Thomas Sutton on Individuation

Consider two copies of this paper. For all intents and purposes they are “identical”. If I give you one copy and I read aloud the other, you can follow what I am reading on your copy. If I ask you to read the first sentence, you would read “consider two copies of this paper” just by looking into your copy, without having to look into mine. Still, obviously, the two copies are not identical, strictly speaking; for if your copy were identical with mine, then there would be only one copy here, and not two copies. If we wanted to make another copy, we would have to take another set of sheets, feed it into the copier and print the text on that other set of sheets. If the same text were printed in the same way on the same sheets, that would not make a different copy. So, apparently, what distinguishes two otherwise identical copies is the paper they are printed on. To be sure, two copies may differ in a number of other ways too; say, my copy may be printed on sheets of a somewhat different color, or it may have a coffee spill on it, etc. But these differences are possible only if we already have two copies printed on different sheets: it is not possible for me to have a coffee spill on my copy and for you not to have one on yours if my copy and your copy are printed with the same letters on the same sheets, for if they are the same text printed on the same sheets, then they are identical. So, what primarily distinguishes two copies of the same paper is the distinctness of the sheets they are printed on, for any other difference between them is only possible if they are printed on different sheets.

I think this example nicely illustrates the basic intuition behind the Thomistic-Aristotelian conception of individuation, namely, that what primarily accounts for the difference between individuals of the same species is their matter.

There are a number of points to be noted about this apparently simple, and, at least on the basis of the foregoing example, perhaps, rather intuitive claim.

The first is that the question of what accounts for individuation presupposes that there must be something that accounts for individuation, because individuation is something to be accounted for. That is to say, it is presupposed that there is something to be individuated in the first place, which, without being individuated would not be individual. Put in this way, the entire business of individuation may at once sound so intuitive. For what sort of thing would it be that, if left un-individuated, would not be individual? After all, isn’t everything that really exists an individual?

The second point to note concerning the Thomistic claim about individuation is that individuation is something to be accounted for only in material beings. For if the answer to the question of what accounts for individuation is that it is their matter, then, clearly, this answer cannot apply to immaterial beings. But why would the individuation of immaterial beings be any less problematic than the individuation of material beings? After all, according to the Thomistic answer, in the constitution of material beings there must be something to be individuated, which is certainly not their matter, for matter is that which accounts for the individuation of what is to be individuated. But then why wouldn’t the same apply to immaterial beings, which may just as well have something in their constitution that needs to be individuated, even if certainly not by their matter?
The third point to be noted about the Thomistic claim is that it is not just matter in general that is supposed to do the work of individuation. The two copies of my paper of course agree not only in their text, but also in their common property that the same text is printed on paper. So, what distinguishes these two copies is not the stuff they are printed on as such, but rather this stuff here as opposed to that stuff there, which Aquinas refers to as designated matter, i.e., matter considered under determinate dimensions, here and now. But then it might seem that if it is the distinction of different chunks of designated matter that primarily does the job of individuation, the primary cause of individuation is the difference of the dimensions distinguishing these distinct chunks of matter in the first place. So the primary principle of individuation would then turn out to be some accident, the dimensive quantity of this chunk of matter, as opposed to that dimensive quantity of that chunk of matter. However, since accidents are individuated by their subjects, this result seems to involve a vicious circularity in the explanation of individuation: the individuation of material substances is explained in terms of the distinctness of their designated matter, which in turn is explained in terms of the distinctness of their dimensions, which, however, given that these dimensions are accidents of their subjects, has to be explained in terms of the distinctness of their subjects, i.e., the individual substances that they are the dimensions of. But with this we have come full circle: the distinctness of material substances is explained by the distinctness of their designated matter, which is explained by the distinctness of their dimensions, which in turn is explained by the distinctness of the substances with which we started out.

As we can see, each of these points, meant to clarify the Thomistic position, leads to some rather disturbing problems. In reverse order, these problems may be summarized as follows.

1. The Thomistic position on individuation seems to involve a vicious circularity of explanations. How could the distinctness of substances be explained in terms of the distinctness of one of their accidents, if the distinctness of accidents is to be explained in terms of the distinctness of substances? Let me refer to this, for want of a better designation, as “Scotus’ (1266-1308) problem”.

2. Why would the individuation of immaterial substances be any less problematic than the individuation of material substances? Why shouldn’t we demand an explanation of the individuation of immaterial substances just as well as we do for the individuation of material substances? And then, if we do have good reason to demand an explanation in both cases, what is that common explanation, if there is one? What is the principle of individuation for both material and immaterial substances? Let me refer to this, without providing here any historical justification, as “Henry of Ghent’s (c. 1217-1293) problem”.

