COPYRIGHT AND USE OF THIS THESIS

This thesis must be used in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Reproduction of material protected by copyright may be an infringement of copyright and copyright owners may be entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.

Section 51 (2) of the Copyright Act permits an authorized officer of a university library or archives to provide a copy (by communication or otherwise) of an unpublished thesis kept in the library or archives, to a person who satisfies the authorized officer that he or she requires the reproduction for the purposes of research or study.

The Copyright Act grants the creator of a work a number of moral rights, specifically the right of attribution, the right against false attribution and the right of integrity.

You may infringe the author’s moral rights if you:

- fail to acknowledge the author of this thesis if you quote sections from the work
- attribute this thesis to another author
- subject this thesis to derogatory treatment which may prejudice the author’s reputation

For further information contact the University’s Copyright Service.

sydney.edu.au/copyright
Aquinas, Scotus and Ockham on the Knowledge of Singular Objects

By Xavier Joseph Anthony Symons
Student number: 310239958

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Research) in Philosophy

December 2014
Table of contents:

CHAPTER I: Introduction.................................................................p.4

CHAPTER II: Aquinas on our knowledge of singular objects..p.27

CHAPTER III: Scotus’ epistemology and metaphysics of the Individual.................................................................p.56

CHAPTER IV: Intuitive Cognition.........................................................p.75

CHAPTER V: Ockham on singular cognition.................................p.101

CHAPTER VI: Conclusion – A comparison of Aquinas, Scotus and Ockham.................................................................p.131
Chapter I: Introduction

Medieval cognitive psychology is not the most popular topic amongst historians of philosophy. The extant scholarship is of a high level, but the literature is limited. This thesis is intended, in a modest way, to encourage further scholarship in the area. I will be focusing in particular on the oft-overlooked topic of singular cognition. Singular cognition is an important aspect of any theory of cognition, and I believe the Medievals had significant insights that contemporary philosophy can profit from.

In this discussion I hope to highlight the unique analytical rigour with which the Medievals approached questions in philosophy of cognition. Medieval philosophy is often charged with taking a cumbersome and inadequate metaphysical framework and forcing it upon problems that require much subtler treatment.¹ I would like to show that, whilst not totally avoiding philosophical error, the Medievals provided the sort of nuanced treatment of these matters that one finds in contemporary philosophy.² They were very

---


² Concerning the Scholastic philosopher John Duns Scotus, Richard Cross remarks: “Scotus’s way of proceeding...is recognizably analogous to those practiced by analytic philosophers: extreme care with logical form, precision in determining the senses of the terms (technical and other) used in the discussion, and so on. In fact, Scotus...[often] has the tools to answer seemingly very modern questions in (say) analytic metaphysics or philosophical psychology even if his own discussions do not take these questions as their starting point.” Richard Cross,
aware of the key problems needing to be resolved in philosophical psychology. They dealt with these problems directly, though some more successfully than others. With this thesis I aim to highlight the subtlety and ingenuity of medieval solutions to some of the key problems in philosophy of mind.

In this chapter I will introduce the area of medieval cognitive psychology – a sub-topic of medieval philosophy defined by its origins in Aristotle. I will state the ‘problem’ of singular cognition, something that the Medievals inherited from Aristotle. I will examine the limited secondary literature on medieval theories of singular cognition, and suggest that modern scholars have overlooked certain issues inherent in the cognitive psychology of key medieval philosophers. Lastly, I will consider how we can profitably compare the problem at hand with what at first seems an unrelated problem – 20th century philosopher Wilfred Sellars’ notion of the ‘Myth of the Given’. Such a comparison will be helpful in clarifying the key issues that Aquinas, Scotus and Ockham were trying to deal with.

1. Medieval cognitive psychology:

To begin our discussion it will help to examine how medieval cognitive psychology differs from contemporary philosophy of mind. The reality is that the Medievals approached this sub-discipline of philosophy with very different metaphysical assumptions than those of contemporary philosophers. The

rational psychology of the high Middle Ages was focused largely on developing Aristotle’s writings on cognition. The Scholastic philosophical method had as a defining characteristic a unique emphasis on exegesis. The Scholastics did philosophy largely by writing commentaries on the works of established authorities – and for rational psychology, Aristotle was the most significant authority.³

A corollary to this was that the Medievals generally made the same broad metaphysical assumptions. They adopted the key tenets of Aristotelian hylomorphic conception of the natural world. Furthermore, they shared as an aim the achievement of a synthesis of Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic philosophy (and in turn, a synthesis of this philosophical system with the doctrines of the Catholic faith). The shared assumptions and motivations of medieval philosophy stand in significant contrast to the varied metaphysical assumptions of contemporary philosophers involved in philosophy of cognition.⁴

---

³ Much attention was also given to Plato, but, in regard to philosophy of cognition, not as much as to Aristotle. Augustine, Avicenna and Averroes were also given significant attention. But these philosophers were themselves drawing heavily upon Plato and Aristotle.

Concerning anthropology and philosophical psychology, the Medievals adopted the broad contours of Aristotle’s philosophy of soul (outlined in key texts such as *De Anima*). The soul, on this conception, is the form or structuring principle of the body. The soul is different from the forms of inanimate objects, for it is an *animating* principle. It gives life to the body by providing it with different vital capacities. Aristotle divided the various capacities of the soul into three categories – vegetative, appetitive and intellectual. Vegetative capacities include functions like self-nourishment and growth, appetitive capacities operations such as sensation and imagination, and intellectual capacities functions such as understanding, abstract memory, and free-will. Cognitive psychology as a discipline concerned itself with the mechanisms by which we come to acquire and process information about the external world. These mechanisms were either sensory or intellectual; hence the discipline of cognitive psychology was focused on the appetitive and intellectual capacities of the person.

According to the Medievals, there was a need to discuss cognitive psychology in terms of ‘faculties’ or ‘powers’ of the soul. These faculties were the only means by which we could get clear on the metaphysics of the mind. Each capacity was said to perform some crucial metaphysical function in cognition. We needed a notion of sensitive capacities, as these explained the phenomenon of perception and imagination, and we needed a notion of intellectual capacities, as this provided us with an explanation for the phenomena of understanding, judgement and ratiocination.
The Scholastics argued that our non-intellectual psychological capacities operated in an embodied context. That is to say, the appetitive capacities of sensation, perception and imagination require a body. This might seem counterintuitive considering the prior claim that vital faculties inhere in the soul, not the body. But for Aristotle, it is a logical consequence of his notion of hylomorphism. The human soul and the body naturally form a composite – the human person. The faculties of the soul operate in an embodied context, precisely because the soul itself is instantiated in matter.

This brings us to what is perhaps the key difference between medieval cognitive psychology and contemporary philosophy of mind. Unlike contemporary philosophy of mind, the ‘mind-body’ problem – as it understood in contemporary philosophical terminology – was not a major concern. In contemporary metaphysics a strict dualism is usually set up between physical properties and mental properties. The two kinds of

---

5 Hylomorphism as a metaphysical position rests on two complementary claims: first, that all material beings (including human persons) are necessarily composed of matter and form; and second, that both the matter and form of any particular material being are metaphysically dependent upon the matter-form composite which they serve to constitute. (Hence, according to this second thesis, a human person is metaphysically more fundamental than his/her matter and form). The second claim grates against the widely held belief in analytic community that parts are always more fundamental than there wholes. But it would take a whole other paper to defend it. For the purposes of this thesis I will assume it to be correct.

6 The notion of the active intellect (intellectus agens) is an exception to this rule.

7 For a useful discussion of the distinction between contemporary and Aristotelian/scholastic conceptions of the mind and body, see Alan Code and Julian Moravcsik, ‘Explaining Various Forms of Living’, in Martha Nussbaum and Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (eds.) Essays on
properties are utterly distinct and seemingly incapable of interaction. This is essentially what underpins the mind-body problem.8

Aristotelian metaphysics, in contrast, conceives of the soul and the body as a composite. All our vital powers, despite having their origin in the soul, are attributable to the human person as a whole – a composite of body and soul. There is no need to talk about interaction between the two, as they are not two distinct substances but rather a metaphysical composite9 – namely, a human

---

8 For the sake of clarification: The contemporary understanding of the mind-body-problem, as I am interpreting it here, centres mainly on the following question: ‘How do mental properties and physical properties – so radically different from each other – interact?’ I concede that this is a highly simplified account of the mind-body problem. It is, however, sufficient for the purposes of this introductory chapter.

9 It is important to distinguish between the notion of ‘metaphysical composites’ and the idea of ‘mereological composites’. The main difference is that metaphysical composites can be more fundamental than their parts (hence matter and form cannot exist on their own without the substance that they are a ‘metaphysical part’ of) while other sorts of composites (mereological composites) are less fundamental than their parts. For a detailed explanation and defence of this distinction, see Alfred Freddoso’s essay “Suarez on metaphysical enquiry, efficient causality, and divine action” in Francisco Suarez, On Creation, Conservation and Concurrence: Metaphysical Disputations 20-22 trans. Alfred Freddoso (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002), pp. xi-cxxiii.
being. The notion of the human being – a composite of the two – dissolves the gap between mind and matter posited by Descartes. We can attribute psychological activity to human organs, whilst still retaining non-reductive descriptions. When we use psychological vocabulary, we are not just referring to elementary matter, but rather the informed matter constitutive of the human being.

Much more could be said about this, but I wish rather to highlight an exception to this idea of the embodied soul. The Medievals believed that the rational dimension of the soul – the sum total of all strictly rational faculties of the human person – could operate independently of the body, and indeed did post-mortem. Operations such as understanding and reasoning were said to occur in an immaterial realm of abstract entities. The intellect was for High Medieval philosophers a kind of immanentised Platonic realm of the forms. One of the motivations behind this claim was the need to make space for the Catholic doctrine of the immortality of the soul. If the Scholastic Aristotelian system was to be compatible with Christian belief, some aspect of the Aristotelian soul needed to be ‘spiritual’ and ‘incorruptible’.

As part of their development of their notion of the intellect, the Medievals had to explain how information from the sensory realm got into the realm of pure rationality. As we have seen, they were already committed to saying the intellect could operate without a material substrate; some even stated explicitly that the intellect did not deal with singular material objects but
rather exclusively with abstract universals. There was a need to reconcile these claims with what was as patently evident then as it is now: we are capable of at least some kind of cognitive grasp of singular, material objects.

2. The problem of singular cognition:\footnote{See, for example, Aquinas’s assertions in Sententia Libri De Anima, 2.12 (XLV, p.115).}

This brings us to the problem of singular cognition. If it is true that the mind operates in a kind of abstract intellectual realm, then how can it comprehend objects that are inherently non-abstract and non-semantic? Importantly, this is not a problem confined to medieval scholastic philosophy. It is evident from simple reflection. When asked about their intuitions on the topic, a non-philosophical audience would probably say they have the ability to form concepts of individual objects. After all, we constantly experience this in our everyday perceptual activities. A closer inspection, however, reveals a problem. How can we be sure we are grasping some individual ‘x’, in its individuality, to the exclusion of all others? When I perceive some individual horse, it is conceivable that this horse could be substituted for a very similar horse and I wouldn’t notice. Are we really, then, grasping an individual? There is even

\footnote{It is important to note, from the outset, the definition I am giving to the word ‘knowledge’ whenever I use it in this thesis. I am not referring to what the Scholastics would call ‘scientia’ (scientific knowledge). I am rather referring to the formation of a basic concept of something. This is the kind of lay-person’s sense of the term ‘knowledge’. On this conception, knowledge is, roughly speaking, the primitive conceptualization of some entity, be it abstract or concrete, mental or extramental.}
another prior issue: we need to defend the position that we have a capacity to form non-general concepts. Some Medieval philosophers seem to deny this.

In describing this problem it is useful to compare it to its complement: the problem of universals. The so-called ‘problem of universals’ is about explaining how we come to gain universal knowledge when all our data is (arguably) received from individual objects. Where are these so-called universals? For the problem of singulars, it is the opposite. It is clear that singulars exist out there in the world, but we don’t quite know how we come to know them. How is it that we are able to form concepts that pick out individual objects to the exclusion of all others? How is it that we can even form an abstract concept of something that is by definition material?

Modern philosophers address this question within their own specific frameworks. This much is trivial. Some are inclined to adopt a ‘linguistic’ approach to analysing thought, such that thought is described in terms of different kinds of syntactically structured propositions. Singular thoughts, on this account, are the referents of singular terms employed in mental propositions. Other philosophers choose to develop an account of thought that takes ‘intentionality’ to be fundamental. Intentionality is the unique property of ‘aboutness’ that one finds in entities of the mind – thoughts, judgements, feelings, beliefs, are all about or directed at objects. On an intentional account

---

of singular thought, singular thoughts are those that are about or reach out to individual objects in the external world.\textsuperscript{13}

Just like philosophers today, the Scholastics addressed the question of singular thought within their own framework – namely, their Aristotelian metaphysical worldview. For the Medievals, though, there was a complicating factor. Aristotle on a number of occasions stated categorically that ‘the mind knows universals, the senses particulars’.\textsuperscript{14} Aristotle was basing this statement on his hylomorphic conception of cognition, whereby the mind comes to know the external world by receiving the forms of the world in an immaterial, universal mode. If we are limited to receiving information in a dematerialized abstract way, cognition of material singulars seems impossible.

As a consequence of this, medieval responses to the problem of singular cognition focused largely on introducing some sort of nuance into Aristotle’s sweeping maxim. Somehow or other it needed to allow for a knowledge of singular objects, even if this knowledge was different and less vivid than the kind of knowledge we have of universal objects. In this thesis I will discuss the different attempts at explicating Aristotle’s maxim.

\textsuperscript{13} The broad dichotomy I have drawn between linguistic and phenomenological approaches is developed in detail in Tim Crane’s paper ‘The Singularity of Singular Thought’, \textit{Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume} 85, no.1 (2011), pp.21-43.

I will focus in particular on the way that three of the Medievals attempted to solve this problem. These three are namely Aquinas, Ockham and Scotus. I have chosen them for two principal reasons: firstly because it is simply not feasible in the space of a 30,000 word thesis to try to discuss in depth the work of more than three of these figures. And secondly, because these three ‘towering’ figures in the history of medieval cognitive psychology were the most influential, and arguably provided the most sophisticated accounts of singular cognition.15

Aquinas was a pioneering figure in cognitive psychology and developed a systematic account of processes of cognition, in such a way that he remained rigorously loyal to Aristotle’s original system. He chose to provide a more literal interpretation of Aristotle than those who came after him.16 Duns Scotus identified what I will argue are genuine shortcomings in Aquinas’s account. Scotus proposed solutions to the errors in Aquinas’s account, most well known of which is his notion of intuitive cognition. Ockham developed this notion, but made it part of his distinctly anti-metaphysical account of cognition. I intend to follow the dialectic between these three philosophers,


16 Note that this claim and the others made in this paragraph will be developed in detail in the subsequent chapters of this thesis. I will refrain from unnecessary referencing here.
and suggest that Scotus over the others provided the most plausible account of singular cognition. I will, at the same time, acknowledge the fragmentary way in which Scotus developed his account, and suggest that it is need of further scholarly exegesis.

3. Existing literature:

Extant literature on singular cognition has as a central focus the relationship between the knowledge of singualrs and scepticism. Those with Thomistic sympathies seem to portray Aquinas’s account of singular knowledge as a safeguard against anti-realism. The notion of intuitive cognition is portrayed as undermining a defensible account of mind-world isomorphism. On the other extreme of the spectrum, philosophers like Berube and Normore suggest the theory of intuitive cognition was a brilliant insight that rightly emphasised the role of singular objects as the ground and reference point of our knowledge of the world. I will briefly survey this literature with a view to showing, in later chapters, that the authors go too far to one or other extreme of the spectrum of views on singular cognition.

17 The notion of intuitive cognition is explained at length in chapters III and IV. In brief, intuitive cognition refers to the idea that we are capable of cognizing singular objects as existing and present. It is opposed to the notion of abstractive cognition, according to which we are said to abstract the essence of singular objects, and cognize the nature of those objects without any attendant judgment of existence or presence.

18 By mind-world isomorphism, I am referring to the view that in cognition the mind enters into a relationship of structural identity with the external world. This notion will be developed in detail in later chapters.
For authors like Gilson and Anthony Kenny the primary concern is to preserve a kind of epistemological realism.\textsuperscript{19} In his \textit{Unity of Philosophical Experience}, Gilson presents a critique of Ockham’s theory of singular cognition.\textsuperscript{20} Echoing a criticism of commentators before him, Gilson questions Ockham’s assertion that we can have ‘intuitive cognitions’ of non-existent objects. Ockham’s account of cognition, Gilson claims, fails to ensure the objectivity of our knowledge of the external world. It is premised upon the idea of intuitive cognition, and we can never be entirely sure of the accuracy of these intuitive cognitions. Kenny offers a similar criticism, except in relation to Scotus’s theory of cognition. Scotus, like Ockham, claimed that we could have intuitive cognition of material particulars. Though Scotus did not explicitly make the same claim as Ockham concerning knowledge of non-existents, Kenny nevertheless argues that it is implicit in his writing: “there is a possibility of such an object being in the intellect and not existing in reality...a possibility which Aquinas’ theory was careful to avoid”.\textsuperscript{21} Kenny suggests that this is sufficient justification to adopt a Thomistic theory of singular knowledge over a Scotistic account.

\textsuperscript{19} By epistemological realism, I am referring to the view that we are able to apprehend objects that exist independently of conceptualization of them. This position can be contrasted with epistemological idealism, the view, roughly speaking, that the only entities in existence are those that exist at the level of the mind (or a ‘conceptual’ or ‘semantic’ level, depending on how you wish to construe the position).

\textsuperscript{20} Etienne Gilson, \textit{The Unity of Philosophical Experience} (New York: Ignatius, 1999), part one, chapters III and IV.

To the other side of the spectrum, there are scholars who suggest that the notion of ‘abstractive cognition’ itself leads to representationalism. On this account, advanced by philosophers such as Robert Pasnau, an intellectual realm of ‘abstracted essences’ separates the mind from the world rather than providing us with access to it. According to Pasnau, the intelligible species (a mental representation said to be the vehicle of primitive acts of cognition) ends up becoming the object of cognition and prevents us from accessing objects in themselves. Pasnau applauds Ockham and Olivi for displacing this problematic conception of cognition: "Olivi and Ockham deserve substantial credit for attempting to displace this seductive but misleading picture of the mind." Pasnau suggests that Ockham’s reductive conception of cognition (to be explained in chapter V) is far more promising.

Whilst Pasnau focuses on cognition in general, there are also those who focus specifically on Ockham’s theory of singular cognition, commending him for making this operation central to his account of human cognitive psychology. Authors like Calvin Normore and Camille Bérubé develop a narrative of high medieval theories of cognition in which Ockham is the preeminent figure.

---

22 Robert Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.26: “Aquinas, I will argue, was committed, as were most of the Scholastics, to introducing such intermediaries into the cognition process.”


According to this narrative, philosophers like Aquinas, preoccupied with trying to provide an account consonant with an Aristotelian understanding of science, failed to acknowledge singular cognition as the foundation and reference point of all human cognition. Ockham (and to a lesser extent Scotus) provided the valuable insight that singular knowledge, achieved by virtue of intuitive cognition, is the bedrock of all other knowledge.

In this thesis I will argue a position somewhat similar to Normore and Bérubé, though placing greater emphasis on Scotus’s contribution. It is my view that Scotus and Ockham were right to emphasise the importance of knowledge of singulars in cognition. And furthermore, they were right to be dissatisfied with Aquinas’s attempt to explain singular cognition. However, Ockham’s reactionary account of singular cognition veered too far in the direction of what is called ‘conceptualism’ – a position that, though not problematic in itself, makes it difficult to explain certain aspects of human cognition. In abandoning the idea of really existing essences, Ockham ruled out one

---


25 By ‘conceptualism’ I am referring to the view that essences only really have existence in the mind. Though concepts of essences may be caused in the mind by the action of external objects in perception, essences themselves have no extramental existence. ‘Conceptualism’ in the broad sense should not be confused with ‘nominalism’, the position that essences are mere mental fictions with no relationship to the world whatsoever. ‘Nominalism’ is a kind of conceptualism, but not the only kind. ‘Conceptualism’ for Ockham is different -- he allowed for specific causal relationships between classes of extramental objects and the formation of corresponding ‘essence concepts’ in the mind. See [chapter V](#) for a further discussion of the matter.
plausible explanation of singular cognition. Forms, according to Aquinas, were the bridge between mind and world. Ockham rejected this. Yet His alternative theory – underpinned by scepticism about the existence of essences – seems rather implausible. Scotus, on the other hand, maintained a ‘realist’ understanding of essences, and hence was able to retain the plausible ‘formal reception’ account of singular cognition. At the same time, he provided a more detailed explanation of singular cognition than that of Aquinas, and abandoned the problematic aspects of Aquinas’s account. Hence I will argue something at least slightly distinct from most views expressed in the literature to date – that Scotus provided the most plausible account of singular cognition out of any account in the Middle Ages.

