Singular Intellection in Medieval Commentaries on Aristotle’s *De anima*

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*Introduction*

It is well known that Brentano’s characterisation of mental phenomena by their intentional character – by the ‘intentional inexistence’ of their object –[[2]](#footnote-2) set the stage for later discussions about the intentionality of singular cognition. Famously, Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell took the linguistic turn and tried to understand the intentionality of singular cognition through the analysis of the semantic properties of singular terms. Their different analyses lead to similar conclusions: Statements that involve singular terms are general statements in disguise. For Frege, on one hand, singular terms are informative of senses;[[3]](#footnote-3) for Russell, on the other hand, they are finite descriptions.[[4]](#footnote-4) Forceful reactions have ensued, holding, in myriad ways, that there are genuine singular statements,[[5]](#footnote-5) which, in one way or another, rely on singular cognition.

As several historians of medieval philosophy have already pointed out, discussions about singular cognition, and its linguistic counterpart, are by no means exclusive of contemporary philosophy.[[6]](#footnote-6) In fact, a strikingly similar discussion, to which several medieval texts bear witness, took place in the late Middle Ages.[[7]](#footnote-7) The medieval discussion carried the distinctive marks of its institutional and intellectual contexts. After Aristotle’s claim in *De anima* II.5 (417a20–25) that sensation apprehends individuals while the intellect apprehends universals, for most of the thirteenth century there was more or less general agreement that sensory cognition is singular and of individuals. So, at first the discussion was concerned exclusively with the possibility of singular intellection of concrete material individuals (henceforth ‘individuals’). But at the turn of the fourteenth-century the gap between sensory and intellectual cognition had been partly bridged: Neither the singularity of sensory cognition nor the primordiality of universal cognition were unanimously accepted and hence the discussion started to be concerned with the singular cognition of individuals in general.

The aim of this article is to partly reconstruct this medieval discussion, as it took place in Parisian question-commentaries on Aristotle’s *De anima*, so as to show the progression from the rejection of singular intellection in Siger of Brabant (d. ca. 1283) to the descriptivist positions of Duns Scotus (d. 1308) and John of Jandun (d. 1328), and finally to the singularism of John Buridan (d. ca. 1358).[[8]](#footnote-8) Scotus’ and Jandun’s positions are descriptivist in that for them the intellectual cognition of individuals amounts to a compound thought, which, although possibly succeeding to pick out only one individual, does not so necessarily. In Scotus this compound thought is the mental counterpart of a linguistic description. Buridan’s position is singularist in that he puts forward a kind of cognition, which necessarily picks out only one individual, namely the mental counterpart of expressions involving a demonstrative, e.g., ‘this man’.

All these authors accept some sort of singular intellection of individuals.[[9]](#footnote-9) They all hold that, since we know that there is a difference between individuals and universals, we must somehow know both of them. Therefore, the conundrum is not whether we can know individuals, but rather whether we can know them singularly. I will begin by showing that for Siger of Brabant the crucial obstacle to singular intellection is the idea that intellectual cognition by assimilation[[10]](#footnote-10) can only take place between metaphysically compatible agent and object. Thereafter, I will show that John of Jandun and Duns Scotus depart in fundamental ways from this constrain, but that for them the intellection of individuals is of general character nonetheless – they put forward something akin to Russell’s descriptivism. Finally, I will propose that John Buridan is a singularist in that he accepts the occurrence of genuine singular cognition: the one expressed by means of the demonstrative ‘this’.

*Siger of Brabant*

Siger of Brabant raises the question whether there is singular intellection of the individual as individual.[[11]](#footnote-11) In other words, the question Siger raises is whether there is singular intellection of Socrates that allows us to know him as Socrates and not just as an instance of man. Siger’s negative reply is a reaction to Thomas Aquinas’ position on the matter.[[12]](#footnote-12) As Camille Bérubé has shown, Thomas Aquinas is one of the first medieval authors to give an affirmative reply to the question whether there is singular intellection of the individual, and to make plain how it happens.[[13]](#footnote-13) For Aquinas our singular intellection of the individual is indirect, by way of a return (*reflexio*) of the intellect to a sensory representation – a *phantasma* – once an intelligible form – a *species intelligibilis* – has been abstracted from it. Once the intellect has abstracted and stored the intelligible form of, say, man, it cannot actually think of man without turning back to the sensory representation of some particular man,[[14]](#footnote-14) say Socrates. Thus, the intellect can know Socrates indirectly by turning back to his sensory representation by which the thought of man is activated.[[15]](#footnote-15) For Siger, the problem with this account is that the intellect can take neither directly nor indirectly the sensory representation as a cognitive object, for intellection, whether singular or universal, can in no way be concerned with something that is material.

Siger’s negative reply to his question relies, then, on the requirement that cognitive agent and object be metaphysically compatible, as well as on the crucial metaphysical disagreement between the intellect and the individual inasmuch as the intellect is fundamentally immaterial and the individual fundamentally material. He says:

It is certain that the intellect does not know the particular primarily and in itself. The reason is that the action of intellection, as any other action, is done according to the exigency of the agent form; but the form that performs the action of intellection is immaterial, abstract, one of many and not proper of this or that. Therefore, similarly that which is specifically related to the action of this form must be immaterial, abstract, one of many and not proper of this or that. The universal itself is as such. Wherefore, it is manifest that the intellect knows nothing in itself other than the universal, and it does not know particular things *qua* particular.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Thus, the impossibility of knowing the individual as individual lies in its metaphysical incompatibility with an immaterial intellect; an incompatibility with epistemological repercussions in that it prevents the cognitive assimilation between agent and object.

