

DUNS SCOTUS ON SINGULAR ESSENCES*

COTUS argues in his mature *Questions on the Metaphysics* Book 7 that there are what we may call ‘singular essences’: Socrates, for example, has an essence that includes more than his human nature, which is his specific essence; he has an essence proper to himself alone, an essence that cannot be had by anyone else. Although Socrates does have singular (individualized) forms, his singular essence is not a form—there is no form *Socrateity* for the singular essence paralleling the form *humanity* for the specific essence. Instead, Socrates has his singular essence in consequence of being an individual, that is, in consequence of having an ‘individual differentia’. Scotus further rejects the distinction between identity and individuality, maintaining that what it is for Socrates to be Socrates is the same as what it is for him to be an individual. Socrates, in the end, *is* his singular essence.

Scotus’s arguments in support of the singular essence are spread through Book 7. He devotes only one question directly to the singular essence (7.7), presenting the rest of his account as he introduces the relevant metaphysical machinery in the latter part of Book 7: the individual differentia in 7.13; the nature and essence of material composites in 7.8–10 and 7.16; the intelligibility of the singular in 7.14–15; the nature of definition throughout. His systematic view of the singular essence, outlined above, has to be reconstructed from arguments he gives piecemeal.

In what follows I shall first examine Scotus’s positive arguments for the singular essence (§1). Since an individual substance is metaphysically composed of a common nature and an individual differentia, the relation between the singular essence and the individual differentia needs to be clarified (§2). Once the metaphysical structure of the individual is understood, we’ll turn to Scotus’s arguments that the identity and the individuality of an individual are the same (§3). Finally, Scotus’s position has the consequence that individuals are definable in a sense, and hence that they are fully intelli-

* All translations are mine. Unless otherwise noted, references are to the critical edition of Scotus’s *Questions on the Metaphysics* (see the Bibliography) and standardly abbreviated by book, question, and paragraph number, so that ‘7.7.21’ refers to *Questions on the Metaphysics* Book 7, Question 7, §21. It is now generally held that at least Books 7–9 of this work are mature works, either composed or revised at an advanced stage of Scotus’s career.

gible in themselves, though not by us in this life (§4). From these several discussions a picture of Scotus’s theory of the singular essence will emerge.

1. Arguments for the Singular Essence

Scotus begins his discussion of essence¹ in 7.7: “Whether the essence is the same as that which has it,” *Utrum quod quid est sit idem cum eo cuius est*.² Scotus offers two initial arguments against identifying essences with their subjects. First, the essence would thereby be as generable and corruptible as its subject, and hence come into being and pass away (7.7.4). Second, the essence of accidental unities would be the same as the essence of essential unities, since their subjects are the same (7.7.9).

Rather than reply immediately to these two arguments, Scotus considers a view in 7.7.11–13 that identifies generic and specific essences with their subjects but rejects singular essences entirely, a view he lays out as follows (7.7.13):³

Since the only essential predicates that singulars have are predicates belonging to the species, the only essence they have is the specific essence; they have no essence of their own, for they include in themselves something that distinguishes them from their specific nature, and so neither are they the same as the specific essence nor do they have any other essence.

Scotus agrees that generic and specific essences are really the same as their subjects, but offers a pair of arguments against the view that individuals have no essence other than their specific essence, arguments for singular essences.

The first of Scotus’s arguments appeals to Aristotle, who says that substance is most of all a being (*Cat.* 5 2^b5–7); if the essence is the same as what the thing is the most of all, then substance and a being have essence most of all, that is, are what they are (7.7.20; see also 7.13.21). The view to

¹ Scotus typically uses ‘*essentia*’, ‘*quod quid est*’, and ‘*quiditas*’ to refer to essence; less commonly the related ‘*quod quid erat esse*’, ‘*quid est*’, or similar variations. I shall render them all uniformly as ‘essence’.

² This is recognizably the same question with which Aristotle begins *Metaph.* Z.6: Πότερον δὲ ταῦτόν ἐστιν ἢ ἕτερον τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι καὶ ἕκαστον, σκοπιέον (1031^a15–16). Note that Aristotle and Scotus do not restrict the question to individuals, but are raising the issue in general, at all metaphysical levels.

³ “Quia singularia non habent praedicata in quid nisi praedicata speciei, non habent quid nisi quid speciei, et nullum proprium eorum quia includunt aliquid intra se in quo distinguuntur praeter naturam specificam, et ideo cum quod quid est speciei non sunt idem, nec habent aliud quod quid.”

which Scotus is objecting admits specific essences but not singular essences. In other words, it maintains that what Socrates is “most of all” is human, that there is nothing more to what he is *qua* individual than what holds of him as a human being.

Scotus’s second argument for the singular essence, extending the results of the first argument, targets the last point (7.7.21):⁴

What is added to the species, whatever it may be, either (*a*) produces something that is one *per se* with the specific nature, or (*b*) does not. If (*b*), then although what is added pertains to the essence of a primary substance, the whole⁵ will be a being *per accidens*, neither generated nor corrupted. If (*a*), then the whole is a substance that is one *per se*, and so the whole will be truly the same as itself—yet it includes something other than the specific nature, and hence is able to have its own proper essence.

Individuals must include something other than the specific essence, for otherwise they would be the species itself, since the specific essence is the same as its proper subject. So much is in accord with common sense. Socrates has features that characterize him only as an individual, features that make Socrates who he is, different from others. Now these features either combine with his human nature to produce unity of the sort typical of primary substance, or they do not. If not, Socrates will not be a genuine unity but merely an accidental combination of features, not a substance in his own right, something generated or corrupted.⁶ If on the other hand Socrates’s individual features do combine with human nature to produce such a unity, the combination must be what Socrates is, since by hypothesis it includes the features that make Socrates Socrates. Hence the combination is the same as its subject. Since the combination includes something more than human nature (the specific essence) and nevertheless spells out what it is to be Socrates, Socrates must have an essence beyond the specific essence—

⁴ “Item, illud additum speciei quidquid sit aut facit unum per se cum natura speciei, aut non. Si non, et tunc cum illud sit de essentia primae substantiae, illud erit ens per accidens et non generatur nec corrumpitur. Si sic, tunc totum illud est una substantia per se, et tunc illud totum erit uere sibi idem, et tamen includit aliud a natura speciei, et tunc potest habere proprium quod quid.”