4. Singular cognition and the Myth of the Given:

To achieve greater clarity in my discussion, and also to show the contemporary relevance of the subject matter of this thesis, I will compare the problem under examination to Wilfred Sellars’ notion of ‘The Myth of the Given’. ‘The Myth of the Given’, in its most general formulation, refers to the mistaken belief that primitive non-propositional data (be it cognitive or sensory) is sufficient to act as a foundation for belief. 26 According to Sellars, if something is to function as a justification for belief it needs to ‘appear’ in the “space of reasons”. 27 Sellars describes the conditions of ‘appearance’

I am here paraphrasing Sellars’ claims. There are some who would argue that bare sense data are sufficient to act as a basis for propositional knowledge.

differently in different contexts. At one point he speaks of the inability of non-conceptualised sense data to figure in cognitive processes. He famously writes, “The idea that epistemic facts can be analysed without remainder...into non-epistemic facts...is, I believe, a radical mistake -- a mistake of a piece with the so-called “naturalistic fallacy” in ethics.”

Mere sense data, he claims, do not possess the properties to figure in justification of truth-claims. Elsewhere he puts the problem in different terms. If primitive sense data is ‘non-analysable’ in the way that propositions are, then there is really no way of telling whether or not they justify truth claims. They are utterly unanalysable – we can’t even ascertain whether they support basic truth claims.

Sellars’ observation is usually taken to be a claim about epistemic justification. Indeed it does concern epistemic warrant, but it has broader implications than this. To state the claim again: Sellars draws our attention to the fact that raw sense data lack the relevant cognitive properties to be present to the mind. In its primitive state such data cannot act as a justification for propositional knowledge. A clear consequence is that anyone wishing to develop a coherent philosophy of cognition needs to explain how sense data acquire the relevant properties – specifically conceptuality and intentionality – so as to appear to the mind. This is a question for philosophy of cognition, rather than epistemology.

---

28 Ibid., p.19.
29 Ibid., pp.18-19.
30 I am here drawing a distinction between the related disciplines of epistemology and philosophy of cognition. While epistemology deals primarily with questions about the
Medieval debates about singular cognition were by and large focused on this question. Aquinas, Scotus and Ockham were all trying to explain how data about singular objects acquired the relevant properties to appear to the intellect. They proposed different solutions to this question, with varying success. I will examine how plausible each philosopher’s solution to the ‘Myth of the Given’ is. The discussion will hopefully be in some way enlightening to those interested in Sellars’ observation and related debates.

Incidentally, Sellars explicitly criticised Aquinas’s attempted solution to the problem.\(^{31}\) He argued that Aquinas’s notion of the conversio\(^{32}\) confuses the senses as causes of cognition with the true acts of cognition. The latter appear in the “space of reasons”, while the former remain at a mere sensory level. I will examine how John Duns Scotus’s notion of intuitive cognition allows him to avoid this error.

5. The structure of this discussion:

In chapter two I will discuss Aquinas’s theory of singular cognition. Aquinas believed that the mind could have only an indirect grasp of individuals. He developed a theory whereby the mind is able to ‘turn’ to data available in the justification of beliefs, philosophy of cognition focuses instead on the processes that underpin cognitive activity.


\(^{32}\) This notion will be explained in the next chapter.
higher sense faculties, and in this data perceive the individual. I will argue that such a theory contradicts the fundamental tenets of Aquinas’ philosophy of mind. In particular, it conflicts with the view that intelligible content is available only through a reception of forms into the mind.

In chapter three I will discuss a number of metaphysical and epistemological ideas that form the foundation for Scotus’ notion of intuitive cognition. One innovation on Aquinas’s system was particularly important. Scotus argued, contra Aquinas, that the proper object of the intellect was being (as opposed to the essences of material objects). This, we will see, allowed Scotus to explain how it was that the intellect could know the individuating notes of singular objects. For those who are sufficiently familiar with Scotus’s works, this chapter may be skipped; it is intended primarily to provide necessary background information on Scotus’s metaphysics and epistemology.

In chapter four I will expound Scotus’s theory of intuitive cognition, and argue that it represents a plausible solution to the problem of singular cognition. Scotus argues that we are capable of achieving an intellectual intuition of singular objects. We do not strictly speaking grasp the objects as distinct from every other similar object, but we nevertheless do cognize them as individual instantiations of some kind (tokens of a particular type, to borrow a phrase from analytic philosophical discourse). Scotus provides a cogent metaphysical story for how this kind of cognition takes place. In light of the plausibility of Scotus’s account, I suggest that Scotus’s intuitive cognition theory is the most promising out of the three major accounts of singular cognition offered in the High Middle Ages.
In chapter five I will discuss William of Ockham’s revisionist account of singular knowledge. Ockham sought simplicity in cognitive psychology and rejected Aquinas’s ‘formal reception’ theory as unnecessarily complex. In its place he posited two alternative mechanisms facilitating cognition. He argued that cognitive acts have similarity relations to classes of objects in the external world – this makes our thought-acts to be about particular classes of objects. Furthermore, there are lines of causality between individual objects and thoughts, and these causal relations allow some of our thoughts to refer to individual objects. I will not describe these two mechanisms in any more depth here. Suffice to say that I will argue against Ockham’s ‘act’ theory of signification. By my lights he fails to explain how cognitive acts can be similar to physical objects in the external world.

The order in which I am discussing the three philosophers may appear peculiar to some readers. Scotus is, after all, at the end of the dialectic I am following – he provides a solution that solves the problems in the accounts of the other two philosophers. This much is true, but there are other factors that make it necessary to place him second in the discussion. Each philosopher’s theory of cognition is based upon the theories of those who preceded him. To discuss, for example, Ockham before Scotus, is akin to discussing Aristotle without any reference to Plato. Chronological order is crucial if readers are to understand the historical background to the three philosophers. Though I am not aiming to provide yet another survey of the history of medieval philosophy, certain virtues of the historical method still apply. I believe my order of
presentation allows for ease of reading and aids the presentation of my overarching argument.
Chapter II: Aquinas on our knowledge of particular objects

Introduction:

Aquinas’s writings on cognition were both profound and hugely influential. Aquinas attempted a monumental task – to synthesise Aristotle’s writings on cognition with that of the Augustine and the Arab commentators. Many accepted his account as authoritative. There were a number of philosophers who set about developing elements of Aquinas’s psychology in greater depth. Other scholars, such as Ockham, reacted strongly against Aquinas and set about developing an alternative account (see chapter III). Regardless of these different reactions, it is clear that Aquinas’s account had a massive impact on the direction of medieval studies of cognition.

In this chapter I will offer a brief account of Aquinas’s cognitive psychology, focusing specifically on how he explained our cognition of singulars (see chapter I, section 2). Aquinas held that the mind was receptive of abstract universals alone. It was metaphysically incapable of receiving information about particular objects. He attempted to explain cognition of individuals by

---

33 See, for example, Jean Capreolus, Defensiones Theologiae Divi Thomae Aquinatis (Tours: Touronibus, 1900), and Jean Poinsot, Introduction to the Summa Theologiae of Thomas Aquinas: The Isagogue of John of St. Thomas, trans. Ralph McInerny (Ann Arbor: St Augustine’s Press, 2004). The Spanish Jesuits Francisco Suarez and Luis de Molina carried out a similar project in the late 16th and earlier 17th centuries.
positing that the intellect utilized information in the higher sense faculties. On
his account, particular knowledge was acquired by the mind through an ‘inner
perception’ of data in the cogitative power (see section 4 for an explanation of
this theory).

Whilst there are many merits to Aquinas’s account, I believe that he fails to
give a coherent explanation of singular cognition. I will argue that Aquinas’s
account of singular knowledge directly contradicts his own account of the
nature of the intellect. Aquinas asserted the intellect only receives the forms of
objects. Forms are ultimately essences, and those present in the intellect
produce an understanding of essences alone. The intellect doesn’t receive any
data about the individuating notes of a thing. Aquinas attempted to explain
knowledge of singulars through his theory of the mind ‘indirectly’ accessing
data from the senses. However, I will argue that this theory either collapses
into a kind of empiricism or comes into direct conflict with the basic
principles of his philosophy of mind.

To begin the discussion I will offer a brief overview of Aquinas’s
understanding of natures and the principle of individuation. This is necessary
background information to understand his cognitive psychology.34

34 I intend to draw on the later texts of Aquinas -- what we might call his mature thought. In
particular I will rely on his Summa Theologiae (c.1265-1273) and Sententia Libri De Anima (c.
1268). I do not know of any philosophers who have argued that Aquinas changed his mind on
the way human beings engage in singular cognition in this life. Georgio Pini points out that
Aquinas changed his mind on a number of key topics, but this is not one of them. See Georgio
1. Natures, universals and essences:

The term nature (natura) has a number of meanings – as Aquinas acknowledges in *Commentary on the Metaphysics* - but there is one particular meaning that is relevant to us here. In this discussion we are concerned with natures as mere structures, prior to any mode of existence in the world. Natures, in this sense, are what Avicenna was referring to when he stated “equinity is just equinity; of itself it is neither one nor many, universal nor singular”. Natures *per se* prescind from any particular instantiation in reality. They are just species, considered in isolation from any mode of existence they might come to have. Examples include ‘humanity’ and ‘equinity’, considered in the abstract.

Natures, writes Aquinas, can take on two modes of being in the world. First, they can exist as the essences of individual material entities, such as this man or this horse. These natures have been ‘individualised’ (see section 2). Second,

---


37 *Sententia Libri De Anima*, 2.12, n.95-151 (XLV, pp.115-116). All references, aside from those for *Metaphysics* and the *Fourth book of the Sentences*, are to the Leonine edition (1882-).
they can exist as universals in the mind. These natures are universals – they are abstract mental entities unbound by any particular spatiotemporal dimensions.

Aquinas writes of the different senses of natura in *On Being and Essence*. He observes that we can consider natures in the abstract, neither instantiated in a material being nor existing as mental entity:

“In one way [a nature] can be considered according to its proper content, and this is an absolute consideration of it. And in this way nothing is true of it except what belongs to it as such; whence if anything else is attributed to it, the attribution is false.”

He later remarks on the two ways natures can exist in reality:

“This nature has a twofold existence, one in singular things, the other in the soul; and accidents follow upon the nature according to either existence. In singular things it has a multiple existence in accord with the diversity of these singular things; yet the existence of none of these things belongs to the nature considered in itself, i.e., absolutely.”

38 *De Ente et Essentia*, 3, n.25-33: “Uno modo secundum rationem propriam, et hec est absoluta consideratio ipsius: et hoc modo nihil est verum de ea nisi quod convenit sibi secundum quod huiusmodi; unde quicquid aliorum attribuatur sibi, falsa erit attributio”.

(XLIII, p.374).

Nature, then, is a basic metaphysical category under which universals and the essences of material objects fall.

Universals, as Aquinas outlined, are natures *qua* grasped in the mind. They have the same essential content as the natures of entities in the external world, but they have a different mode of being, namely mental being. The important point here is that Aquinas did not, like Plato, locate universals in a realm of the forms. Nor did he locate universals in objects of the external world. Strictly speaking, universals only exist in the mind:

“So in this way it is clear that the notion of universality can be attributed to a common nature only as regards its existence in the intellect”.

Natures certainly exist in both the external world and the mind, but universals do not.

The type-token distinction, then, is not between universals and particulars but rather natures *qua* uninstantiated structures and natures *qua* conjoined to matter. The essences of objects, according to Aquinas, are specific instantiations of *natures*, not universals. In the metaphysical ‘process’ of

---

40 “Sic igitur patet, quod naturae communi non potest attribui intentio universalitatis nisi secundum esse quod habet in intellectu”. *Sententia Libri De Anima*, 2.12, n.139-140 (XLV, p.116).

41 There is, however, a relevant connection between natures in the world and universals. Natures in the world “are conceivable universally”, and it is for this reason that we often apply universal terms like ‘man’ or ‘horse’ to individuals. Or so Aquinas argues in 2.12 of the *Sententia Libri De Anima* (XLV, pp.115-117). Cf. *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, 7.11, n. 1524 and 1536, *De Ente et Essentia*, 3, n.56-57.

42 See introduction, section 3.
individuation, a nature is ‘conjoined’ with accidental, material features. The nature is no longer a mere structure. It takes on a ‘material mode of being’ as the essence of a particular object.43

2. Individuation:

Aquinas asserted that matter is the principle of individuation.44 Matter is that which gives particular spatiotemporal dimensions to a nature, and hence distinguishes one instance of a nature from another. Matter, in this sense, provides ‘numerical difference’. It gives a unique spatiotemporal character to each token. It does not, however, provide ‘specific difference’. Even though individual instances of natures have different spatiotemporal dimensions, they remain tokens of the same type.

Aquinas's position on individuation had a major impact on his theory of knowledge of particulars. Aquinas asserted that matter is unintelligible to us because it cannot be received (recipitur) by the immaterial intellect.45 As a

43 Cf. Sententia Libri De Anima, 2.12, n.102-107 (XLV, p.116): “Ista autem natura, cui advenit intentio universalitatis, puta natura hominis, habet duplex esse: unum quidem materiale, secundum quod est in materia naturali; aliud autem immateriale, secundum quod est in intellectu.”

44 De Ente et Essentia, 3, n.51-71 (XLIII, p.374). Cf. Super Boethium De Trinitate, 2.2. There is a debate here, going beyond the scope of this thesis, as to whether the principle of individuation is determinate matter (materia signata) or indeterminate matter (materia indeterminata). Aquinas puts forward the former view in De Ente et Essentia, and the latter in De Trinitate.

result, we are unable to grasp singular objects directly. Aquinas was left with the quandary of explaining how we cognize individual objects.

3. Aquinas on cognition:

Aquinas adopted the Aristotelian maxim that the intellect knows universals while the senses know particulars. This is a key difference between his theory and that of Scotus and Ockham. The latter two chose to nuance Aristotle’s maxim. Aquinas accepted it in its most literal formulation. He developed a theory to fit with a literal interpretation, rather than reinterpreting Aristotle to fit with his theory.46

Drawing on Aristotle’s maxim, Aquinas asserted that the proper objects of the intellect are the essences of material objects: “the created intellect is naturally capable of apprehending the concrete form, and the concrete being abstractedly, by way of a kind of resolution of parts”.47 He expounded a theory

---

46 Sententia Libri De Anima 2.12, n.70-95 (XLV, p.115): Aquinas enquires as to “why sensation is of individual things, whereas science is of universals”. His answer is that the senses receive forms still individuated by matter, whereas the intellect receives them abstracted from their material, individuating features.

47 Summa Theologiae I 12.4, ad.3 (IV, pp.120-123). In context, the Latin reads, “Et ideo, cum intellectus creatus per suam naturam natus sit apprehendere formam concretam et esse concretum in abstractione, per modum resolutionis cuiusdam, potest per gratiam elevari ut cognoscat substantiam separatam subsistentem, et esse separatum subsistens.” Cf. Commentary on the Metaphysics, 2.1, n.285. Later in the Summa Theologiae Aquinas explicitly states what the proper object is: “the proper object of the human intellect, which is united to a body, is a quiddity or nature existing in corporeal matter” (1.84.7) (V, pp.325-328).
of universal knowledge whereby the mind grasps essences in the abstract. I will here briefly reiterate the rudiments of Aquinas’s cognitive psychology, assuming that readers have had at least some exposure to Aquinas’s philosophy of cognition.

Aquinas was concerned with explaining how the mind could grasp the essence of objects in the external world separated from all material individuating features. To do this he developed a theory of ‘intellectual abstraction’, whereby the mind abstracts the nature of an object from detailed sense representations.

The process of cognition begins with the reception of data from the external world by the five senses. Two powers, the ‘common sense’ and the ‘cognitive power’, take this data and synthesise it into different ‘unified experiences’ of objects (what Aquinas called ‘phantasms’ (*phantasmata*).\(^{48}\) It is important to note here how phantasms are representations of specific objects, not generalized images of the surrounding environment. Phantasms, in this sense, provide the mind with the raw material for ‘simple’ or ‘objectual’ apprehension (the grasping of the nature of an object).\(^{49}\)

---

\(^{48}\) For an explanation of the notion of the common sense, see *Summa Theologiae* 1.78.4, ad.2. For the cogitative power, see *Sententia Libri De Anima*, 2.13, n.192-201. (XLV, pp.121-122).

\(^{49}\) Perhaps the most informative passages on phantasms are *Super III Sententiarum*, d.23, q.1, art.2, and *Summa Theologiae* I 84.7, particularly ad.2. In the latter passage, Aquinas describes a phantasm (sometimes translated as “image”) as “the likeness of a particular thing” (“phantasma est similitudo rei particularis”) (V, p.325).
Each phantasm is ‘presented’ to the mind, whereby the active component of the mind – the agent intellect (*intellectus agens*) – is able to abstract the essence or form of the object under consideration. The active intellect is the faculty which makes “things sensible...actually intelligible by way of abstraction”. 50 The abstracted form is received by the ‘knowing’ part of the mind, the ‘passive intellect’ (*intellectus possibilis*). 51 It is at this point that cognition occurs.

### 4.1: The problem of particulars:

As stated earlier, Aquinas believed that the intellect grasps natures abstracted from their individuating features. Thus natures are the intellect’s proper object. There is an obvious problem that arises from this: The mind is unable to grasp any singular objects. As Aquinas himself states, the intellect receives all information in an immaterial manner, according to its own immaterial mode of being. 52 Hence it seems metaphysically impossible for the intellect to grasp information about material particulars. Aquinas needed to resolve this issue if he was to explain singular knowledge.

---

50 *Summa Theologiae* I 79.3, ad.3. (V, p.264-265). The full response reads: “Intelligibile autem in actu non est aliquid existens in rerum natura, quantum ad naturam rerum sensibilium, quae non subsistunt praeter materiam. Et ideo ad intelligendum non sufficeret immaterialitas intellectus possibilis, nisi adesset intellectus agens, qui faceret intelligibilia in actu per modum abstractionis.”

51 *Summa Theologiae* I 79.4, ad.4. (V, p.268)

52 *Sententia Libri De Anima*, 2.12 (XLV, p.115)
Aquinas proposed two related solutions (at different times in his work). One of these is the theory of the *conversio ad phatasmata*. According to this theory, the mind is able to ‘intellectually perceive’ the phantasms from which species have been abstracted, and in doing so achieve at least some knowledge of particular objects (this will be further discussed in section 2). The other solution is that the ‘cogitative power’ is able to cognize individual objects, despite being a faculty of the senses (this theory is discussed in section 3). In the remainder of this chapter, I aim to show that both of these solutions are in direct conflict with Aquinas’s contention that the mind knows universals and not particulars. They are ultimately inconsistent with his metaphysics of mind.

**4.2 The *conversio ad phantasmata*:**

The term *conversio ad phantasmata* literally translates as a “return to the phantasms”. ‘Conversio’ is the most common term used by Aquinas to describe this operation. Less frequently he would employ visual metaphors to describe the process. As Scapelli Cory observes, “[according to Aquinas] the intellect “gazes at,” “looks back toward,” or “looks toward” (*inspicit, respicit, aspicit*) the phantasms, or “beholds” (*speculat*) the nature in them.”

The *conversio ad phantasmata* is the cognitive operation by which the mind comes to know singular objects. It has additional functions to this, but in the

---

53 Therese Scarpelli Cory, ‘What is an Intellectual “Turn”? The Liber De Causis, Avicenna, and Aquinas’s Turn to the Phantasms’, *Topicos Revista De Filosofia* 45 (2013), pp.131-132. For the relevant texts in Aquinas, see *Super II Sententiarum*, d.20, q.2, art.2, ad. 3, *Super IV Sententiarum* d.50, q.1, art.2, and *Summa Theologiae* I 84.7 (V, 325-326).
context of cognition of particulars this is its role – it is the means by which we are able to apprehend concrete material entities. In the conversio, the mind’s focus is directed towards a sensorial representation from which it has initially drawn some universal. By ‘looking at’, ‘gazing at’ or ‘beholding’ the phantasm, the mind comes to perceive a particular instantiation of a nature that it has grasped. Hence Aquinas writes,

“our intellect knows directly the universal only. But indirectly, and as it were by a kind of reflection, it can know the singular, because, as we have said above (1.85.7), even after abstracting the intelligible species, the intellect, in order to understand, needs to turn to the phantasms in which it understands the species, as is said De Anima iii, 7. Therefore it understands the universal directly through the intelligible species, and indirectly the singular represented by the phantasm. And thus it forms the proposition ‘Socrates is a man’.”

