnia alia accidentia, tu non poteris scire an sit eadem uel alia albedo aut nigredo, aut figura quae posterius ostenditur cum illa quae prius tibi ostensa fuit.” The same point is made in *QDA* (3) 3.08 261–274: “Illa quae sunt eiusdem speciei specialissimae tantam habent essentialem conuenientiam quod tu non habes uiam ad percipiendum eorum distinctionem nisi per extraneam. Verbi gratia, sint duo lapides similes in magnitudine et figura et colore et aliis singularis accidentibus, et nunc uideas unum et quantum potes considerare ipsum. Demum, te recedente, auferatur ille et ponatur alius loco eius. Tunc tu rediens, iudicabis quod ille qui nunc est ibi sit idem quae ante uidebas. Et similiter, color quae in eo iudicabis sit idem ille color quae ante uidebas, et sic de magnitudine et figura. Nec tu habebis aliquam uiam ad sciendum an ille est idem lapis uel alter (et sic etiam de hominibus). Sed si uideas eos simul, tu iudicabis quod sunt alii per alietatem locorum uel situs.”

ous factors, or because they are seen together externally and situated with regard to each other. For example, suppose there were two rocks completely similar in size and shape and other accidents and one were presented to you today and the other tomorrow; you couldn't know whether the later one is the same one presented to you before or the other one. And likewise for accidents too: if those stones were white in an equal degree of intensity and equally large and both spherical, and they were also similar with regard to all other accidents, you couldn't know whether it is the same whiteness or blackness, or shape, which is picked out as that which was previously shown to you.

The difficulties with discernibility noted earlier turn out to provide a positive basis for imputing real agreement to things. Our inability to correctly re-identify items is a logical ground for thinking them substantially in agreement.

Now in all these passages Buridan seems to be speaking of an arbitrary species, a point borne out by his remark that essential agreement and diversity are coordinated with genera and species.⁴⁷ Furthermore, agreement and diversity seem to admit of more and less, in crossing generic or specific boundaries.⁴⁸

We hold that things of the same species or genus existing outside the soul singularly have of their nature a greater essential likeness or agreement than do those of diverse species or genera. For Socrates and Plato agree in reality more than Socrates and Brunellus do (even as regards their essences), and Socrates and Brunellus also agree more than do Socrates and this stone. Greater essential agreement of this sort comes from the fact that things belonging to the same species or genus come from the same or very similar causes more than do others, because in the order of beings they have the same

⁴⁷ *DDC* 238: "...conuenientiae uel diuersitates essentiales seu quidditatiuae, cuiusmodi sunt conuenientiae uel diuersitates aliquorum secundum speciem aut secundum genus..."

⁴⁸ *QDA* (3) 3.08 246–261: "Tunc accipimus quod res extra animam singulariter existentes de eadem specie uel de eodem genere habent ex natura sui similitudinem seu conuenientiam essentialem maiorem quam illae quae sunt diuersarum specierum uel diuersorum generum. Plus enim conueniunt ex natura rei Socrates et Plato quam Socrates et Brunellus (etiam quantum ad suas essentias), et plus etiam conueniunt Socrates et Brunellus quam Socrates et ille lapis. Et huiusmodi maior essentialis conuenientia prouenit ex eo quod illa quae eiusdem speciei uel generis proueniunt ex eisdem causis, uel similibus magis, quam alia, propter quod in ordine entium sunt eiusdem gradus, uel propinquorum graduum ad inuicem, quam alia."

rank, or a closer rank to one another than do others.

From a contemporary point of view, then, essential agreement is an equivalence relation that partitions the class of individuals into their respective natural kinds, where members of different kinds are more or less in agreement depending on how 'close' their respective natural kinds are. (Buridan's talk of things having distinct 'ranks' is an oblique nod to the Great Chain of Being.) In short, things in the world seem to be sorted into natural kinds: they agree or differ depending on their natures.

This, of course, serves to point up the underlying metaphysical problem. How can things be objectively divided into natural kinds unless there is some extra-mental real commonness? Agreement seems to be not only a relation but a so-called 'real' relation, that is, a relation that obtains independent of any mental states: Socrates and Plato agree with one another regardless of anyone's thinking so. Therefore, it should be something real too, and Buridan has to show that does not introduce any real commonness or universality into the world.⁴⁹ What is more, the fact that distinct individuals may agree more or less with one another—so that an ass and a horse are more in agreement than an ass and a stone—seems to be an irreducible feature of the world, not easily explicable by appeal to anything less than real common features.⁵⁰ Yet if Buridan gives in to either of these

⁴⁹ Buridan takes this argument seriously: it is the first argument given in favor of the claim that there are relations outside the soul distinct from their foundations, *QM* 5.09 fol. 32rb (incorrectly paginated in the incunabulum as fol. 33): "Quaeritur nono utrum sit aliqua relatio praeter animam distincta a fundamento suo. Arguitur quod sic: Quia similitudo Socratis ad Platonem (si uterque est albus) est praeter animam, quia, quamvis nullus intelliget, adhuc Socrates esset similis Platoni et non sine similitudine; ideo similitudo esset licet nullus intellexeret, et tamen illa similitudo est relatio et est res distincta a Socrate qua Socrates est similis, quia dictum est quod similitudo est una qualitas, scilicet illa albedo quae est distincta a Socrate; igitur."