⁵ “The whole”: Scotus writes only *illud*, but see the next sentence for the propriety of understanding *totum* here. The ‘whole’ is made up of the specific nature with what is added to it, an accidental unity according to (*b*).

⁶ Generation and corruption are proper to substantial change, and hence only apply strictly speaking to substances, whereas changes of quantity, quality, or place can happen to accidental unities. For instance, a musical man—the classic case of an accidental unity—can put on weight, become tired, or run from one spot to another.

that is, Socrates has a singular essence.

The key insight in Scotus's argument is that whatever makes Socrates Socrates must produce a genuine substantial unity with the specific essence: the 'individualizing principle' of a being (Scotus has not yet introduced his theory of the individual differentia), combined with the specific essence, yields an individual substance. This individual substance is clearly a substantial unity, which is impossible unless its principles make a substantial unity in themselves. For otherwise, Scotus reasons, the concrete individual is merely an accidental unity, on the one hand human and on the other individual—much as a musical man is on the one hand human and on the other musical. Thus if the individualizing principle cannot be accidental to the specific essence, it must be 'substantial' to it,⁷ and therefore be a part of what its subject is. The whole of what its subject is thus includes something beyond the specific essence, and so is not identical to its specific essence; hence the individual has a singular essence distinct from its specific essence. Since the individualizing principle by definition incorporates all the features that make the individual to be the very individual it is, there is nothing else that could be part of what the individual, the subject of the singular essence, is. Therefore the individual is the same as its singular essence.

A defender of the view Scotus is attacking might object that Scotus hasn't yet told us what features are part of the individual's singular essence but not included in its specific essence. Not all of Socrates's properties can be part of his singular essence; if they were, he would not have any accidental properties, and therefore could not change in any respect. Which properties belong to his singular essence? Scotus hasn't answered the hard question.

There is some justice in this objection. Scotus will address it in 7.13, when he introduces and defends his theory of the individual differentia. In the end, Scotus holds that we are unable in this life to identify the individual differentia. But he also thinks that being able to identify the individual differentia is not as important as recognizing that there must *be* an individual differentia, whatever it may be, which has a precise metaphysical role to play as a constituent of the singular essence. (We'll discuss the individual differentia in §2.) Scotus has deferred the hard question, not ducked it. The first order of business is to recognize that the individualizing principle is essential to the individual, and so that the individual has a singular

⁷ As Scotus notes in 7.7.22, this extended sense of 'substantial' applies to items in all the categories: an individual quality, like an individual substance, must have an individualizing principle that renders its specific essence individual, for instance. It is parallel to Aristotle's use of 'οὐσίᾳ' in the *Metaphysics*.

essence.⁸

The upshot, Scotus informs us in 7.7.22, is that not only are the species in every genus the same as their essences,⁹ so likewise all the individuals strictly in a genus, that is, individuals belonging to a genus *per se*, are the same as their essences. Accidental beings, such as a white surface or a musical man, do not strictly belong to any genus, since they are aggregates of two beings belonging to different categories (7.7.25); nor do such accidental unities have an essence—there is no formula to spell out what it is to be a white surface (for it is only to be a surface and to be white). Hence whatever is a being in the strict sense, be it a species or an individual, has an essence.

Scotus's next pair of arguments take it as established that individuals have singular essences, and seek to prove that the individual is the same as its singular essence. The first of the pair runs as follows (7.7.23):¹⁰

Take a thing (*A*) and its essence (*B*). Now *B* is a being and [by hypothesis] it isn't *A*; thus it is something else, and therefore it has an essence. The essence of *B* is either the same as *B* or it is something else. If it is the same, then there should be a stopping-point in the first case [of *A* and *B*]. If it is something else, let it be *C*, and I raise the same question about *C*, and so on to infinity.

If *B* were the same as *A*, the essence of *B* would be the essence of *A*, which is just *B*; hence the regress can't get off the ground if we countenance singular essences. If *A* is a thing and *B* the essence of *A*, where *A* is not the same as *B*, then, since *B* is a being in its own right (since an essence is more a being than any non-essence could be) and every being has an essence, *B* will have an essence *C*. If *C* in its turn differs from *B* we are faced with an infinite

⁸ In Scotus's reply to the second initial argument in 7.7.27 he says that the specific essence isn't the same as the singular "because it adds something further to the species, namely individual matter." He does *not* say that individual matter is the individualizing principle, but only that individuals include something that isn't part of the specific essence, namely the individual matter. Whether the individual matter makes the individual to be individual is another question altogether. (The reference in the critical edition to 7.16.44 here should be to 7.16.45.) In any event, Scotus's reference to individual matter is merely dialectical, taking up a point alluded to in 7.7.5 for the sake of completeness.

⁹ Scotus declares that they are *secundum se*, his equivalent of Aristotle's καθ' αὐτό; all such are the same as their subjects.

¹⁰ "Similiter, accipio rem et quiditatem, scilicet a et b. B est ens, et non a, ergo aliud; ergo habet quod quid est. Et quod quid est ipsius aut est idem sibi, aut aliud. Si idem, standum est in primo. Si aliud, sit c; et quaero de illo in infinitum." Scotus's argument is inspired by *Metaph.* Z.6 1031^b29–1032^a1, where Aristotle proposes an infinite-regress argument based on distinguishing an essence from the essence of that very essence; Aristotle's argument does not begin with individuals, however.

regress. If we grant that C is the same as B to avoid the regress, though, we might as well admit that B is the same as A in the first case: what reason would there be for essences to become the same as their subjects at any point, if they are not always the same as their subjects? Thus either we admit singular essences or we are saddled with an infinite regress.

It could be objected that there is a relevant difference between the first and the remaining cases, namely that in the first case we are dealing with individuals and thereafter with specific essences; the metaphysical relations between individuals and species might systematically differ from those between species and genera, much as individuals themselves systematically differ from species. But it isn't clear whether this difference, which Scotus readily accepts, provides enough traction to distinguish the first and the remaining cases. Grant that individuals are different; the question is whether they are so different that they are not the same as their essences. There is no reason to think so.