Aquinas, then, believed that this operation gives the intellect an indirect grasp of individual material objects.

---

54 Summa Theologiae I 86.1: “Intellectus noster directe non est cognoscitivus nisi universalium. Indirecte autem, et quasi per quandam reflexionem, potest cognoscere singulare, quia, sicut supra dictum est, etiam postquam species intelligibiles abstraxit, non potest secundum eas actu intelligere nisi convertendo se ad phantasmata, in quibus species intelligibiles intelligit, ut dicitur in III de anima. Sic igitur ipsum universale per speciem intelligibilem directe intelligit; indirecte autem singularia, quorum sunt phantasmata. Et hoc modo format hanc propositionem, ‘Socrates est homo’.” (V, p.347). Translation taken from The Summa Theologica, trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947-8).
Some interpreters have described the *conversio ad phantasmata* as a ‘process’ by which the mind actually ‘turns’ its attention towards individual objects. Pasnau, for example, describes the *conversio* as a process in which the intellect shifts its attention to particular examples so as to relate universal concepts back to reality. Thus Pasnau writes: “Given that the intellect’s role is to understand universal natures as existing in a particular, it is only to be expected that the intellect is constantly casting its attention on those particulars. Since the intellect itself cannot directly apprehend particulars (*Summa Theologica* 1.86.1), this implies that it must turn toward the senses, constantly.”^{55} On this interpretation the *conversio* is an ongoing operation in which the mind frequently switches its focus between the universal and the phantasm.

Others argue that the *conversio* is a *state* rather than a process. As Cory, Stump and Kretzmann assert, the *conversio* refers to the ‘cognitive orientation’ of the mind throughout cognition, not a process of ‘turning’ from abstract to singular thought.^{56} On this interpretation, any species abstracted from a phantasm bears an intentional relation to the phantasm from which it was abstracted. According to Cory, this intentional relation arises from the relation


of ontological dependence between the species and the phantasm. Where cognition is concerned, it means that when the mind grasps the species it also glimpses the phantasm from which it was taken. The intentional ‘mark’ left on the species by the phantasm draws the attention of our mind back to the sense representation.

It is immaterial to my critique which of these positions is correct. The objection I will propose applies to both. However, it does seem that the latter position – that the conversio is a state – is the most plausible. It appears to have sound textual support in Aquinas\(^{57}\), and it fits with the apparent historical roots of the notion of a conversio ad phantasmata.\(^{58}\)

**A critique:**

A number of commentators have expressed their dissatisfaction with Aquinas’s response.\(^{59}\) The main criticism is that the notion of conversio simply doesn’t explain how we conceptualize singular objects. The problem

\(^{57}\) See for example, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate*, 2.5 n.17 and 10.4. (XXII, p.61, pp.305-308).

\(^{58}\) See Cory (2013), pp.135-158 for an impressive historical analysis of the notion of an intellectual ‘turn’.

that needs to be addressed is the conflict between a ‘formal reception’ account of cognition and the idea that we can know objects that are not strictly speaking ‘forms’ (see 4.1). Aquinas seems to merely assert an answer rather than offer an explanation. There is nothing in the notion of conversio that reconciles the tension at hand. Conceptualization involves the reception of the form in the mind, and nothing like this is occurring in the conversio.

This issue seems relatively obvious, and it is difficult to imagine that Aquinas was unaware of it. Perhaps what Aquinas intended to argue with the notion of conversio is that the mind and the inner sensorium operate in tandem, allowing us to consider at once a sense experience and relevant conceptual content. Eleonore Stump puts forward this sort of interpretation when she writes:

“For Aquinas, cognition is a systems feature; it is to be ascribed to the whole human being, and not to one of her components, not even to the fanciest component, the intellect.”

The claim is that though the intellect per se is incapable of accessing sense data, the whole human being can achieve this function, because both the intellect and the senses inhere in the human being. We as composites of a rational soul and material body can consider both sense experiences and conceptual content at the same time.

---


61 Cf. Stump, 2003, p.269: “Insofar as we think perceiving as to be requisite for perception, our notion of perception is equivalent to Aquinas’s sensory cognition plus the first operation of the intellect. The senses and the phantasia together enable Hannah to get sensory data
However, there still seems to be an issue with the account. On Stump’s interpretation, Aquinas denied that we conceptualize singular objects \textit{qua} singulars. We rather consider the non-conceptual sense data together with our universal concepts, and in doing so form a unified picture of reality. If indeed this is what Aquinas believed, then I can’t see how this argument gets him to the conclusion that he drew. With his account of singular cognition, Aquinas wanted to explain how we can acquire a concept of singular objects like ‘Socrates’. Importantly, we are not talking about a mere awareness of the singular object, but rather a conceptual grasp of it. I can see how a phantasm would provide you with awareness of singular objects, but I think there is a significant philosophical difference between this position and holding that the intellect can have a conceptual grasp of singulars. It is, I take it, the distinction known in contemporary philosophy of perception as ‘simple seeing’ vs. ‘seeing as’.\textsuperscript{62} I don’t think a phantasm will give us the former. But this is precisely what we are after – a concept of Socrates which can enter into the judgment ‘Socrates is a man’.

A nuanced account might take sensory awareness to have proto-conceptual content. The phantasm does not contain universal concepts, but perhaps it

\textsuperscript{62} ‘Simple seeing’ refers to a non-epistemic, non-conceptually structured vision. It is the ‘raw material’ of perception. ‘Seeing as’ refers to conceptually structured experiences in which we perceive categorized objects. See Fred Dretske, \textit{Perception, Knowledge and Belief: Selected Essays} (London: Cambridge, 1996) ch.6, pp.97-112.
contains mental content about the accidental features of an object. This would seem to sit well with Aquinas’s claim that phantasms are “more spiritual” than lower senses, but nevertheless distinct from the intellectual concepts.63 Where Aquinas writes “We apprehend the individual through the senses and the imagination”,64 we could take the word ‘apprehend’ to be referring to a kind of non-universal conceptualization.

But even this interpretation seems problematic. To categorize as black, straight, pointy etc. requires universal concepts (blackness, straightness, sharpness). For a phantasm to contain this sort of information, the senses would have to have an analogous conceptual capacity to the intellect. Aquinas could argue that the senses just do have this capacity. But then there is no analogous story of ‘formal reception’ that we can give to the senses. Aquinas has to either significantly modify his ‘formal reception’ account of cognition, or otherwise deny that we have singular knowledge. Assumably he would adopt the former rather than the latter approach – but even this would require the development of a philosophy very different from what he expounds elsewhere. This, I contend, is the major issue with his notion of the cogitative sense, to be discussed in the next section.

The notion of conversio, then, doesn’t seem adequate to solve the problem at hand. In fact, as I have argued, it is a notion quite underdeveloped in Aquinas.  

63 Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate 19.1, n.240-264 (XXII, p.565); Cf. Summa Theologiae I 55.2 ad 2. (V, pp.55-56).
64 Summa Theologiae I 84.7 (V, p.325): “Particulare autem apprehendimus per sensum et imaginationem.”
In what follows I will discuss Aquinas’s attempt to expound a further mechanism for singular cognition, the so-called ‘cogitative power’.

4.2: Knowledge obtained by the cogitative power:

In addition to the notion of the conversio, Aquinas argued that we could obtain knowledge of singulars via the most noble of the sense faculties, the cogitative power. Aquinas was aware of the problem identified in the previous section – there is a need to attribute some sort of conceptual capacity to the senses. In this section I will briefly discuss this particular faculty, and suggest why it too fails to provide an adequate response to the problem of the knowledge of singulars.

Aquinas, following upon Avicenna, suggested that we have a sense faculty that possesses certain intellectual abilities. Aquinas most commonly referred to this faculty as the ‘cogitative power’ (Occasionally he uses Avicenna's term ‘the estimative power’, and the term ‘particular reason’). The primary function of the cogitative power is to direct us toward what is good and away from what is harmful. To do this, it has to perform a variety of subordinate functions. One of these is apprehending the common natures of particular objects (drawing up the storehouse of common natures known by the intellect). Thus Aquinas writes:

“[The cogitative faculty] apprehends the individual thing as existing in a common nature. It is able to do this because it is united to intellect in

65 For the latter two terms see Summa Theologiae I 78.4 and Sententia Libri De Anima, 2.13.
one and the same subject. Hence it is aware of a man as this man, and of a tree as this tree”.66

The cogitative power can also compare and contrast different individuals:

“[the cogitative power] is also called the ‘particular reason’ because it correlates individualised notions, just as the ‘universal reason’ correlates universal ideas.”67

The power is even capable of syllogistic reasoning about particular objects:

“Since, however, [the operation of reasoning] may be one of deliberation either about universal notions, which belongs to the intellectual faculty, or about particular matters, which belongs to the sensitive part, hence it is that “to think” is taken secondly for an act of the deliberating intellect, and thirdly for an act of the cogitative power.”68

---

66 Sententia Libri De Anima, 2.13, n.206-210 (XLV, p.122): “Nam cogitativa apprehendit individuum, ut existens sub natura communi; quod contingit ei, inquantum unitur intellectivae in eodem subiecto; unde cognoscit hunc hominem prout est hic homo, et hoc lignum prout est hoc lignum.”

67 Sententia Libri De Anima, 2.12, n.195-197 (XLV, p.121): “[vis cogitativa] dicitur etiam ratio particularis, eo quod est collativa intentionum individualium, sicut ratio universalis est collativa rationum universalium.” Cf. Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate, 10.5 ad.4.

68 Summa Theologiae II-II, q.2, art.1, co. (VIII, p.26): “Sed quia talis motus potest esse vel animi deliberantis circa intentiones universales, quod pertinet ad intellectivam partem; vel circa intentiones particulares, quod pertinet ad partem sensitivam, ideo cogitare secundo modo sumitur pro actu intellectus deliberantis; tertio modo, pro actu virtutis cogitativae.”

(My translation).
The cogitative power, then, shares in certain functions of the intellect. According to Aquinas, it can grasp common natures, compare and contrast individuals, and reason about particular matters.

Pasnau and De Haan interpret the cogitative power to be the relevant bridge between the intellect and particular sense objects. On their account, the cogitative power supplies intentions (*intentiones*) of particular objects to the intellect. This allows the intellect to make judgements concerning particular objects, and subsequently reason about them. Thus, in a paper concerned specifically with linguistic apprehension, De Haan writes:

“Semantics is not a matter which is exclusive to the intellect...the cogitative plays an essential role in forming meaningful singular propositions.”

Pasnau asserts that,

“Without the cogitative power, there would be no particular judgments to reflect on. Thus the cogitative power plays a crucial role in human reasoning, especially practical reasoning.”

Aquinas’s notion of the cogitative power certainly has more explanatory power than his passing allusions to the *coversio ad phantasmata*. Aquinas asserts that the higher senses can, to a limited extent, participate in intellectual activity. The cogitative power, writes Aquinas, synthesizes data from the senses into a unified experience. It allows us to perceive in all the flurry of

---


stimuli some individual object in the external world. In this way Aquinas is giving us one possible answer to the question at hand – he describes at some length a mechanism whose raison d’être is to allow for singular cognition.

The notion of the conversio, in contrast, is merely an allusion to what needs to take place to secure singular knowledge, rather than an explanation of how it takes place. The notion of a cogitative power can be used as a response to Peter King’s criticism that “even with the best will in the world, the partisans of Aquinas’s “indirect” knowledge cannot say that [Aquinas’s] vague references to mental functions count as specifying a mechanism by which singular thought takes place — at best it is no more than a suggestion about where an answer might be found, not an answer itself.”

But while Aquinas’ theory of the cogitative power constitutes a more detailed response, it comes at a significant price. The notion of the cogitative power conflicts, in a similar manner to the conversio, with Aquinas’s broader account of the mind. The cogitative power, after all, is really just the inverse of what is proposed with the conversio – instead of imputing knowledge of singualrs to the intellect, Aquinas is attributing knowledge of universals to the senses. Like the conversio, it undermines Aquinas’s ‘formal reception’ account of the knowledge of natures. If a sense faculty can cognize common natures, than it seems that abstraction of the form of an object is unnecessary for this operation to occur. Sense faculties, recall, are incapable of abstracting forms

---

from their spatio-temporal context.\textsuperscript{72} One might say, with Dorothea Frede, that the \textit{vis cogitativa} is “something of an embarrassment for it seems to be an ability that is somehow \textit{in between} sense-perception and thought”.\textsuperscript{73}

A rejoinder to this criticism is to argue, in a similar way to how Stump defends the \textit{conversio}, that the cogitative sense is united to the intellect by virtue of inhering in one and the same individual (the human person). Aquinas states as much in his \textit{Commentary on De Anima}: “[The cogitative power] apprehends the individual thing as existing in a common nature, and this because it is united to intellect in one and the same subject.”\textsuperscript{74} According to this account, it is the intellect that is supplying the conceptual overlay of perception. Therefore, if Stump is correct, the intellect and cogitative sense are active in one and the same act.\textsuperscript{75}

This seems plausible, and if it were Aquinas’s explanation, we would have our desired answer. On this story, we have a genuine account of conceptualization of \textit{singulars}, not just the fusing of universal concepts with pre-conceptual sensation of particulars. Ultimately, however, I don’t think that is what

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Sententia Libri De Anima} 2.12, n.70–94 (XLV, p.115).


\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Sententia Libri De Anima} 2.13, n.206-209 (XLV, p.122): “Nam cogitativa apprehendit individuum, ut existens sub natura communi; quod contingit ei, inquantum unitur intellectivae in eodem subjecto.”

Aquinas wants to claim. I contend that Aquinas wants to say that the
cogitative sense is itself responsible for the conceptualizing act. As he states in
the preceding passages of De Anima,

“What is not perceived by any special sense is known by the intellect, if
it be a universal...But if this apprehension is of something individual,
as when, seeing this particular coloured thing, I perceive this
particular man or beast, then the cogitative faculty (in the case of man
at least) is at work”.

Thus the cogitative sense, or the “particular reason” as it sometimes called, is
responsible for the conceptualization of singular objects.

The cogitative sense, ultimately, has roots in the Neo-Platonist commentators
Avicenna and Averroes. And it appears that Aquinas is drawing upon the neo-
platonic account of participation when trying to justify how the cogitative
sense is capable of conceptualisation. It “has some share in the life of the
intellect”. The notion of Aquinas’s cogitative power participating in the
realm of rationality is precisely what Avicenna had expounded with his own
idea of the estimative power. Avicenna posited a power that could compare,

---

76 Sententia Libri De Anima 2.13, n.182-183, 191-194 (XLV, p.121): “Quod ergo sensu proprio
non cognoscitur, si sit aliquid universale, apprehenditur intellectu... Si vero apprehendatur in
singulari, utputa cum video coloratum, percipio hunc hominem vel hoc animal, huiusmodi
quidem apprehensio in homine fit per vim cogitativam”.

77 Ibid., n.195.

78 Sententia Libri De Anima 2.13, n.199-200 (XLV, p.122). “vis sensitiva in sui supremo
participat aliquid de vi intellectiva in homine”.

46
contrast, and syllogize about sensible, individual objects. In this sense, he wrote, the estimative sense is “almost rational”.79

Aquinas ultimately claimed that the cogitative power shares in some meaningful way in the conceptual capacities of the intellect. Unfortunately this Neo-Platonic line seems to undermine the strict dichotomy that Aquinas, following Aristotle, sets up between the senses and the intellect. This, I take it, is where the real tension lies – Aquinas’s attempt to synthesise a neo-Platonic conception of mind with an Aristotelian ‘dualist’ account. As admirable as Aquinas’s effort is, he doesn’t seem to succeed in this particular area. He doesn’t adequately reconcile the notion of “overflow”80 with his abstractionist theory of intellection.

5. Composite concepts in Aquinas:

One possible answer that Aquinas entertained was that the intellect could form ‘composite concepts’ and thereby apprehend individuals. We are, after all, capable of developing quite particular concepts through combining and dividing our existing concepts. We can thus go beyond a mere class of objects and draw closer to knowledge of a particular. To use an example provided by


80 *Summa Theologiae* I 78.4 ad.5. The word Aquinas uses here in this passage is “refluentiam” – a nominalisation of the verb refluo, refluere, refluxi, ‘to overflow’.
Aquinas, we can combine the concepts of man, white and musical to draw
closer some individual with those characteristics.\textsuperscript{81}

Nevertheless, as Aquinas himself observed, this is inadequate to latch on to
the singular in itself. Aquinas states,

\begin{quote}
“It is clear that, no matter how closely universals may be united, a
complete singular never results from their union: just as if I say man,
white, musical, and will have added whatever others are possible, a
singular will never result from them; since it is possible for all these
universals, which are joined together, to belong to many men.”\textsuperscript{82}
\end{quote}

Combining concepts will not secure a knowledge of singular objects. We will
always be left with a composite concept applicable to more than one
individual.

**Conclusion:**

In this chapter I have considered Aquinas’s cognitive psychology, focusing
specifically on how he explained our knowledge of particular objects. I argued
that his account of singular cognition is inadequate. After describing
Aquinas’s two theories of singular knowledge, I indicated that they both come
into direct conflict with his metaphysics of intellection. The intellect,
according to Aquinas, is only capable of receiving abstract forms, and this precludes it from grasping singular objects. Despite Aquinas’s nuanced description of ‘indirect knowledge’, he fails to avoid contradicting his own metaphysics of mind. The theories of *conversio ad phantasmata* and cognition via the cogitative power both conflict with Aquinas’s description of cognition by abstraction. The intellect needs to receive a form abstracted from matter if it is to grasp it – an inner perception of phantasms or data from the cogitative power is insufficient for this to occur.

In a 1964 essay, Sellars critiqued Aquinas for his confusion of the inner senses with the intellectual faculties. Arguing against the attribution of intentionality to sense data, Sellars wrote:

“My thesis will be that sense is a cognitive faculty only in the sense that it makes knowledge possible and is an essential element in knowledge, and of itself it knows nothing.”

As Sellars rightly observed:

“acts of sense are intrinsically non-cognitive and do not present anything to us as being of a kind—e. g. white or triangular… ”

I will return to this criticism in my conclusion, and examine how Scotus avoids it. Scotus, as we shall see, foresaw Sellars criticism, and offered a compelling response.

Evidently Aquinas encountered significant difficulties when trying to explicate a theory of ‘indirect knowledge of singulars’. While Scotus or Ockham

---

83 “Being and Being Known”, n.27.
encountered other issues, the specific difficulties that Aquinas faced were non-problems for them. Scotus rejected Aquinas’s initial assumption, that essences are the proper object of the intellect. Instead, Scotus asserted, being was the proper object of the intellect. This dissolved the problematic dichotomy between the intellect, which was said to know universals alone, and the senses, which were said to know particulars. Scotus went on to describe, with relative ease, how we have a direct knowledge of singulars. Ockham adopted a similar position to Scotus.

In the coming chapters I will examine the distinct varieties of direct realism proposed by Ockham and Scotus. I will argue that Scotus provided a more complete explanation of our ability to know particular objects. Ockham ultimately went to the other extreme of Aquinas – he could explain our primitive grasp of objects in front of us, but he couldn’t explain how we grasped them under a common nature.
CHAPTER III: Scotus’ epistemology and metaphysics of the individual

Introduction:

In the last chapter I analysed Aquinas’s account of singular cognition. I argued that he failed to provide a coherent account of the mechanisms involved in this process. The claims he makes about the metaphysics of the mind prevent him from developing a plausible account of singular knowledge. In the next two chapters I will discuss John Duns Scotus’s theory of intuitive cognition – the view that we are able to have an intuitive, intellectual knowledge of singular objects proximate to us. This theory served as an alternative account to Aquinas’s problematic position. Scotus argued that, rather than the senses being responsible for the knowledge of singulars, the mind was able to gain cognitive access to material singulars in the world. Granted, this process took place through the senses, but the ultimate cognitive act occurred in the intellect. It was in this way that Scotus was able to avoid Aquinas’s error of attributing cognitive capacities to what must of necessity be pre-cognitive capacities of the human person.84

It is necessary to state from the very outset that this is a ‘reconstruction’, not a mere ‘restatement’, of Scotus’s cognitive theory. To discuss ‘Scotus’s cognitive theory’ in an unqualified way is to mistake it for a well-developed, totally

84 This was a criticism that Sellars leveled at Aquinas’s account of senses. In my conclusion I will develop my claim that Scotus overcomes this issue found in Aquinas’s writings.
unambiguous account of cognition. This is simply not the case. Scotus’s writings on cognition are spread sporadically throughout his work and sometimes key passages appear in total isolation from other relevant observations. Surprisingly, at no point in his works did Scotus provide an extended treatment of intuitive cognition, despite its significance for his conclusions.\(^85,86\) As a result, Scotus scholars are left with the difficult task of piecing together a theory from his various and, \textit{prima facie}, disparate remarks.

