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Common Natures and Metaphysics in John Duns Scotus

0. As its title shows, the present discussion is about the relationship between Scotus's notion of *natura communis* and his approach to metaphysics¹. An examination of the main features that Scotus ascribes to «common natures» can shed substantial light on the nature of metaphysics in itself. But, first, I shall set forth some observations on historiography.

1. In the preface to his authoritative book on Scotus, *Jean Duns Scot: Introduction à ses positions fondamentales*, Étienne Gilson wrote:

«Chercher à comprendre les positions fondamentales du Docteur Subtil n'est aucunement le situer dans son temps. L'intérêt du philosophe ne peut pas ne pas faire tort ici à la vérité de l'histoire»².

Gilson's discussion is carried out as a close confrontation – an essential one, in his mind, from a philosophical point of view – between Scotus's and Aquinas's fundamental positions. But Aquinas was not, historically, Scotus's direct opponent, although «philosophically» he was, in Gilson's words, his «chief» antagonist. And that is why an effort towards a comprehension of his thought does wrong to an historical reconstruction of his work. But are these two purposes really so

¹ References to the works of Scotus are given to the following editions: *Ordinatio* [= *Ord.*], ed. C. Bally et al., Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, Civitas Vaticana, 1950-... («Opera omnia», 1-7); *Quaestiones in librum Porphyrii Isagoge* [= *In Porph.*], *Quaestiones super Praedicamenta Aristotelis* [= *In Praed.*], ed. G. Etzkorn et al., The Catholic University of America, Washington D.C. / The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure, N.Y. 1998 («Opera philosophica», 1); *Quaestiones super libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis* [= *In Met.*], ed. G. Etzkorn et al., The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure, N.Y. 1997 («Opera philosophica», 3-4); *Reportata parisiensia* [= *Rep. par.*], ed. L. Wadding, Laurentius Durand, Lugduni 1639 («Opera omnia», t. 11.1-2) [Reprograf. Nachdr., G. Olms, Hildesheim 1968-69]; *De primo principio* [= *De pr. princ.*], ed. W. Kluxen, in W. KLUXEN (Hrsg.), *Abhandlung über das erste Prinzip*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1987.

² É. GILSON, *Jean Duns Scot: Introduction à ses positions fondamentales*, Vrin, Paris 1952, 10.

contrary to each other? Could we have a *history* that would not elicit at the same time an act of *comprehension* of the author's thought? Such a contention seems hardly defensible. But if that is the case, how could we set any limit to the comparison of different positions, albeit far removed, historically, from each other? What matters here is that the several levels of discourse do not get confused, and that we manage at the same time not to oppose, but to articulate and relate them properly to each another.

What kind of history, then, are we envisaging? Let us recall what Peter Brown, the renowned historian (historian-historian) of late antiquity, has to say about an age so distant in time from us:

«On the other hand, we are increasingly aware of the astounding new beginnings associated with that period: [...] we have become extremely sensitive to the 'contemporary' quality of the new, abstract art of this age; the writings of men like Plotinus and Augustine surprise us, as we catch strains – as in some unaccustomed overture – of so much that a sensitive European has come to regard as most 'modern' and valuable in his own culture»³.

But it would hardly have been possible to appreciate the “new, abstract art” which flourished in late antiquity before the recent development of abstract art in the twentieth century. If, as Peter Brown says, we have now become «extremely sensitive to the 'contemporary' quality» of that kind of art «that is only possible because our own culture [...] has now become able to 'understand' (*verstehen*) it»⁴. In a famous essay, *Lire Duns Scot aujourd'hui* (1978), Paul Vignaux shows us – let us take it as an invitation – how to read Scotus today⁵. And already in his earlier book, *Philosophie au Moyen Âge* (1958²), he addresses himself the following question: «comment donc exprimer son effort – Scotus's effort – en un terme évocateur, après six siècles?»⁶. But what can we say about Vignaux's attempt at «reading Scotus today»? does it amount to anything but placing Scotus's thought «dans un ensemble *interrogatif*» that permits its understanding⁷? The expression «ensemble interrogatif» was used by Merleau-Ponty,

³ P. BROWN, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750*, Thames and Hudson, London 1971, 7.

⁴ D. BUZZETTI, *Metafisica dell'Esodo e psicologia del sacro: Scoto e Jung, un accostamento possibile*, in S. CASAMENTI (a cura di), *Etica e persona: Duns Scoto e suggestioni nel moderno*, Atti del Convegno di Studi (Bologna, 18-20 febbraio 1993), Edizioni Francescane, Bologna 1994, 122.

⁵ P. VIGNAUX, *Lire Duns Scot aujourd'hui*, in C. BÉRUBÉ (ed.), *Regnum hominis et regnum Dei*, Acta 4. Congressus scoticus internationalis (Patavii, 24-29 septembris 1976), Societas internationalis Scotistica, Romae 1978, 2 vols., I, 33-46.

⁶ P. VIGNAUX, *Philosophie au Moyen Âge* (1958²), Éditions Castella, Albeuve (Suisse) 1987, 192.