Scotus's second argument to show that individuals are the same as their singular essences continues in the same vein as the first (7.7.24):¹¹

Again, B is the essence of A and not wholly other than A ; it therefore includes either (a) more, (b) less, or (c) exactly the same as A . If (b), then it isn't properly the essence, since the definition is the limit of the thing that is defined (*Metaph.* Δ .17 1022^a4–11), but the limit is that inside which the whole thing is included with nothing left outside. If (a), then one can abstract what is added to A by B , and then what remains will be the essence of A , since it is the limit including the whole. If (c), we have what was to be proved.

The challenge for Scotus is to rule out (b). He begins by noting that a proper definition gives the essence of the definiendum.¹² Hence B is given by a definition of A . But a proper definition will comprehend the whole of what is to be defined, that is, it will include all features relevant to what the thing is. Hence it cannot contain less than A , or more exactly it must contain everything relevant to what A is, and it certainly should not contain

¹¹ "Item, b est quod quid est a, et non est omnino aliud ab a. Ergo includit plus quam a; uel minus; uel idem praecise. Si minus, ergo non est proprium quod quid, quia definitio est terminus rei; V: sed terminus est intra quem includitur tota res, et nihil est extra. Si plus, tunc contingit abstrahere illud additum a b, et tunc quod remanet erit quod quid est a, quia terminus totum includens. Si idem tantum dicit, tunc habetur propositum."

¹² This is the 'metaphysical' notion of definition (see 7.4.26 for example), as opposed to the 'logical' notion, which specifies the genus and specific differentia of the definiendum. There are questions about the propriety of applying definitions to individuals, which will be taken up in §4.

anything extraneous. Therefore, *B* (which is given by the proper definition of *A*) cannot contain ‘less than’ *A*, which rules out (*b*).

The brevity of Scotus’s argument obscures his point that the singular essence by definition must include everything essential to its subject. Nothing essential can be left out. Thus *B* must include everything that goes into making *A* what it is (the individual it is), and hence there is nothing that makes *A* a ‘what’ that is not also part of *B*. Hence *A* is the same as *B*, its singular essence.

Scotus concludes that individuals have singular essences and are the same as (not merely ‘instances of’) their singular essences. His response to the first initial argument is evident from his discussion above: accidental unities do not have essences, and so there is no essence of the musical man to be identified with human nature. The second initial argument objected that if essences were the same as their subjects, they would come into being and pass away along with their subjects. Since genera and species do not come into being or pass away, or do so at best *per accidens*, the objection really concerns the singular essence. Essences are eternal, after all, but individuals are not.

Scotus bites the bullet: he replies that Socrates’s singular essence *is* generated *per se* along with Socrates, though his specific essence is not (7.7.29). More exactly, Socrates’s specific essence, the common nature *humanity*, is generated only incidentally when Socrates is generated, since the common nature exists with a less-than-numerical unity in each human; it does not require Socrates as the vehicle of its existence, although it does exist in and through Socrates when Socrates exists.¹³ In contrast, Socrates’s singular essence exists only in Socrates and depends on Socrates for its existence, and therefore is not ‘eternal’ in any interesting sense. It is not generated incidentally, since Socrates’s singular essence is essential (by definition) to Socrates; it could not be a mere by-product of generating Socrates—it is part of what makes the generation of Socrates to be of Socrates rather than of anyone else. That is, Socrates’s singular essence is bound up with his identity as Socrates. To prove this point fully Scotus needs to clarify the relation between identity and individuality, discussed in §3. But his claim is plausible. If, for example, we take Socrates’s parents to be essential to him, then before they are born Socrates’s essence literally does not exist.¹⁴

¹³ The individualized or contracted common nature, namely *Socrates’s* humanity, exists only in Socrates, but this is just a part of Socrates’s singular essence, not his specific essence. The point takes some careful handling, which Scotus provides; see §4.

¹⁴ The same holds after his parents are born but before Socrates is born, for they are only his parents while he is alive. Nothing hangs on this point.

The same point holds *a fortiori* for any particular feature or constituent of Socrates himself that may belong to his singular essence

But what features *do* belong to the singular essence? Clearly, not accidents; it is hardly essential to Socrates that he be a certain height or weight, for instance. Equally clearly, the singular essence must include more than the specific essence, for otherwise the singular essence and the specific essence would not be different. The singular essence must therefore include features essential to Socrates *qua* Socrates. They must be features that make Socrates an individual of a specific kind, features that distinguish him from other individuals of the same kind. In short, they must individualize Socrates. What are they?

2. The Individual Differentia

In 7.13 Scotus takes up the question whether a stone's nature is individual of itself or through something not included in its nature, *Utrum natura lapidis de se sit haec uel per aliquid extrinsecum*. The possibility that individuals are individual of themselves is disposed of rapidly (7.13.61): two stones share a common nature, as much as do Socrates and Plato, and this is a matter of their natures being intrinsically common (or at least not intrinsically individual); hence there must be some other feature, not belonging to the nature in itself, that accounts for the individuality of each individual.¹⁵ So much we have seen already, since Scotus's initial argument for the singular essence begins with the claim that the individual is metaphysically composed of the species (or the specific essence) and something added to it, "whatever it may be" as he says in 7.7.21 (cited above). The real work, as Scotus sees it, would be to identify the individualizing principle at work in the individual. But this we cannot do, or at best can do only indirectly.

The burden of Scotus's argument in 7.13 is that no known metaphysical constituent of the individual can play the role of the individualizing principle. He argues against all candidates: accidents, either singly or in combination; matter; form; even 'existence' to the extent that it differs from form. In addition to extensive arguments against each particular can-

¹⁵ See King [1992] and Noone [2003]. Scotus describes the position that the nature is intrinsically singular as one of the class of theories holding that individuation does not require some positive feature: 7.13.52–53. In addition to the initial arguments against this position (7.13.1–8) and the refutation in 7.13.61, Scotus restates the position in 7.13.103–108 and argues against it in 7.13.109–114. The commonness of the common nature as well as the individuality of the individual stand in need of explanation on Scotus's account, the former through his theory of less-than-numerical unity and the latter as described here.