3. Finally, why should there be “a problem of individuation” at all? Apparently the problem is based on the unjustified, unjustifiable, and simply wrong assumption that there is something to be individuated in the first place, which without this “individuation” would be left un-individuated. Let me call this “the nominalists’ objection to the problem”.

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In the remainder of this paper I will address each of these problems in this order, taking my cue from the astute discussions of Thomas of Sutton, O.P. (c. 1250-1315), an early defender and quite original interpreter of Aquinas in Oxford.

Sutton takes on Scotus’s problem in the 21st question of his 1st Quodlibet by raising the question “whether the principle of individuation is a substantial property that precedes all accidents”.

He presents only one argument in favor of the affirmative answer, without attributing it to Scotus. The argument runs as follows:

No accident can be a principle of per se subsistence. But an individual in the category of substance, insofar as it is individual, is subsistent. For species and genera do not subsist, but individuals of the category of substance do. Therefore, no accident is the principle of individuation, but some substantial property is. For it cannot be said that form is the principle of individuation, for the form is the cause of agreement of individuals of the same species; it cannot be matter either, for it is purely passive, and it is a part of the species just as form is. Therefore, nothing can be the principle of individuation, except a substantial property.¹

Of course, this argument by elimination can only work with the common presupposition that these are all the possible candidates for being the principle of individuation. But this is not contested by Sutton. In the body of the article he rather strives to show how individuation is possible through a combination of some of these candidates, namely, matter and quantity, i.e., materia quanta, or quantified matter. To prepare his answer, he first carefully explicates the question itself:

When it is asked what the principle of individuation of material substance is, then the question concerns what causes its incommunicability or contraction under the most specific species, so that it is predicated only of one thing and not of several things. Therefore, it is one thing to ask what the cause of individuation is and it is another to ask what the cause of the individual is. For an individual in the category of substance has all four causes, namely, matter, form, efficient, and final. But not all of these can be the cause of individuation, that is, incommunicabilitiy, or limitation under the species, in the same way as not everything that is the principle of the species, such as man, is the principle of its specification, that is, contraction under the genus. For animal is a principle of the species man. However, animal is not a principle of its specification or contraction under the genus, but rational is the principle of contraction under the genus.²

¹ Nullum accidens potest esse principium per se subsistendi, sed individuum in genere substantiae secundum quod individuum est per se subsistens. Species enim et genera non subsistunt, sed tantum individua in genere substantiae. Ergo nullum accidens est principium individuationis, sed aliqua proprietas substantialis. Non enim potest dici quod forma sit principium individuationis, quia forma est causa convenientiae individuorum eiusmodem speciei; nec materia, quia ipsa est pure passiva et etiam ipsa est pars speciei, sicut et forma. Nihil ergo potest esse principium individuationis nisi proprietas substantialis. Thomas of Sutton, Quodlibeta, München 1969, henceforth: QDL, q. 21, p. 139.

² Cum quaeritur, quid est principium individuationis substantiae materialis, quaeritur, quid est causa incommunicabilitatis ipsius, seu contractionis sub specie specialissima, ita quod praedicetur de uno solo, non de pluribus. Unde aliud est quaerere, quid est causa individuationis, et aliud est quaerere, quid est causa individui. Individuum substantiae habet omnes quattuor causas, scilicet: materiam, formam, finem et efficientem. Sed non omnes istae causae sunt causae individuationis, hoc est incommunicabilitatis seu limitationis sub specie, sicut non omne, quod est principiu speciei ut hominis, est principium specificationis, hoc est contractionis sub genere. Animal enim est principium huius speciei homo.
This is a rather difficult passage, couched as it is in a rather strange language. But even so, it makes one thing at the beginning quite clear: the question is not what causes this individual to be; for that question would appropriately be answered by providing the four causes accounting for the individual’s existence; but those are not what we are looking for. The question rather is what causes this individual to be this individual, which is a more specific question, concerning the individuality of the individual itself. Therefore, what we are looking for is not the cause or causes of the existence or subsistence (i.e., per se existence) of the individual, but rather the cause or principle of its individuality itself.

So, what is this “individuality itself”? And what is this “contraction” that supposedly results in this individuality?