Despite the challenge involved, I will attempt this task, as I believe it possible to reconstruct a coherent, defensible account of intuitive cognition. Particularly relevant to us here, this Scotistic account of singular cognition avoids the inherent problems in Aquinas’s account. This is not to say that Scotus gives us the most developed theory of singular cognition. Rather, my claim is that Scotus’ account is the most promising response to the problem of the cognition of singulars. It is the response most deserving of further study.

In this chapter I aim to provide the necessary metaphysical and epistemological background for a discussion of intuitive cognition. Scotus’s metaphysics of the individual is ultimately quite similar to Aquinas’s, but his cognitive psychology differs significantly. I will discuss Scotus’s conception of

\(^{85}\) Scotus’s longest sustained discussion of intuitive cognition In Question 13 of the \textit{Quodlibet} (Wadding Edition XII, pp.308-323). Even in this passage there are many questions left unanswered. He does not, for example, specify whether we have intuitive cognition in our current life.

\(^{86}\) Where not otherwise specified references will be to the Vatican edition, not the Wadding edition.
common natures, and then his theory of the principle of individuation 
(founded on his notion of the individual differentia). I will then consider his 
unique understanding of the object of the human intellect. Scotus believed 
that the proper object of the mind was ‘being’ (\textit{ens}). This, we shall see, had a 
significant impact on his belief that individuals are intelligible to us.

\textbf{1. Scotus’ metaphysics of the individual:}

\textit{1.1: Common Natures and their intelligibility:}

Scotus’ account of ‘natures’ is quite similar to that of Aquinas. Like Aquinas, 
Scotus was impressed by Avicenna’s statement that “Equinity is just 
equinity”.\textsuperscript{87} Natures, conceived in the abstract, do not entail either singularity 
or universality. Scotus asserted that natures exist in two ways in the world. 
They can exist ‘conjoined’ to universality in the mind, or they can exist ‘joined’ 
to singularity in the world. In both cases the nature is ‘joined’ with something. 
Thus, a nature is not in itself singular or universal.\textsuperscript{88} This is essentially the 
same view as that which Aquinas expounded (see \textbf{chapter II}, section 1). 
Scotus differed from Aquinas concerning the principle of individuation (see

\textsuperscript{87} Avicenna, \textit{Metaphysics}, V.1, 86\textsuperscript{a}. The translation has been taken from \textit{The Metaphysics of 

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Quaestiones Metaphysicae Subtilissimae Super Libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis}, 7.18 
(VII, p.458): “Est ergo natura in potentia remota ad determinationem singularitatis et ad 
indeterminationem uniuersalis; et sicut a producente coniungitur singularitati, ita a re agente 
et simul ab intellectu agente coniungitur uniuersalitati.”
1.2), but they were in agreement that natures were individualised in this situation and became constituents of particular objects.

Aquinas and Scotus also seem to have agreed on the question of the ‘intelligibility’ of natures existing in the external world. For Aquinas, natures are unintelligible when instantiated in material objects. In this state they have a ‘material being’ and are unable to be received by the mind.\(^{89}\) It is necessary for the agent intellect (intellectus agens) to abstract an intelligible species from the sense representations of the object. The species is the same kind of nature as the nature in the object, but in this case it has ‘intentional’ or ‘mental’ being.\(^{90}\) It is a bearer of semantic content, in contrast to the non-intelligible nature in the object.

Scotus subscribed to a position quite similar to this. Natures that inform matter are not actually intelligible, only potentially so. The action of the agent intellect is required to make them actually intelligible to the mind. In the Ordinatio and the Reportatio, Scotus repeatedly stated that the agent intellect is required to make data from the external world accessible in the mental realm (it converts information “from order to order”, as Averroes wrote).\(^{91}\) In

\(^{89}\) Summa Theologica 1.79.3 ad.3: “Now the intelligible in act is not something existing in nature; if we consider the nature of things sensible, which do not subsist apart from matter.”

\(^{90}\) Ibid. Cf. Sententia Libri De Anima 2.12, n.337.

the Reportatio, Scotus described the process in the following way: “the agent intellect acts together with this sense imagination moved efficaciously by the image of the most efficacious object, and prepares the possible intellect to use the corresponding species by abstracting the intelligible species.”92 Implicit in these comments is the idea that natures as instantiated in the external world are not in that state intelligible. They need to be acted upon by the active intellect if they are to appear in the mental realm.

There are, I concede, certain passages that suggest natures in the external world are already intelligible. In the Metaphysics, Scotus wrote of an individual that is “suited to be seen” without being converted into an intelligible species:

“Further, as regards the agent intellect it can be said that it has no action as regards the understanding; and therefore with no object does it co-act in intellectual vision [intuition], which is immediately in the intellective [power], not by means of a species in memory. For then it would not be vision...neither does a nature which is suited to be seen and exist actually in reality require in us [an agent intellect].”93

92 Reportatio Parisiensis 1-A.3.4: “huic autem phantasiae efficaciter motae per phantasma obiecti efficacissimi coagit intellectus agens et immutat intellectum possibilem ad usum speciei correspondentis abstrahendo speciem intelligibilem” (Merton 59, 35v-37v). Cf. Ordinatio I 3.6 (IX, 243).

93 Quaestiones Metaphysicae, 7.15.30. (VII, pp.438-439): “Ulterius de intellectu agente potest dici, quod non habet actionem circa intelligentiam; et ideo nulli objecto coagit in intellectione visiva, quae est immediate in intellectiva, non mediante specie in memoria. Tunc enim non esset visio...nec in nobis natura, quae nata est videri, et est actu in re, ut natura.” Cf. Ordinatio I 3.7 (III, pp.296-297).
The nature, as Scotus wrote, is already in such a state that it can be perceived by the mind – there is no need for a species to render it cognizable. Further, as Richard Cross has noted, there are passages in the *Ordinatio* that state that an intelligible object can be present to the intellect despite not informing (i.e. inhering subjectively in) the intellect.⁹⁴ These passages imply that intelligible objects exist in the external world, not just in the mind.

Although these passages are interesting, I do not think that it is not quite accurate to say they describe a kind of ‘semantic externalism’.⁹⁵ In the *Metaphysics* text, it seems that Scotus was responding to a particular question – namely, whether or not intuitive cognition requires an intelligible species. I do not think that Scotus was trying to rule out the role of the agent intellect altogether. The agent intellect can still be said to co-act in a certain way with the external object, even if it is not for the sake of producing an intelligible species. It seems rather that, for Scotus, the agent intellect was a co-cause of the direct, unmediated cognition that occurs in cases of intellectual

---


⁹⁵ By the term ‘semantic externalism’, I am simply referring to the idea that objects in the external world are already intelligible, and don’t require the action of the agent intellect to make them accessible to the human mind. See Cross 2009 for a more detailed explanation of this notion.
intuition.\textsuperscript{96} Scotus stated in the fourth book of the \textit{Ordinatio}, arguably his most mature\textsuperscript{97} writing on the topic:

\begin{quote}
\textit{The sufficient causes of [intuitive cognition] are the object present in its actual existence and the agent and possible intellects, all of which can work together (concurrere)}.\textsuperscript{98}
\end{quote}

Furthermore, in the \textit{Ordinatio} passage that Cross refers to, Scotus stated that intuitive cognition involves both the intellect and the object:

\begin{quote}
\textit{These two partial causes [i.e. the object and the agent intellect], close to each other without the informing of the one by the other, cause one common effect by their required proximity alone}.\textsuperscript{99}
\end{quote}

Whilst Scotus often emphasized the direct causal role played by objects in intuitive cognition, I do not think that this should imply that he was a supporter of semantic externalism. Instead, Scotus is merely trying to

\textsuperscript{96} I will refrain from giving a protracted definition of intuitive cognition here, as I will provide one in the next chapter. For now, it shall suffice to refer back to the definition offered in footnote 16.


\textsuperscript{98} \textit{sed istae duae causae partiales approximatae, absque informatione alterius ab altera, per solam approximationem debitam causant unum eff ectum communem. Ordinatio}, 1.3.3.2, n.500-1 (XIX, pp.157-8).

\textsuperscript{99} Cross, 2009, p.276.
emphasize the difference between intuitive cognition and abstractive
cognition, the latter having an intelligible species as its direct cause.100

1.2: Scotus on ‘individual differentia’:

Scotus is well known for his rejection of the idea that matter is the principle of
individuation. The reasons for this rejection are varied and complex, and it
would go beyond the scope of this thesis to describe them in detail. Suffice to
say that Scotus goes through various possibilities (quantity, existence, matter,
and any aspect of the agent itself) and rules them out as possible principles of
individuation.101 The alternative principle that Scotus proposed was what he
sometimes called ‘thisness’ (*haecceitas*) or the individual differentia
(*differentia individualis*).102

Human beings are unable to cognize individual differentia in this life (see
section 2). Hence, when trying to define them we need to be content with a
kind of functional definition. The individual differentia is that which gives

100 “actus abstractivus et intuïtivus differunt specie, quia aliud et aliud est ibi movens ; hic
enim movet species similis rei ; ibi autem movet res praesens in se.” (“An abstractive and an
intuitive act differ in kind, because there is a different thing producing the movement in each
case. In the first, a species that is similar to the object produces the movement; in the second,
the object present in its own right produces the movement.”) (*Ordinatio* 4.49.12 (XXI, p.442)).


102 Peter King observes that Scotus uses a number of different terms to describe this
individuating principle. I have mentioned two. Others include ‘individual form’, ‘singular
differentia’ and ‘individual degree of unity’. See Peter King, ‘Duns Scotus on Singular
individuality to a common nature. It fixes the nature to a specific individual and makes it a “this”. Whereas Aquinas argues that matter individuates specific forms, Scotus claims that the ‘individual differentia’ performs this role.\(^{103}\)

Importantly, the individual differentia does not create new species but rather differentiates individuals. It is not opposed to the idea of a unified nature of humanity. As Peter King observes,

> “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.”\(^{104}\)

What the individual differentia does do is produce a singular essence, additional to the specific essence. When Scotus referred to the ‘specific essence’, he was describing the common nature of entities (for example, rational animal in the case of human beings). When he used the term ‘singular essence’ he was referring to the integrated whole that is the common nature plus its individuating differentia. Together these form a singular essence, above and beyond the specific essence.

1.3: Formalities and the formal distinction:

\(^{103}\) *Quaestiones Metaphysicae*, 7.13.109 (VII, p.416).

\(^{104}\) King, 2005, p.123.
In this section I aim only to provide a brief explanation of formalities and the formal distinction. I will focus on the details strictly relevant to this thesis. Suffice to say that is much more to the formal distinction than stated here.\textsuperscript{105}

The formal distinction is a conceptual distinction made by the mind about individual objects. When we make a formal distinction we isolate conceptually one aspect of the intelligible content of an object. The mind apprehends one metaphysical component of the object on its own. Some examples are apprehending the “animality” of a particular human being, or alternatively her “rationality”. Scotus also applied the formal distinction to the attributes of God, though in this case the distinction between the attributes is far weaker than the metaphysical composition of creatures.

A formal distinction is different from what the Scholastics called a ‘distinction of reason’ (\textit{distinctio rationis}). A distinction of reason has no actual foundation in the reality of a thing itself, whereas a formal distinction is grounded in the metaphysical composition of the substance. There is also a difference between the formal distinction and a ‘real distinction’ (\textit{distinctio realis}). A real distinction is one that exists entirely independent of the mind. A trivial example would be the distinction between two separate individuals. This exists completely independently of any conceptualisation. A formal distinction, in contrast, while having some basis in reality, needs to be

discovered by the mind. For example, the faculties of the will and the intellect are both identical with the soul, despite being distinct powers. It is necessary for our mind to make a conceptual distinction between the two if they are to be considered in isolation from each other. When we do this, we can speak validly of two distinct powers, despite their ontological identity in reality. In this example we see how formal distinctions have some grounding in reality, and yet also require a mind to “draw them out”.

Scotus called the objective correlate of the formal distinction a ‘formality’. A formality is the metaphysical aspect of the object itself that constitutes the basis for the distinction made by the mind. Examples of these objective formalities include body and soul, animality and rationality, specific essence and haecceity, and so forth. Whilst these formalities constitute a unity with all the other aspects of the entity, they nevertheless do not dissolve into an amorphous whole – they are capable of being grasped alone by the intellect.

In some cases the mind is able to grasp an object under some formalities and not others. The intellect can grasp an individual object under the aspect of its specific essence, as will be discussed, but not under the aspect of its particular essence. I will return to this subtle distinction when explaining intuitive cognition in the next chapter.

2. The cognitive capacities of human beings:

2.1: Being as the object of the human intellect:

As outlined in Chapter II of this thesis, Aquinas argued that the object of the human intellect is the essence of any concrete material thing. Scotus dissented from this view, stating in the very first question of the Ordinatio that “the prime natural object of our intellect must be being insofar as it is being”.107 There were a number of reasons why Scotus held this position, but most seem reducible to his fundamental conviction that we can grasp all things in se, and not accidentally through some other entity. Insofar as this is true, Scotus reasoned, the object of the intellect must be some essential characteristic of all per se intelligibles. The only common characteristic in all things is being, and hence this must be the proper object of the intellect.108

It is on these grounds that Scotus critiques Aquinas’s position. If, as Aquinas believed, the proper object of the intellect is the form in material things, then we would be unable to grasp ‘being’ in its generality. By definition the mind would be confined to a particular kind of being – namely, material things – and this would render metaphysics impossible.109 Metaphysics is the study of

107 Ordinatio, prologue, 1, n.1: “primum objectum intellectus nostri naturale, est ens inquantum ens”. (VIII, p.9).

108 Quaestiones Metaphysicae, 6.3.20 (VII, p.336).

109 Thus Scotus writes: “No power is able to grasp an object under some formality more general than the formality of its prime object – this is obvious, for then things [powers] would not be adapted to the essence of their first object”. Insofar as the object of the mind is the essence of material things, it is unable to grasp being in its generality (ens qua ens). See Ordinatio, I.3.3, no.117: “nulla potentia potest cognoscere obiectum aliquod sub ratione
being *qua* being, according to Aristotle,\textsuperscript{110} and is not focused on particular kinds of beings.\textsuperscript{111} Scotus used similar reasoning when critiquing the view that truth is the proper object of the intellect. If the object of the intellect were something like truth, the other transcendental aspects of being (unity, goodness and beauty) could only be accessed in a derivative manner (*per accidens*), through the particular instances of truth that concern them (particular instances concerning ‘the good’, ‘the one’ and ‘the beautiful’).\textsuperscript{112} This was for Scotus an unacceptable conclusion. It is necessary to posit being as the proper object of the intellect, as this is the only category under which every aspect of reality can be grasped in itself (*in se*).

2.2: The ability of the human intellect to know individual objects:

Scotus’ position on the object of the human intellect implies that the mind is theoretically capable of grasping individual objects. Individuals as well as universals fall under the fundamental category of ‘being’. There is no obstacle to individuals being grasped in their individuality. For Aquinas the materiality of singulars meant that they were unintelligible to the human mind. For

\begin{equation}
\text{communiore quam sit ratio sui primi obiecti, - quod patet primo per rationem, quia tunc illa ratio primi obiecti non esset adaequata} \quad \text{(III, p.72)}.
\end{equation}

\textsuperscript{110} Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV.1 (1003a21): “[Metaphysics is] a science that studies being in so far as it is being”. The reason why I am mentioning Aristotle’s definition of metaphysics, and not another Ancient philosopher, is because Scotus himself develops a critique of Aquinas based on this definition.


\textsuperscript{112} *Quaestiones Metaphysicae*, 6.3.18-20 (VII, pp.335-336).
Scotus, the materiality of singulants made no difference. They were still beings and thus in principle intelligible.\textsuperscript{113}

This aspect of Scotus’ writings – concerning the theoretical capacities of the human intellect – is quite detailed and contains interesting insights about the cognitive life of the beatified in Heaven. These theological concerns, however, fall beyond the scope of this thesis. We are here concerned with our ability in this life to know particular objects.\textsuperscript{114}

After his significant treatment of the theoretical capacities of the human intellect, Scotus concludes that we are incapable of knowing the singular essence of objects in statu isto.\textsuperscript{115} In our current state, we can only grasp the common nature and accidents of an object. The mind cannot access the individuating feature of a particular entity. Scotus appeals to our phenomenological experience of objects to justify his conclusion:

“the most distinct intellection of the singular seems to be of some intention that the intellect knows distinctly; but positing such precisely, and prescinding from all time differences and the various


\textsuperscript{114} I direct the reader to the following primary and secondary literature on the topic if they wish to know more about Scotus on the beatific vision: For Scotus’ writing on the question see Metaphysics 7.14 and 7.15. For relevant secondary literature, see King, 2005, pp.132-136, and Robert Pasnau, “Abstract Truth in Thomas Aquinas”, in Henrik Lagerlund ed., Representation and Objects of Thought in Medieval Philosophy (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p.33-39.

\textsuperscript{115} Quaestiones Metaphysicae, 7.15.19 (VII, p.437).
degrees of intensity as well as all other accidents ['befalling'] such an intention, it does not seem that our intellect knows how to distinguish or differentiate this intention from the intention of any other singular of the same species that may be shown to it”.116

If we did know singular essences we would be able to distinguish these two objects. We cannot, and so it seems that this singular essence is unintelligible to us. We can know the various accidents, but not this unique and unrepeatable feature of the object.

Scotus, like Aquinas before him, developed a theory of composite concepts whereby we can draw closer to a full understanding of individuals. We can grasp data about the accidents of an individual, in addition to its specific essence, and with this we are able to formulate a description of the particular entity.117 We can add concepts of the object as something that is mind-independent. The terms Scotus uses as examples are “existence here and now”, “one in number” and “incommunicable”.118

Whilst we can develop quite sophisticated composite concepts, Scotus asserted that such concepts would remain to some degree imprecise. Our

116 Quaestiones Metaphysicae, 7.15.20: “distinctissima intellectio singularis videtur esse alicuius intentionis, quam intellectus distincte cognoscit; sed posita illa praecise, amota differentia temporis, amoto alio et alio gradu intentionis, et sic de omnibus accidentibus illi intentioni non videtur quod intellectus noster sciat distinguere vel discernere, si ostendatur sibi a quacumque alia intentione singulari eiusdem speciei” (VII, p.437).

117 Ibid., 7.15.32. (VII, p.439).

118 Ibid., 7.13.166. (VII, p.424). Cf. 7.15.32: “individuum, unum numero, incommunicabile”.
concept will always be applicable to individuals who, though sharing both the same specific essence and all accidental features, have distinct ‘individual differentia’. Hence the conclusion Scotus drew that we are incapable of grasping singulars *per se* distinct from all other existing entities.\textsuperscript{119}

**Conclusion:**

Aquinas and Scotus were working within a similar metaphysical system when expounding their theories of cognition. As has been outlined in this chapter, they both described individuals as composites of a nature and an individuating feature (for Aquinas, the individuating feature was matter, for Scotus it was the individual differentia). They both held that this individuating feature was unintelligible to us in this life. Furthermore, they both expounded a theory of ‘abstractionism’ whereby the agent intellect extracts universal content from representations in the senses. These similarities have led some to see Scotus as simply developing a similar account of cognition to Aquinas.\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 7, 15.32. Scotus writes, “...nam ad nihil devenimus, cui de ratione sua inquantum a nobis cognoscitur, contradictorie repugnant alteri inesse, et sine tali conceptu numquam conciptur singular distincte.” (“We do not arrive at anything in which, according to the content of the concept known by us, there is something contradictorily opposed to being in another. And without such a concept we never conceive the singular distinctly”)

There is a crucial difference, however, between the two in their understanding of the proper object of the human intellect. For Aquinas, the proper object was universals, whereas for Scotus it was being. This allowed Scotus to develop a theory of cognition whereby we apprehend individual objects directly. Aquinas could not make the same claim. His belief about the proper object of the mind proved very problematic for his cognitive psychology (see the critique presented in chapter II).

Scotus stated that the individual essence of objects is unintelligible to humans in this life. He nevertheless believed that we could grasp the individual in another sense. In the following chapter I will describe this notion of Scotus’s and show how his unique position on the object of the intellect influenced his response to the problem of the knowledge of singulars.
CHAPTER IV: Intuitive Cognition

Introduction:

While Scotus and Aquinas agreed on certain questions in cognitive psychology, they differed greatly in how they answered the question of singular cognition. As explained in Chapter II, Aquinas held that we have indirect knowledge of singulars through intellectual reflection on sense representations. Scotus, on the other hand, argued that we have a direct grasp of singulars through a novel kind of simple apprehension – ‘intuitive cognition’. In intuitive cognition the mind is able to apprehend singulars in themselves. According to Scotus, this process relies on the senses but does not use the senses as a cognitive intermediary. The mind thus has a genuine (and direct) intellectual grasp of singular objects.