didate, Scotus points out that each of these positive features is repeatable, and hence cannot serve to individuate (7.13.120); negative features, on the other hand, are non-starters, since individuality is itself positive. Now Scotus's arguments on all these counts are well-known, and there is no need to rehearse them here.¹⁶ What matters for our purposes is the conclusion he draws from them. Since the principle of individuation cannot be identified with any known metaphysical constituent, Scotus reasons, it must therefore be an otherwise *unknown* metaphysical constituent, one whose properties are deduced entirely from the role it plays. In short, for Scotus the principle of individuation is a *theoretical construct*: his preferred term for it is the 'individual differentia'.¹⁷ We have no direct cognitive grasp of the individual differentia, at least in this life; at best we can construct an indirect higher-order concept 'individual' and apply it to individuals, though without intuitive knowledge of them *qua* individual.¹⁸ Instead, much as we might deduce the existence and nature of an undiscovered planet by the effects it has on known planets, or more generally by the role it must play in a planetary system, Scotus deduces the existence and nature of the individual differentia by considering its relation to the common nature and, more generally, the role it must play in metaphysics. He identifies five

¹⁶ See King [1992] and Noone [2003]. For details on Scotus's discussion in 7.13 in particular, see Dumont [1995] and Noone [1995].

¹⁷ Scotus's terminology is not fixed; in 7.13 he speaks of the "individual form," the "individual differentia," the "singular differentia," and the "individual degree [of unity]" (*gradus indiividualis*), with no apparent shift in meaning, often in successive paragraphs: see the first five of his six replies to objections in 7.13.109–113, for instance. I'll use 'individual differentia' uniformly here, which doesn't presuppose that the individuating principle is a form—note that Scotus drops the term 'individual form' altogether by the time he writes the addition on individuation that occupies 7.13.115–181, in favour of 'individual differentia' and its near variant 'singular differentia': see also 7.13.23, where Scotus declares that the individuating factor "is properly termed the individual or the singular differentia" (*istud proprie uocatur differentia indiividualis uel singularis*). For the record, in 7.13 Scotus explicitly uses the term 'individual form' in nn. 84, 86–87, 97, 101, 109, 112–13; 'individual differentia' in nn. 89, 91, 110–112, 114, 123–125, 127–131, 142–145, 147, 158–160, 164–166, 172, 175–177; 'singular differentia' in nn. 123, 152, 154; 'individuating grade' in nn. 131, 133, 136—and he describes it as the 'material differentia' in 7.13.124! The term 'haecceity' (*haecitas*) does appear in 7.13.61 and 7.13.176, but not to single out the individuating factor; instead, Scotus uses it to refer to the individual's individuality, not to the principle or cause of the individual's individuality.

¹⁸ See 7.13.158 and 7.15.20–30 for Scotus's argument that we have no direct cognitive grasp of the individual differentia, and 7.13.165–166 for 'individual' as an abstracted concept of second intention. Scotus's arguments for these claims will be discussed in §4.

functional criteria for the individual differentia, “whatever it may be”: an individual differentia (*i*) individualizes the individual; (*ii*) is intrinsically unrepeatable; (*iii*) is metaphysically simple; (*iv*) is an ultimate differentia; (*v*) differentiates rather than diversifies individuals. Each of these calls for further comment.

First, the individual differentia individualizes. It is by definition the factor that individuates the individual, the principle or cause of the individual’s individuality. When combined with the common nature (which includes at least the specific essence), the individual differentia ‘contracts’ the common nature to produce the single unified being that is the individual. For the commonness of the common nature “is determined to numerical unity” through the individual difference, thereby becoming “proper to that to which it belongs even though in itself it isn’t proper to anything” (7.13.109); indeed, “the nature in itself is not incompatible with perhaps being separated from all individual degrees (*gradibus indiividualibus*),” although it must occur “with some individual degree” in order to exist (7.13.136; see also 7.13.144). The individual is made up of the common nature combined with an individual differentia, as Scotus tirelessly tells us, and the individual differentia is the factor limiting the commonness of the common nature.

Second, the individual differentia is intrinsically unrepeatable. The key argument that the individual differentia is neither matter nor form nor existence, nor any known positive feature, is that “each of them is repeatable” (*quodlibet istorum est communicabile*: 7.13.120). The individual differentia of a given individual, then, must differ from the individual differentia for another individual; what makes Socrates Socrates is not the same as what makes Plato Plato. Socrates has his individual differentia, and Plato has his, and they differ. Yet this formulation invites a misunderstanding. To speak of “Socrates’s individual differentia” suggests that *individual differentia* might be a natural kind with various individuals falling under it, namely each individual differentia, a situation that threatens infinite regress, since the individuality of each individual differentia needs to be grounded somehow (7.13.106). Scotus holds instead that the individual differentia “is not properly a *this*’ but is rather that by which something is a *this*’” (7.13.112 using the terminology of ‘individual form’):¹⁹

Likewise, although the individual form determines the specific nature so that it be genuinely a ‘*this*’, that form nevertheless is not

¹⁹ “Similiter, licet forma indiividualis determinet naturam specificam ut sit haec uere, non tamen illa forma est proprie haec, siue hoc aliquid. Quia si sic, tunc sequitur quod differentia esset species.”

properly a ‘*this*’ or a ‘*this-such*’, for if it were it would then follow that the differentia would be a species.

Scotus’s point here is not, as it might seem on first reading, that the individual differentia is not an individual. If that were his claim he would immediately face the very infinite regress he is trying to avoid. His point is rather that an individual differentia (say, Socrates’s) is not itself individualized—it is not an individual instance of the kind (or species) *individual differentia*. Unlike individuals, individual differentiae are self-individuating, so to speak, not standing in need of further metaphysical ingredients to make each one what it is. They are not metaphysical composites of a generic kind combined with an individualizing factor, the way individuals such as humans or frogs are.

Third, an individual differentia must be simple. The preceding discussion established that an individual differentia is not metaphysically composed of a specific nature and an individualizing feature. Scotus continues in 7.13.113 to argue that “any particular contained under a species” must thereby “be composed of something potential and something actual, and anything of the sort is a ‘*this*’ through an individual form.” Since an individual differentia is not rendered individual (“a ‘*this*’”) through another individual differentia, on pain of infinite regress, an individual differentia need not be a composite of potency and act, which is to say that it must be metaphysically simple.