In answering these questions, we first need to clarify the language of this passage, especially with regard to the supposedly helpful analogy of the contraction or specification of the species under the genus. Just what are the things Sutton is talking about when he says “animal is a principle of the species man; however, animal is not a principle of its specification or contraction under the genus, but rational is the principle of contraction under the genus”? In what way is animal a principle of man, but not a principle of its specification? And in what sense is rational the principle of specification sought for? What are the things the terms ‘man’, ‘animal’ and ‘rational’ are supposed to stand for in these sentences? The key to the answer is provided by Sutton’s indication that he is talking about the species, genus, and difference, and not the individuals that fall under the corresponding terms. In scholastic logical jargon, these terms here are to be taken in simple, and not in personal supposition. In the Thomistic version of the medieval theory of supposition, when a term is in simple supposition, then it stands for the nature signified by the term in question precisely as it is conceived by the concept expressed by the term in question. Now what are the natures signified by the terms ‘man’, ‘animal’ and ‘rational’? According to Aquinas and his followers, they are the individual humanities, animalities, and rationalities of individual humans, animals, and rational beings, which constitute them as individual humans, animals and rational beings, conceived in abstraction from their individuating conditions. But the reason why these terms are predicatable of the corresponding individuals is precisely the fact that these individuals actually have these natures, constituting them as singular beings in their natural kinds. Furthermore, as Aquinas insisted, the individual humanity of this human being is not distinct from the animality or the rationality of the same. It is one and the same individual nature that constitutes this individual in his or her specific kind, which is the kind of a human being, a rational animal. But this very same essence or nature is conceived differently, insofar as it is conceived as the principle of the vital operations of any animal, and insofar as it is the principle of the operations of a rational being. Animal nature, as such, is the principle of sensitive life, rational nature, as such, is the principle of rational life, so a rational animal nature is the principle of a rational animal life, which is what we call a human life.

Now, with this understanding of the “things” Sutton is talking about, we may have a better understanding of the contraction or specification that results in the specific nature

tamen animal non est princiüim suae specificationis, id est contractionis sub genere, sed rationale est principium contractionis sub genere. Ibid. pp. 139-140.
“contracted under” the generic nature. The generic nature, conceived as such, that is, as the principle of animal life, can be present in any animal, whether brute or rational. However, rational animality can only be present in a rational animal, but not in a brute animal. So, rationality, when it specifies animality, contracts animality to rational animals, that is to say, to human beings only, constituting rational animality, or humanity, the specific nature of humans. Thus, the predicate ‘man’ signifying this nature as such, namely, rational animality, cannot be predicated of brutes, for brute, irrational animality is not rational animality per se, on account of the immediate opposition between rationality and irrationality. Therefore, the principle of specification that contracts the specific nature under the generic nature is the difference, even if the genus is also a principle of the specific nature, but is not the principle of its specification or contraction.

Now, Sutton’s claim is that when we are looking for the principle of individuation, we are analogically looking for the principle of contraction of the individualized nature under the specific nature: we are looking for what it is on account of which the individual nature of Daniel is contracted to Daniel in such a way that the name signifying his individual nature cannot be predicated of anything else. So, the analogy is that the name ‘Daniel’ can only be predicated of Daniel on account of the fact that the nature signified by this name can only belong to this person named Daniel (without equivocation) and not to anything else, in the same way as the nature of rational animality can only belong to humans and not to anything else, and in both cases there is something that accounts for the contraction of the nature signified by these names.

But then, on the basis of this understanding of the question, one part of Sutton’s answer to “Scotus’ problem”, namely, the reason why he would reject Scotus’ solution in terms of a per se individual substantial property, should immediately be obvious. For in this setting, the individual nature of Daniel is necessarily the result of individuation (just as the specific nature is the result of specification), whence is cannot be its principle. Therefore, the principle of individuation must be something other than the individual nature, something that is per se incommunicable to other individuals of the same species and thus it contracts the specific nature to result in the individual nature, in the way in which the specific difference is per se incommunicable to other species of the same genus (as the difference of rational nature is per se incommunicable to brute animal species) and thus it contracts the generic nature to result in the specific nature.

In the body of the question, Sutton provides the following, as he claims, “necessary reasoning” to prove that the principle of individuation thus understood can only be the dimensive quantity of material substances:

... that is the principle of contraction under some common [nature] by which one thing contained under that common [nature] is distinguished from another thing under that same common [nature] ... but that by which one individual is per se and primarily distinguished from another individual of the same species is dimensive quantity, and nothing from the genus of substance or from another genus other than quantity.  

