Phil 312
Scotus on the Principle of Individuation

(A) Overview of the problem
What, if anything, is responsible for the individuality (singularity, thisness) of particular substances (within a species)? [Closely linked to the problem of universals: what is responsible for that which is common to distinct individuals?]

q. 1 - q. 5: Rejection of proposed solutions.
q. 6: Scotus’ solution.
An individual is numerically one and a being per se (the strongest sort of unity). [By contrast, a heap of stones is only a being per accidens.]
The individual is nevertheless a composite of a specific nature and an individual difference (which Scotus also calls haecceity or thisness).
The specific nature (e.g., stone-nature or human nature) is conceived along lines similar to Aquinas: a positive principle responsible for a thing’s essential characteristics, operations, and intelligibility. Also like Aquinas, the specific nature is a composite of form and matter. Unlike Aquinas, Scotus thinks of the nature as a kind of quasi-being that has a “real but less than numerical unity”.
The individual difference is a positive but non-quidditative entity (i.e., it doesn’t add any essential characteristics) – all it does is determine the nature to be this individual.

(B) q. 1: Is a Material Substance of its Nature ‘This’, that is, Singular and Individual?

The position: A substance is by its very nature one thing that is not divisible into several individuals. This is because the stone-nature in the stone is itself already singular and individual. No principle of individuation is required.

In favour:
Things are individual in a natural or unqualified way, but universal only in a qualified sense (as considered in the intellect).
Whatever is true of things in an unqualified way requires no cause.

Refutation:
(a) Impossibility of science: the intellect, which grasps natures universally, would be fundamentally in error if natures are of themselves singular.
(b) The nature has a real but less-than-numerical unity: hence, the nature is not singular of itself (for its lesser unity is compatible with numerical plurality).

Concepts of unity and distinction prior to Scotus:
Numerical unity: one in number (the unity of a whole substance)
Conceptual unity: applies to an aspect of a thing, or a thing under an intelligible description (only the idea is assumed to have the unity)
Real or numerical distinction: holds between any two individual things
Conceptual distinction: holds between two aspects of the same thing

Scotus’ invention:
Real but less-than-numerical unity: applies to a real principle that must be supposed in things (not merely mental) yet may not be capable of separate existence (e.g., nature and haecceity)

Formal distinction: holds between two real principles in a thing that are nevertheless inseparable (e.g., nature and haecceity)
Seven arguments for accepting real but less-than-numerical unity

#1 and #2: best way to accommodate certain more or less accepted Aristotelian doctrines.

#3 [21]: From similarity.
   Similarity is a real relationship (not merely conceptual). A real relationship has a real foundation. This foundation must be something that has unity. But not numerical unity: we don’t say the substance as a whole is similar to itself or to something else. Hence, the foundation has a real but less-than-numerical unity. (In fact, the nature is the foundation for the relation of similarity.)

#4 [22]: From contraries.

#5 [23-24]: From sense perception.
   An act of seeing requires a sense object (colour) that must be a thing with some type of real unity. But not numerical unity: hence, a less-than-numerical unity.
   [If the sense-object were this particular whiteness, vision alone could discriminate between this whiteness and every other whiteness that was numerically distinct. But vision alone lacks this kind of discrimination.]

#6 [25]: From univocal generation. Members of an accidental series have a real unity that is not numerical.

#7 [26]: From the need for a real but less than numerical distinction. Without this, there would only be real and conceptual distinction. Any two things would be equally distinct (Socrates would differ as much from a line as he would from Plato). Every abstraction (like ‘human’) would be a ‘mere figment’ of the mind.

Scotus’ opinion:

‘Equinity is just equinity’: of itself, the nature is neither one nor many, neither universal nor singular. This applies not just in the mind, but also in the outside world: a nature is neither one nor many. It has its own proper less-than-numerical unity.

Objection 1: A real thing could then be a universal, which is absurd.
   Reply: The lesser unity is not repugnant to universality, but neither is it formally a universal.