⁷ M. MERLEAU-PONTY, *Le visible et l'invisible* (1964), Gallimard, Paris 1979, 238; cfr. Engl. transl. by A. Lingis, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill., 1968, 187: «an *interrogative* ensemble».

who conceived the history of philosophy not as a «subjective bringing into perspective», but as a “structural” kind of historical reconstruction. And in fact, according to Merleau-Ponty, «if the philosophies in their integrality are a *question*, the interrogative thought which makes them speak» does not inevitably lead to “relativistic” or subjective conclusions (250; *L* 199-200). My reference to Merleau-Ponty and to his own particular view of the history of philosophy does not come out by chance, but is precisely prompted by Vignaux’s question. For an answer that he himself gives to it is that «Scotus’s theology appears to be like an essay of ‘phenomenology’», although «not of the human conscience, but of the Absolute»⁸, and it is exactly to *phenomenology*, and in particular to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, that I shall come back in an attempt to understand some crucial aspects of Scotus’s metaphysical thought. Here, however, what I wanted to show was only that the need to understand and to interrogate, which necessarily arises by reading Scotus’s works, inevitably invokes a question on historiography.

2. As I said at the beginning, I have chosen to focus my discussion on common natures, because Scotus’s contentions about them seem to me quite enlightening on his way of conceiving the very nature of metaphysics. Moreover, since we can find something surprisingly modern, as Peter Brown would say, in Scotus’s positions, from such an examination we can elicit a number of useful insights that have a bearing, not only on the understanding of his thought, but also on the current discussion. I do not presume to say anything new about Scotus’s views on common natures, after Joseph Owens’ masterly examination of their *loci classici* in the *Ordinatio*, the *Reportata parisiensia* and question 13 on book 7 of the *Metaphysics*⁹, and after a series of further discussions¹⁰, to which Giorgio Pini has just added a thorough analysis of question 7, also on book 7 of the *Metaphysics*¹¹. But I shall start precisely from this last contribution, because there is

⁸ VIGNAUX, *Philosophie au Moyen Âge* cit., 192: «La théologie scotiste ressemble à un essai de ‘phénoménologie’ non de la conscience humaine, mais de l’Absolu».

⁹ J. OWENS, *Common Nature: A Point of Comparison Between Thomistic and Scotistic Metaphysics*, «Medieval Studies», 19 (1957), 1-14.

¹⁰ See O. BOULNOIS, *Réelles intentions: Nature commune et universaux selon Duns Scot*, «Revue de métaphysique et de morale», 97 (1992), 3-33; P. KING, *Duns Scotus on the Common Nature and the Individual Differentia*, «Philosophical Topics», 20 (1992), 50-76; G. SONDAG, *Universel et natura communis dans l’Ordinatio et dans les Questions sur le Perihermeneias (Une brève comparaison)*, in L. HONNEFELDER ET AL. (eds.), *John Duns Scotus: Metaphysics and Ethics*, Brill, Leiden 1996, 385-391; T. NOONE, *Universals and Individuation*, in T. WILLIAMS (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, 100-128; R. CROSS, *Divisibility, Communicability, and Predicability in Duns Scotus’s Theories of the Common Nature*, «Medieval Philosophy and Theology», 11 (2003), 43-63.

¹¹ G. PINI, *Scotus’s Essentialism: A Critique of Thomas Aquinas’s Doctrine of Essence in the Questions on the Metaphysics*, «Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale», 14 (2003), 227-262.

a point in Giorgio Pini's discussion that does not seem to me thoroughly convincing. It is advisable, however, to recall beforehand some important elements of Scotus's treatment of the common nature.

It is well-known that Scotus derives his notion of the common nature from Avicenna, who speaks about a *humanitas tantum*¹², or an *equinitas tantum*, that do not exist either in the mind or in the external world (*ipsa enim ex se nec est existens in his sensibilibus nec in anima*) and are neither one nor many (*nec est multa nec unum*)¹³; such a *humanitas tantum*, or for that matter such an *equinitas tantum*, are identified with the essence taken in itself (*in se*), which is neither universal nor singular (*nec est universale nec est singulare*)¹⁴ and which precedes, in the order of being, its existence both in the external world and in the understanding (*praecedit in esse et individuum et intelligibile*)¹⁵. So Scotus, in his own way, resumes Avicenna's notion¹⁶ and describes the essence, or common nature, as an *ens reale, nec universale nec particulare, secundum Avicennam*¹⁷. Such an essence, which is neither individual nor universal (*ex se non habet hoc esse singulare, nec esse universale*)¹⁸, is nevertheless endowed with positive reality: it is a real entity that has its own kind of being, an *esse quidditativum* that has to be assigned a *naturalis prioritas* towards singularity and universality. Accordingly, the common nature does not possess a numerical or individual unity, but is endowed with a unity of its own, an *unitas realis minor* that is passed on to it by its quidditative entity; however, although the common nature is for that very reason a real entity, it does not exist separately from the individuals that contain it or from the mind that makes it an object of intellection.

¹² AVICENNA, *Metaph.*, V, 1B, in *Opera*, Venetiis 1508, f. 86vb; cfr. AVICENNA LATINUS, *Liber de Philosophia prima sive Scientia divina*, V-X, ed. S. Van Riet, Peeters, Louvain / Brill, Leiden 1980, V, 1, 230 ff.