⁵⁰ Buridan seems to have found this line of thought particularly compelling. It is the first argument he gives to show that agreements and diversities have an ontological standing independent of the things they apply to, in *QM* 5.06 ff.29vb–30ra: "Supposito enim quod equus et asinus habent adinuicem aliquam conuenientiam ex natura rei, propter hoc quod ad naturas eorum consequuntur accidentia magis similia quam consequuntur ad naturam lapidis et asini. Oportet igitur concedere quod ex natura rei equus et asinus magis conueniunt quam asinus et lapis. Et cum hoc etiam certum est—quia ipsi ex natura rei sunt adinuicem diuersi magis quam essent duo asini adinuicem—omne modo igitur si conuenientia eorum adinuicem non sit res uel dispositio alia ab eis, tunc sequeretur quod idem erit conuenientia eorum adinuicem et diuersitas eorum abinuicem*. Sed illud consequens est falsum, quia ex natura rei asinus et equus ratione suae conuenientiae ducunt ad unum conceptum communem, scilicet animalis, et tamen ratione diuersitatis eorum non ducunt ad illum conceptum communem, immo ad diuersos conceptus specificos. Igitur huiusmodi conuenientia et

lines of argument his attempt to find a non-realist solution to the problem of universals will be a failure.

Buridan recognizes the challenge, and rises to meet it in two works on the theory of relations.⁵¹ His early polemical treatise *DDC* (dated in its colophon to 1332) examines whether agreements, diversities, and causalities have any independent ontological standing; the second of three theses he defends in it is that “essential or quidditative agreements or diversities... add nothing in the things that so agree or are diverse, apart from their essences.”⁵² He also devotes *QM* 5.06 to the question “whether the agreements and diversities of things with one another are things or dispositions added to the things that agree or are diverse”⁵³ (*QM* 5.08 takes up the corresponding question about causality). He declares that they are not:⁵⁴

My first conclusion is that for any things said to agree or to be diverse of themselves, the agreements or disagreements in them are not things or dispositions added to them. This result is clearly established by the negative principal arguments.

Agreements and diversities, because they stem from the essences of things, are not ordinary relations; Buridan discusses whether ordinary relations are real accidents, that is, whether they have any independent ontological

huiusmodi diuersitas non sunt idem.” [*Reading *abinuicem* for *adinuicem*.] In his resolution of the principal arguments, he defers his solution of this one to *QM* 7, where, as far as I can tell, he never returns to it (fol. 30rb): “Illa prima ratio quae arguebat de illis conceptibus tangit magnas difficultates tractandas in septimo libro: ideo dimittuntur usque tunc.”

⁵¹ See the treatment of Buridan’s theory of relations in Schönberger [1994], which also deals with Buridan’s polemical *Tractatus de relationibus*.

⁵² This is the complete version of the passage cited in n.40 above: “Secunda: Quod conuenientiae uel diuersitates essentiales seu quidditatiuae, cuiusmodi sunt conuenientiae uel diuersitates aliquorum secundum speciem aut secundum genus, nihil addunt in rebus sic conuenientibus uel diuersis praeter suas essentias.” The polemical *DUI* presents the same view (175.21–23: “Quarto dico quod huiusmodi conuenientiae uel diuersitates Socratis ad Platonem, et econuerso, nihil addunt in Socrate et Platone.”

⁵³ *QM* 5.06 fol. 29vb: “Quaeritur sexto utrum conuenientiae et diuersitates rerum adinuicem sint res an dispositiones additae rebus conuenientibus uel diuersis.” The date of *QM* is disputed—estimates range from 1336 to 1350—but it is generally conceded to be a work of Buridan’s philosophical maturity, and so I shall concentrate on it.