Let there be singular intellection of the individual. This intellection could amount to the intellect either directly assimilating the individual’s individuating form or indirectly grasping it by turning back to the sensory representation. Siger rejects both possibilities: the first one because for him there is no such individuating form;[[17]](#footnote-17) the second because the intellect can in no way know what is in an organ.[[18]](#footnote-18) In this latter point, the aforementioned metaphysical obstacle plays a crucial role, which is evident in his explanation of the abstraction of the intelligible form from the sensory representation.

According to Siger, the intelligible form, which triggers directly the act of intellection, is caused by the active power of the intellect – the agent intellect – which produces it using the sensory representation as a model.[[19]](#footnote-19) But in this productive process there is no efficiency from the part of the material realm (i.e., the sensory representations and the individuals) upon the intellect.[[20]](#footnote-20) Siger rejects, in fact, the explanations of the act of abstraction according to which the agent intellect, by an act similar to illumination, makes actually intelligible the sensible form in the material organ, which is there intelligible only potentially. While vision is possible because the visible form is endowed with the capacity to multiply itself in the organ thanks to the action of light, the same capacity cannot be attributed to the sensory representation with respect to the possible intellect.[[21]](#footnote-21) Whatever is in matter is particular and hence not endowed with intelligibility, whether actual or potential. The agent intellect must, then, produce an intelligible form which is causally disconnected from the sensory representation and related to it only by way of likeness.

Thus, Siger rejects the possibility that the intellect turns from the intelligible form back to the sensory representation by which it was caused and knows it indirectly. In the case of sensory knowledge, the act of perceiving, say, Socrates is indeed caused by Socrates and hence we perceive Socrates by means of its sensory representation on the grounds of that causal chain.[[22]](#footnote-22) But in the case of intellectual knowledge, the intellection of man is not caused by the sensory representation of an individual man but by the agent intellect and the intelligible form. Therefore, there is no way to intellectually access the individual by descending through a causal chain from the intelligible form because there is a missing chain between the intelligible form and the sensory representation.

Consequently, since through the intellection of the intelligible form we come to know that of which the intelligible form is a representation, i.e., a universal, we know the real forms that instantiate that universal only as instantiations of it:

[T]he immaterial form produces its cognition of the object insofar as it is a likeness of that object. However, since it is a likeness of its object, not under particular being, but under universal being, you can convince yourself that the real man, which is the object of the universal form, is not known under its real being, but under its universal being.[[23]](#footnote-23)

For Siger, it is simply not possible to intellectually access the individual as individual. We can only know Socrates as Socrates through sensory knowledge, and whatever intellectual knowledge we have of him will inevitably be subsumed under the concept of man. In his account, however, Siger stops short of explaining how exactly our thought of Socrates and the intellection of man can be related. As we shall see, such an explanation is given by John of Jandun but in a way that seems to part ways with Siger’s requirement that the intellect only apprehend the universal.

*John of Jandun*

The Parisian master John of Jandun suggests a way in which we have intellection of the individual in a somewhat determined way.[[24]](#footnote-24)

John mentions three conundrums of singular intellection. I will focus here only in the first two. The first conundrum concerns cognition by assimilation: If the intellect knows the individual, and given that cognition is by assimilation of a species, is this individual known by means of the species of its quiddity or of its individual form? Not of its individual form, because such a species would be material and hence could not be assimilated by the intellect. Neither of its quiddity because such a species is not a representation of the individual form:

If the intellect knows the individual, it knows it either through its own species or through the species of the quiddity … Not through its own species, which is material without qualification, because an abstract power … can only receive an abstract species, which represents universally … But the intellect is such a power. Therefore, the intellect must receive only the universal species, i.e., that which represents universally, and such a species is not proper of the individual … Nor through the species of the quiddity, because through the species of the quiddity the quiddity itself is known. Therefore, the individual is not known through it.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The second conundrum concerns singular intellection itself: Is it the same as universal intellection or different? If it is different, then their objects must be different. For them to be different the individual must have different ontological constituents than those of the universal. But if the individual had ontological constituents different than those of the universal it would not belong to a genus. John’s idea must be that if all individual things had different ontological constituents there would be one Porphyrian tree for each of them and hence it would be impossible to assign to them a species and a genus, as all individuals of the same species are in just one Porphyrian tree. If singular and universal intellection are the same, then universal intellection must have as its direct object both the universal and the individual, which contradicts the common assumption that the individual is not known directly:

Likewise, if the intellect knows the individual or the singular, such as Socrates *qua* Socrates etc., either the intellection of Socrates *qua* Socrates is the same as the intellection of man *qua* man or it is different. If it is the same, this seems implausible, because then the singular would be known directly, which seems impossible, because the singular is not known directly … as is commonly argued ... But if we say that the intellection of Socrates *qua* Socrates is different from the intellection of man *qua* man, then Socrates *qua* Socrates has some elements in him other than those related to man *qua* man, which seems implausible, because then Socrates wouldn’t be in himself and without qualification in a kind and hence he wouldn’t belong to a genus.[[26]](#footnote-26)