¹³ AVICENNA, *Metaph.*, V, 1A, f. 86va; ed. Van Riet, V, 1, 228,29-36: «Definitio enim equinitatis est praeter definitionem universalitatis nec universalitas continetur in definitione equinitatis. Equinitas etenim habet definitionem quae non eget universalitate, sed est cui accidit universalitas. Unde ipsa equinitas non est aliquid nisi equinitas tantum; ipsa enim in se nec est multa nec unum, nec est existens in his sensibilibus nec in anima, nec est aliquid horum potentia vel effectu, ita ut hoc contineatur intra essentiam equinitatis, sed ex hoc quod est equinitas tantum».

¹⁴ AVICENNA, *Logica*, III, in *Opera*, Venetiis 1508, f. 12ra.

¹⁵ AVICENNA, *Metaph.*, V, 1C, f. 87ra; ed. Van Riet, V, 1, 233,36-234,44: «Igitur haec consideratio praecedit in esse et animal quod est individuum propter accidentia sua et universale quod est in his sensibilibus et intelligibile».

¹⁶ Cfr. A. DE LIBERA, *L'art des généralités*, Aubier, Paris 1999, 607: «Il n'est pas question de nier [...] l'influence d'Avicenne sur Scot»; and «le scotisme [...] n'offre qu'une des lectures possibles d'Avicenne». On Avicenna's influence on the *Latini*, see P. PORRO, *Universaux et esse essentialia: Avicenne, Henri de Gand et le "troisième Reich"*, «Cahiers de Philosophie de l'Université de Caen», 38-39 (2002), 9-51.

¹⁷ IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *In Met.*, VII, q. 7, n. 22, ed. Etzkorn et al., 4,153.

¹⁸ IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *Rep. Par.*, II, d.12, q. 5, n. 11, ed. Wadding, 11.1,328b.

3. Common natures, then, have not a separate or independent form of existence, but they possess a kind of being of their own, which is different both from the being of an individual and from the being of a universal, and which is to be distinguished from any form of existence either inside or outside the mind. On account of their peculiar ontological character, common natures render Scotus's so-called 'realism' a realism of its own kind. The natural priority of their own being with regard to any form of factual existence confers on the common natures their particular ontological status. Let us refer to Scotus's own words:

«et secundum prioritatem naturalem est 'quod quid est' – i.e. the essence or common nature – per se obiectum intellectus, et per se, ut sic, consideratur a metaphysico et exprimitur per definitionem; et propositiones 'verae primo modo' sunt verae ratione quiditatis sic acceptae, quia nihil dicitur 'per se primo modo' de quiditate nisi quod includitur in ea essentialiter, in quantum ipsa abstrahitur ab omnibus istis, quae sunt posteriora naturaliter ipsa»¹⁹.

And further:

«In creaturis tamen est aliquod commune unum unitate *reali*, minore unitate *numer-ali*, – et istud quidem 'commune' non est ita commune quod sit *praedicabile* de multis, licet sit ita commune quod non repugnet sibi esse in alio quam in eo in quo est»²⁰.

It is worthwhile insisting for a moment on these contentions. The common nature, or *quiddity*, is the object of the understanding, and so is essentially intelligible, and it is the object of metaphysics. Moreover, the common nature is expressed by a definition, that is by a proposition *per se primo modo*. The common nature is what makes such propositions true, but it is not predicable of individuals. But what is the reason why the common nature is not predicable of individuals? Giorgio Pini explains this behaviour by observing that «an essence, since it is a constituent of reality, cannot be predicated»²¹. But this is not the only reason. There is also a logical reason, which consists in the fact that definitions, or quidditative discourse as such, do not concern individuals taken as actually existing beings. A *per se primo modo* proposition, which expresses the essence in a definition, speaks «de esse quidditative sive de esse possibili, non

¹⁹ IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *Ord.*, II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, n. 32, ed. Vat., 7,403 (italics added). Cfr. *Ord.*, II, d. 3, p. 1, qq. 5-6, n. 172, ed. Vat., 7,476: «*natura* prius est naturaliter quam *haec natura*, et *unitas* propria – consequens naturam ut *natura* – est prior naturaliter unitate eius ut *haec natura*; et sub ista ratione est consideratio metaphysica de natura, et assignatur definitio eius, et sunt propositiones *per se primo modo*» (italics added).

²⁰ IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *Ord.*, II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, n. 39, ed. Vat., 7,408 (italics added).

²¹ PINI, *Scotus's Essentialism* cit., 248.

autem de existentia actuali»²². Scotus's chief concern in question 7 on book 7 of the *Metaphysics* is indeed to maintain, to quote Desmond Henry, that any proposition which expresses the essence «is not about words or 'intentions' of the mind»²³; but this way of construing definitions, as a *de re* as opposed to a *de voce* type of assertion, exposes only one of the properties of the kind of discourse which refers to common natures and which we may call – with Henry again – «quidditative discourse»²⁴. A thorough awareness of its nature remains one of the chief tasks in the interpretation of Scotus's doctrine.

4. From a logical point of view, the essential feature of quidditative discourse, its fundamental property, consists in its form of predication. Quidditative discourse requires a second-order kind of predication, or copula, a form of predication which is different from the kind of predication, or copula, used in statements about particular things existing outside or inside the mind, which is a first-order form of predication, or copula. This fact has been clearly established and abundantly exemplified by Desmond Henry since his first essays on saint Anselm's logic²⁵. And this is the essential logical feature which distinguishes the propositions *per se primo modo* from the propositions *per se secundo modo*. It is worth recalling Scotus's distinctions about predication, because they shall turn out useful later on in the course of our discussion.