[3] ... illud est principium contractionis sub aliquo communi, per quod unum contentum sub communi distinguitur ab alio contento sub codem communi ... Illud autem, per quod distinguitur per se et primo unum individuam ab alio eiusdem speciei, est quantitas dimensiva et nihil de genere substantiae nec de aliquo genere alio quam de genere quantitatis. Ibid. p. 140.
Sutton goes on to prove the minor premise by means of the following reasoning:

... those [principles] that distinguish individual s of the same species have to be things of the same ratio [or formal character], insofar as they are parts of the same nature. For if they were things of diverse natures, then they would distinguish [whatever they distinguish] in species, and thus the latter would not be individuals of the same species. Indeed, rational and irrational, by which man and brutes are distinguished are not of the same nature, and so they distinguish [man and brutes] by species. But it is only quantity and nothing else that has parts of the same ratio. ... for quantity is per se, [i.e., by itself] divided into parts of the same ratio, and not by substance or something else, because position, which is the order of parts in the whole is included in its ratio. For dimensive quantity is that which has position. And so the parts of quantity of the same species are distinguished on account of the diversity of their positions.  

Thus, the main reason why Sutton singles out dimensive quantity as the principle of individuation for material substance is that it is something consisting of parts that do not differ specifically at all, and yet they are different, just because of what they are, namely, parts of a whole situated at different positions, thereby spatially extending the whole itself, so that it has parts outside of parts in space. But the different positions, which in this way constitute dimensive quantity itself, are not different on account of anything else: to put it in modern, but not incompatible terms, points of the same coordinates are just the same, whereas those of different coordinates are diverse, period (and, of course, the same goes for lines, surfaces and bodies determined by such points).

Accordingly, Sutton vehemently rejects the Scotistic objection to the alleged circularity of the Thomistic account, on the basis that it rests on not understanding the question, confusing the cause of individuation with the causes of the individual, and so confusing different orders of priority. For although it is true that quantity, being an accident, depends for its being on the substance that it informs, nevertheless, material substance, as well as its matter, form, being, and even its individualized nature, depends for its individuation on quantity, which is the only kind of thing that has to have distinct parts of the same specific nature, and so it is only quantity that can be the primary cause of the numerical distinction of individuals of the same species of anything else that without quantity cannot be individually distinct. Therefore, although substance is necessarily prior to quantity in the order of dependency for being, nevertheless, quantity is prior to substance in the order of dependency for individuation.

So, Scotus’ problem on Sutton’s analysis is simply the result of ignoring these proper priorities. Accordingly, no wonder Sutton closes his argumentation against Scotus, 16 years his junior, and a Franciscan, with the following biting remark: “It is obvious,
therefore, that the entire position of those who take themselves so subtly to have found something new is but childish fiction.\textsuperscript{5}

But the much older, and at the time much more influential Henry of Ghent does not fare much better in Sutton’s opinion, for he is also guilty of ignoring the proper order of individuation, although on the basis of a more fundamental, underlying error.

The proper priorities of the order of individuation, as conceived by Sutton, are neatly laid out by him in his \textit{Quaestiones Ordinariae}, in the following passage, directly targeting Henry of Ghent’s conception:

\begin{quote}
... the cases of dimensive quantity and substantial being are not similar to each other. For dimensive quantity of itself has the distinction of parts on account of the diversity of their position, which pertains to its \textit{ratio}. Therefore, such a quantity is the cause of the multiplication of individuals of the same \textit{ratio} among material things. But substantial being does not of itself have the distinction of its parts. And so it cannot be the cause of multiplication of individuals in the same species, but it is multiplied by the multiplication of form in material substances of the same species, and form is multiplied by the multiplication of matter in which it is received, matter is multiplied by the multiplication of dimensive quantity, and dimensive quantity is multiplied of itself on account of the diversity of position. And thus the entire root of the multiplication of material substances is dimensive quantity; and so, since there is no dimensive quantity in angels, it is necessary that there is no multiplication of angels in the same species.\textsuperscript{6}
\end{quote}