John’s solution is that the intellect knows the individual by means of a universal species, which both represents the individual’s quiddity and is a likeness of its sensory representation. That universal species directly triggers the intellection of the individual’s quiddity so as to be the principle of a direct cognition of such a quiddity. But it also stands in a relation of similarity to the sensory representation, so as to also make us know the individual but indirectly via the relation of likeness between the universal species and the sensory representation. Accordingly, the same universal intellection is directly referred to the quiddity and indirectly referred to the individual:

[T]he singular sense-object is known through the species of its quiddity. But that species involves two things, for it is a representation of the quiddity, and thus it is the principle of intellection of the quiddity, and it is similar to a singular phantasm, and thus through it we know the individual or the singular.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Siger and John certainly agree in that the universal species stands in a relation of similarity to the sensory representation, but John posits an indirect intellection of the individual and spells it out clearly when he raises the question whether there is no difference at all between the intellection of Socrates and that of man.

To tackle this question John asks what exactly must be understood as Socrates *qua* Socrates: Is it a man that has concrete existence or is it a man that was made concrete by an individuating form? John, as Siger, rejects the latter option, because positing such a form results invariably in a metaphysical impossibility: in an individual with two substances, with two matters or with multiple forms.[[28]](#footnote-28) Moreover, there is no evidence of a form of that sort, as individuals do not exhibit any proper operation that separates them from other individuals. In other words, there is nothing Socrates can that makes him be Socrates and not, e.g., Plato.[[29]](#footnote-29) Since there is nothing Socrates can that allows us to demarcate him from other men, it seems that there is no such thing as Socrates *qua* Socrates. It even seems to John that the intellection of Socrates *qua* Socrates is in reality no different from that of Socrates *qua* man:

[S]ocrates *qua* Socrates regardless of his accidents does not include something different from those things related to his being a man. For this reason, I think that the intellection of him as such is not really different from the intellection of him as man.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Notice, however, that John speaks here of ‘Socrates *qua* Socrates *regardless* of his accidents’. But if we take Socrates *with* his accidents, there may be a crucial difference between the intellection of Socrates *qua* man and that of him *qua* Socrates. John goes on to suggest that the former amounts to the concept of man – a simple thought which only includes man’s essential features – and that the latter amounts to the compound thought where the concept of man is linked to a number of accidents belonging to Socrates and perceived through sensation. In his words:

The substance existing individually, taken with its accidents, is known with an intellection different from that of only its quiddity, and this intellection is not individual without qualification, nor is the thing thus known … Hence, if some beings existed singularly and individually without being joined to some accidents, the concept[s] of such individual[s] would never be different from the concept of their species, as in the case of the substances separated from matter and magnitude.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Therefore, even if there is no such thing as Socrates *qua* Socrates in terms of an individuating form, there is a white man who is now sitting in front of me, and my intellection of man is certainly different from my intellection of him; different in that the latter involves representations, at first provided by sensation, of colour and location. There is even a difference between thinking of the white man sitting in front of me as a man and thinking of him as precisely Socrates, as in the former case I will only focus in the fact that he is a rational animal, while in the latter case I will *also* consider the fact that he is white and sitting in front of me. Knowing Socrates *qua* man amounts to knowing him as an instantiated essence, i.e., as an animal endowed with reasoning. Knowing him *qua* Socrates amounts to the compound descriptive thought that links the concept of man to Socrates’ accidents such as his white color, his location, etc.; accidents which, nonetheless, are not the cause of his individuality.

Would Siger have accepted John’s descriptivism, i.e., would he have accepted that the intellect can entertain such a compound thought of the individual? It is difficult to say given that Siger usually falls short of taking his positions to their ultimate consequences. What is certain is that he would have rejected John’s suggestion that universality is not a necessary condition for intelligibility, as for John we can think of the individual, although, to be sure, universally. For John it seems that universality is the mark of intellection rather than a necessary condition for intelligibility:

[T]he thing is actually universal only according to its being in the intellect; but the being of the thing in the intellect is not the formal account according to which the object primarily moves the intellect … But it is not implausible that the thing that exists singularly and corporally be grasped universally by the intellect as separated from matter; thus, even though the singular as singular is not formally universal, we, however, understand the singular according to its being outside the soul.[[32]](#footnote-32)

From this quotation, it is clear that John entertains the possibility of universal intellection of the individual. If this possibility is a necessary condition for the formation of the compound thought John suggests, we could conclude that Siger would also reject John’s descriptivism. But it seems to me that such a possibility is indeed a necessary condition, for in order to form the compound thought of the white man sitting in front of me my intellect needs access to the whiteness and the location that are encoded in my sensory representation of him; an access I believe Siger would deny.

With the suggestion that universality is not a necessary condition for intelligibility, John removes a crucial obstacle to the possibility of singular intellection. But genuine singular intellection which is not descriptive and singular *de facto*, but necessarily picking out only one individual, needs the introduction of a kind of cognition which is not, as cognition by assimilation, inevitably generalising. As we shall see, Duns Scotus comes close to going in that direction.