In this chapter I intend to lay the foundation for my claim that Scotus proposed a more coherent account of singular cognition than the theory that was proposed by Aquinas. In the concluding chapter I will argue that Scotus, in contrast to Aquinas, manages to avoid the danger posed by Sellars’ ‘Myth of the Given’ objection. To this end I will here discuss Scotus’ theory of intuitive cognition, addressing a number of key interpretive dilemmas along the way. I will examine the motivations behind Scotus’s theory, the mechanisms that he believed to underpin the process, and the responses that he proposed to certain anticipated objections.
As I emphasised at the beginning of the previous chapter, we are working with a collection of sporadic remarks about intuitive cognition. Unlike Ockham, who discussed the topic confidently and at length, Scotus tends to treat the topic hesitantly and in a piecemeal fashion.\textsuperscript{121} Despite this approach, as I will show below, I believe we have sufficient evidence to achieve some degree of certainty about what Scotus intended. A number of statements he made in his later works provide us with explicit answers to key exegetical questions.

\textbf{A brief note on dating:}

Unlike in the works of Aquinas, in Scotus’s writings there is an identifiable change in opinion on the question of intuitive cognition of singular objects. In his earliest writings Scotus treats intuitive cognition as a mere theoretical possibility, whereas in his later work it plays an indispensable role in everyday cognition. I will only focus on Scotus’s mature thought on intuitive cognition, and as a result I will pay closest attention to those works written towards the end of his career. According to Allan Wolter, the two main works that reflect Scotus’s later thought are his \textit{Quodlibet} and his \textit{Ordinatio} book IV: “Hence the questions in distinction 45 of this book we rank with questions six and thirteen of the \textit{Quodlibet} as the most mature expressions of his thought on intuitive cognition”.\textsuperscript{122} Where I make reference to Scotus’s earlier works I will


only use passages that are consonant with the ideas expressed in Scotus’s later works. Some argue that Scotus, in his earlier works, explicitly denied the possibility of intuitive cognition in this life. I do not think there is sufficient textual evidence for this claim, but he certainly had a degree of doubt about the possible coherence of such a project. These doubts had obviously disappeared by the time Scotus wrote book IV of the *Ordinatio*. In that text he states explicitly that we have intuitive cognition in this life as well as the next.

1. **The motivation for the theory:**

Scotus made a number of observations about human cognition in general that he believed demonstrated the existence of intuitive cognition in particular. I believe his most convincing argument is that which is based on our ability to verify contingent judgements about the world. Scotus argues that if we do indeed make accurate contingent judgements – such as ‘Socrates is running’ – then we must be able to grasp singulars qua existent and present.

---


124 In his *Quaestiones Metaphysicae*, he limits himself to stating the arguments for both sides of the discussion. He doesn’t state categorically that we can have intuitive cognition in this life. See *Quaestiones Metaphysicae* 2.3.

125 See the passages from the *Ordinatio* IV 45 discussed in the following section. It appears that Scotus already had the relevant arguments in mind when he wrote the passages of *Ordinatio* III 14.3 (XIV, 512).
He writes,

“From the knowledge of quiddities and universals, which is certainly necessary, it is not possible to know a complex contingent being. But the existences or non-existences of things are contingent; therefore it is not sufficient to have knowledge of the quiddities and universals, since what is known is this singular thing, for instance, it is Socrates who runs.”

He continues:

“Moreover it is necessary to receive (with the mind) the knowledge of the existence of the actual thing, or its non-existence, and even the knowledge of its accidents, which are required for the existence or non-existence from things.”

Scotus’s argument is thus essentially this: It is necessary that we have knowledge of singular objects as existing if we are to make judgements like ‘Socrates is running’. Abstract cognition is inadequate to give us such knowledge. Therefore we must have some other kind of cognitive grasp of singular objects.

---

126 “Ex notitia quidditatum et universalium, quae scilicet sunt necessaria, non potest cognosci complexio contingens. Sed existentiae rerum vel non existentiae sunt contingentes; ergo non sufficit habere notitiam quidditatum et universalium, ad hoc quod cognoscat hoc singulare esse, puta hunc Socratem currere…” Ordinatio II 3.11.11; (XII, 278), my translation. Cf. IV 45.3.17 (XX, 348-349); Reportatio Parisiensia IV 45.2.20 (XXIV, 567).

127 “Adhuc necessario habetur accipere notitiam existentiae actualis rei, vel non existentiae, et etiam accidentium notitiam, quae requiruntur ad existentiam vel non existentiam a rebus”. Ibid. (my translation).

128 Pasnau argues that we only have intuitive cognition in the next life. See Robert Pasnau, ‘Cognition’, in The Cambridge Companion to Scotus (London: Cambridge University Press,
Scotus provides another argument for intuitive cognition based on reflections on the nature of knowledge and on the kind of perception had by the senses:

“Every perfection which is a perfection of cognition absolutely and which can be present in a faculty of sense knowledge can pertain eminently to an intellective cognitional faculty...a sense power...can attain an object in itself as existing and present in its real existence, and not just diminutively in a kind of imperfect likeness of itself.

Therefore this perfection also pertains to an intellective power in the act of knowing. It could not pertain to it however unless it could know an existing thing and know it as present...in its own existence”

This text is an amended version of a slightly longer argument. Scotus argues that first (i.e. primitive) knowledge involves the ‘perfect attainment of an object’, as distinct from possessing some diminished likeness of it. Following this he notes that the senses – which manage to achieve a ‘sensory knowledge’ of things – grasp individual objects as present and existent. In a final step he

2006), p.299. His claim seems implausible once we consider the role that intuitive cognition was intended to fulfill. One of its key functions was to account for our ability to verify contingent judgments. Insofar as this is its role, then we must have it in this life.

129 “omnis perfectio cognitionis absolute, quae potest competere potentiae cognitivae sensitivae, potest eminenter competere potentiae cognitivae intellectivae...sensitiva autem habet hanc perfectionem in cognitione sua, quia potest obiectum attingere in se, ut existens et ut praesens est in existentia reali, et non tantum dimunite attingendo ipsum in quadam perfectione diminuta; ergo ista perfectio competit intellectivae in cognoscendo; sed non posset sibi competere, nisi cognosceret existens et ut in existentia propria praesens est” Quodlibet 6.19 (Wadding edition XII.1, 145). Cf. q.13.29 (Wadding edition XII.2, 309); Ordinatio II 3.2.2 (Vat. VII, 552-554).
claims that the cognitive perfections possessed by the senses are possessed in an analogous way by the intellect. Hence the conclusion: that the intellect is capable of intuitive cognition (a grasp of individual objects as present and existent).

There are certain contentious premises in this argument, such as the claim that sense perfections are possessed in an analogous way by the intellect. I don’t, however, believe the argument hopeless. There is a sense in which our intellectual activity co-travels with the senses, and operates in an analogous way. For the sake of brevity though, I won’t try to develop it further. The first argument regarding contingent judgments can stand alone as a justification for positing intuitive cognition. It does not need this latter argument to support it.

Scotus also provides us with a number of arguments that begin from articles of faith – not in themselves subject to philosophical demonstration – and end in philosophical conclusions. One consideration that was a strong motivation for the notion of intuitive cognition was the desire to explain the Catholic doctrine of the Beatific Vision – that we will one day behold God in an immediate way (“face to face”, to use the phrase of St. Paul).\(^{130}\) This led Scotus to argue that:

\(^{130}\) “aliqua etiam potest esse objecti existentis, ut existentis; quia talem habebit Beatus de objecto beatifico alioquin posset aliquis esse beatus in objecto, esto per impossibile, ispum non esset existens, de quo dictur habere claram visionem, facie ad faciem; propter hoc, quod actus eius cognoscendi tendit in illud, ut in se praesens in propria existential actuali.”

*Quodlibet*, q.13, n.28 (Lyon XII, p.309). The translation has been taken from *God and*
“There can also be intellectual knowledge of the existent qua existent, for the blessed will have such knowledge of the beatific object [God]. Otherwise someone could be beatified by the object even if, to assume the impossible, it did not exist. And yet there is admittedly a clear face-to-face vision of this object, since the act of knowing it tends to this object as present in itself with its own actual existence.”

If you accept the articles of faith that Scotus is relying upon (that there is a ‘next life’, that we will have a beatific vision of God) then his argument is plausible. His philosophical observation – that the beatific vision would require intuitive cognition – follows from a consideration of what the beatific vision necessarily involves.

There is then, good justification for positing the notion of intuitive cognition. If you accept the relevant doctrines of Catholic theology, then intuitive cognition seems, at least in the next life, to be a necessity. Even if you don’t accept these doctrines, there is the strong argument that we need intuitive cognition to verify our contingent judgments about the state of world.

2. The nature of intuitive cognition:

Intuitive cognition was Scotus’ way of explaining how we know objects as existing and present. He argued that we have an intuitive (i.e. non-abstractive) grasp of the individual objects proximate to us. To be exact, we grasp common

natures as instantiated in some individual existing here and now (\textit{hic et nunc}). We grasp the individual under the aspects (or \textit{formalities}) of nature, existence and spatiotemporal presence.

There seems to me to be two aspects of intuitive cognition that require explanation:

1) That we apprehend common natures as instantiated in an individual.

2) That we apprehend the individual under the aspects of existence and presence.

I will discuss these two in turn.\textsuperscript{131}

Through intuitive cognition we apprehend a particular token of a common nature. Rather than apprehending a common nature in the abstract (as is the case with abstractive cognition) we grasp the nature as belonging to some individual. We apprehend the token of the nature ‘man’ as ‘\textit{this man}’. The intention ‘\textit{this}’, as we will see, arises from the cognitive grasp of the object as existing and present. The common nature is apprehended as a belonging to the ‘\textit{this}’ (i.e. the existing and present object). This is what Scotus means when he writes, “intuitive cognition is not only of the singular, insofar as it is intuitive cognition, but essentially is of the nature of the existent, as it is

\textsuperscript{131}The interpretation I will present is more or less along the lines of what Sebastian Day (1947) and Peter King (forthcoming) argue. In contrast to Day and King, however, I place greater emphasis on the role of common natures in intuitive cognition. I emphasise that it is the common nature, rather than the haecceity, of the object that we grasp.
existing”. He makes a similar remark in the *Metaphysics*: “our intellect has some intellection which is called vision, which can be of the nature of the existing without the vision of singularity, as sight through the eye sees”. Intuitive cognition, then, involves a grasp of the nature of an existing object, as it exists in concrete reality.

Before we proceed, there is an important distinction that must be made between the two senses in which Scotus uses the term ‘singular’ (*singulare*). It will make clear just exactly what we grasp when we grasp ‘the singular’. The first sense of the term refers to ‘an existent being’ that instantiates a nature. This is a metaphysically thin sense of ‘singular’. ‘Singular’ in this sense refers to any existing object that instantiates a common nature (such as ‘this existing cat’, or ‘this existing chair’). There is nothing more to the notion than this. The second sense of the term is metaphysically rich. It refers to an individual entity *qua* as distinct from all other real or possible entities. ‘Singular’, in this sense, picks out the haecceity of an individual. The first sense of ‘singular’ might usefully be called generic singularity, and the second particular singularity.

---

132 “Cognitio intuitiva non est tantum singularis, inquantum est cognitio intuitiva, sed essentialiter est ipsius naturae existentis, ut existens est” *Reportata Parisiensia* IV 45.3.13 (XXIV, 575-576)

133 “intellectus noster habet aliquam intellectionem, quae dicitur visio, quae potest esse naturae existentis sine visione singularitatis, sicut visus oculi videt” *Quaestiones Metaphysicae* 7.15.6 (VII, p.438).
Scotus believed that we can grasp generic singularity through intuitive cognition, but we are unable to grasp particular singularity. The former is accessible to us in this life via our intuitive grasp of existing objects. The latter can only be grasped in the next life. The cognitive infirmities of this life prevent us from grasping the haecceity of an individual.\textsuperscript{134}

The second characteristic of intuitive cognition is that it involves a grasp of an object as existent and present. According to Scotus, when we have an intuitive cognition of an object, we apprehend the object under the formalities of presence and existence. He writes in the Quodlibet, “[intuitive cognition is of] a present object qua present and of an existing object qua existing”.\textsuperscript{135} Similarly, in the Ordinatio, he writes, “vision is of what is existent as it is existent and as it is present to the seer according to its existence”.\textsuperscript{136} Whereas in abstractive cognition objects are experienced in a manner indifferent to existence, in intuitive cognition the object is present to the perceiver.

It is difficult to know just what Scotus had in mind with the phenomenological notion of presence. In an essay on 14\textsuperscript{th} century notions of cognitive presence,

\textsuperscript{134} This limitation of the mind was discussed in chapter IV, section 2.2.

\textsuperscript{135} Quodlibet 6.19 (Wadding edition XII.1, 145), my italics. The translation has been taken from Alluntis and Wolter 1975, p.136.

\textsuperscript{136} “Visio (i.e., cognitio intuitiva) est existentis ut existens est, et ut praesens est videnti secundum existentiam suam,”. (Ordinatio I, 1.2, n.3) (XIII, P.101)
Joël Biard argues that Scotus’s notion is modelled upon the beatific vision.\textsuperscript{137} He writes,

\begin{quote}
“in the beatific vision, [intuitive cognition] is possible and even required, and this determines a sort of model: the model of knowledge as a direct vision of the thing itself, without any intermediate or any diminution in the being or consistency of the thing thus understood.”\textsuperscript{138}
\end{quote}

Scotus asserted that abstract entities inhering in the mind have a kind of diminished being (\textit{ens diminutum}), and Biard wants to contrast this with a case in which the object is \textit{present to} rather than \textit{present in} the mind. In abstractive cognition, we perceive a similitude in the mind, but in intuitive cognition, we perceive objects themselves, in the full richness of their being. We perceive ‘clearly’ insofar as we cognize the object in its fullness.

I believe that Biard is right to claim that in intuitive cognition we have a richer vision of the object. However, I believe we can be more precise in identifying exactly what exactly this richer vision consists in. It seems to me that Scotus has turned the predicates of existence and presence into phenomenal qualities of objects. Instead of having to judge that objects are present, we literally perceive that they exist and are present to us. To use Scotus’s terminology, existence and presence are formalities (\textit{formalitates}) under which we grasp


\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., p.128.
the object.\footnote{139}{See \textit{chapter IV} for a discussion of formalities.} This, I take it, is what Scotus means when he writes of apprehending an object “as it is existent and as it is present”. It would also explain why he remarks elsewhere of an object being present to the perceiver “in its characteristic presentness”.\footnote{140}{“Propria praesentialitate” - Scotus uses this phrase (which appears to turn ‘presence’ into a phenomenal quality of objects) in the \textit{Ordinatio} IV 10.5, n.4 (XVII, p.258).} Presence and existence, on this story, are properties of the object that we apprehend in intellectual vision. The perception of these properties is what accounts for the richer vision of which Biard writes.

Intuitive cognition, it should be noted, is not only confined to a grasp of objects external to us. We can also apprehend our own internal cognitive acts by intuitive cognition. Scotus stated this repeatedly in the \textit{Ordinatio} and the \textit{Quodlibet}. In the \textit{Ordinatio} he wrote of the importance of intuitive cognition for certitude of our own cognitive states: “If we did not have intuitive cognition of a thing, we would not know of our [cognitive] acts whether they were in us, or not”.\footnote{141}{Ordinatio IV 49.8.5 (XXI, p.306): “si non haberemus de aliquo cognitionem intuitivam, non sciremus de actibus nostris si insunt nobis, vel non”.
} He made a similar observation in the \textit{Quodlibet} when writing of the ability of an angel to know its own thoughts.\footnote{142}{Quodlibet 6.19 (XII, 145)} Scotus also states that we can have intuitive cognition of our own sensory acts. In the \textit{Ordinatio} IV Scotus stated in passing, “the act [of perception] can be intuitively known when it exists”.\footnote{143}{Ordinatio IV 45.3.17 (XX, 348-349)} Shortly after he presented a particular
hypothetical situation: “The intellect intuitively recognizes that I see something white”.\textsuperscript{144} It is clear, then, that intuitive cognition applies not just to our grasp of extramental objects but also to our awareness of our own cognitive acts.\textsuperscript{145}

In this chapter I will focus on intuitive cognition of external objects, simply because this is the most relevant kind of cognition to the topic of this thesis (\textit{viz.} knowledge of individual objects). I acknowledge that there is much material for further research on the intuitive cognition of cognitive acts. But to enter into this discussion goes beyond the scope of this thesis.

\textbf{3. The mechanisms of intuitive cognition:}

What exactly is occurring to facilitate our grasp of objects as existing and present? Scotus held that the mechanisms of intuitive cognition differ from abstractive cognition in one important respect: they do not involve an intelligible species. This is why intuitive cognition manages to attain the object in its concrete existence. In the \textit{Collationes}, Scotus wrote:

\textit{“There is a difference between intuitive and abstractive cognition, as abstractive cognition, which is through a species, is not of the thing as it}

\textsuperscript{144} \textit{Ordinatio} IV 45.3.18 (XX, 349-350)

\textsuperscript{145} Some scholars, such as Marenbon (1987, p.168-168) and Bérubé (1964, p.201), have argued that intuitive cognition is \textit{solely} of our own cognitive acts. It is never directed at objects in the external world. This view seems to me implausible. Scotus states explicitly on countless occasions that intuitive cognition is of ‘the object as present and existing’. Clearly he believed that intuitive cognition on certain occasions is directed at objects in the external world.
exists, nor as it is present, but can be of the thing indifferent to its absence or presence...but intuitive cognition is of the existent thing, as it is existing”.

Intuitive cognition, in other words, is unmediated by a mental representation. The object is present in itself, and this allows for a direct perception of presence and existence.

Not only is the object present to the mind, but it is also a direct cause of the mental act. As Scotus stated in the *Ordinatio*, “it is the object in its own right that produces the movement”, and “the object does not act as in a species but as present in itself”. Unlike abstractive cognition, which is brought about by the action of the agent intellect and a species, in intuitive cognition the external object is a partial cause. In a later question Scotus stated this explicitly:

---

146 “Differentia est inter cognitionem intuitivam et abstractivam, quod cognition abstractiva, quae est per speciem, non est rei ut est existens, nec ut praesens est, sed indifferenter potest esse rei absentis et praesentis...sed cognition intuitiva est rei existentis, ut existens est” (*Collationes*, 36.11 (V, 301)).

147 As I understand it, Scotus is denying the intervention of an intelligible species in intuitive cognition. However, some commentators have taken the aforementioned passage to rule out the involvement of *any* kind of species. Such a view seems implausible, as it would commit Scotus to the notion of ‘action at a distance’, an idea he elsewhere rejects. Intuitive cognition, like abstractive cognition, necessarily involves sensible species. These are vehicles in virtue of which the mind is brought into contact with the external world. Where intuitive cognition differs from abstractive cognition is in the involvement of intelligible species.

148 *Ordinatio* III 14.4, n.15 (XIV, 539).
“the sufficient causes of [intuitive cognition] are the object present in its actual existence and the agent and possible intellects, all of which can work together (concurrere)”\textsuperscript{149}

An interesting corollary to this is that we will only be able to have intuitive cognitions (in the strict sense) when objects are present to us. An absent object cannot cause an occurrent cognition. This is a crucial point of difference between Scotus and Ockham. Ockham controversially argued that intuitive cognitions of non-existent individual objects were possible.\textsuperscript{150} Gilson and Pegis argue that if we can intuit non-existing objects, then we can never be sure of the veridicality of intuitive cognition (and this would essentially lead us to scepticism).\textsuperscript{151} Scotus, in contrast, believes such acts to be impossible.\textsuperscript{152} In this way, he avoids what is, perhaps, a sceptical trap.

In the *Quodlibet*, Scotus clarified his account of intuitive cognition by describing different relations obtaining between cognitive acts and their objects. Both abstractive and intuitive cognitions bear a relation of ‘likeness’ to their objects: “the act of knowing is also related to the object participatively

\textsuperscript{149} “nam causae illius sufficientes sunt objectum in actuali existential praesens, et intellectus agens et possibilis; haec omnia possunt concurrere” *Ordinatio* IV 45.2, n.12 (XX, 305).

\textsuperscript{150} Ockham, *Ordinatio* I prologue, 1 (I, 38-39).