The underlying error that in Sutton’s analysis prevents Henry from seeing this proper order is his failure to see how the individuation of existence is itself dependent on the individuation of essence. As in the body of the article he writes:

\begin{quote}
We should consider that being is not multiplied, except by the multiplication of essence, and this can be seen from the following. The essence which is its own existence cannot be multiplied, but is only one, namely, God Himself … And existence cannot be included in the essence of something caused, for an essence the \textit{ratio} of which contains existence cannot be understood not to exist, and hence it cannot be produced from non-existence into existence. For the multiplication of existence, therefore, essences have to be multiplied, which receive and delimit existence in which they participate; for a subsistent, unlimited existence not received in anything can only be one. It has to be said, therefore, that just as form is multiplied because it is received in diverse matters, in the same way, actual existence is multiplied because it is received in diverse essences.\textsuperscript{7}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{5} Patet igitur quod totum dictum istorum, qui tam subtiliter putant nova invenire, non est nisi fictivum puerile. Thomas of Sutton, \textit{Quaestiones ordinariae}, München 1977, henceforth: QORD, q. 27, p. 760

\textsuperscript{6} Ad septimum dicendum est quod non est simile de quantitate et de esse substantiali, quia quantitas dimensiva ex se ipsa habet distinctionem partium eiusdem rationis propter diversitatem situs, qui est de ratione sua. Et ideo talis quantitas est causa multiplicationis individuorum eiusdem rationis in substantiis materialibus, sed [sicut, ed.] esse substantiali non habet de se distinctionem partium. Et propter hoc oportet quod non sit causa multiplicationis individuorum in una specie, sed multiplicatur in substantiis materialibus eiusdem speciei ex multiplicatione formae, et forma multiplicatur ex multiplicatione materiae in qua recipitur, materia autem multiplicatur ex multiplicatione quantitatis dimensivae, quantitas vero dimensiva propter diversum situm de se multiplicatur. Et ita tota radix multiplicationis substantiarum individualium est quantitas dimensiva; et quia quantitas dimensiva non est in angelis, ideo necesse est quod ibi non sit multiplicatio angelorum in una specie. Ibid. pp. 762-763.

\textsuperscript{7} Advertendum est igitur quod esse non multiplicatur nisi per multiplicationem essentiae, et hoc potest sic videri: Essentia quae est ipsum esse, non potest multiplicari, sed est una sola, scilicet deus ipse, ut alibi dictum est. Nec esse potest includi in essentia alieuius causati, quia essentia, de cuius ratione est esse, non
To be sure, Henry’s “failure” to see Sutton’s (or for that matter Aquinas’s) point is his subtly, but radically different conception of participation, based on a fundamentally different understanding of the relationship between essence and existence in general.

As in an earlier paper of mine I have pointed out, the difference in their conceptions is all the more surprising because apparently both Henry and Sutton (or again, Aquinas) draw basically on the same stock of common principles; so it is apparently a dark mystery how they can arrive at radically opposite conclusions. However, as I have argued in the same paper, the mystery can be solved, if we focus on the subtly different interpretations of those same principles provided by these authors, on account of their slightly different construal of the semantic role of the notion of being in all predications, influencing their entire understanding of how the essences signified by the categorematic terms of the ten categories specify or qualify the act of existence signified by the transcendental notion of being.

But similar considerations apply to the “nominalists’ objection to the problem” raised at the beginning, which Sutton of course did not have to deal with, but anybody after Ockham had to and still has to. For at the core of the nominalist objection, which simply eliminates the problem instead of solving it, lies the even more radical departure from the semantic principles informing Sutton’s, as well as Henry’s and Scotus’ relevant considerations. For with the nominalist conception of the semantic relations between categorematic terms and what they signify, the multipliable and so “contractible” common forms signified by these terms in the via antiqua are no longer needed or even wanted, and so they are the first to fall victim to Ockham’s razor. But then, in this framework, the problem of individuation, as Sutton, or for that matter, Aquinas, Henry or Scotus construed it, cannot even be meaningfully formulated.

However, before anyone would reach for the champagne bottles to celebrate this “achievement”, we should note that this achievement of the nominalists came at the dear price of not only generating a whole new set of (mostly epistemological) problems for themselves as well as for later generations, but also of leading to a breakdown of the unity of scholastic discourse in general. But if the previous reflections on Sutton, Henry and Scotus are correct, then it is fair to say that at least in its finer details that unity was already pretty precarious when it was still by and large intact.

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potest intelligi non esse, et per consequens non potest produci a non-esse in esse. Ad hoc igitur quod esse multiplicetur, oportet essentias multiplicari, quae recipient esse et limitent esse, quod participat; esse enim subsistens non receptum in aliquo est illimitatum et unum tantum. Oportet igitur dicere quod, sicut forma multiplicatur per hoc quod recipitur in diversis materiis, ita esse actual multiplicatur per hoc quod recipitur in diversis essentis. QORD, q. 27, pp. 753-754.