*Duns Scotus*

As Siger and John, Scotus[[33]](#footnote-33) also rejects the possibility of knowing the individual through the assimilation of its individuating feature, but, contrary to them, not because he thinks there is no such feature. In fact, as it is well known, Scotus posits a feature – the haecceity – that is the cause of the indivisibility of individuals into subjective parts.[[34]](#footnote-34) Nonetheless, we cannot know that feature by assimilation, as we can only know common things in that way. Let us take a closer look to this. As Giorgio Pini has shown, for Scotus the cognition by assimilation of the *per se* object of a knowing faculty involves the ability to distinguish that object from other *per se* objects of that faculty.[[35]](#footnote-35) So, if people knew my daughter Emilia singularly by assimilation of her haecceity they would be able to distinguish her from her identical twin, Lucía, which they in fact cannot. Therefore, experience shows that we do not know individuals singularly by assimilation of their haecceity, not even through sensory knowledge. Thus, in his *De anima*, Scotus says:

[T]he agent tends to assimilate itself to the patient, and this is specifically true in cognition by assimilation, but the principle of assimilation is not the singular *qua* singular … but the common nature in which the singulars agree. Hence the singular *qua* singular is a principle of action neither on the sense nor on the intellect.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In order to illustrate this, in the case of both the intellective and sensory faculties, Scotus proposes an experiment where a concrete object is replaced with another one exhibiting exactly the same external features, i.e., two patches of white or two individuals with the same figure, colour, size, place etc. What the experiment shows is that, as in the case of my twins, neither vision can distinguish between the two patches or white nor can the intellective faculty distinguish between the two individuals. This would be possible if they were known by the assimilation of their individuating feature. Therefore, we assimilate that feature neither in perception nor in intellection,[[37]](#footnote-37) so that both sensory and intellectual cognition by assimilation are of common natures and hence both general in character and unable to discriminate between their objects.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Now, regarding the intellection of the individual, Scotus puts forward a stronger version of John’s descriptivism. Scotus says that our intellection of an individual amounts to the compound thought that puts together a common nature and a number of accidents and extrinsic circumstances such as place, time, figure etc. This compound thought may perchance *happen* to pick out only one individual but it *could* *also* pick out other individuals of the same kind with exactly the same accidents and extrinsic circumstances:

Third, we can understand the concrete individual by turning the consideration of the nature towards the concrete circumstances related to it (by determining it through them), e.g., because it is here and now and with this figure and magnitude etc. But this description we can have of the singular in this life, or any concept, is not contradictory with another one, but the proper concept under the proper singularity is contradictory with another one … That mode of understanding the singular is not simple … but composed of the concepts of many circumstances added to the universal concept. And this is evident with an experiment: As we understand things, in the same way we express them and indicate them to others … hence we say: ‘Socrates is a white man, tall etc.’, as anyone has experienced.[[39]](#footnote-39)

But Scotus’ descriptivism takes a linguistic turn, as he illustrates what the compound thought of an individual is by making it the mental counterpart of the finite description of a proper name. Following the principle that we understand things as we express them,[[40]](#footnote-40) a description of Socrates, i.e., that he is a white man, tall, etc., shows that what we know of him is that he is a man with a number of accidents and extrinsic circumstances such as being white, tall, etc. But those accidents and extrinsic circumstances combined between them and with the concept of man could pick out other men than Socrates, as could the description ‘white man, tall, etc.’

More importantly, contrary to John, Scotus considers the possibility of a sort of non-assimilative cognition of the individual, i.e., intuitive cognition. Unfortunately, as Robert Pasnau has pointed out, Scotus’ general use of intuitive cognition is rather timid. And his use of it in his *De anima* commentary is no exception: Here Scotus only vaguely suggests, in a short reply to a counter-argument, that intuitive cognition, whether sensory or intellectual, amounts to a direct acquaintance with an object that is presently before us.[[41]](#footnote-41) Moreover, in his *De anima* he does not even introduce intuitive cognition as *the* way in which we might have genuine singular cognition of the individual.

To sum up, although Scotus introduces new theoretical tools into the picture such as the haecceity and intuitive cognition, we cannot have intellectual access to the haecceity in this life, not even by intuition. Therefore, his position regarding the question of singular intellection is in the big lines not too different from John’s descriptivism. But, as we shall see, by John Buridan’s time the way is already open to put forward a clear characterisation of genuine singular cognition.

*John* *Buridan*

Buridan rejects the claim, crucial in Siger’s account, that matter is an obstacle to intellectual cognition; not that he denies that the intellect is immaterial, but rather because he denies that the immateriality of the intellect determines both that its object be immaterial and that only cognition of immaterial objects can be universal. For Buridan, the cognitive modalities *universally* and *singularly* are not determined at all by the immateriality or materiality of the cognitive power and its object, which is evident from the fact that God, who is immaterial in the strictest sense of the word, does not know universally:

[T]he aforementioned opinion seems to me to fall short because it takes the intellect to know only universally, and sensation only singularly, because of the immateriality and lack of extension of the intellect and the materiality and extension of sensation. In fact, even if we grant that the intellect lacks extension and is immaterial, and that sensation has extension and is material, however from this it does not seem to follow such diverse mode of the way of apprehending, i.e., singularly and universally; which is evident because God is immaterial and without extension to the highest degree, but does not know in a universal way, because such mode of intellection is confuse and imperfect.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Buridan writes at a time when universal cognition has lost the primordiality it had in the Latin Aristotelian tradition of the thirteenth century,[[43]](#footnote-43) hence his claim that universal intellection is confuse and imperfect, or rather imperfect because confuse.