⁵⁴ opcitfol. 30rb: “Prima conclusio est quod quaecumque dicuntur per seipsa conuenire uel esse diuersa in illis conuenientia uel disconuenientia non sunt res uel dispositiones ipsis additae. Et sic illa conclusio manifeste probatur per rationes quae iam factae sunt ad secundam partem quaestionis.”

standing, in *QM* 5.09. His arguments turn on special properties of such essential relations. First (putting aside an initial *ad hominem* theological argument), Buridan maintains that identity and diversity should be treated symmetrically, and that it is implausible to treat a thing's identity, which is just a case of self-agreement, as consisting in an added thing or disposition.⁵⁵ Next, if they were things, as soon as anything comes into existence the whole universe is remade anew, since in each existent being agreements and diversities are created in a kind of ontological 'ripple effect'. But this is implausible in its own right and seems to involve action at a distance.⁵⁶

Buridan's final argument that agreements and diversities have no independent ontological standing is a cleverly concise version of Bradley's Regress:⁵⁷

If Socrates is diverse from Plato by a diversity added to him, then that diversity is diverse from Socrates, and Socrates diverse from it. Then either (a) Socrates and that diversity are diverse of themselves from one another, or (b) they are diverse through another diversity. If (a), then by the same reasoning we should stop at the first stage. If (b), we proceed with regard to it as before, and so to infinity—which is unacceptable.

(Buridan leaves the corresponding argument for the case of agreements as an exercise for the reader.) The conclusion Buridan draws from these three

⁵⁵ *Op. cit.* fol. 30ra: "Item: Si identitas non est res addita, ita nec diuersitas. Et tamen identitas non est aliquid additum rei quae est eadem, quoniam quacumque re accepta omnibus aliis circumscriptis, adhuc ipsa esset* sibi eadem. Et etiam ex diuersitate: quaecumque enim duae res quarum haec non est illa, si concedantur esse et omnia alia circumscribantur, adhuc illae erunt diuersae abinuicem, quoniam ad aliqua esse diuersa sufficit hoc esse et illud esse et hoc non esse illud: igitur diuersitas non est res uel dispositio alia a rebus diuersis." [*Reading *esset* for *essent*.] A much briefer version of this argument is given in *QP* q. 10 73.104–108.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem.*: "Item: Ego pono quod Socrates est generetur de nouo. Constat quod quaecumque res alia de mundo efficitur de nouo diuersa a Socrate, quia antequam Socrates esset, nulla erat res diuersa ab eo; et non quaelibet alia est diuersa ab eo; igitur si ad esse diuersum ab aliquo requiretur dispositio addita, sequitur quod apud generationem Socratis generaretur in qualibet alia re quaedam dispositio sibi addita—quod est absurdum dicere, quia tunc oporteret Deum et Intelligentias mutari in recipiendo tales dispositiones."

⁵⁷ *Op. cit.* fol. 30ra–b: "Item: Si Socrates est diuersus a Platone per diuersitatem sibi additam, tunc illa diuersitas est diuersus* a Socrate, et Socrates diuersus ab alia, et tunc: uel Socrates et illa diuersitas sunt abinuicem diuersi seipsis, uel per aliam diuersitatem: si seipsis, pari ratione standum erat in primis; et si hoc sit per aliam diuersitatem, procederetur de illa ut prius, et sic in infinitum, quod est inconueniens." [*Reading *diuersus* for *diuersitas*.]

arguments, then, is that agreements and diversities aren't things or dispositions above and beyond the things that agree or are diverse. Hence they must be identified with those very things themselves. Buridan concludes that "the diversity of Socrates from Plato is just Socrates, and conversely the diversity of Plato from Socrates is just Plato."⁵⁸ He surprisingly does not say, but presumably the agreement of Socrates with Plato is just Socrates and Plato, which is likewise the agreement of Plato with Socrates: then the agreement and the diversity of Socrates and Plato do differ but neither is in any sense 'added' to already existent individuals. Hence agreements and diversities do not add anything to Buridan's ontology. Since Buridan hasn't countenanced any new entities, he *a fortiori* hasn't countenanced any new non-individual entities. His solution to the problem of universals, then, doesn't appeal to anything really common in the world. In the end, the real basis for universal concepts are the agreements and diversities that hold among individual items in the world, yet these are no more than those items themselves. He has finally made good on his promissory-note that "everything can be preserved" without appealing to "universals distinct from singulars."

7. Conclusion

Or has he? I want to conclude by drawing some wider implications about Buridan's proposed solution to the problem of universals.

An obvious problem faces Buridan's account—one that he perhaps recognized and could not resolve.⁵⁹ It is this. Buridan has argued that diversities come in different grades: Socrates is less diverse from a horse than from a stone (say). But the diversity of Socrates from a horse is just Socrates, and likewise the diversity of Socrates from a stone is just Socrates. Yet how is one diversity greater than the other? Both are just the same thing, namely Socrates.