Objection 2: This destroys the distinction between universals in God (which are numerically one) and in material things (which are one only in thought).
   Reply: No it doesn’t. It’s still true that each stone has its one nature. But it’s compatible with this that the nature in each stone has a lesser unity than the stone itself.

(C)  q. 2: Is a Material Substance Individual by something positive and intrinsic?

Against (Henry of Ghent): The individuality or singularity of a thing is nothing but a double negation: not divisible into parts that are substances, and not identical to anything else. Since individuality is purely negative (like blindness), no positive principle is needed to explain it.

In favour: Individuals are primary substances: the most real things. It is primarily individual substances (not ‘species’ or ‘genera’) that come into being, pass away, and exercise causal powers. Something positive is required to explain their individuality.

Refutation of Henry:

i) ‘Formal repugnance’ is stronger than mere logical repugnance. [Sight may be logically repugnant to a blind person, but not ‘formally repugnant’ or by nature repugnant.] ‘Formal repugnance’ must be explained by some positive feature. Divisibility into parts that are substances [subjective parts] is formally repugnant to an individual.

Similarly: only a positive feature can explain why a negation or imperfection is repugnant to a thing. Divisibility into parts is an imperfection; hence its repugnance to an individual must be explained by a positive feature.

ii) The double negation doesn’t really explain anything. We are still left with the question: why is there this double negation (indivisibility and distinction from all else)?
iii) If a primary substance has only its nature and the double negation, then primary substance has no greater perfection than secondary substance (species and genera), which is false.

(D) q. 3: Is it through actual existence that a material substance is this and singular?

Initial argument in favour: Every actuality distinguishes. The ultimate (last) actuality of a thing is its act of existence. So individuals of the same species are distinguished through their acts of existence.

Against:
   i) Actual existence does not convey any distinction. If two things are not already different prior to a consideration of their actual existence, then they will not be different existents.
   ii) The act of existence is no different for any two things, just as the nature is no different for two things of the same species. So if the nature is not a determinate this, neither is the nature + act of existence.
   iii) An essentially ordered hierarchy is a chain descending from a highest genus down to an individual (e.g., Substance – Material substance - … - Socrates). The act of existence has no role in distinguishing the members of a hierarchy. So individuality is “prior” to the act of existence.

Reply to initial argument: Actual existence is NOT the ultimate intrinsic feature of a thing – it comes after the thing has been distinguished, and is something extrinsic arising from the thing’s relation to an outside agent or cause.

(E) q. 4: Is Quantity that Positive Characteristic Whereby a Material Substance is This Singular and Indivisible into Subjective Parts?

Initial arguments in favour: cites various authorities.

Initial argument against: It is primarily individual substance that is generated and functions. A being per accidens is not primarily what is generated and functions. A composite of substance and any accident (quantity or anything else) is a being per accidens. So no accident can make individual substance singular.

More detailed arguments in favour:
   1) Quantity allows things to be divided into parts of the same kind. Hence, everything divisible into parts of the same kind must be so by virtue of quantity. And the division of species into individuals is a case of division into parts of the same kind. Hence quantity is the principle of individuation.
   2) One substance is distinct from another by its individual form. But form is made individual by being received in different matter, and quantity is what divides up different bits of matter.
   3) The agent (producer) differs from the effect (produced) because of matter; but the matter differs only because of quantity.

Four Refutations: (first three show that no accident could be the principle of individuation)

#1 [73]: i. A substance numerically one cannot lose its singularity and cease to be a “this” without also being destroyed or undergoing substantial change. [If not so changed, it remains this thing.]
   ii. But a material substance can remain the same substance without having quantity or any other accidents (better: while changing its quantity and accidents).
   iii. Hence, quantity and the other accidents cannot be what secures its singularity.

On ii: a substance continues to exist even though the quantity changes. In rarefaction and condensation, the numerical quantity perishes or at least changes. If singularity or thisness derives from quantity, the substance remains the same without having the same thisness, which is absurd.