The cognitive modalities in question are rather determined as follows: A cognitive power knows universally when it knows by means of representations – species – that relate things that are similar to a lesser or higher degree in relation to features naturally related to their essences. For instance, horses and dogs have a greater similarity in their capacity to perceive than have horses and trees, and hence on the grounds of that similarity they both fall under the same genus – animal – by means of the same representation. Likewise, Plato and Socrates have a greater similarity in their capacity to reason than they have with horses, and hence they both fall under the same species – man – by means of the same representation.[[44]](#footnote-44) Evidently, in this sort of cognition the cognitive power does not have a way to discern between two things of the same kind, as the species related to it indifferently represents all individuals of the kind. Accordingly, universal cognition is characterised as the assimilation of a species that indifferently represents the things of a same kind:

[I]f we want to assign a cause, although not sufficient, because of which the intellect can know universally, even though the things known are neither universal nor exist universally, I say that this cause is that the things are known, not because they are in the intellect, but because their species, which are likenesses representing them, are in the intellect.[[45]](#footnote-45)

In turn, Buridan tells us, a cognitive power knows singularly when it knows in the mode of what exists in the view of the knowing subject.[[46]](#footnote-46) The very name of this modality – ‘what exists in the view of the knowing subject’ – may suggest at first that Buridan’s demarcation between universal and singular cognition relies on a division of cognitive mechanisms into assimilation of species and direct acquaintance. But things are not that simple.

Buridan’s first attempt to characterise singular cognition turns to the case of the external senses, where clearly cognition happens through a sensory representation – a sensible species – and hence by assimilation:

[T]he external sense, because it knows the sense-object in the mode of what exists in its view, according to a certain place (even though sometimes we judge falsely about the place because of the reflection of the species), knows it singularly or concretely, as this or that.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Contrary to Scotus, then, for Buridan the cognition by assimilation of a sensible species is singular. Moreover, as Gyula Klima has suggested, singular cognition also includes in its scope objects that are not presently available to the cognitive power, e.g., the objects of dreams and of memory, as well as objects that could never be available to it, e.g., fictions:

Likewise, also in dreams we conceive things singularly, because [we conceive them] in the mode of what exists in our view; whence in our view they appear as concrete; but often those concepts are fictitious, because they are not in agreement with an external thing. Indeed, it is not implausible that there are some singular fictitious concepts as there are common ones.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Presumably, singular cognition can refer to objects that are not present and to objects that do not exist at all. Therefore, the difference between universal and singular cognition does not seem to be simply a difference of cognitive mechanism, i.e., a difference between assimilation and direct acquaintance.

However, in his questions on the *De anima,* Buridan is unequivocal in that singular cognition without qualification (*simpliciter*) is only concerned with objects with which the cognitive power has or has had direct acquaintance. In his *De anima*, then, he seems to be introducing a qualification to the singular cognition by assimilation described in the two passages above. Take, for instance, Aristotle, whom we have never met and hence, strictly speaking, we do not know in the mode of what exists in our view. For Buridan, we do not know Aristotle singularly without qualification, but rather in the same way suggested by Scotus’ descriptivism, i.e., by means of the compound thought that corresponds to a description of the proper name ‘Aristotle’; a concept by means of which I cannot distinguish Aristotle from other men, as it could apply to any other man exhibiting the same features:

[W]e must believe that you cannot know Aristotle singularly without qualification, because you never knew him in the mode of what exists in your view. Hence, it is true that you know singularly this word ‘Aristotle’ … because you hear it in the mode of what exists in the range of your hearing. But you don’t know the thing signified by that name by a mode properly and without qualification singular, because you never know distinctly Aristotle from Plato or Robert, but only by a description made to you by others, as that Aristotle was a man, born in Greece, disciple of Plato, consultant of King Alexander, who wrote these books etc. But that description is not according to a concept singular without qualification, because if we posit, either truly or falsely, that someone else had similar conditions, that description would fit both of them, and you don’t know more the one than the other with that description.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Clearly, a proper name as ‘Aristotle’,[[50]](#footnote-50) when used by someone who has never been acquainted with Aristotle does not correspond to a concept that necessarily picks out only the Greek philosopher. To be sure, we can think of Aristotle teaching at the Lyceum, and talk of a time when Aristotle was teaching at the Lyceum, but neither that thinking of Aristotle is properly singular, nor the corresponding use of the name ‘Aristotle’. Even though the name ‘Aristotle’ for those who gave it and those who knew Aristotle was properly singular, it is not singular for us, as we do not use it in correspondence with a concept that necessarily picks out only that one person:

‘[S]ocrates’, ‘Plato’, ‘Aristotle’ etc. were properly singular [terms] with corresponding singular concepts without qualification, because they were imposed in order to signify things conceived in the mode of what exists in the view by those who imposed [them], who said ‘this or that boy is called with the proper name “Socrates”’. But to those who didn’t see them, these names are not singular any longer, nor do they have singular concepts without qualification corresponding to them.[[51]](#footnote-51)

But how to square this with the passages above where Buridan talks about singular cognition of things that do not exist at all? For Klima the problem does not arise because ‘… the singularity of a cognitive act is due to its carrying distinctive information of singulars as such from which it is unable to abstract’;[[52]](#footnote-52) and the fact that this distinctive information results from direct acquaintance with the singular is not crucial for him.[[53]](#footnote-53) However, this solution would imply that the thought corresponding to a description of Aristotle as a ‘white man, born in Greece, disciple of Plato, consultant of King Alexander, who wrote these books’ could be singular without qualification, which Buridan explicitly denies. To be true, that description does not include location; but even if we added ‘who taught at the Lyceum’, i.e., a reference to a location, the description would still not pick out necessarily only the relevant Aristotle, because being at the Lyceum is also a general feature and we still did not get it by being directly acquainted with Aristotle.