\textsuperscript{151} See, for example, Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Ignatius, 1999), particularly part one, chapters III and IV; Anton C. Pegis, ‘Concerning William of Ockham’, *Traditio* 2 (1944), pp.465-480.

\textsuperscript{152} This is precisely why Anthony Kenny is mistaken when he claims Scotus’s theory of intuitive cognition leads to scepticism. See Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Mind* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.114.
in the way a likeness is to that of which it is the likeness”.\textsuperscript{153} By this I take Scotus to be referring to the representational qualities of the acts. Both acts, insofar as they are \textit{about} certain objects, bear a relation of resemblance to those particular objects. Both abstractive and intuitive cognition are directed at common natures and in this way resemble those natures.

Intuitive cognitions, however, possess an additional relation, that of ‘tending towards’ concrete objects existing in the external world. Scotus described the relation thus: “[This relation] can be called a relation that, as an intermediary to the end term to which it unites, formally unites, and this relation of being the medium of unification (\textit{medii unientis}) can, in a special name, be called a relation of attaining something as an end term, or of tending to it as an end term”.\textsuperscript{154} Prima facie the idea of tending seems to refer merely to the characteristic of being ‘representational’. But this can’t be the case, for the notion of ‘likeness’ seems to already be describing this. ‘Tending’, then, must mean something over and above representation. I take this notion of ‘tending’ to refer to the characteristic of transparency that intuitive cognitions possess. The content of an intuitive cognition is not just similar to an object – it is in a certain sense \textit{identical with it}. It represents so perfectly that ceases to be a representation but becomes structurally identical with its object. We can see that this is the case merely by considering the traits of an intuitive cognition – it represents objects in their \textit{concrete existence}. It is, in this sense,

\textsuperscript{153} \textit{Quodlibet}, 13.39 (XII, 340-342).

\textsuperscript{154} “\textit{alio potest dici relation unientis formaliter in ratione medii ad terminum, ad quem unit, et ista relatio medii unientis specialiori nomine potest dici relation attingentiae alterius, ut termini vel tendentiae in alterum, ut in terminum}.” \textit{Quodlibet}, 13.12 (XII, 311-312).
transparent to or identical with reality. Scotus, then, provides us with a theory of relations that grounds his description of intuitive and abstractive cognition. Both aim to represent certain objects, but only one is able to ‘attain’ the objects through perfect representation. Intuitive cognition bears a unique relation of “tending to an object as its terminus”.

The categories of ‘internalism’ and ‘externalism’ have become so dominant in contemporary epistemology that Scotus commentators have felt the need to place him in one of these categories. Peter King puts forward a nuanced ‘externalist’ reading of Scotus: “the content of Socrates’s cognition depends on purely internal features, whereas its character depends on the world’s being a certain way. External factors determine what a singular thought is indeed directed at, as a contingent matter.”155 Richard Cross is more cautious about using this label: “the externalism only extends so far as singular cognition. To the extent that intuitive cognitions include cognition of the common nature, intuitive cognitions directed at different natures have different internal structures, just as in the case of abstractive cognitions.”156 I would argue however that internalism and externalism ultimately collapse into each other in Scotus’s account. As we have just seen, it is the relation of ‘tending’ that distinguishes intuitive cognition from other kinds of simple apprehension. The relation manifests itself in the content of the act – through the characteristics of existence and presence that we perceive. In this sense, we can know which cognitive acts are intuitive, despite their being characterized

155 Peter King, forthcoming, p.13. Socrates is here a character in an illustrative example presented by King. In the example, Socrates is looking at a cat on the floor of his room.

by a relation extrinsic to our perception. When this relation is present, we are able to perceive its effects and hence be aware of its presence.

**Objections:**

Few contemporary scholars have written at length on Scotus’s theory of intuitive cognition, and those that have have not raised many objections. Of the objections that have been made, it seems that most rest upon a misunderstanding of Scotus’s theory. Scotus’s theory seems quite defensible when properly interpreted.

One objection made to Scotus’ theory is that it bypasses any intelligible species – precisely the mental entity that converts sense data into content accessible to the mind. This argument was put forward by Gilson and, later, Stephen Langston.\(^{157}\) Gilson asserts that the species is the very thing that converts the sense data from the presence of the object into knowable content. He argues that the mere presence of the object can cause cognition of existence, but the actual knowledge of what it is is caused by an intelligible species.\(^ {158}\)

---


This objection may at first seem convincing, in light of certain passages where Scotus describes the intelligible species as indispensible to cognition. For example, Scotus states in the Reportatio, a phantasm “has extension and is not proportioned to move the possible intellect”, and hence there is need for an agent intellect “to make the potential universal actual.”\(^\text{159}\) He also writes in the Ordinatio of the need of to convert sense data “from order to order”, which assumedly is referring to the need to make it intelligible to the mind.\(^\text{160}\)

Based on these passages, one might interpret Scotus as being vulnerable to the objection of Gilson and Langston. However, an alternative interpretation is to see these passages as focused on a specific problem, namely Henry of Ghent’s critique of the role of the intelligible species in abstractive cognition. This interpretation seems to be more consistent with Scotus’s statements about intuitive cognition bypassing species. In the Ordinatio passage it seems that Scotus is focused on the indispensible role of the intelligible species in abstractive cognition. I contend that he is not ruling out the possibility of direct cognition by other means (such as through intuitive cognition).

Scotus, after all, provides an explanation for how content could be supplied without an intelligible species. Recall the explanation given in section 3: the

\(^{159}\) [\textit{phantasma}] est extensum et improportionale ad movendum intellectum possibilem”.
There is need for an agent intellect “facere universale in actu de universali in potentia”.

\(^{160}\) \textit{Ordinatio I} 3.6 (IX, 243): “De ordine ad ordinem”. Scotus is here drawing upon an expression used previously by Averroes.
object itself, present in a sensible species, is made accessible to the mind by virtue of the agent intellect acting on it and giving it the necessary qualities to ‘appear’ in the intellectual realm. There is no species or mental image produced during this process. The mind perceives the object itself, in its concrete existence. This observation alone seems sufficient to address Gilson and Langston’s criticism.

Another objection that could perhaps be made of Scotus, although never directly made against him explicitly, is that any notion of perceiving essences below the surface of the level of appearances seems to be ‘extranatural’, insofar as it takes us beyond a world of multifarious sensations to a kind of “pure perception of bare essences”. To be more precise, an idea like intuitive cognition takes us beyond a naturalistic account of perception into a kind of mysterious idealism. In any event, the clarity presupposed by the idea of intellectual vision simply doesn’t map on to the vagueness of our everyday perception of the world.

It is indeed true that our perceptions of objects vary in accuracy. Often we will mistake one kind of object for another, and sometimes we will think we see an object present before us when it is not really there. Scotus certainly did not deal with this criticism directly, but I think we find in his writings the resources to explain imperfect cognitions. As he wrote in Question 13 of the Quodlibet, two relations have to obtain between an object and the mind for an

---

161 Paul MacDonald, Knowledge and the Transcendent: An Inquiry into the Mind’s relation to God (Washington: CUA, 2010), p.128. MacDonald considers the objection in relation to Aquinas’s writing, but I think the same might be said of Scotus.
intuitive cognition to occur. The first is that the mind accurately grasps the
form of the object (the relation of the measurable to its measure); the second
is that the intellectual act terminates in the actual object present in the world
(the relation of reaching out and coming into contact with the other term).\textsuperscript{162}
It is the second relation that would offer space for the phenomenon under
consideration. The explanation for vague or inaccurate cognitions is that they
do not make contact with the object as their end term. That is to say, the
relatio attingentiae alterius ut termini is absent. This relation of attaining the
object as a terminus is necessary for it classify as an intuitive cognition. A
vague cognitive act lacks this relation, and hence would not, strictly speaking,
classify as an intuitive cognition (though it perhaps bears resemblance to an
intuitive cognition). It may in fact be that intuitive cognition is a rarer
phenomenon than we might at first suppose. I do not wish to be detained in
speculation; suffice to say I think there are adequate resources in Scotus’s
philosophy to address this objection.

Rather than labelling Scotus’s account ‘extranatural’, Pasnau has suggested
that Scotus’s notion of intuitive cognition, via the senses, is all too ordinary.
Pasnau, it seems, sees little difference between Scotus’s account and
something provided by Aquinas. Scotus’s account is for him “less interesting”
than others have supposed.\textsuperscript{163} However, Scotus is clearly telling us something
more than Aquinas. He provides us with a sophisticated explanation of how
we apprehend singular objects. As I will discuss in my concluding chapter, this

\textsuperscript{162} Quodlibet 13.35 (Wadding edition XII v.3, 525-526)
\textsuperscript{163} Robert Pasnau, “Cognition”, in The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus (London:
seems to be a significant improvement on Aquinas’s notion of a *conversio ad phantasmata*.

**Conclusion:**

Scotus’s solution to the problem of singular knowledge was to posit the existence of a novel kind of cognitive operation – intuitive cognition. Through intuitive cognition, the human intellect is able to apprehend common natures that have been instantiated as individuals in the world. In this chapter I have offered an interpretation of intuitive cognition, according to which it is a cognitive operation that bypasses intelligible species but that which nevertheless relies upon the agent intellect. The agent intellect acts together with some object in the world to cause an occurrent cognition. It is in this way that we are able to obtain knowledge about individual objects.

Scotus’s solution, I contend, offers a plausible response to Sellars ‘Myth of the Given’ objection. Sense data are no longer presumed to be automatically available to the cognitive faculties. Scotus rejected Aquinas’s belief in the “pseudo-intentionality” of the senses. In its place he offered an account of simple apprehension in which the mind itself, not the senses, apprehends the singular object. In this chapter, I hope to have shown that he offered a plausible explanation of the mechanisms behind this foundational cognitive operation. I will defend my contention further in my concluding chapter. For now it will suffice merely to indicate the direction of my argument.

---

164 Cf. ‘Being and Being Known’, n.18.
In the next chapter I will examine the account of intuitive cognition provided by William of Ockham. Ockham explained intuitive cognition by developing what scholars have called an ‘act’ theory of cognition. I will argue that Ockham’s alternative explanation falls victim to one serious objection. Scotus, in contrast, has the resources to deal with the objections levelled at his account. I will return to the comparison of Scotus, Ockham and Aquinas in the final chapter of this thesis.
Chapter V: Ockham on singular cognition

1. Introduction:

Whereas Aquinas grounded his cognitive psychology in a traditional interpretation of Aristotle, William of Ockham was not afraid to reinterpret or dissent from ‘The Philosopher’. Ockham rejected the Aristotelian notion that essences have some sort of extra-mental existence. He claimed that essences, though caused by objects in the external world, were purely entities of the mind. On this new ‘conceptualist’ foundation Ockham developed a novel cognitive psychology, vastly different from Scotus or Aquinas.¹⁶⁵

In this chapter, I will describe this new cognitive psychology, focusing particularly on its implications for the problem of the knowledge of particulars. I will discuss Ockham’s repudiation of the Aristotelian realism of Scotus and Aquinas, as well as his rejection of the species doctrine. Ockham proposed as an alternative the idea that cognitive acts in themselves have the ability to signify objects in the external world, and that reference is fixed by this ‘act

¹⁶⁵ Various scholars have applied the label ‘conceptualist’ to Ockham. See for example Philotheus Boehner, ‘The Realistic Conceptualism of William of Ockham’, Traditio 4 (1946), pp.307-335, and Alan Wolter, The Philosophical Theology of John Duns Scotus (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) p.65. This label is preferable to the label more commonly applied to Ockham, ‘nominalist’. ‘Nominalist’ implies that universals have no grounding whatsoever in the world, whereas ‘conceptualist’ allows for some link between universals in the mind and external reality. And Ockham did believe in such a link, as will be shown in section 2.
signification’, combined with causal relations between particular objects and the mind. In the final sections of the chapter, I will evaluate two common criticisms made of Ockham’s theory. I will argue that one of these criticisms fails, but that the other proves problematic for Ockham’s account.\footnote{The translations used in this chapter have been taken from William of Ockham: Philosophical Writings, trans. Philotheus Boehner O.F.M. (Indianapolis IN: Hackett Publishing, 1990), and William of Ockham: The Quodlibetal Questions vol. 1-2 Questions 1-7, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso and Francis E. Kelley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).}

1. **The evolution of Ockham’s cognitive psychology:**

Ockham’s major philosophical works were produced within quite a short space of time (roughly 1317-1325).\footnote{Cf. William J. Courtenay, ‘The Academic and Intellectual Works of William of Ockham’, in Paul Vincent Spade (ed.) The Cambridge Companion to Ockham (London: Cambridge, 2006), pp.17-30; Paul Vincent Spade and Claude Panaccio, ‘William of Ockham’, in Edward N. Zalta (ed.) The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2011), published online at http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/ockham/, accessed on the 17/11/2014.} Nevertheless, there does seem to have been an ‘evolution’ in his views on cognitive psychology. In his earlier works, such as his Reportatio (c.1317-1319), he defends what has been labeled the ‘objective existence theory’. On this theory, concepts have what he calls ‘objective existence’ in the mind. By this he means that they are present in the mind as ‘known objects’, but without being present as “real entities existing in the soul”.\footnote{Expositio in Librum Perihermenias Aristotelis prologue, sect. 7 (OPh II, 359).} There is much that could be said to further explain this theory, but I will not do so as I wish to focus on his more mature view. This mature view, known as the ‘act theory’ of cognition, is defended most stridently in his
Quodlibetal Questions (c.1324-1325) and his Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics (before 1324). According to the act theory of cognition, simple apprehension does not require the presence of some mental representation in the mind. All that is needed for an operation of intuitive cognition is the presence of the object.

I will explain Ockham’s act theory in greater depth in the subsequent sections of this chapter. Suffice to say here that I will focus on the act theory of cognition instead of Ockham’s earlier theory. The act theory best represents Ockham’s strident reaction to the supposed metaphysical excesses of Aquinas’s cognitive psychology.

2. Ockham’s ‘conceptualism’:

The key difference between Ockham and scholastic orthodoxy was that Ockham subscribed to a kind of conceptualism about essences. He believed that knowledge of the universals that particulars fall under was ultimately the product of our minds. The essences we grasp have no extra-mental existence in things. This is obviously in direct contrast to Aquinas’s contention that natures (roughly synonymous with essences) are present in ‘a material mode’ in individual things. Likewise, he rejected Scotus’ notion that common

---


170 Thomas Aquinas, Sententia Libri De Anima, II, Lectura XII, no. 378.
natures were instantiated – or, to use the Scotistic phrase, ‘joined to singularity’ - in particular objects.¹⁷¹

In the place of the traditional account of the ‘abstraction’ of species, Ockham argued that we form, as opposed to abstract, concepts. The mind creates species concepts when it comes into contact with individual members of a species. Where a member of class ‘x’ is present to the mind, the mind is prompted to form a concept of the class. Importantly, there is no abstraction of the essence from the individual taking place. The essence has no existence outside the mind. Rather, the individual extra-mental thing causes the formation of the species concept.¹⁷²

Once we have apprehended these species concepts, we are able to form higher order concepts based on these initial ideas. The concept of animal, for


¹⁷² Ockham’s theory of ‘species’ concept formation was a very significant departure from the traditional scholastic Aristotelian account. He does not only reject the notion of abstraction, but also abandons the idea of concept formation by induction. On the conventional account, based on passages in Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, concepts are formed by a process of induction. After acquaintance with numerous members of the species, we are able to form a universal concept of the species. Ockham dissents from this view, arguing that cognition of just one member of species is sufficient to obtain a concept of that species. Hence he writes in the *Quodlibet*, I.13, “the concept of the species and the concept being are simultaneously caused by the extra-mental thing” (*OTh* IX, 78). This notion is ultimately linked to his idea of intuitive cognition (to be discussed in section 4).
instance, is formed once we have concepts of different animal species.\textsuperscript{173} Metaphysical concepts of genus and species, substance and accidents, are formed subsequent to this initial process.\textsuperscript{174}

3. Abstractive vs. intuitive cognition in Ockham’s philosophy:

According to Aquinas there is only one kind of simple apprehension – abstractive cognition. In abstractive cognition we abstract an essence from a sense representation of an object, and cognize this essence as a universal. Ockham, following Scotus, gave a new definition to the operation of abstractive cognition, and posited a second kind of simple apprehension, intuitive cognition.

Intuitive cognition is the cognitive operation in which the mind apprehends objects as existing here and now. It is the special capacity with which we can apprehend the existence or non-existence of objects in the world. Ockham writes in the Sentences: “[intuitive cognition is that] by the mediation of which a thing is cognized to exist when it exists and not to exist when it does not exist.”\textsuperscript{175} For intuitive cognition to take place, we need to be in sufficient physical proximity to an object: “intuitive cognition cannot be naturally

\textsuperscript{173} Quodlibet, I.13 (OTh IX, 77-78).
\textsuperscript{174} Quodlibet, IV.35. (OTh IX, 469-474).
\textsuperscript{175} “...per notitiam intuitivum rei potest evidenter cognosci res non esse quando non est vel si non sit.” Commentarium in Librum Primum Sententiarum, Prologue, 1 (OTh I, 70)
caused except when [its] object is present at a determinate distance.” 176

Intuitive cognition also serves another purpose: it is the primitive cognitive act in which we first come into contact with singular objects: “That very same singular which is sensed first by the sense is itself, under the same description, intellectively cognized first with intuitive cognition by the intellect.” 177 It is only through intuitive cognition that we are able to form propositions about objects present to us: “if I see with intuitive cognition a body and whiteness, immediately [my] intellect can form this complex: ‘There is a body,’ ‘There is a white thing,’ or ‘A body is white.’” 178

Abstractive cognition, according to Ockham, has a number of senses. In one sense, it is just what Aquinas thought it was – the apprehension of a universal. At one point in the *Sentences*, Ockham calls abstractive cognition the acquisition of a universal after a series of intuitive cognitions: “in this [sense] abstractive cognition is nothing other than the cognition of a universal

176 “…cognitio intuitiva non possit naturaliter causari nisi quando obiectum est praesens in determinata distantia…” *Commentarium in Librum Secundum Sententiarum* 13 (*OTH V*, 259).

I am here referring to intuitive cognition of existents. Of course, physical proximity is something impossible when you have an intuitive cognition of a non-existent object.

177 “Illud idem singulare quod primo sentitur a sensu idem et sub eadem ratione primo intelligitur intuitive ab intellectu…” *Commentarium in Librum Primum Sententiarum* 3.6 (*OTH II*, 494).

abstractable from many things.” Elsewhere, he defines abstractive cognition as every other cognitive operation apart from intuitive cognition (including the apprehension of mental sentences and even acts of judgement). Perhaps the sense most relevant to this discussion is the following: abstractive cognition is, like intuitive cognition, an apprehension of a particular, but it takes place when the object is absent and does not allow us to form and verify contingent judgments about the world. Abstractive cognition, in this sense, is the grasp of an individual object in a way indifferent to its existence or non-existence in the world. Ockham states in the prologue to the Sentences: “an abstractive cognition of a contingent thing is one by virtue of which it is not possible to know evidently whether the thing exists or not.”

If we adopt this last sense of abstractive cognition, we can establish a clear dichotomy between the two kinds of cognition. Intuitive cognition gives us our initial grasp of individual objects (just as they are here and now). Abstractive cognition also grasps the individual, but only after the individual is absent. It is parasitic upon the initial intuitive cognition, and cannot of itself verify the existence or non-existence of the object being cognized.

---

179 “et sic cognitio abstrativa non est alid quam cognitio alicuius univeralis abstrahibilis a multis…” Commentarium in Librum Primum Sententiarum Prologue 1 (OTH I, 30).
180 Commentarium in Librum Secundum Sententiarum 13 (OTH V, 257). I assume he would stop short of calling reasoning a kind of abstractive cognition.
181 “Notitia autem abstractive est illa virtute cuius de re contingente non potest sciri evidenter utrum sit vel non sit.” Commentarium in Librum Primum Sententiarum prologue 1 (OTH 1, 31–2).
Ockham focused on intuitive cognition when developing his account of singular knowledge. An abstract thought of an individual does not grasp it as an object existing in the world. Intuitive cognition, on the other hand, gives us access to the individual as existing here and now in front us. In the remainder of this chapter, I will examine how Ockham explained our capacity to have intuitive cognitions of individual objects.

4. Ockham’s act theory of cognition, and his causal theory of thought character:

There are two theories that inform Ockham’s account of cognition of singulars. The first of these is his act theory of cognition, and second is his causal theory of thought character. According to Ockham, both are needed to explain intuitive cognition of singular objects. I will discuss the two theories in turn.