Scotus distinguishes, on the one hand, between a *per se primo modo* and a *per se secundo modo* kind of predication, and on the other, between a predication *in quid* and a predication *in quale*. These two distinctions give rise to matching subdivisions concerning, respectively, the *de subiecto*, or second-order form of predication, which pertains to the definitions or to the discourse on common natures, and the *in subiecto*, or first-order form of predication, which pertains to the discourse on existing particular beings or individuals. So, in the kind of discourse that refers to definitions, or to common natures, *per se primo modo* is the way something contained in or identical to the definition of a subject gets predicated, whereas *per se secundo modo* is the way something that is said *per se* of a subject, but is not contained in the definition, or in the *ratio*, of its essence – a *proprium*, for instance – gets predicated. And respectively, in the kind of discourse that refers to individuals, «*praedicari in quid est praedicari essentiam subiecti*

²² IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *Ord.*, I, d. 2, p. 1, q. 1-2, n. 56, ed. Vat., 2,162.

²³ D.P. HENRY, *Medieval Logic and Metaphysics*, Hutchinson, London 1972, 93.

²⁴ D.P. HENRY, *That Most Subtle Question (Quaestio Subtilissima)*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1984, 138.

²⁵ See D.P. HENRY, *The De grammatico of St. Anselm: The Theory of Paronymy*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Ind., 1964, and D.P. HENRY, *The Logic of Saint Anselm*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1967.

per modum essentiae, id est, per modum subsistentis, non denominantis [...] praedicari in quale est praedicari per modum denominantis»²⁶. More precisely, *in quid* is how we predicate the essence of an individual subject, either *in toto*, when we predicate its species, or *in parte*, when we predicate its genus, whereas *in quale* is how we predicate, *per modum denominantis*²⁷, or paronymously, the qualities of an individual subject, either the essential ones, such as the specific differences, or the accidental ones, such as a *proprium* or an accident. Thus, only something that exists by itself, and that cannot be inherent in something else, can be predicated *in quid*; whereas what can be predicated *in quale* is all that, in itself, cannot be the bearer of any property, but can only be inherent in something else that subsists by itself.

5. There is another reason why the reference I made earlier to Desmond Henry's essays on the logic of saint Anselm is not out of place, for Scotus shares Anselm's semantic views on the meaning of paronyms. Scotus too deals explicitly with the relationship between the meaning of the abstract terms and the meaning of the corresponding concrete terms. In his commentary on the *Categories*, he maintains a position similar to that argued for by Anselm in his *De grammatico*²⁸, and denies that any concrete name can be equivocal and concern «aliud a suo significato». Thus, in his answer to the question *Utrum denominativum idem significet quod abstractum*, he declares «quod nomen concretum non significat subiectum, sed tantum formam»²⁹ and also elsewhere he confirms «quod denominativa in nullo pertinente ad significatum debent differre a suis principalibus, sed tantum forte in modo significandi et in fine vocis»³⁰. According to Scotus, then, as to Anselm, the meaning of 'denominative' terms, or paronyms, cannot be different from the meaning of the corresponding abstract, or 'principal,' terms. Anselm calls the proper meaning of the terms that express qualities, both abstract and concrete, *significatio per se*, and he calls the meaning that is commonly ascribed to the concrete terms, that is to say the designation of the qualified subject together with the quality that qualifies it, *significatio per aliud*.

²⁶ IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *In Porph.*, q. 12, nn. 15-16, ed. Etkorn et al., 1,57-58.

²⁷ In Scotus's technical usage, a *per modum denominantis* predication is «that form of predication which does not answer to the question 'What is this?' but answers to the question 'How is it like?' and so designates a sheer 'how'» (L. HONNEFELDER, *Ens in quantum ens*, Aschendorff, Münster 1979, 319).

²⁸ Cfr. D. HENRY, *The De grammatico of St. Anselm and Commentary on De Grammatico: The historical-logical dimensions of a dialogue of St. Anselms*, Reidel, Dordrecht 1974.

²⁹ IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *In Praed.*, q. 8, n. 14, ed. Etkorn et al., 1,317.

³⁰ IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *In Praed.*, qq. 30-36, n. 92, ed. Etkorn et al., 1,500.

Now, the kind of discourse that expresses the meaning *per se* of the terms of quality is quidditative, or second-order discourse, whereas the kind of discourse that expresses the meaning *per aliud* of the same terms, as used in a connotative or denominative manner (*denominative*), is first-order discourse; so, «to this extent paronyms constitute a natural bridge» between «the nominally termed» first-order copula, and the «functorially» termed, or «quidditatively termed», second-order copula³¹. And this semantical doctrine is totally consistent with Scotus's contention that, as Giorgio Pini has shown, also the terms of quality and the accidents in general have an essence, which is quidditatively expressed by a formal definition.