I submit that, in order to explain why there is for Buridan a difference between the thought corresponding to the use of ‘Aristotle’ by those who met him and the one corresponding to its use by us, who did not meet him, we must posit a singular cognition *stricto sensu,* i.e., a sort of cognition that necessarily picks out one and only one individual. Singular cognition in this sense must come about by assimilation via a non-abstractive sensory representation (i.e., non-abstractive in that a kind, say, man, is not separated from its accidental circumstances, e.g., colour, size, location etc.) directly caused by an object that at some time *t* is (or was) experientially available to the cognitive power. The important thing here is not that singular cognition *stricto sensu* is via a non-abstractive sensory representation which encodes location etc., but rather the fact that the individual *is or was at some t experientially available* to the cognitive power; for otherwise we could not explain what demarcates the thoughts corresponding to the proper and the improper uses of a singular term. Singular cognition *stricto sensu* explains why sensory cognition, as well as acts of memory, are for Buridan necessarily singular. Fictitious singular thoughts and some cases of dreaming, in turn, would be singular improper in that, although they appear to us as in the mode of what is in our view, they do not result from experiential acquaintance with anything.

This characterisation of singular cognition *stricto sensu* is further supported by Buridan’s claim that, most properly, only demonstrative pronouns express singular cognition, as only they unequivocally express the acquaintance with a present object:

Most properly the mode of ‘this white’ … has singular concepts corresponding to it because this demonstrative pronoun ‘this’ is not given properly according to its mode of signifying unless there is a cognition of the thing in the mode of what exists in the view of the cognitive subject.[[54]](#footnote-54)

And then:

This description [of Aristotle] happens to be singular because it never agrees with another man. But it is not singular, because it could agree with other men, for it wouldn’t be impossible that there was another man as such. But when I say: ‘this man’, it is impossible that another man is ‘this man’.[[55]](#footnote-55)

What makes it impossible that the man I am point to while saying ‘this man’ is another man? Presumably, the fact that this man is now, here, directly available to my perceptual organs, occupying a space that, under normal circumstances, could not be occupied by someone else. Simply put, the use of ‘this’ unequivocally expresses the availability to my cognitive powers of the thing I am talking about so as to make it the optimal marker of cognitive singularity.

Consequently, the mental counterpart of the proper name ‘Aristotle’, when used by someone who has never met him, is nothing but a compound thought akin to those we found in John and Scotus, which, as they readily accept, are of general nature. Thus, genuine singular cognition (i.e., *stricto sensu*) must be ultimately characterised by the experiential availability, past or present, of an existing object to our cognitive powers. Accordingly, the singular cognition of fictional entities is singular only in a weaker sense, but the one I have of someone I have met, when she is not around, is singular in the strict sense.[[56]](#footnote-56) I submit, then, that with singular cognition *stricto sensu,* Buridan puts forward a singularist position that has no precedent in Parisian commentaries on Aristotle’s *De anima*: Genuine singular cognition, the one which necessarily picks out one and only one individual and which corresponds to the proper use of demonstratives, is in Buridan the one that comes about by the assimilation of a non-abstractive sensory representation directly caused by an object that at some time *t* is (or was) experientially available to the relevant cognitive power.

*Conclusion*

As we have seen, the metaphysical incompatibility between the intellect and the material world prevented Siger of Brabant from accepting any sort of intellectual cognition of the singular *qua* singular, so as to present us with a sort of Fregean way to explain our intellectual access to the external world: That access is always mediated by general concepts. We also saw Siger’s Averroist fellow, John of Jandun moving to a more descriptivist explanation: Individuals can surely be known in a more determined way through a compound thought that adds determining circumstances to a general concept. Both Scotus and Buridan made it clear that such a compound, descriptive, thought can only incidentally single out only one individual, as in principle it can also be applied to others.

In order to account for genuine singular cognition, Scotus flirts timidly with the idea of intuitive cognition, but does not embrace it fully. Buridan’s account, on the contrary, fits the bill, for it puts forward a cognitive mechanism, proper of singular cognition *simpliciter,* that merges assimilation through a non-abstractive species and the direct acquaintance, past or present, with the external world. To be sure, singular cognition *stricto sensu* can be rather vague, as it may not include identifying information about the object: The thought we express with ‘this man’ clearly does not tell us much about the man with which it is uniquely linked. So, in some sense, Buridan’s account does not seem to be too distant from the one put forward recently by Kent Bach,[[57]](#footnote-57) according to which we entertain singular thoughts by means of non-descriptional modes of presentation which connect us to an object in a causal-historical fashion involving a chain of representations that originates with a perception of the object. In Bach’s account, as in Buridan’s, the object of genuine singular cognition is determined, not by its satisfaction of a description, but by its being experientially connected to it.