4.1 Ockham’s act theory of cognition:

Ockham rejected Aquinas’ and Scotus’ notion of a formal isomorphism between mind and world during cognition. He asserted that the idea of forms being present intentionally in the mind was unnecessary. There were alternative ways of explaining the intentionality of our thoughts. We need not resort to such heavy metaphysical machinery to explain cognition. Thus he wrote:

182 Summa Totius Logicae, I, 12 (OPh I, 43).
“all the theoretical advantages that derive from postulating entities distinct from acts of understanding can be had without making such a distinction, for an act of understanding can signify something and can supposit for something just as well as any sign. Therefore, there is no point in postulating anything over and above the act of understanding”.

This is a quintessential case of Ockham using his razor. He asserts that we can explain cognition without reference to a mental representation (be it a fictum or an species intelligibilis). This alone is reason enough to abandon the notion of ‘forms’ present in the mind.

In his mature thought, Ockham proposed what has been called the ‘act theory of cognition’. On this theory, a mental act is sufficient to signify some class of objects ‘x’ in the external world. There is no need for a mental representation that directs the mind to external objects. The very act of cognition of the class of objects ‘x’ is sufficient to provide this intentionality. The act of cognition itself bears a relation of similarity to the class ‘x’. And this relation of similarity is sufficient to produce signification. Hence Ockham


184 Due to the constraints of this thesis, I am here addressing only Ockham’s later theory of cognition. His earlier ‘Objective existence’ theory is described and critiqued in Marilyn McCord Adams’ ‘Ockham’s on Natural Signification’, The Monist, 61, no.3 (July 1978).

185 Expositio Super Librum Perihermenias, I, sect. 6 (OTH II, 351-358).
wrote, “No prior assimilation through a species is required before an act of intellectively cognizing. Rather, the assimilation suffices that comes about through the act of intellectively cognizing, which is [itself] a likeness of the thing cognized”.\textsuperscript{186}

The idea is quite a radical step away from the canonical rational psychology expounded by Aquinas. Aquinas had proposed a system in which we access extra-mental universals by virtue of a form or intelligible species present in the mind. Forms present in the mind are \textit{necessary} vehicles to achieve this. Without them, there is nothing to provide content to our thoughts –thoughts without forms as their objects are essentially thoughts without content.\textsuperscript{187} Ockham offered a groundbreaking alternative to this approach. The act theory of cognition suggests that a mere similarity relation holding between the external object and the mental act is sufficient to provide mental content. There is no need for an \textit{isomorphism} between the mind and reality. The resemblance of a mental act to a class ‘\textit{x}’ provides specific intentional content – content about class ‘\textit{x}’ – to our thoughts.

\textbf{4.2. Ockham’s causal theory of thought character:}

\textsuperscript{186} “\textit{non requiritur ante actum intelligendi aliqua assimilation praevia quae sit per speciem. Sed sufficit assimilatio quae fit per actum intelligendi qui est similitudo rei cognitae.” Reportatio II.12-13 (\textit{OTh V}, 295-96).

\textsuperscript{187} For Aquinas, see \textit{Summa Theologica} I.85, art.2. For Scotus see \textit{Ordinatio} I, d.3 p.3 q.1.
In Ockham’s system, the act theory had as its complement what I shall call a causal theory of thought character. This latter theory was crucial for explaining how we know individual objects. According to Ockham, the act theory was inadequate to explain thoughts about particulars.

Our cognitive acts, Ockham asserted, pick out objects at the level of class, not individuality. The similarity relation holds between cognitive acts and classes, not individuals. Certainly, our cognitive acts are sufficient to pick out one class to the exclusion of others. However, they are incapable of distinguishing between one particular individual over another. Hence Ockham writes in the *Commentary on the Perihermenias*,

> “By such a common or confused intellection, singular things outside the mind are known. For instance, to say that we have a confused intellection of man means that we have a cognition by which we do not understand one man rather than another, but that by such a cognition we have cognition of a man rather than a donkey”.

188 By thought character I am referring to the nature of a particular thought (i.e. a singular thought or a general thought) rather than what it has as intentional content. There is a crucial difference between the former and the latter. Mere intentional content is insufficient to fix whether a thought is about a singular object or many objects. Many different objects can have the same external features, but still be distinct objects, as Scotus observed. Thought character — i.e. the singularity or generality of thought — is fixed by features external to the thinker’s awareness. It is, according to Ockham, fixed by a causal relation holding between an object and the thought.

189 *Expositio Super Librum Perihermenias*, prologue (OPh II, 355): “Ad primum potest dici quod tali intellectione confusa intelliguntur tales res singulares extra, sicut haere intentionem
Similarly, he writes in the *Quodlibet*, “No simple abstractive cognition is more a likeness of one singular thing than of another exactly like it”.\textsuperscript{190}

Ockham’s way of explaining our cognition of singulars was to supplement the act theory of cognition with a causal theory of thought character. The theory is that singular thoughts are about singular things (and those things exclusively) because the singular things have caused the thoughts. A relation of efficient causality always holds between an object and any thought about that object. This very fact causes those thoughts to be about the particular object. Thus Ockham writes in the *Quodlibet*:

“I reply that an intuitive cognition is a proper cognition of a singular thing not because of its greater likeness to the one thing than to the other, but because it is naturally caused by the one thing and not by the other, and is not able to be caused by the other”.\textsuperscript{191}

Similarly, in the *Ordinatio*, he remarks:

\begin{quote}
\textit{hominis confusam non est aliud quam habere unam intentionem qua non magis intelligitur unus homo quam alius, et tamen tali cognitione magis cognoscitur sive intelligitur homo quam asinus; et hoc non est aliud dicere quam quod talis cognitio aliquo modo assimilationis magis assimilatur homini quam asino, et tamen non magis illi homini quam isti...”}. Cf. *Ordinatio* I, d.2, q.8 (*OTh* II, 266-292).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{190} *Quodlibet*, I.13 (*OTh* IX, 74): “Nulla cognition abstractiva simplex est plus similitudo unius rei singularis quam alterius sibi simillimae”.

\textsuperscript{191} “Dico quod intuitiva est propria cognitio singularis, non propter maiorem assimilationem uni quam alteri, sed quia naturaliter ab uno et non ab altero causatur, nec potest ab altero causari.” *Quodlibet*, I.13 (*OTh* IX, 76).
“Even though the intellect is a likeness to all things of the same species, it is able, however, to know determinately the one and not the other. But this is not on account of likeness, but (its) cause”.  

Evidently, Ockham believed a causal relation between the object and the thought produced the thought’s intentionality.

Ockham, I contend, is proposing a kind of ‘externalism about thought’ (the view that the character of a thought is fixed by features external to the thinker’s awareness). Singular thoughts are made to be singular thoughts not by some feature of the thought’s content, but rather the causal relation holding between the thought and the object that caused it. Peter King and Claude Panaccio rightly apply this label to Ockham’s theory. Ockham’s descriptions of his causal theory strongly suggest that singular thought is fixed by factors external to the content of the thought itself.

Susan Brower-Toland has challenged this externalist reading of Ockham. She refers to texts in which Ockham writes of the possibility of divine

---


intervention in the process of intuitive cognition. God has the power to cause intuitive cognitions of objects in the material world. Hence ‘natural causal pathways’ are interrupted by the ever-present possibility of ‘divine interference’. In light of this, it becomes hard to say that a necessary causal relationship obtains between particular thoughts and particular objects. How do we really know the thought has been caused ‘naturally’ rather than ‘supernaturally’? Brower-Toland goes on to suggest an internalist reading of Ockham, according to which singular thought is what it is merely in virtue of having some individual thing as its intentional object.

Toland’s objection is reasonable one, but a close inspection of Ockham’s comments on divine necessity reveals that his causal theory of divine intervention is compatible with his notion of naturally necessary causal relations. Rather than attempting a glib dismissal of the claim, I will address this objection at length in the next section.

5. Resolving the tension between Ockham’s causal theory and his views on the contingency of the natural world:

Toland’s objection is a criticism often made of Ockham. There appears to be a tension between his causal theory of thought character and his supposed belief in the radical contingency of the laws of the natural world. Historically,

---

195 Some of texts referred to include the Commentarium in Librum Primum Sententiarum Prologue q. 1 (OTh I, 30-31); Reportatio II, q.q., 12-13 (OTh V, 284); Quodlibet 5.5 (OTh IX, 496).

this objection has been the main reason why philosophers have rejected Ockham's theory.\textsuperscript{197} In this section I will outline the basic tenets of this objection. I will then suggest that this criticism relies on a misinterpretation of Ockham's understanding of the natural world. I will propose that we can distinguish between Ockham's understanding of logical necessity and natural necessity, and that we should consider only the latter when assessing the tenability of his causal theory of reference. Once this distinction is made, we see that the theory is coherent.

Ockham asserted that the natural world is contingent in its structure - it could very easily have been different to what it is if God so willed it. It is not logically necessary that the causal structure of our world be the way it is. Fundamental physical laws could have been different, and, particularly relevant to our purposes, the causal relations between objects and the mind could have been different. Ockham indicates this in various places in his corpus.\textsuperscript{198} And he is not making any groundbreaking claims - Aquinas and Scotus made similar assertions.\textsuperscript{199}

However, Ockham entered uncharted philosophical terrain when discussing the possibility of supernatural intervention in the realm of thought. Ockham


\textsuperscript{198} See for example, \textit{Quodlibet} I.5, II.10, and VI.6 (\textit{OTh} IX, 29-35, 156-161, 604-607), and \textit{Commentarium in Librum Primum Sententiarum} d. 44 (\textit{OTh} IV, 650-661).

\textsuperscript{199} For Aquinas see \textit{Summa Theologica}, I q.19, art.3. For Scotus see \textit{Reportatio} I-A, d.39.
claimed that God could cause a thought in the mind of a non-existing object. In his *Quodlibet*, Ockham wrote:

“Intuitive cognition of a non-existent object is possible by the divine power. I prove this first by the article of faith 'I believe in God the Father almighty', which I understand in the following sense: Anything is to be attributed to the divine power, when it does not contain a manifest contradiction. But that this [i.e. cognition of a non-existent object] should be produced by the power of God, does not contain a contradiction; therefore, etc. Again, on this article is based the famous maxim of the theologians: 'Whatever God can produce by means of secondary causes, He can directly produce and preserve without them'. From this maxim I argue thus: Every effect which God can produce by means of a secondary cause He can produce directly on His own account. God can produce intuitive sense cognition by means of an object; hence He can produce it directly on His own account.”

The significance of this passage is that it seems to imply that the causal action of the object is not necessary to bring about a thought of the object. God could

---

200 *Quodlibet* VI.6 (*OTh* IX, 604): “Cognitio intuitiva potest esse per potentiam divinam de obiecto non existente. Quod probo primo per articulum fidei: “Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem”. Quem sic intelligo quod quodlibet est divinae potentiae attribuendum quod non includit manifestam contradictionem; igitur etc. Praeterea in illo articulo fundatur illa propositio famosa theologorum ‘quidquid Deus producit mediantibus causis secundis, potest immediate sine illis producere et conservare’. Ex ista propositione arguo sic: omnem effectum quem potest Deus mediante causa secunda, potest immediate per se; sed in notitiam intuitivam corporalem potest mediante obiecto; igitur potest in eam immediate per se”. The English translation has been taken from *Philosophical Writings – A Selection: William of Ockham* trans. Philotheus Boehner O.F.M. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1990).
easily cause a thought of an object, whilst not producing the object of that thought. His causal action would not in anyway impinge on the content of the thought. If this is the case, then it seems lines of causality do not determine the character of a thought.\(^{201}\)

Based on this passage and others similar to it, Adams et al claim a contradiction in Ockham’s writing. He thinks that the causal structure of the natural world is radically contingent, and yet he thinks an essential relationship exists between particular mental acts and their objects. It seems that something has to give – either one holds that there are no essential causal relationships between things in the natural world, or one rejects the view that the world is radically contingent. The two positions are mutually exclusive.

In response to Adams’ criticism, I argue that there is a crucial distinction in Ockham’s theory of causality between logical necessity and natural necessity. Ockham’s causal theory of reference is grounded in the latter, and hence remains unaffected by his strong views on divine omnipotence. Ockham, as a theologian, is obliged to acknowledge the possibility of supernatural phenomena interfering with the natural order of things. Aquinas and Scotus do the same with their treatment of miracles.\(^{202}\) However, Ockham holds such supernatural phenomena to be so rare that he preserves a parallel natural account of causality alongside the theological picture of radical contingency.

\(^{201}\) Which is to say, lines of causality do not determine whether a thought is a general or a singular one.

\(^{202}\) For Aquinas, see *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III.101. For Scotus see *Reportatio* I-A, d. 44, q. 1, n. 9.
Hence he provides two "conclusions" to the question of intuition of non-existence. The first – the theological conclusion, based on an article of faith – was quoted above. In the second conclusion, he states, "So far as natural causes are in question, an intuitive cognition cannot be caused or preserved if the object does not exist..."\textsuperscript{203} Here we see the two approaches of Ockham - one concerning the abstruse realm of theological possibility, the other concerning the natural order of things.\textsuperscript{204,205}

Insofar as Ockham's causal theory of reference is grounded in a naturalistic account of causality, divorced from his theological speculations, it can sit comfortably alongside his account of divine omnipotence. The two do not

\textsuperscript{203}"quamvis naturaliter notitia intuitiva non possit esse sine existentia rei, quae est vere causa efficiens notitiae intuitivae mediata vel imediata..." \textit{Commentarium in Librum Primum Sententiarum} prologue, q.1 (\textit{OTh} I, 38).

\textsuperscript{204}As Day observes, Ockham distinguishes between facts which are "secundum se et necessario" (according to the thing itself and necessarily) and "secundum nos et contingenter" (according to us and contingently). See Sebastian Day, \textit{Intuitive Cognition} (New York: The Franciscan Institute, 1947) p.163. The first category refers to an absolute necessity, whereas the later refers to necessity based on contingent state of the world. To further explain the latter category: the world could have been otherwise, if God has chosen to make it that way. But considering the way he contingently has chosen to make it, certain things are now necessary (unless God chooses to intervene with a miracle).

\textsuperscript{205}Interestingly, in the \textit{Quodlibet} V.5 Ockham denies that God could produce in us an intuitive cognition of an absent object: "I reply that God cannot cause in us a cognition through which it would evidently appear to us that a thing is present when it is absent, since this involves a contradiction..." (\textit{OTh} IX, 498). If we take this quote as an expression of his most mature thought, then it seems Ockham's almighty God could never play the role of a Cartesian evil demon.
overlap. There are essential relations between objects and thoughts that obtain in the natural order, and this is all that is needed to support Ockham’s theory.

6. The unsolved mystery of act signification:

As stated in section 3, Ockham’s act theory of cognition claims that cognitive acts are sufficient to signify groups of objects in the external world. When developing this theory Ockham argues that there is a natural relation of similarity that obtains between the act of cognition and the objects of the class ‘x’. The act of cognition naturally – independent of any positing of the mind – shares the relation of resemblance to these external objects.²⁰⁶ Importantly, it is not some quality shared by the act and the object that underpins the similarity relation. Ockham takes an anti-reductive approach to similarity.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Commentarium in Librum Primum Sententiarum 30.5. (OTh IV, 385).

²⁰⁷ I am here adopting Adams interpretation of Ockham’s views on similarity (See Adams, 1978, p.447). Adams bases her view the following passage from the Ordinatio,: “Si dicatur quod Sortes et Plato plus conveniunt realiter quam Sortes et asinus, igitur Sortes et Plato in aliquo reali conveniunt in quo no conveniunt realiter Sortes et asinus, sed non in Sorte nec in Platone, igitur in aliquo, alio modo distincto, et illud est commune utrique, respondeo quod de virtute sermonis non debet concedi quod Sortes et Plato conveniunt in aliquo nec in aliquibus, sed quod conveniunt aliquibus, quia se ipsis, et quod convenit cum Platone non ‘in aliquo’ sed ‘aliquo’, quia se ipso”. Commentarium in Librum Primum Sententiarum, 2.6; (OTh II, 211-12). Ockham rejects the view that Sortes and Plato are similar in virtue of a common property. Rather, Sortes and Plato just are similar. They are similar “se ipsis”, and not in virtue of some shared attribute.
It is the act *in itself* that is similar to the objects. In other words, the relationship obtains at an object level, not a feature or trait level.

This theory of act signification is an aspect of Ockham’s theory that has attracted significant criticism from commentators. The key objection that is made is that Ockham fails to explain how an act can resemble some class of objects. Joel Biard puts the objection thus: “[on the act theory of cognition] the idea of similitude loses some of its sense. For we might admit a resemblance between a thing and a concept endowed with *esse obiectivum*, but what does resemblance between a thing and an act mean?”

Adams begins from a similar starting point, and after discussing what she sees as the various options open to Ockham, concludes that none adequately explain how cognitive acts can have a ‘comparative resemblance’ to particular classes of objects.

I propose to take a similar approach to Adams, and describe the options available. In the end, though, I do not think any option adequately solves this conceptual-exegetical issue.

Where cognition is concerned, Ockham is working with relations of comparative resemblance. A relationship of resemblance *simpliciter* can trivially obtain between any two things, as Adams observes. However,

---

208 Joel Biard, *Guillaume d’Ockham. Logique et philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 1997), p.120.


210 Ibid., p.447.
Ockham is referring to a relationship whereby two things are more similar to each other than to a range of other entities in the world. I reproduce an important passage from *Perihermenias* quoted above:

“To have a confused intention of man is only to have an intention by which one man is no more understood than another and nevertheless by such a cognition a man is more cognized or understood than a donkey. And this is only to say that such a cognition is, by some sort of similarity more similar to a man than to a donkey and nevertheless not more similar to that man than to this one...”  

The question is whether Ockham has sufficient resources to explain why a cognitive act ‘z’ would be comparatively more similar to class ‘x’ of objects than class ‘y’.

The first issue encountered is the fact that mental acts are ultimately more similar to mental entities than to anything in the outside world. Before one can address how mental acts might be similar to particular kinds of extra-mental things, one needs to ascertain why the mental act would signify an extra-mental object at all, and not some other mental quality. The solution that Marilyn Adams proposes on Ockham’s behalf is “to exclude from consideration any similarities that result from the fact that the act is a mental

---

If we do this, then there seems no reason to suppose that mental act ‘x’ will be more similar to other mental acts than extra-mental things. The similarity relationship becomes focused on the content of the act, rather than its ontological status as a mental quality.

This response has some merit, but it still would not fix the reference of the cognitive act on the desired class outside the mind. Leaving aside similarity based on existing in the mind as opposed to external reality, the fact that the concept ‘human’ is indeterminate means it will be more similar to other indeterminate concepts about ‘human’ than it will to individual humans. The concept of ‘human’ would still be more similar to partially indeterminate concepts like ‘caucasoid human’ or ‘mongoloid human’ more than the fully determinate particular humans it supposed to signify. The quality of indeterminacy thus undermines the aim of establishing similarity between the concept of man and really existent particular human beings. The proposed response made on Ockham’s behalf fails to address the objection.

Even if Ockham were able to solve the issue of concepts signifying other mental entities, he would lack an explanation for why concepts signify class ‘x’ rather than class ‘y’ extra-mental objects. I can find no passage explaining why

---

212 McCord Adams, 1978, p.450. She concedes, “I have not found a passage in which Ockham explicitly makes this correction”.

213 I use these examples reluctantly, and only because the categories are still in use in forensic anthropology. No offence whatsoever is intended. Furthermore, I am using the term ‘man’ rather than ‘human being’ only because Ockham himself used the equivalent word in Latin. Otherwise I would adopt the latter term.
the concept of human would signify all particular humans out there in the world, rather than all particular horses. Unlike other forms of signification, the notion of act signification is obscure and in need of elucidation. It is prima facie clear how pictures signify particular objects in the external world. The colors are similar, and the objects delineated in the two-dimensional photographic space are analogous to objects in some real three-dimensional space. But what sort of story can we provide for concepts that might explain their comparative similarity to certain particular objects in the external world? As Adams remarks, “an act of the intellect that is of a green house cannot resemble a green house the way a colour photograph of the green house can. For it is a mental quality and is not coloured or extended.”214 This seems to me a valid observation. We need a new theory of resemblance to explain why certain acts have a comparative similarity to particular objects. Ockham ultimately fails to supply such an observation.