Fourth, an individual differentia is ultimate. In Scotus’s terminology, an ultimate differentia is one that does not itself have a differentia. Most familiar examples of differentiae are composite: substances are differentiated into animate and inanimate by ‘living’, for example, which itself can be resolved into the different kinds of living—life characterized by nutritive and reproductive functions only; life characterized by the further powers of locomotion; and so on. Only when we reach differentiae that are not themselves further decomposable do we reach the ultimate differentiae, which are therefore purely qualitative. Since an individual differentia is metaphysically simple, it is indecomposable. Such ultimate differentiae have nothing in common at all. Sharing no common features, they are primarily diverse from one another (7.13.121):²⁰

Note that just as some items are primarily diverse (namely diverse as

²⁰ “Notandum ergo quod sicut aliqua primo sunt diuersa, scilicet se totis, quae uidelicet in nullo conueniunt, sic in omnibus differentibus quae sunt ‘diuersa aliquid-unum entia’, oportet inuenire aliqua quibus differant, quae se totis sunt diuersa (aliter procedetur in infinitum); et illa sunt ultimae rationes unitatis, qua sic sunt indiuisibilia, sicut differentia specifica in specie est causa indiuisibilitatis in species. Nec est causa prior, quia ipsa est cui primo repugnat diuisibilitas ista.”

wholes), *viz.* those that do not agree in anything, so too in the case of differentiae that are “diverse somehow-one things” [*Metaph.* 5.10 1018^a12–13] we must find some items by which these differentiae differ which are themselves diverse as wholes, for otherwise there would be an infinite regress. These are the ultimate grounds on which [individuals] are thus indivisible (just as in the case of the species the specific differentia is the ground of indivisibility in the species). Nor is there any prior ground, for the [ultimate differentia] is that with which such divisibility is primarily incompatible.

Individual differentiae are thus the ultimate ground of the individual’s individuality. Roughly, an individual is a unified being that cannot be further divided into “subjective parts” (7.13.115–116), that is, it cannot be divided into parts of which the whole being is truly predicable—so that the part plays the role of subject (hence the name). A genus such as *animal* is divided into subjective parts, for its proper parts, *e. g.* the species *human*, is such that “Humans are animals” is true; likewise a species, for its proper parts, *e. g.* the individual Socrates, is such that “Socrates is human” is true. But Socrates cannot be further divided in this way. He can of course be ‘divided’, for he is a heterogeneous material integral whole; we could sever his hand, for example. But hands are not subjective parts: “The hand is Socrates” is not true. Likewise for his form and his matter (7.13.118). The final division of commonness yields something indivisible, the individual (etymologically *in-dividuum*), and the individual differentia which produces the individual is itself indecomposable and hence ultimate.²¹

Fifth, individual differentiae, though primarily diverse from one another, do not diversify the individuals they produce but only differentiate them from other individuals of the same kind; indeed, the fact that there are other individuals belonging to the same kind simply means that “individuals are properly different but not primarily diverse” (7.13.123): individuals, while falling under the same species, are nevertheless distinct. The metaphysical diversity that separates one individual differentia from another does not carry over into diversity of what each produces when combined with a given common nature. Socrates’s individual differentia, though utterly unlike Plato’s individual differentia, serves to produce an individual human, namely Socrates, when combined with human nature, and likewise

²¹ Scotus also holds that there are irreducibly simple specific differentiae that are primarily diverse from one another and ultimate, though he does not say what they are (7.13.121); likewise the most generic genera, *i. e.* those that comprise the categories, are primarily diverse from one another: see King [2003] for a discussion of this claim in Scotus’s works generally.

Plato's individual differentia to produce a distinct individual of the same kind, namely Plato. The commonness shared by these individuals stems not from the individual differentiae, which have nothing in common, but from the common nature with which the individual differentiae are separately combined.

An individual differentia, then, is a simple and unrepeatable ultimate differentia which, when combined with the appropriate²² common nature, limits its commonness by producing a unified being not capable of further division but belonging to a given kind. More than this we cannot say, except negatively: an individual differentia is no known metaphysical component of the individual. In particular, an individual differentia, despite Scotus's use of 'individual form', is not a form. (Or at least it isn't a form like any other with which we are acquainted.) Forms are repeatable and belong to kinds; they inform their subjects and impart qualitative features to them.²³ None of these things is true of an individual differentia. All we know is that an individual differentia satisfies the five functional criteria listed above, "whatever it may be."

Yet even if we cannot say what an individual differentia is, merely what it does, we can ask about its relation to the singular essence—that is, its relation to the essence of the individual it produces from the common nature. As a constitutive principle of the individual, an individual differentia clearly is part of what it is to be a given individual. The analogies and disanalogies between the species with respect to genus and specific differentia, and the individual with respect to species and individual differentia, are instructive.

In the case of the species, the commonness of the genus is limited by the advent of the specific differentia, which constitutes a new unity, the species, from the genus via the presence of a form inhering in it; the essence of the species is given through the formula (in this case a definition) combining genus with the differentiating feature. Thus *rationality* is the form whose presence in the genus *animal* constitutes a subordinate kind as a specific unity; it thereby divides the genus *animal* through the differentiating feature *rational*, constituting the species as the whole *rational animal*. (For this reason Scotus holds that *rationality* is not strictly speaking the differentia

²² Could Socrates's individual differentia be combined with a specific nature *other* than human nature? In contemporary terms, is there a possible world in which Socrates is (say) a squirrel? See the discussion in §3.

²³ Individualized forms, of course, are unrepeatable—but then again they are already individualized, and so cannot be the principle of individuation. This is one way in which Scotus's account differs from those of his predecessors. See for instance Wood [1996].

but the principle of the differentia *rational.*) The essence of the species—what it is to be the species—therefore includes the kind of thing it is (the genus) as well as its distinctive feature (the differentia). As noted at the beginning of §1, the species is its essence.

In the case of an individual, the commonness of the species is limited by the advent of its individual differentia, which constitutes a new unity, the individual, from the species, though we cannot say how; the essence of the individual is given through the formula (in this case not strictly a definition) combining the species with the individual differentia in some manner. The various and primarily diverse individual differentiae divide the species, through the differentiating feature each engenders, into the different individuals falling under it; each individual differentia thereby renders its given individual an indivisible whole. The essence of the individual—what it is to be that individual—must include the kind of thing it is (the species) as well as its distinctive feature (the individual differentia), and the individual is its essence, as Scotus has argued.