Further: problems for transubstantiation: two substances could have the same ‘thisness’.
the priority of substance over accidents

Substance is prior in nature to quantity and to every accident. No accident can explain anything in the order of substance. Substance is prior to quantity in being, and has being only as something determinate. So its determinate character is prior to its quantity.

[Scotus then demolishes a variant position attributed to Giles of Rome.]

from the nature of a categorical hierarchy (cf. rejection of esse in q. 3)

What differentiates members within the hierarchy must not be anything accidental, but only something substantial or essential or intrinsic to the concatenation, “apart from any other ordered arrangement”.

The individual must be marked within the species by something positive and essential within the category of substance. But accidents like quantity are extrinsic to the category.

from the nature of quantity.

i. Quantity as cause of singularity would have to be definite or indefinite.

ii. Not definite, because that pre-supposes the existence of a definite form, which in turn demands an explanation for its definiteness.

iii. Nor indefinite quantity, because that persists through substantial change (paper → ash) and hence it cannot be what makes something a ‘this’.

Further: quantity is a form. It is just as indifferent towards being ‘this’ as flesh (= non-signate matter); neither flesh nor quantity is of itself singular. It’s the same thing in any two individuals.

Aquinas says quantity makes something a ‘this’ by giving it position (in space). But position too is just another form or generic thing (like quantity).

Idea here: quantities are like ultimate species. They are maximally determinate, but still not singular or individual.

Replies to detailed arguments in favour:

All of those arguments suppose some analogy between dividing a lump of matter into parts and dividing a specific nature into individuals. Scotus just thinks that is a terrible analogy.

a) The formal reason for the nature’s divisibility must be something intrinsic to it, whereas quantity is extrinsic. (If it were intrinsically indivisible, quantitative forms would not make it divisible.)

b) The ‘parts’ of a lump of matter are not ‘wholes’ in the way that individuals are. The specific nature is not this sort of ‘integrated whole made up of the natures of individuals’.

c) The analogy rests on the idea that quantity is divisible into parts of the ‘same sort’, but that is at most accidentally the case (you can divide up the lump into unequal or inhomogeneous parts).

Finally: the division of matter does indeed involve quantity, but quantity is only a necessary condition for divisibility, not its formal reason (and certainly not for the division of species into individuals).

q. 5: Does Matter Individuate a Material Substance?

Matter = prime matter (pure potentiality).

The view is that a thing’s singularity derives entirely from prime matter; the nature becomes singular as it received in matter.

In favour:

Aristotle states: those things are one whose matter is one. [Scotus agrees, but denies that matter is the reason for the oneness.]
Against:

Primary matter is in itself indistinct and can’t be responsible for any distinctions.

Main Refutation:

‘Matter’ can be abstracted from this and that matter, just as form can. Since matter is in itself indifferent to its presence in diverse material things, it cannot be the cause of individuation. Indeed, we need a cause that individuates matter.

If matter were the cause of individuation, then successive individual substances (sharing the same matter) would be the same ‘this’.

(G) q. 6: Is a material substance individual through some positive entity restricting the nature to be just this individual substance?

Initial arguments against:

[140] Every individual would be a composite of the specific nature (already a composite of form and matter) plus the positive individual difference – hence, the individual would be even more composite than the nature, which is ‘incongruous’. [Why? Because individuals are supposed to have wholeness or unity.]

[141] What would this positive principle be? It would be distinct from the form and matter of the nature; hence, if either form or matter, it would be adding form to form or matter to matter.

[142] The singular individual would be intelligible, as a nature and a ‘quasi-act’; but there is no science of individuals.

[143] The singular would have ‘another nature’ and hence a definition; hence, there would be a distinct science of the singular.

Initial argument in favour:

[145] What is ‘special’ or particular to the individual must add to what is common (i.e., to the specific nature, which was proven in q. 1 not to be singular). But what is added must be added in such a way that the individual is still a per se unity. So both the nature and what is added can only have a lesser unity. That which is added contracts or limits the specific nature to this individual.