6. I have insisted on these semantical aspects of Scotus's position, because there is a direct correspondence between the semantic doctrine of the quidditative kind of discourse and the ontological doctrine of the common natures³². And it is both components that qualify Scotus's metaphysical doctrine. This strict mutual connection comes to the fore in Scotus's doctrine of the formal distinction. According to Scotus, just as the species and the accidents have an essence, also the individuals possess a quasi-essential feature of their own³³, an individual entity – *entitas individualis, forma individualis, ultimus gradus formae, entitas positiva*, or *haecceitas*³⁴ – which is not a quidditative entity, since a quiddity must be common³⁵, but is nonetheless a reality in itself, an *entitas singularitatis*, formally distinguishable from the individual and related to its essence, as an ac-

³¹ HENRY, *Quaestio Subtilissima* cit., 154.

³² Peter King points out, in a footnote to his essay *Duns Scotus on the Common Nature* (54, note 10), that a «real less-than-numerical unity» pertains to the common, or «uncontracted» nature, and that such a lesser unity «is predicable of the uncontracted nature *per se secundo modo*», but he does not pursue the matter further.

³³ Scotus's notion of the individuating property, or *haecceitas*, is essentially ambiguous, as it can be gathered from the opposing interpretations it has received: Simo Knuuttila, for instance, identifies *haecceitas* with «individual essence» (S. KNUUTTLA, *Being qua Being in Aquinas and Scotus*, in S. KNUUTTLA / J. HINTIKKA [eds.], *The Logic of Being*, Reidel, Dordrecht 1986, 212), whereas Woosuk Park contends that «*haecceitas* cannot be understood as an individual essence» (W. PARK, *Haecceitas and the Bare particular*, «Review of Metaphysics», 44 [1990], 378). But this ambivalence is not detrimental and it actually makes good sense (see below, section 8).

³⁴ On Scotus's terminology and its variations see S. DUMONT, *The Question on Individuation in Scotus's Quaestiones super Metaphysicam*, in L. SILEO (a cura di), *Via Scoti: Metodologica ad mentem Joannis Duns Scoti*, Atti del Congresso scotistico internazionale (Roma 9-11 marzo 1993), 2 vols., Antonianum, Roma 1995, I, 193-227.

³⁵ «Ista autem realitas individui est primo diversa ab omni entitate quidditativa. Quod probatur ex hoc quod intelligendo quamcumque entitatem quidditativam (loquendo de entitate quidditativa limitata), communis est multis, nec repugnat dici de multis quorum quodlibet est 'ipsum'» (IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *Ord.*, II, d. 3, p. 1, qq. 5-6, n. 181, ed. Vat., 7,480).

tual entity is related to its potential counterpart³⁶. Besides the humanity, the essence of his species, Socrates has a *haecceitas*, a Socraticity, that is an individual entity. The second-order assertion of the non-identity of the humanity and the Socraticity belonging to Socrates, does not imply the first-order assertion of a non-identity or real numerical distinction between these two entities, that is to say the assertion that they constitute entities separate and numerically distinct from the individual which is Socrates³⁷. An essential aspect of Scotus's doctrine should furthermore be stressed. The formal distinction is a distinction *a parte rei*, which refers to existing things, or «thing-centred», as Desmond Henry puts it³⁸, and not a mere distinction of reason, depending on purely mental considerations³⁹. However, although the formal distinction refers to really existing things, «to try to conceive the common nature as existing separately from the individuating mode would be», as Joseph Owens observes, «attempting to conceive a contradiction», because «the common nature would be thereby conceived as an individual»⁴⁰. The formal distinction, then, «is a truth about how things are», but «at the same time», as Henry points out, «it does not commit one to the existence of separate Platonic abstract formal objects called *Sorteitas* 'Socraticity' and *humanitas* 'humanity'». According to Henry, again, «the most vexed question» of Scotus scholarship has been the problem of reconciling the «apparently anti-Platonic» claim that the common nature «is not an extra-mental substance distinct from individuals», with the claim that «the formal distinction (e.g. between Socrates' individuating difference and human nature) is *a parte rei*»⁴¹. But Scotus's doctrine tries precisely to ensure the coincidence *in re* of the concrete individual objects that are the bearers of real properties, both particular and general, which are essentially and formally distinct from one another, but do not exist separately from their bearers.

7. From another point of view, the doctrine of the formal distinction can be seen as an attempt to relate to each other two distinct oppositions, that are certainly connected but not altogether corresponding. Calvin Normore presents them as

³⁶ «Quoad hoc ista realitas individui est similis realitati specificae, quia est quasi actus, determinans illam realitatem speciei quasi possibilem et potentialem» (IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *Ord.*, II, d. 3, p. 1, qq. 5-6, n. 180, ed. Vat., 7,479).

³⁷ For a formal proof, cfr. HENRY, *Medieval Logic and Metaphysics* cit., 88-95.

³⁸ HENRY, *Medieval Logic and Metaphysics* cit., 10.

³⁹ «Est ergo ibi distinctio praecedens intellectum omni modo, et est ista, quod sapientia est in re ex natura rei, et bonitas in re ex natura rei, – sapientia autem in re, formaliter non est bonitas in re» (IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *Ord.*, I, d. 8, p. 1, q. 4, n. 192, ed. Vat., 4,261).

⁴⁰ OWENS, *Common Nature* cit., 10.