The way the individual differentia combines with the species is quite different from the way the specific differentia combines with the genus. The specific differentia creates from the genus a new formal unity, and hence a new kind of thing, which includes only certain features of the common generic unity. By contrast, the individual differentia creates from the species a new unity that is formally identical to the species rather than a new kind of thing; individuals are not kinds, not even singleton kinds whose members are each necessarily unique (as the Sun was thought to be the necessarily sole member of its class of stellar objects). The individual therefore includes the whole of the species, not just a part of it; whereas the species *human* leaves aside the irrational animals from the genus *animal*, the individual *Socrates* does not leave out anything pertaining to the species *human*.

The essence of the individual, therefore, includes its individual differentia, and the individual can loosely be ‘defined’ through species and individual differentia. Since we have no direct acquaintance with the individual differentia, and do not know how it combines with the species, this does not tell us a great deal. Scotus has much more to say about what can in principle be known about the singular essence, though it cannot be known by us in this life. But before we look at what he has to say about the intelligibility of the singular essence, there is a point in need of clarification: does Socrates’s singular essence spell out what it is to be an individual human, perhaps even this individual human, or does it spell out what it is to be Socrates?

3. The Singular Essence, Individuality, and Identity

An essence gives the what-it-is-to-be of something; above all, it says what something is. The singular essence thus gives the what-it-is-to-be of an individual, saying what the individual is. But *what* Socrates is (namely an individual human) seems different from *who* Socrates is (namely Socrates). The former is concerned with Socrates's individuality, the latter with his personal identity. Scotus, for all his subtlety, seems to conflate these distinct concerns and take Socrates's singular essence to be the ground of his personal identity. But while Socrates's individual differentia is plausibly thought to explain Socrates's individuality, it does not obviously have anything to do with whatever it is that makes Socrates the person he is. Or so it might be objected.

Scotus does treat the singular essence as the ground of personal identity. This is not an oversight on his part, but a metaphysical position he adopts deliberately. Consider what he says in 7.13.145:²⁴

If we postulate other forms from which quidditative predicates are taken, we must allow that there are many individual differentiae in the same thing, since the nature of the genus can, without contradiction, be prior to the specific form, and it is not without its own individual differentia. And so we must allow that this animal can be this man and not this man, and likewise this man or that man (unless we were to say that this animal is only apt to be completed by the nature of an intellective soul under a given individual differentia). Nevertheless, there is only one final individual differentia, which determines the specific form.

Scotus accepts the plurality of substantial forms: there are a multiplicity of distinct substantial forms in a single composite substance, so that in Socrates, for instance, there are the distinct substantial forms *substance*, *body*, *animal*, *human*. Each of these substantial forms is associated with its own individual differentia, Scotus declares, for a given individual is severally *this substance* and *this body* and *this animal* and *this human*. What is more, forms earlier along the predicamental line are not only logically

²⁴ “Si ponantur aliae formae a quibus sumuntur praedicata in quid, necesse est concedere multas differentias indiuiduales in eodem, quia natura generis sine contradictione potest esse prior forma specifica, et non est sine sua differentia indiuiduali. Et sic necesse est concedere quod hoc animal potest esse hic homo et non hic homo, similiter hic homo uel ille homo, nisi dicatur quod hoc animal non est natum perfici nisi natura animae intellectiuae sub certa differentia indiuiduali. Non est tamen nisi una differentia indiuidualis ultima, quae determinat formam specificam.”

but metaphysically independent of later forms, so that *this animal* may be Socrates or not, and equally may be Socrates or Plato.²⁵ But when we get to the last stage, *this human*, there is no free play left in the account; the final individual differentia determines the specific form to be Socrates, or, in another sequence, a distinct individual differentia determines *human* to be Plato. Scotus's reasoning here is transparent: while an individual animal must be an animal but might be any one of the kind singled out, since the identity of the animal is not fixed by the requirement that it be (say) human, an individual human is the individual he is (Socrates is Socrates), and so his identity is fixed simply by the requirement that we are referring to an individual. Put another way, there cannot be '*this human*' who is not some particular human, whereas '*this animal*' still leaves the identity of the individual, though not its kind, open.²⁶ (Scotus asserts that a similar position can be adopted by partisans of the unicity of substantial form: 7.13.146.) Hence the identity of the individual is bound up with its individuality, and so must be a part of the singular essence.

Scotus's reasoning here depends on the claim that the individual's identity is not a contingent aspect of the individual. If, for example, human personal identity were a matter of having a given set of memories, and having those memories is just a matter of having had certain experiences, then clearly different individuals might have the very same set of memories. (Think of memory duplicators, alternative possible histories, and suchlike.) To the extent that Scotus, or any other mediæval philosopher, had a view about human personal identity, though, it was never treated as a contingent matter. If anything, personal identity was bound up with having a given intellectual soul, capable of individual salvation or damnation.²⁷ Since hav-

²⁵ This is true even if the animal in question is Socrates, for in that case it is equivalent to the claim that the generic nature *animal* in Socrates, taken in itself, is common to other animals and other humans—unless, as Scotus points out, we hold that the generic nature can be individualized in only one way, in which case the nature in itself is common but its individualization cannot be.

²⁶ Semantically we can read Scotus as claiming that the demonstrative 'this' always serves to fix reference one metaphysical level down: 'this animal' fixes the specific kind of animal, *e. g.* human, but not which human; 'this body' would fix the reference to living bodies (say), but not settle whether plants or animals are in question. With 'this human' (or 'this weasel' or the like) we fix the reference to an individual human being or an individual weasel, and there is nothing metaphysically lower left to fix—we do not say 'this Socrates'.

²⁷ Mediæval theories of human personal identity became very complicated very quickly, since they are tangled up with theological doctrines such as assumption and incarnation. See Cross [2002] for a discussion of Scotus's views on these topics.

ing a given intellective soul is not contingent, neither is personal identity. Human personal identity, that is; Scotus is just as concerned in his discussion here with the individual identity of a given weasel or waterfall as he is with humans. No matter the kind of being, the individual differentia simultaneously makes something an individual and makes it the very individual it is—it grounds both individuality and identity. Socrates’s individual differentia must of necessity render the individual human it produces from the common nature to be Socrates. Thus Socrates’s singular essence must include being Socrates, as one would naturally expect.