Alternative position:

a) The specific nature is of itself individual.
b) The nature exists in many due to quantity.

The position (two interpretations of it) is discussed from [146] to [163], but does not seem to add a great deal to similar discussions in q. 1 and q. 4. Scotus provides many arguments against what he considers the absurd position that the specific nature could be of itself individual.

Scotus’ view:

[164] Something positive determines a material substance to being this singularity (and diverse positives [haecceities] for diverse singular substances.

Scotus promises to: (a) argue for the position; (b) explain what the positive thing is.

(a) Two Arguments.

[166] Unity always derives from some kind of positive entity or being. But the strong numerical unity and indivisibility that belong to an individual substance cannot come from its nature (which is not singular, and has only a lesser unity compatible with divisibility). Hence it must derive from some positive entity outside the specific nature or essence.

[167] In any comparison between two things, there is some real basis of agreement and some real basis of difference. The specific nature in Socrates and Plato is the basis for agreement. Although each has his own nature, the two natures do not differ of themselves (as shown earlier). So there must be some other positive principle of difference. But not matter, existence, or any accident. Hence, it has to be something in the category of substance.
(b) The positive entity: what is it like, and what does it do?

The only way to understand this positive entity is by analogy with the specific difference: the final differentia that determines an ultimate species.

[170] An ultimate differentia (e.g., rational) is the reason why an ultimate specific nature (e.g., human) is “atomic or elementary”: maximally determinate and not divisible (like a genus) into more species. Scotus attributes this to the “specific indivisibility” of this last differentia: a kind of repugnance to further division. Scotus offers a particularly clear example of an ultimate nature: a maximally determinate shade of whiteness. By analogy, an “atomic” individual substance requires a positive principle which brings singularity or “individual indivisibility”. We grant that genera and species have a kind of unity explicable by an entity; we should grant this all the more for individual substances.

[171] The real principle from which genus derives [e.g., animal nature as it exists outside the mind] is of itself an indeterminate (and determinable) thing, able to be ‘contracted’ to a species by the specific difference. Similarly, the reality from which the species derives [e.g., the specific nature human as it exists in a person] is indeterminate (and determinable), able to be ‘contracted’ to an individual through the individual difference. So there must be a positive entities individual difference.

There is a disanalogy between individual difference and specific difference: the latter is quidditative and pertains to essence, the former is not. It contributes nothing to essence.

[172] Specific differentia that are not ultimate (generic differences like “corporeal”) can have something in common (they are not simply simple). But ultimate specific differences are ‘primarily diverse’: they have nothing in common. Similarly, individual differences (being really ultimate) are primarily diverse and have nothing in common.

Objection 1: If the individual differences are primarily diverse, the individuals will be primarily diverse and have nothing in common.

Reply: False: the things also have a nature in which they primarily agree. (cf. two ultimate species of animal can have diverse differentia.)

Objection 2: Either human-nature in Socrates is numerically one or not. If it is, then there is no ‘lesser unity’ there. If it is not, then some one thing (humanity) will be in many humans.

Reply: False. The nature is not numerically one (it has the lesser unity), but that does not imply that a single ‘humanity’ is present in many humans.

Replies to initial arguments:

[178] To [140]: yes, the individual is composite, but this causes no difficulty for its per se unity. Scotus again explains the less-than-numerical unity and the formal distinction.

[179] To [141]: yes, the individual adds a formal reality (haecceity) to the nature considered absolutely, just as form can determine other form (e.g., genus → species).

[180-1] To [142-3]: the positive individual difference is non-quidditative and there is no definition of it; singulars remain unintelligible to us because we take in only the specific nature, but there is nothing intrinsically unintelligible about an individual (e.g., to God).

Remainder: more refutations of the ‘alternative position’ and replies to arguments from q. 5.