⁴¹ HENRY, *Medieval Logic and Metaphysics* cit., 93.

associated with two different “claims” about what nominalism is thought to be today⁴², namely the contention that «nominalism is the doctrine that there are no abstract objects»⁴³, and the similar but not quite matching contention that «nominalism [...] consists of the refusal to countenance any entities other than individuals»⁴⁴. From this point of view, the doctrine of the common natures maintains precisely their indifference with respect to both oppositions, for common natures are seen as neither individual nor universal, and as neither abstract nor concrete. Accordingly, common natures are regarded as entities that do not exist separately from the things that exist in the mind or outside the mind, but belong to a realm of metaphysical reality, which is prior to that of factual existence, be it in the mind or outside the mind. In this respect, the doctrine of the formal distinction serves precisely to relate these two different realms of entities and to explain «what relationship there is», as Giorgio Pini says, «between a thing and its essence»⁴⁵. In more detail, the doctrine of the formal distinction explains what kind of relationship holds between the things that exist factually – to wit the universals that exist as concepts in the mind and the individual things that exist outside the mind – and the common natures – to wit a kind of entities that are neither individual nor universal and do not exist either in the mind or outside the mind. It may be tempting to say that in Scotus’s *scientia transcendens*⁴⁶ – I intentionally refer to the expression on which Ludger Honnefelder has insisted so much⁴⁷ – the formal distinction constitutes a kind of ‘schematism’⁴⁸, which connects the common natures to the things that actually exist in the natural world.

⁴² C. NORMORE, *The Tradition of Mediaeval Nominalism*, in J.F. WIPPEL (ed.), *Studies in Medieval Philosophy*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 1987, 201-202.

⁴³ H. FIELD, *Science without Numbers: A Defence of Nominalism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1980, 1.

⁴⁴ N. GOODMAN, *The Structure of Appearance*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1951, 33-34.

⁴⁵ PINI, *Scotus’s Essentialism* cit., 230.

⁴⁶ «Et hanc scientiam vocamus metaphysicam, quae dicitur a ‘meta’, quod est ‘trans’, et ‘ycos’ ‘scientia’, quasi transcendens scientia, quia est de transcendentibus» (IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *In Met.*, I, Prol., n. 18, ed. Eitzkorn et al., 9).

⁴⁷ Cfr. L. HONNEFELDER, *Duns Scotus: Der Schritt der Philosophie zur scientia transcendens*, in W. KLUXEN (Hrsg.), *Thomas von Aquin im philosophischen Gespräch*, Alber, Freiburg-München 1975, 229-244; L. HONNEFELDER, *Scientia transcendens: Die formale Bestimmung der Seiendheit und Realität in der Metaphysik des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit (Duns Scotus – Suárez – Wolff – Kant – Peirce)*, Meiner, Hamburg 1990; L. HONNEFELDER, *La métaphysique comme science transcendante*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2002.

⁴⁸ Ludger Honnefelder actually resorts to this analogy: «Comme la *non repugnantia ad esse* chez Scot, la catégorie schématisée de la possibilité représentée chez Kant l’explication de la *réalité objective*, telle qu’elle convient aux concepts de notre connaissance des objets» (HONNEFELDER, *La métaphysique comme science transcendante* cit., 108).

But how can we construe the indifference of the common natures with respect to the two oppositions that contemporary nominalists assume as the starting point of their theorizing? According to Normore, the two distinct nominalist positions cannot be brought together, unless one would be ready to admit the Leibnizian identity of indiscernibles, a principle that «nominalists» of whatever ilk «are not in a position to accept». So Normore asks himself whether the history of its medieval usage may not properly be «the best way to find out» what the term ‘nominalism’ actually means⁴⁹.

And in the Middle Ages, as Richard Gaskin has recently shown, a doctrine that assumes the validity of the principle of the identity of indiscernibles, just as Frege’s distinction between sense and reference does, is precisely the Scotist doctrine of the formal distinction, which can arguably be considered «an anticipation of the sense/reference distinction»⁵⁰. Scotus’s position cannot be regarded as nominalist, but his doctrine of the formal distinction allows «a merger» of «the two faces of nominalism» distinguished by Normore⁵¹. And the reason for that is to be found precisely in the indifference of the common natures, and in the ‘priority’ of the *esse quidditativum*, towards the kind of being that belongs to the beings that actually exist in nature, either in the mind or outside the mind⁵². At this point, Vignaux’s reference to phenomenology, taken as a science not of facts but of essences, seems particularly fitting. The common natures can thus be considered as pure eidetic contents⁵³, seized by way of a «phenomenological epoché», through the suspension of the judgement on their actual existence in the natural world. The indifference of the common natures with respect to their natural existence in the mind or outside the mind can be considered equivalent to the suspension of what Husserl calls «the natural attitude» (*natürlicher Einstellung*), and of its implicitly implied «thesis», that the world «is given to our consciousness as existing ‘reality’»⁵⁴.

⁴⁹ NORMORE, *The Tradition of Mediaeval Nominalism* cit., 202.

⁵⁰ R. GASKIN, *Complex Significabilia and the Formal Distinction*, in A. MAIERÙ / L. VALENTE (eds.), *Medieval Theories on Assertive and Non-assertive Language*, Acts of the 14. European Symposium on Medieval Logic and Semantics (Rome, June 11-15, 2002), Olschki, Firenze 2004, 497.