But what exactly does being Socrates involve? Does it, for example, involve being human? Even if we grant that Socrates’s individual differentia must produce Socrates, it does not obviously follow that it can only be combined with human nature. We might ask whether there are possible worlds in which Socrates is a woman, a fox, a hedge, a mountain, a telephone—and if not, why not.

Scotus held that the higher ‘upward’ entailments along a predicamental line are all necessities. Given that Socrates is human, he must thereby be an animal, a body, a substance; each is essentially bound up with the next, being defined in terms of it. The remaining question is whether Socrates must be human. Again, Scotus takes this to be a necessity. Here are three reasons for thinking so. First, as we have seen in §1, Socrates is a unified entity with a singular essence; if he were not necessarily human, the combination of his individual differentia with human nature would produce only an accidental unity, not an essential unity, and as a human he must be Socrates. Second, whatever else may be included in Socrates’s singular essence, any account of Socrates that leaves out his ability to think would be sadly lacking; but this means that he must have an intellective soul, that is, be human. Third, Scotus seems to have held that each individual must be as it is, “especially if one holds that essence and existence differ only in reason” (*maxime si ponant essentiam et esse non differre nisi ratione*);²⁸

²⁸ See 9.1–2.36, where Scotus seems to endorse the difficult doctrine that beings in potency are mere non-beings (which he here finds “plausible,” *probabile*). This doctrine has the clear implication that there are only actual individuals, not possible ones. Such a position fits well with Scotus’s claim that singular essences come into being and pass away with the individuals whose essences they are, as noted at the end of §1 above. It also agrees with his remarks elsewhere that the individual is the ultimate reality or actuality of the specific form: *Ord.* 2 d.3 p.1 qq.5–6 n.180 and n.188; *Lect.* 2 d.3 p.1 qq.5–6 n.172. Yet the obvious drawbacks of this position mean that more work needs to be done on Scotus’s metaphysics of modality; see for instance Scotus’s apparently contrary remark at 7.15.17 that the Divine Ideas will be mostly of singulars.

since Socrates is actually rational, that is what he must be. Hence Socrates is necessarily human. Though Scotus does not say so explicitly, the inability of an individual differentia to be combined with an unsuitable common nature (Socrates's individual differentia with froghood) must stem from the individual differentia, since the common nature in itself is merely common and in potency to individual differentiae.

Socrates's individual differentia must therefore produce Socrates whenever it can produce anything at all, namely in combination with human nature. It is therefore the metaphysical feature that renders human nature Socratic. To coin a vocabulary, Socrates's individual differentia is the Socratizer; Plato's is the Platonizer; and so on. This terminology has the virtue of emphasizing the diversity and uniqueness of each individual differentia, while making it evident what each one does. The individual differentia uniquely produces the individual whom it names, whose singular essence is to be that individual, a cross of who it is and the kind of thing it is. So Scotus concludes in 7.13.154:²⁹

On this view it's clear that the singular is one essence... And if the singular is one essence, it is intelligible *per se*, even the singular differentia.

The singular essence, which is the same as the individual that has the singular essence, encapsulates the identity of the individual with its individuality. It is made up of the common nature plus its individual differentia. More than that we cannot say, for we are not directly acquainted with the singular essence. It is time to take a closer look at this claim.

4. The Intelligibility of the Singular Essence

Scotus's concluding inference from the singular essence to its intelligibility directly contradicts Aristotle who, in Scotus's own words, holds that "the singular does not have its own essence because then (a) it would be definable, and (b) there would be knowledge (*scientia*) of it" (7.15.3; see also 7.13.155).³⁰ Definability entails intelligibility, and so the possibility of knowledge. Aristotle seems direct and unambiguous. Scotus's strategy in reply is generally to distinguish intelligibility in itself from being intelligible to us, arguing that the singular essence is intelligible in itself but that we cannot grasp it, at least in this life, due to the (contingent) limitations of

²⁹ "Ex ista opinione patet quod singulare est unum quid... Et si singulare est unum quid, est per se intelligibile, etiam differentia singularis."

³⁰ Aristotle, *Metaph.* Z.15: διὰ τοῦτο δὲ καὶ τῶν οὐσιῶν τῶν αἰσθητῶν τῶν καθ' ἑκάστα οὔτε ὀρισμὸς οὔτε ἀπόδειξις ἔστιν (1039^b27–29).

our cognitive capacities; Aristotle, by Scotus's lights, was addressing only the singular essence's relative intelligibility, not its intrinsic intelligibility.

For this strategy to work Scotus has to refine the notion of 'definability'. Following Aristotle (*Top.* A.5 101^b37–38), ἔστι δ' ὅρος μὲν λόγος ὁ τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι σημαίνων, Scotus holds that a definition is a formula expressing the essence of something (7.4.3). If the formula expresses the essence "completely and perfectly" it is 'metaphysically' a definition (7.4.25); if it gives the genus and specific differentia of what is to be defined it is 'logically' a definition (7.4.26). Strictly speaking an account must be both logical and metaphysical to qualify as a definition. The two criteria do not always dovetail. An accident may have a logical definition through genus and differentia, but, since this formula fails to capture a metaphysical truth about the essence of an accident, namely that an accident has an aptitudinal dependence on substance, it is not a metaphysical definition (7.4.25). So too in the case of the individual: the formula *rational animal* captures the essence of the species, but, since it doesn't include everything belonging to the singular essence, it is not a metaphysical definition of the individual. Of course, *rational animal* is the definition of the species rather than the individual; while it does apply to the individual, it does so only in virtue of the individual's membership in the species—it does not apply to the individual 'primarily', as Scotus would say.³¹ The obvious candidate for a definition applying primarily to the individual, expressing the singular essence, is the specific nature and individual differentia. This proposal, however, will not work, since definitions are predicables by their nature and thus general (7.13.89):³²

The individual differentia is not "apt to be said of many"; hence the individual cannot be defined through the individual differentia, since 'definition' is a universal predicate and the whole account of the individual is not apt to be said of many.