Claude Panaccio has attempted to address this resemblance criticism by explaining resemblance in using the analogy of 'static' physical acts. Using the analogy of a hand grasping a ball, he attempts to make intelligible the unusual signification of cognitive acts:

“the acts ‘resemble’ objects in the same way that the posture of my fist in the act of grasping an object comes to resemble that object: It is neither qualitative resemblance in the Aristotelian sense (as between two red things, or two round things), nor essential similitude (as between two nuthatches, or between a dog and a horse), nor

perceptual likeness (as between a photograph or a statue and the pictured object). The relevant Ockhamistic connection typically follows upon a causal link and thus differs from both qualitative resemblance and essential similitude by being asymmetrical; a foot track, in this sense, is a similitude of the foot, but not conversely". 215

To my mind there are multiple serious issues with this explanation. However, I will focus on what seems to be the fundamental flaw of the account. Pace Panaccio, there seems to be a disanalogy between his example of a static physical action (the grasping of a ball) and the metaphysical/cognitive action of grasping an object. As Panaccio himself states, “A mental act for Ockham is not an action in the modern sense, or a gesture, or a movement. It is more like an actualized state in the mind”. 216 An 'act' according to Ockham is the exercise of a metaphysical capacity. Granted, physical actions are a kind of metaphysical act. But they are vastly different to the exercise of other metaphysical capacities, such as the use of the capacities of the mind. Mental acts are not physical or extended. Comparing mental acts to molds reduces cognitions to quasi-physical objects, and there is no textual justification for such an interpretation. The mere fact that they are both metaphysical acts will not suffice to secure Panaccio’s conclusion. Furthermore, working against Panaccio's account is Ockham's belief in non-reductive similarity. Ockham was adamant that similarity obtained at an object level, and was not reducible to certain qualities of the objects. 217 However, the similarity of a mold to

216 Ibid., p.123.
217 Commentarium in Librum Primum Sententiarum 2.6 (OTh II, 211-12).
certain objects seems to be reducible to a kind of qualitative resemblance: the contours of the mold mirror the contours of the object. Insofar as it is a kind of qualitative resemblance, Ockham would repudiate this as an unnecessarily reductive account of similarity.

Ultimately, Ockham's account of act signification needs to be interpreted along the lines of his non-reductivism. Considering the metaphysical constraints he placed on the way we explicate mental acts, there is no way to explain the comparative similarity relation that holds between mental acts and classes of things in the world. We need to take similarity as an irreducible feature of our mental acts.

Here lies the ultimate issue. To take similarity as a brute fact seems very implausible. It would mean that, for instance, there was nothing in common between the similarity between my thought of a given object and that object and the similarity between another person's thought of that same object and that object. This is indeed a difficult view to accept. Intuitively there is some sort of reductive explanation for the similarities between our experiences of the same object. Yet Ockham does not allow for this.

McCord Adams ends her essay by writing “Ockham’s doctrine of natural signification must be pronounced a failure”.218 I would not go as far as labeling it a ‘failure’. Rather, I would simply call it far less plausible than other alternative theories. Ockham’s razor only applies if the competing theories are

---

on par with each other in their explanatory value. Yet his theory fails to measure up to that offered by Scotus. If the latter has greater explanatory power, we have no reason to abandon it.

**Conclusion:**

Ockham's account of the knowledge of particulars was a radical departure from the conventional Thomistic account of cognition adopted by most of his peers. He rejected the idea that knowledge entailed an isomorphism between the mind and world. Ockham's approach was to posit a primitive similarity relation obtaining between cognitive acts and classes of really existing material things. He argued that this relation was sufficient to explain the specific content of our thoughts. Ockham also dissented from Scotus and Aquinas in claiming that we can know singular things *in se*. To explain how this was possible, he developed a novel causal theory of reference, according to which causal relations between thoughts and particular objects fix reference.

I have argued that the 'divine omnipotence' objection often made of Ockham's causal theory rests upon a misinterpretation. Ockham's philosophy of cognition is grounded in a naturalistic theory of causality, and he does not intend his theological speculations to affect this naturalistic account. But whilst his causal theory withstands criticism, Ockham’s theory of act signification does not fare as well. Ockham does not provide an adequate explanation for the theory. And even when one explores the options that Ockham had available, there still seems to be no adequate answer. Ultimately, his non-reductive account of act signification seems implausible.
In my concluding chapter I will emphasise how Scotus avoids these difficulties encountered by Ockham. Scotus, like Ockham, developed a theory of intuitive cognition to explain our grasp of singulars. However, he did not adopt a conceptualist explanation for our cognition of essences. According to Scotus, essences really exist in things, and we perceive these essences in intuitive cognition. This, I will suggest, is the fundamental reason why Scotus’s account succeeds and Ockham’s fails. Ockham – with his reductionist metaphysics – was unable to give a coherent explanation of our grasp of the essences of objects in intuitive cognition. Scotus had a metaphysical system that allowed him to provide such a story.
Chapter VI: Conclusion – A comparison of Aquinas, Ockham and Scotus

We come to the end of our examination of the three major medieval theories of singular cognition. Each of the three theories is significantly different – a fact that often goes unacknowledged. Aquinas provides us with a kind of mediated realism, Scotus abandons the notion of an intelligible species and posits the notion of intuitive cognition, and Ockham boldly abandons key elements of Aristotelian essentialism. Each philosopher drew upon sophisticated philosophical machinery to justify his claims.

In this chapter I aim to provide a brief summary of the argument that has been made throughout this thesis, as well as to examine the insights that can be drawn from the discussion in the past few chapters. Even though I have examined just a small area of the philosophy of cognition, it seems that there are some key insights that can be gained.

1. The problem of cognition of singulars:

This thesis is focused on the problem of the knowledge of singulars. The stated aim was to provide an evaluation of three significant high medieval theories of singular cognition. I have examined how these theories reconciled Aristotelian claims about the mind’s exclusive orientation toward universals with the view that we do indeed have singular knowledge. As is hopefully evident, a grasp of singular objects is essential if we are to make judgements about particular
objects. And insofar as this is a fundamental operation by which we know the corporeal world, we can say that singular knowledge is essential to any kind of rational human action. The problem of the knowledge of singulars is thus an important problem – perhaps more important than has been acknowledged in the literature to date.

1.1 Aquinas on the inner sensorium:

Aquinas tries to resolve the problem of singular knowledge by suggesting, at certain points in his work, that the intellect ‘returns to the phantasms’, and elsewhere, that we have a special sensory capacity, the cogitative power, that is capable of conceptualising singular objects. Aquinas’s solution is ultimately to posit a second means of cognizing objects, parallel to his formal reception account.

I argued that Aquinas’s notion of the *conversio* fails to provide an adequate explanation of singular cognition – it merely points to where an answer might lie, rather than providing a comprehensive solution. I also considered his notion of the cogitative power, and claimed that it solves one problem only to create another in its wake. The cogitative power, on Aquinas’s account, is capable of grasping common natures as present in concrete material objects. But insofar as this is the case, why is a notion of formal reception necessary at all? The original notion of formal reception was based on the assumption that only dematerialized species of objects could be intelligible to the mind. In positing a cogitative power Aquinas undermines this assumption – indeed, he
is contradicting one of the key suppositions of his broader philosophy of mind. This ‘solution’, founded upon a fractured system, seems rather unattractive.

1.2 Ockham’s ‘act theory’ of singular cognition:

I also examined the account of singular cognition provided by William of Ockham. Ockham’s account rests upon two complementary cognitive theories – his act theory of cognition, and his causal theory of thought character. I offered the following interpretation: Cognitive acts, according to Ockham, can themselves signify specific classes of objects in the extra-mental world. And the causal pathways that obtain between certain thoughts and particular objects are sufficient to make the thought about on one particular object within the relevant class.

I argued that Ockham’s causal theory is coherent, whilst his act theory is in dire need of further development. Ockham, in his non-reductionist approach, chooses not to explain how cognitive acts come to signify specific classes of objects in the extramental world. He sets strict constraints on how we can explain similarity relations between mental entities and objects in the external world. And this creates what seems to be an intractable obstacle to explaining the notion of ‘act signification’. Ockham’s non-reductive theory thus seems to go too far – in trying to simplify explanations, Ockham loses the very ability to provide an adequate explanation.

1.3 Scotus on intuitive cognition:
Scotus’s claim is that we can have intuitive cognition of individual instantiations of common natures in the external world, and we can literally perceive as qualities of the entity their existence and spatial proximity to us. The cognitive act is produced by the object itself, acting with our agent intellect.

In the end, Scotus’s theory is not without its own issues. It is rather complex and certain aspects are in need of further development (such as the distinction between true intuitive cognitions and merely apparent ones). Nevertheless, his account of the process of singular cognition – a departure from the formal reception account – seems free of serious objections. His notion of singular cognition sits without tension alongside his theory of abstractive cognition, judgement and reasoning.

Scotus avoids the main error found in Aquinas’s account. According to Aquinas, cognition involves a reception of forms into the mind. Insofar as this is the case, we cannot have knowledge of particulars, as we can only receive universal forms. Scotus, in contrast, argues that it is sufficient for a nature to be present to the mind, rather than present in it. Insofar as individual natures can be present to the mind, we are able to grasp individual objects under a

---

219 It is perhaps important to note that current models of perception and cognition are themselves rather complex. Complexity, then, is perhaps not a weakness of any philosophical account of cognition. Cf. Stump’s assessment of Aquinas’s cognitive psychology: “Although Aquinas’s account is complicated, then, its complication seems to reflect accurately the complexity of our cognitive processes as we currently understand them.” Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.269.
certain aspect (although we can never grasp what makes them absolutely

distinct from every other thing). Scotus thus manages to circumvent the

problem of individual knowledge encountered by Aquinas. It seems there is

significant merit in modifying the Aristotelian formal reception account of
cognition in the way Scotus did.

Scotus also avoids the problems plaguing Ockham’s account. Ockham
attempts to explain cognition by positing a similarity relation between
cognitive acts and objects in the external world. The ‘fatal blow’ for Ockham
seems almost self-inflicted – he refuses to provide an explanation for this

notion of comparative similarity. And an explanation is clearly needed,
because cognitive acts are intuitively very different in nature from the
contents of the external world. Scotus, like Ockham, posits a relation of
similarity between the contents of the mind and the world. But unlike Ockham,
Scotus retained an essentialist metaphysics. Using this metaphysics, Scotus
grounded his similarity account. There is, he claimed, a formal isomorphism
between entities present to the mind and entities in their material existence.
This is a far more satisfactory account of the similarity between mind and
world than that provided by Ockham.

Scotus, then, provides a coherent account of how the mind initially accesses

singualrs, and also provides a compelling account of what we can and cannot
know about those singualrs. He follows what seems to be a via media between
the Aristotelianism of Aquinas and the conceptualist nominalism of Ockham.
Though his theory would profit from further development, it does seem to be
the best out of the three major theories proposed in the Middle Ages. It
provides a reasonable explanation of how structures in the mind mirror the structure of individual objects; it explains how our thoughts come to pick out individual objects rather than all the members of a class; and it gives a plausible account of how information about these objects enters into the conceptual realm.

2. Two key conclusions

One conclusion we can draw is that Scotus should be given greater prominence in historical narratives about medieval theories of singular cognition. As stated in chapter 1, historians of philosophy generally argue that Aquinas or Ockham provided the most plausible account of singular cognition in the Middle Ages. Either this, or they deny that a coherent account was ever-provided during the period. I have argued that Aquinas and Ockham’s accounts face serious objections. Duns Scotus, in contrast, offers a defensible solution. I would argue for a reconsideration of traditional historical narratives, such that greater emphasis is placed on Scotus’s contribution.

Why hasn’t this occurred already? There seem to me to be two reasons. One is that Scotus’s writings on singular cognition are very fragmented. Many scholars find it quite difficult to reconstruct a coherent theory from these disparate remarks. The second reason is that those who do attempt an

---

220 Pasnau, for example, basically disregards evidence from the fourth book of the *Ordinatio* and the *Quodlibet* on account of its conflict with strong comments in his earlier writings. This leads to what Pasnau himself calls an “uninteresting” interpretation. See, Robert Pasnau,
interpretation do so in the context of a discussion of scepticism. Intuitive
cognition is presented as a response to sceptical concerns, rather than a
solution to the problem of singular knowledge.

I hope to have shown that it *is* in fact possible to ‘reconstruct’ an account of
Scotus’s mature position. And a coherent theory emerges when we examine
Scotus’s fragmented remarks on intuitive cognition. Bear in mind as well that
aspects of Aquinas’s cognitive psychology have been reconstructed from short,
disjointed remarks. If scholars are willing to accept Aquinas’s account, then
they should also accept a reconstruction of Scotus’s thought on the matter.

Concerning the scholarly focus on scepticism, it is important to realise that
Scotus was more preoccupied with developing an account of singular

*Cognition*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus* (London: Cambridge University

Cf. Alexander Broadie: “[Scotus’s doctrine of intuitive cognition] is evidently conceived by
him as a response to what he clearly regards as a skeptical implication in the doctrine of
perceptual cognition that he inherited”. *Why Scottish Philosophy Matters* (Edinburgh: The
Saltire Society, 2000), p.39; Leen Spruit: “In Duns’ epistemology, intuition of the singular has
a complementary role with respect to abstractive knowledge, which is unable to guarantee
that its objects actually exist”. See Leen Spruit, *Species Intelligibilis: From Perception to
Knowledge vol. 1* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), p.258. See also Katherine Tachau, *Vision and
Certitude in the Age of Ockham* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), pp.75-81. Tachau does acknowledge that
“the problem of existential certitude was nevertheless relatively peripheral in Scotus’s
epistemology”. Ironically, Tachau devotes a very lengthy part of her discussion to examining
the skeptical connotations of Scotus’s doctrine.

The notion of the *conversio ad phantasma* is a good example of this.
knowledge rather than guarding against scepticism. My discussion in chapter IV gives sufficient evidence of this. To provide a complete account of Scotus’s theory requires that one discuss his concern with the problem of singular cognition. Contemporary interpreters should be mindful of this.

The second conclusion is substantive rather than historical. Scotus offers a genuine solution to the ‘Myth of the Given’ objection that Wilfred Sellars levelled at Aquinas. Sellars, as I will briefly explain here, criticised Aquinas for attributing a kind of ‘pseudo-intentionality’ to the senses. This was one particular example of the error Sellars called ‘The Myth of the Given’. Scotus, I argue, manages to avoid this objection, and offers a genuine way forward to anyone trying to develop a Neo-Scholastic account of cognition.

Recall that Aquinas imputes certain cognitive capacities to the inner senses – in particular the cogitative sense. The cogitative sense is capable, according to Aquinas, of making primitive judgements about material particulars:

“The cogitative faculty apprehends the individual thing as existing in a common nature. It is able to do this because it is united to intellect in one and the same subject. Hence it is aware of a man as this man, and of a tree as this tree”.223

---

223 Sententia Libri De Anima, 2.13, n.206-210 (XLV, p.122): “Nam cogitativa apprehendit individuum, ut existens sub natura communi; quod contingit ei, inquantum unitur intellectivae in eodem subiecto; unde cognoscit hunc hominem prout est hic homo, et hoc lignum prout est hoc lignum.”
Sellars rightly objected to the theory that the senses have a kind of proto-intentionality.\textsuperscript{224} To attribute conceptual abilities to the senses is, on an Aristotelian account, to confuse their role as causes of cognition with the idea that they cognize objects themselves (i.e. that they belong to the cognitive or ‘intentional’ order). The peculiar way in which forms are present in the senses does not in itself entail that the senses are capable of knowledge. The “pseudo-intentionality” of the senses is “mistaken for the genuine intentionality of the cognitive order”.\textsuperscript{225} The reality is that “acts of sense are intrinsically non-cognitive and do not present anything to us as being of a kind—e.g. white or triangular. . . ”.\textsuperscript{226}

It seems to me that we find in Scotus a sensitivity to this issue. Scotus was aware that the senses, though possessing a relation of isomorphism with objects in the world, nevertheless did not possess the uniquely cognitive attribute of intentionality. In the \textit{Commentarium in Librum Quartum Sententiarum}, Scotus distinguishes between sense experience and the knowledge provided by the intellect. He discusses the need for the intellect to

\textsuperscript{224} By proto-intentionality, I take it that he was referring to a subtle attribution of intentionality (‘aboutness’) to the inner senses. It is a proto-intentionality insofar as it provides the foundation for the fully-fledged intentionality (an intentionality that we are reflexively aware of) of thoughts about the world.

\textsuperscript{225} ‘Being and Being Known’, in \textit{Science, Perception, and Reality} (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 1963), pp. 41–59, n.17. (The final part of this citation refers to the relevant section number in the essay). Sellars’ critique, by his own admission, relies on a Kantian account of the senses.

\textsuperscript{226} “Being and Being Known”, n.27.
intuitively know what the senses know, so that there is a possibility of verifying the truth of contingent propositions:

“That the intellect not only knows universals...but also that it can know intuitively what the sense knows...is proved from the fact that the intellect knows contingently true propositions...but the truth of these concerns objects known intuitively, that is to say, under their existential aspect, which is something known by sense. It follows that [concepts of singulars] can be found in the intellect”.227

Though Scotus does not state it explicitly, the implication is that sense experience of singulars is insufficient to play the cognitive role of justification. Singular objects need to appear in the intellectual realm if we are to verify contingent propositions – hence the need for intellectual intuition. Through intuitive cognition, the intellect is able to know “the nature [of a thing] qua existing”.228

Scotus, then, was aware of the objection Sellars would make to medieval theories of cognition. Scotus recognized the need to posit a uniquely cognitive


228 To quote the precise Latin: “Illam autem naturam ut existentem intuitive cognoscit intellectus” Ibid. (XXI, p.366).
grasp of singular objects. Without it, we lose the foundation of our epistemic edifice.

To respond to the criticism, Scotus developed his theory of intuitive cognition. Intuitive cognition was a means by which to explain how information regarding material objects ‘got into’ the realm of cognition. The way in which this happened, Scotus claimed, was by virtue of the mind achieving epistemic contact with objects in themselves. The mind did not merely work with sense representations, but rather was able to reach out and apprehend the essences of objects themselves. In doing so, the mind achieved a semantic or intentional grasp of objects, not a mere sensory acquaintance.²²⁹

With this response, Scotus provided an answer to the objection that Sellars would make 650 years later. Scotus avoided the aforementioned manifestation of ‘The Myth of the Given’. The cornerstones of our cognitive edifice, claimed Scotus, are singular objects that are intuitively grasped by the mind. He did not just take intentionality as a ‘given’. With the notion of intuitive cognition he explained how data from the external world acquired intentionality.

Those wishing to develop a Neo-Scholastic philosophy of cognition would be wise to take note of this insight offered by Scotus. Though Aquinas’s philosophy of cognition may have been accurate in many respects, there is certainly a shortcoming in this crucial area. A notion of intuitive cognition is

²²⁹ This passage is noticeably bereft of footnotes. I have left it so on account of the exhaustive discussion of intuitive cognition in chapter IV. Relevant references can be found in that chapter.
essential to bridging the epistemic gap between the extra-mental world and
the world of thought.

**Conclusion:**

In this thesis I have examined a particular topic of debate in medieval rational
psychology – the problem of the knowledge of particulars. I presented the
views of three philosophers on the subject – Aquinas, Scotus and Ockham –
and suggested that Scotus provided the most promising account. I do not
pretend to have proved the coherence of Scotus’s broader rational psychology
and philosophy of mind. Indeed it may be that on most other topics Aquinas
and/or Ockham are far more convincing. Nevertheless, Scotus account of the
first stages of cognition – the initial operation of simple apprehension, seems
correct. For those working to develop a coherent philosophy of cognition
based on medieval philosophy, I would think it appropriate to integrate
Scotus’s insights into their theory.
Bibliography:

Primary sources:

Aquinas:

*St. Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici Opera Omnia* (Vatican: Leonine, 1882-).

*St. Thomae Aquinatis Opera Omnia 1.: In Quattuor Libros Sententiarum*, Roberto Busa (ed.) (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980).

Translations:


Duns Scotus:

*Ioannes Duns Scoti: Opera Omnia* (Civitas Vaticana: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1950–).

The Reportatio I-A, Merton College Library folio 59 (Oxford: Merton College, dating uncertain).

Translations:


Ockham:

Translations:


Other:


Capreolus, Jean, *Defensiones Theologiae Divi Thomae Aquinatis* (Tours: Touronibus, 1900).


**Secondary literature:**


Gilson, Etienne, The Unity of Philosophical Experience (New York: Ignatius, 1999).


-----------------


-----------------


-----------------


-----------------


McCord Adams, Marilyn, 'Ockham’s on Natural Signification', The Monist, 61, no.3 (July 1978).

Problem from Avicenna to the Medical Enlightenment (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007).


Panaccio, Claude, Ockham on Concepts (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004).


------------------


------------------


------------------

Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages (London: Cambridge University Press, 1997).


Scarpelli Cory, Therese, ‘What is an Intellectual “Turn”? The Liber De Causis, Avicenna, and Aquinas’s Turn to the Phantasms’, Topicos Revista De Filosofia 45 (2013).

Spruit, Leen, Species Intelligibilis: From Perception to Knowledge vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1994).