⁵¹ NORMORE, *The Tradition of Mediaeval Nominalism* cit., 202.

⁵² Cfr. IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *Ordinatio*, II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, n. 33, ed. Vat., 7,403: «ipsa natura de se est indifferens ad esse in intellectu et in particulari, ac per hoc et ad esse universale et particulare (sive singulare)».

⁵³ Cfr. A. DE LIBERA, *La querelle des universaux*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1996, 330: «La théorie scotiste de la *natura communis* est un développement et un déplacement de la théorie avicennienne de l’essence dans son identité éidétique pure».

⁵⁴ Cfr. E. HUSSERL, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, Niemeyer, Halle a.d.S. 1928, I, § 27 ff.

8. But there is more to say about that. The indifference of the common natures is conceived by Scotus as something that ‘precedes’ the being of the naturally existing beings. Something, therefore, that is prior to the natural attitude that seizes it. And it is precisely in his attempt to go back to that original constitution of the world, prior to its natural existence, that we can find the rationale of Scotus’s metaphysical outlook. Let us go back for a moment to the two distinct nominalist claims. A nominalist stance conceived as the denial of abstract entities posits the polarity between mental and extramental facts and looks at reality from the vantage point of its representations. On the contrary, a nominalist stance conceived as the denial of universal entities posits as primary the *fundamentum in re* of those representations and substitutes for the polarity between the representation and the represented the objective polarity between different orders of the reality that is to be represented. The principle of the identity of the indiscernibles postulates the equivalence of the two polarities and the doctrine of the formal distinction, that presupposes its validity, brings back the two polarities to a unique and indistinct foundation, that is prior to their coming to be. The very fact that the two different nominalistic claims cannot be easily reconciled confronts us with an apparent difficulty⁵⁵ and a solution cannot be found unless we acknowledge that «we will get out of the difficulty only by renouncing the bifurcation of the ‘consciousness of’ and the object» (184; *L* 141).

The statement just quoted is Merleau-Ponty’s and it refers to his conception of the *chiasm* as a primary condition and a true “paradox” of Being (178, *L* 136). Merleau-Ponty introduces the notion of the chiasm in his last work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, a work that was left unfinished and published posthumously. Let us recall one of its most expressive formulations:

«[...] what begins as a thing ends as consciousness of the thing, what begins as a ‘state of consciousness’ ends as a thing (264; *L* 215)»⁵⁶.

In this contention, all the ambivalence and paradoxical character of the primary condition of Being comes to the fore, an ambivalence that is to be found also in the admission of the indifference of the common natures with respect to the ways of their individuation in natural realities, both mental and extra-mental. With regard to that ambivalence, the doctrine of the formal distinction can be considered as an attempt to analyse the complex relationship between the natu-

⁵⁵ The difficulty arises because either claim «reduces the other into [an] object» (MERLEAU-PONTY, *Le visible et l’invisible* cit., 184; Lingis, 141).

⁵⁶ MERLEAU-PONTY, *Le visible et l’invisible* cit.: «Ce qui commence comme chose finit comme conscience de la chose, ce qui commence comme ‘état de conscience’ finit comme chose».

ral things and their essence. On that matter, Merleau-Ponty reminds us that «in *Ideen II*, Husserl [aims to] ‘disentangle’ ‘unravel’ what is entangled», but observes that «the idea of chiasm and *Ineinander* is on the contrary the idea that every analysis that *disentangles* renders unintelligible» (316; *L* 268)⁵⁷.

As a matter of fact, Scotus’s metaphysics can be considered as an attempt at disentangling the idea of the chiasm. One of the most striking examples of the complex «play of inclusions (*jeu d’inclusions*)»⁵⁸ that results from it – to quote Paul Vignaux’s well-chosen expression – is undoubtedly the following, which refers to the *duplex primitas* of the abstract concept ‘being’ (*ens*), both in the order of *communitas* and in the order of *virtualitas*:

«dico quod primum obiectum intellectus nostri est ens, quia in ipso concurrunt duplex primitas, scilicet communitatis et virtualitatis, nam omne per se intelligibile aut includit essentialiter rationem entis, vel continetur virtualiter vel essentialiter in includente essentialiter rationem entis: omnia enim genera et species et individua, et omnes partes essentielles generum, et ens increatum includunt ens quidditative; omnes autem differentiae ultimae includuntur in aliquibus istorum essentialiter, et omnes passionem entis includuntur in ente et in suis inferioribus virtualiter»⁵⁹.

Here, in this reciprocal play of inclusions, we can easily detect a figure of the chiasm and of its typical inversions.

9. It is not possible here to proceed with a detailed analysis of this passage, which calls forth the different types of predication, *per se primo modo* and *secundo modo*, as well as *in quid* and *in quale*⁶⁰. It is perhaps more expedient to observe that Scotus’s metaphysical doctrine of the common natures does not only serve the purpose of bringing back the specific characters of both the physical and the mental reality to the paradoxical ambivalence of Being, but it serves also the purposes of his theology. As Joseph Owens reminds us, the reference to «the quiddity or possibility of things», conceived as their common nature, enables Scotus to resume «the Anselmian argument for the existence of God»: since «the essence as such has an entity of its own», it «can be the starting-point

⁵⁷ MERLEAU-PONTY, *Le visible et l’invisible* cit.: «D[an]s *Ideen II*, Husserl, ‘démêler,’ ‘débrouiller’ ce qui est emmêlé[.] L’idée du chiasme et de l’*Ineinander*, c’est au contraire l’idée que toute analyse qui *démêle* rend inintelligible».