Being 'apt to be said of many' is the characteristic feature of a universal, and thence of a predicable; the account of the individual, however, is semantically singular, and no more predicable of many than a proper name is.

To this line of reasoning one might object that the formula taken from

³¹ Scotus takes the sense of 'primarily' from Aristotle, *An. post.* A.4 73^b32–35: τὸ καθόλου δὲ ὑπάρχει τότε, ὅταν ἐπὶ τοῦ τυχόντος καὶ πρώτου δεικνύηται. See 9.14.74 for Scotus's analysis of this passage.

³² "Sed ista differentia indiuidualis non est nata dici de pluribus. Ideo indiuiduum per illam differentiam non potest definiri, cum definitio sit praedicatum uniuersale, et tota ratio indiuidui non est nata dici de pluribus."

the specific nature and the individual differentia, although not semantically general, does express the singular essence completely and perfectly, as required for a metaphysical definition (7.13.90). Scotus in reply insists that definitions be general—that is part of what it is for them to be logical—but also notes that the objection confuses necessary and sufficient conditions (7.13.91):³³

[The definition expresses] a universal essence, not an individual essence; not every formula indicating the essence of a thing is a definition. Therefore, the formula taken from the specific nature with the individual differentia added on to it is not a definition.

The individual formula, then, expresses the singular essence even though it does not technically qualify as a definition. But the technical sense of ‘definition’ doesn’t matter for the point at issue, as Scotus is well aware: the singular essence, now expressed in a formula, will be just as intelligible as the constituent parts of that formula, as would be the case for any definition. For Scotus, intelligibility follows upon the being of something, not more narrowly upon its form; he notoriously holds that *being* is the proper object of our intellect (6.4.10–12),³⁴ a point he applies to the individual in 7.15.14 and 7.15.25 to insist that *qua* being the individual is intelligible—at least, intelligible in itself, the conclusion of 7.14: there is nothing in the nature of the individual that prevents it from being understood, neither its form nor its matter nor its singularity itself (7.14.26).

For all that, Scotus holds that the singular essence is not known by us in this life (7.13.158 and 7.15.20–30). His argument is simple and direct. Take two individuals α_1 and α_2 belonging to the same species; if they are sufficiently similar we could not tell which one is before us, something we could easily do if we were to grasp the individual differentia, for then by the arguments of §3 above we would know of any individual which one it is (7.13.158):³⁵

The individual differentia is generally not known by anyone in this life. Proof: The difference between it and anything else would then

³³ “Responsio: ‘quid est’ uniuersalis, non ‘quid est’ indiuidui, quia non omnis ratio indicans quid est esse rei est definitio; ergo illa ratio ex natura speciei, cum differentia indiuiduali superaddita, non est definitio.”

³⁴ See also 2.2–3.32–33.

³⁵ “Differentia indiuidualis a nullo nota est in hac uita communiter. Cuius probatio est: quia tunc nota esset differentia eius ad quodcumque aliud, et ita non posset errare de quocumque alio sibi intellectualiter ostenso quin iudicaret illud esse aliud. Sed hoc est falsum de alio omnino simili. . .” See also 7.15.20, where Scotus further argues that we could not tell if two sufficiently similar patches of white were superimposed.

be known, and so one could not be in error about anything else shown to oneself intellectually;³⁶ one would judge it to be something else. But this is false for something else wholly similar [to the original].

The individual differentia, a component of the singular essence, includes the identity of the individual it helps constitute. If it cannot be grasped—and evidently it cannot, for we are not infallible as regards the identity of things—then the singular essence cannot be known: Scotus concludes “thus *we* cannot define the individual due to our incapacities, not due to anything on its side.”

The best we can do “in this life,” Scotus reasons, is to construct a general concept of the individual (7.15.32), which, while not proper to only one thing, is the best we can do (7.13.165):³⁷

Note that anything abstracted from individual differentiae is something of second intention, and so the person [in question]. Thus when I understand Adam I do not understand the singular, for if he were shown to me intellectually I wouldn’t know that it was him. Instead, I understand a concept composed of *human* and *singular*, which is a common second-intentional concept. I have such a composite concept in understanding any given singular.

We do not grasp Adam as a unique individual, for we have no cognitive purchase on the ‘Adamizer’ (his individual differentia); we instead construct an admittedly inadequate general concept ‘individual human’ to apply to him, perhaps associating it with other features that serve to pick Adam out. What it is to be Adam—his singular essence—is not open to us, as Scotus concludes: “The singular is intelligible for its part, since it is an essence, but it is not intelligible to us at the present time by a simple positive understanding” (7.13.172).

Our current cognitive infirmities do not prevent the singular essence from being knowable, of course, and furthermore in principle allows for the possibility of demonstrative knowledge of Socrates (7.13.160 and 7.15.39). If

³⁶ The phrase ‘shown to oneself intellectually’ is meant to rule out incapacities or limitations stemming from the senses or the process of sense-cognition. See the next cited passage as well.

³⁷ “Item, nota quod a differentiis indiividualibus quidquid abstrahitur est aliquid secundae intentionis, et ita ‘persona’. Et sic, cum intelligo Adam, non intelligo singulare, quia si ipse intellectualiter mihi ostenderetur, nescirem quod ipse esset, sed intelligo conceptum compositum ex homine et singulari, quod est quoddam commune secundae intentionis. Talem etiam conceptum compositum habeo, intelligendo quodcumque singulare.” An addition refining the account of abstraction given here follows in 7.13.166, but it doesn’t affect the point Scotus is making.

there is such knowledge, God has it—or the appropriate correlate to demonstrative knowledge, since God knows everything by direct non-discursive intuition. Essences, even singular essences, are the ground of knowledge.

Conclusion

According to Scotus, then, Socrates has a singular essence. There is something it is to be Socrates, and nothing but Socrates can or could have that essence; Socrates literally is his singular essence, and, just as nothing else could be, he could be nothing else. We cannot know Socrates's singular essence at the present time, since our cognitive capacities aren't up to the task, but his essence, like all essences, is intrinsically intelligible and capable of yielding genuine knowledge about him. Scotus's articulation of his theory of the singular essence is one of the great achievements in his *Questions on the Metaphysics*. Its relation to Aristotle's account of the essence of the individual is well worth exploring for the light that may be shed on each.

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