A less obvious problem also faces Buridan's account. For Buridan has

⁵⁸ *Op. cit.* fol. 30rb ad 2: "Et breuiter ego credo quod diuersitas Socratis ad Platonem est Socrates; econuerso diuersitas Platonis ad Socratem est Plato." Buridan reiterates the point in *QM* 5.09 fol. 32va: "Et aliquando ita est quod nullam aliam rem significat uel connotat praeter illas duas res, scilicet praeter illam pro qua supponit et illam ad quam est comparatio, sicut si ego dico 'Socrates est diuersus a Platone' uel si dico 'Socrates dependet a Deo' et tunc adhuc in isto casu credo quod eadem res est pro qua supponit terminus absolutus et pro qua terminus relatiuus etiam in abstracto sumptus: ita eadem est res quae est Socrates et quae est diuersitas Socratis ad Platonem, et dependentia Socratis ab ipso Deo."

⁵⁹ See note 50 above.

argued that there are no non-individual entities in the world, and that we should identify universals as mental items that represent many things in reality. Such a universal concept is not 'fictitious' because it is grounded in reality by objective agreement among the substances it represents. This agreement, however, is not anything in the world above and beyond the individual substances themselves. But this line of argument threatens to lapse into triviality. Does it say anything more than that the universal concept applies to the individuals it does because it in fact does apply to them?

These are at bottom the same problem, I believe. They both address Buridan's identification of certain individual things as the real correlate answering to metaphysical truths. Turn it around: perhaps the kind of explanation Buridan is offering rejects the need to give some entity (*res*) in the first place: not merely an 'added' thing, but any thing at all. We may be looking in the wrong place for Buridan's solution.

I can think of two ways to capitalize on this insight. Both have some support in the texts; neither is fully satisfactory; each manages to avoid the problems mentioned above.

We might, for instance, take Buridan's approach to agreement and diversity as being fundamentally modal.⁶⁰ The agreement between Socrates and Plato is not at bottom a matter of any thing they have or share, but rather a matter of the way they are. Socrates and Plato, as well as Socrates and Brunellus, are related in a certain fashion (*aliqua liter*)—or rather the former in one way and the latter in another—namely as being in agreement, or one pair being more in agreement than the other. But such ways or modes are not themselves part of the ontology: there are things and there are the ways things are, but there is no such thing as the way things are.

The modal approach has historical as well as philosophical merits. Buridan did recognize modes and speak of them; if less often than other contemporary philosophers, still often enough to make their deployment on the problem of universals a plausible move.

The disadvantage of the modal approach is that it seems a mere sleight of hand: modes by definition do not appear in the ontology, but make a metaphysical difference to individuals that do appear in the ontology. How can the relation between Socrates and Plato be parsed in terms of some feature that does not exist, despite the fact that they have more of it than Socrates and Brunellus?

Alternatively, we might think of Buridan's approach as a roundabout

⁶⁰ I have in mind modes taken roughly along the lines sketched in Klima [1998].

way of getting at features we call nowadays 'metaphysically primitive'. It is a brute fact that Socrates and Plato agree with each other, and another brute fact that they agree more than do Socrates and Brunellus. (Not that there are facts, of course.) These are metaphysical truths, but truths that do not have any further explanation; they are primitive. Once we distinguish the truth from the truth-maker (whatever is responsible for making the truth true), we can easily see why Buridan should say that Socrates's essential agreement with Plato just is Socrates and Plato: the metaphysically primitive truth that they essentially agree requires them both to exist and follows from each being the very thing it is (in this case: human). Nor does countenancing metaphysical truths cause any ontological worries. There are truths, but truths are not things. Some truths are primitive, including those that describe how the world is ultimately sorted into natural classes: a fact that admits of no further explanation, or no further metaphysical explanation.

The disadvantage of this second approach is that the very facts that seem to prompt the problem of universals are in the end not explained but assumed: we are told that the facts hold rather than why the facts hold, a very different matter. In the end, Socrates and Plato agree because, well, there is no 'because': they just do. And that is not very helpful.

Buridan could well accept the disadvantages of either approach sketched here; he wouldn't be the first philosopher to defend a position known to have problems. (He could even adopt both views.) My suspicion—it is no more than that—is that Buridan is in the end a partisan of the second approach. The appeal to primitive metaphysical truths can be more or less rewarding, depending on how deep in the theory one has to go to find the appeal. In Buridan's case, the sheer wealth of close philosophical argument articulated in his proposed solution to the problem of universals suggests that we must go a long way indeed. And that, perhaps, is all we can ask of any philosopher. Buridan's nominalism is a robust example of mediæval philosophy at its finest.

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