⁵⁸ P. VIGNAUX, *Métaphysique de l’Éxode et univocité de l’être chez Jean Duns Scot*, in A. DE LIBERA / É. ZUM BRUNN (éd.), *Celui qui est*, Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1986, 119.

⁵⁹ IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *Ord.*, I, d. 3, p. 1, q. 3, n. 137, ed. Vat., 3,85.

⁶⁰ Cfr. BUZZETTI, *Metafisica dell’Esodo e psicologia del sacro: Scoto e Jung, un accostamento possibile* cit., 138 ff.

for the demonstration of infinite being»⁶¹. So, once again, the preference bestowed on the essential order rather than on the other properties of being⁶², as well as on the final causality rather than on the efficient causality⁶³ in his *De primo principio*, finds its ground in the indifference which is proper to the common nature conceived as a pure possibility. Just because of their absolute indifference, the common natures can act as the remote potency of both the essentially undetermined universal concepts that exist in the mind, and the totally determined singular beings that exist outside the mind⁶⁴. And so, considered as pure eidetic or phenomenological contents, indifferent to their mode of existence⁶⁵, the common natures can be regarded exclusively in their «noetic role»⁶⁶ and seen as *noetic* as opposed to *ontic* notions, in the very way Karl Barth interprets Anselm's famous formula⁶⁷, his *unum argumentum* of the *Proslogion*⁶⁸. A noetic notion, in this sense, is a notion which concerns the conditions under which an object can be thought of as a purely intelligible content. It is quite telling, though, that assertions involving notions of this kind require a quidditative type of discourse and the use of terms that *per se* or in their proper meaning express simply an essence. And once more it is to be noticed, in this case too, a direct correspondence between the ontological and the semantical doctrine.

We may round off our discussion with one last brief observation. The recognition that according to Scotus «only in infinite being are nature and individuality identical»⁶⁹ prompts us to observe that from this point of view «fact and essence can no longer be distinguished», as Merleau-Ponty would have it⁷⁰, and that Scotus's theology, which is strictly connected, as we have seen, with the doc-

⁶¹ OWENS, *Common Nature* cit., 14.

⁶² «Quamvis entis sint plurimae passiones, quarum consideratio valeret ad propositum prosequendum, tamen de ordine essentiali tamquam de medio fecundiori primo prosequar» (IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *De pr. princ.*, I, 2, ed. Kluxen, 2).

⁶³ «Quod non est ad finem, non est a causa efficiente per se» (IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *De pr. princ.*, II, 11, concl. 4, ed. Kluxen, 12).

⁶⁴ «Est ergo natura in potentia remota ad determinationem singularitatis et ad indeterminationem universalis [...]. Et isto modo bene intelligitur illud dictum Avicennae quod natura de se non est universalis nec particularis, sed tantum natura» (IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *In Met.*, VII, q. 18, nn. 48-49, ed. Etzkorn et al., 4,351).

⁶⁵ «Prima ergo intellectio est 'naturae' ut non cointelligitur aliquis modus, neque qui est eius in intellectu, neque qui est eius extra intellectum» (IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS *Ord.*, II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, n. 33, ed. Vat., 7,403-404).

⁶⁶ NOONE, *Universals and Individuation* cit., 111.

⁶⁷ Cfr. K. BARTH, *Fides quaerens intellectum: Anselms Beweis der Existenz Gottes im Zusammenhang seines theologischen Programms*, 2. Aufl., Evangelischer Verlag, Zollikon 1958.

⁶⁸ Cfr. ANSELMUS, *Proslogion*, c. II: «credimus te esse aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit».

⁶⁹ OWENS, *Common Nature* cit., 13.

⁷⁰ MERLEAU-PONTY, *Le visible et l'invisible* cit., 151; Lingis, 114.

trine of the common nature, is indeed the part of his thought which gets closer to the most daring endeavours of contemporary metaphysical speculation. The bearing of this likening on the appraisal of the very nature of theological and metaphysical thought considered in themselves cannot be pursued here and is left to other and more mature considerations.

Quaestio 5/2005

Metaphysica • sapientia • scientia divina

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Atti del Convegno della Società Italiana
per lo Studio del Pensiero Medievale (S.I.S.P.M.)
Bari, 9-12 giugno 2004

a cura di Pasquale Porro
con la collaborazione di Marienza Benedetto

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© 2005, Pagina soc. coop., Bari, Italy

Questo volume è stampato con contributi
del Consiglio di Amministrazione
dell'Università degli Studi di Bari
e della Società Italiana per lo Studio del Pensiero
Medievale, e con quote dei fondi Prin/Cofin 2002
(«La metafisica nel Medioevo») e Prin/Cofin 2004
(«Soggetto e statuto della filosofia nel Medioevo»),
Unità di Ricerca di Bari
(Responsabile Scientifico: Pasquale Porro)

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ISBN 2-503-51872-9

ISSN 1379-2547

D/2006/0095/101