1. This article was written with the financial support of Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation and Riksbanken Jubileumsfond. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gottlob Frege, ‘Sense and Reference’, *The Philosophical Review* 57/3 (1948): 209–230. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bertrand Russell, ‘On Denoting’, *Mind* 14/56 (1905): 479–493. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, e.g., David Kaplan, ‘Demonstratives’, in J. Almog, J. Perry, and H. Wettstein eds., *Themes from Kaplan*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977/1989, pp. 481–504; John Perry, ‘Frege on Demonstratives’, *Philosophical Review* 86 (1977): 474–497. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, e.g., Peter King, ‘Thinking about Things: Singular Thought in the Middle Ages’, in Gyula Klima ed., *Intentionality, Cognition, and Mental Representation in Medieval Philosophy*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2015, pp. 104–121; the contributions in Part 1 of Gyula Klima and Alexander Hall eds., *The Daemonic Temptations of Medieval Nominalism,* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011; Henrik Lagerlund, ‘Vague Concepts and Singular Terms in a Buridanian Language’, in Gyula Klima and Alexander Hall eds., *Mental Representation*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, pp. 33–46; Susan Brower-Toland, ‘Intuition, Externalism and Direct Reference in Ockham’, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 4 (2007): 317–335; and Russell Friedman, ‘Peter Auriol on Intellectual Cognition of Singulars’, *Vivarium* 38/1 (2000): 177–193. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For the medieval discussion in a theological setting, where it is related to the possibility that God and angels know singulars, see Camille Bérubé, *La connaissance de l’individuel au moyen âge*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1964. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I will focus on Parisian question-commentaries between Siger of Brabant and John Buridan because the development of the discussion in this literary and institutional framework has not been studied – the only Parisian master considered in Bérubé’s seminal work is Siger of Brabant, to whom only two pages are devoted. Moreover, the studies about Buridan do not put him in the literary and institutional context where he belongs. Since Thomas Aquinas’s position has been sufficiently studied, this article will start with Siger’s reaction to Aquinas. Other authors, e.g., Radulphus Brito, won’t be considered because their positions do not represent a point of inflexion in the discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Siger of Brabant, *In De an.* III [i.e., *Quaestiones in tertium De anima,* ed. Bernardo Bazán, Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1972], 66–67: ‘Nec dico quod particulare nullo modo cognoscatur ab intellectu. Hoc contingit dicenti quod universale aliud sit a singulari …’. John of Jandun, *In De an.* [i.e., *Super libros Aristotelis De anima,* Venice, 1552], q. 22: ‘De conclusione vero huius quaestionis non est magna diversitas inter doctores solemnes. Omnes enim concedunt quod ipsum individuum seu singulare sensibile potest intelligi, sed de modo intelligendi sunt difficultates, ut videbitur.’ Duns Scotus, *In De an.* [i.e. *Quaestiones super secundum et tertium De anima*, eds. Bernardo Bazán et al., Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006], 239: ‘… aliquo modo cognoscimus ipsum (i.e. singulare) reflectendo, ut dictum est.’ John Buridan, *In De an.* [i.e., *Quaestiones super librum De anima secundum tertiam lecturam*, eds. Peter Sobol, Jack Zupko et al., forthcoming], l. III, q. 8, § 19: ‘… virtus ponens convenientiam vel differentiam inter aliquam oportet quod ambo ea cognoscat ita etiam cum ponamus differentiam inter universalem et singularem …’. I’d like to thank the editors of Buridan’s text for allowing me to use their forthcoming edition in this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cognition by assimilation captures the idea that during the act of cognition agent and object become *alike*. In the late middle ages, the cognitive process of assimilation, of the cognitive agent becoming like the object, is often explained by means of the reception in the soul of sensible or intelligible species which represent the relevant features of external things. Cognition of this sort is more or less abstractive, in that the species through which it comes about is at least separated from the matter of external objects (e.g., visible species) and in the most extreme case separated from all individuating circumstances (i.e., intelligible species). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Siger of Brabant, *In De an.* III, q. 18: *Utrum intellectus noster cognoscat particulare particulariter,* ed. Bazán, 64–69. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Bérubé, *La connaissance de l’individuel,* p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Bérubé, *La connaissance de l’individuel,* p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This is what Giorgio Pini calls an occurrent thought in his ‘Aquinas versus Scotus on the Cognition of Singulars’, in Klima and Hall eds., *The Daemonic Temptations*, pp. 45–56. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cf., e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I, Iae, q. 85, a.1: ‘Unde intellectus noster directe non est cognoscitivus nisi universalium. Indirecte autem, et quasi per quandam reflexionem, potest cognoscere singulare, quia, sicut supra dictum est, etiam postquam species intelligibiles abstrahit, non potest secundum eas actu intelligere nisi convertendo se ad phantasmata, in quibus species intelligibiles intelligit, ut dicitur in III de Anima. Sic igitur ipsum universale per speciem intelligibilem directe intelligit; indirecte autem singularia, quorum sunt phantasmata.’ For exhaustive analyses of singular thought in Aquinas, see Bérubé, *La connaissance de l’individuel*, pp. 42–64; King, ‘Thinking about Things’; and Adam Wood, ‘Transduction and Singular Cognition in Thomas Aquinas’, in Klima and Hall eds. *The Daemonic Temptations*, pp. 11–24. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Siger of Brabant, *In De an.* III: 65: ‘Certum est quod intellectus primo et per se particulare non cognoscit. Cuius ratio est: actio enim intelligendi, sicut et quaelibet alia actio, fit secundum exigentiam formae agentis; forma autem quae agit actionem intelligendi est immaterialis, abstracta, una plurium, nec huius est ita quod non alterius. Ergo similiter et illud quod specificat actionem huiusmodi formae, debet esse immateriale, abstractum, unum plurium, nec debet esse huius ita quod non alterius. Huiusmodi autem est ipsum universale. Quare manifestum est quod intellectus nihil per se intelligit nisi universale, nec particularia cognoscit secundum quod particularia.’ All translations are mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Cf. Siger of Brabant, *In De an.* III: 67: ‘Unde dicit Aristoteles quod particulare non habet proprium nomen, nec propriam formam, nec propriam cognitionem.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cf. Siger of Brabant, *In De an.* III: 66: ‘Ideo credo et dico quod intellectus … particulare particulariter non intelligit, nec primo nec ex consequenti. Intellectus enim noster non est <talis> ut intelligat per organum, sed separatus est secundum utramque partem suae virtutis, et secundum possibilem et secundum agentem’. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cf. Siger of Brabant, *In De an.* III:50: ‘… dico quod intellectus agens intelligibilia universalia abstracta actu facit in intellectu possibili. Unde dico quod, praesentibus imaginatis intentionibus in organo phantasiae, facit intellectus agens intentiones universales intentionibus imaginatis … anima rationalis duo facit: agit enim rationes rerum intelligendi universales et postmodum recipit illas et intelligit eas.’ Cf. q.6, ed. Bazán, 20: ‘Cum igitur intellectus de se sit intelligibilis actu et se ipsum actu intelligens, manifestum quod in ipso non est materia. Si enim in ipso esset materia, non esse intelligibilis actu, sed solum in potentia.’ For intellection and abstraction in Siger of Brabant, see Bernardo Bazán, *La noétique de Siger de Brabant*, Paris: Vrin, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cf. Siger of Brabant, *In De an.* III: 40: ‘… intellectus possibilis non est <naturae> materialis ad comprehensionem intelligibilium, quia plus aguntur intelligibilia ab intellectu quam agatur <intellectus> ab intelligibilibus.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cf. Siger of Brabant, *In De an.* III:49: ‘Quidam … imaginantur quod, <sicut> lumen propter sui irradiationem potentia colores facit actu colores, sic intellectus agens imaginatas intentiones existentes in organo phantasiae illustrando irradiat, et sic ipsas facit actu intelligibiles. Sed hoc nihil est, dictum intellectum irradiare et illuminare, immo falsum est et ab ignorante dictum. Praeterea, quantumcumque lumen colorem irradiet, tamen numquam color abstraheretur quantum ad esse verum quod habet in obiecto, nisi haberet esse intentionale. Ergo similiter quantumcumque intellectus intentiones imaginatas irradiet, numquam tamen abstrahuntur per irradiationem.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Cf. Siger of Brabant, *In De an.* III: 67–68: ‘Alia via est, qua ponitur quod intellectus intelligat particulare particulariter ex consequenti. Dicitur enim quod, licet forma primo cognita ab intellectu sit universalis et immaterialis, ipsa tamen causatur a phantasmatibus particularibus. Unde per hoc quod ipsa causatur a particularibus, per hoc intellectus cognoscit particulare. Et ponitur unum simile. Sensibile per se et primo est <cognoscibile> secundum quod est in organo, sed cum illud causatur ab esse quod habet in obiecto, ideo sensus non solum cognoscit sensibile in organo, sed ipsum etiam cognoscit in obiecto. … Dicitur : forma immaterialis, abstracta, non solum facit cognitionem sui in intellectu, sed etiam facit cognitionem illius, cuius est species, a quo est causatur tamquam a suo obiecto. Unde, cum forma immaterialis sit in <forma> reali tamquam in obiecto a quo causatur, ideo, <si> cognoscatur forma universalis, cognoscitur etiam forma realis.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Siger of Brabant, *In De an.* III: 68: ‘… forma immaterialis cognitionem sui obiecti facit secundum quod est similitudo obiecti. Cum enim forma (tamen enim vero *Bazán*: cum enim forma *Bérubé*), cum ipsa sit similitudo sui obiecti non sub esse particulari, <sed sub esse universali>, ex hoc potes <te> convincere (convincere *Bazán*: te convincere *Bérubé*) quod homo realis, quod est obiectum formae universalis, cognoscitur non sub reali esse, sed sub esse universali.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For a comprehensive study of John of Jandun’s theories of intellect and knowledge, see Jean-Baptiste Brenet, *Transfers du sujet. La noétique d’Averroès selon Jean de Jandun*, Paris: Vrin, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. John of Jandun, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 22: ‘Si intellectus intelligit individuum, aut intelligit ipsum per speciem eius propriam, aut per speciem quidditatis ... Non per speciem propriam, quae est simpliciter materialis, quia virtus abstracta … non est nata recipere nisi speciem abstractam et universaliter repraesentatem ... Sed intellectus autem est huiusmodi virtus. Ergo intellectus non debet recipere nisi speciem universalem, scilicet universaliter repraesentatem, et talis non est species propria individui ... Nec per speciem quidditatis, quia per speciem quidditatis intelligitur ipsa quidditas. Ergo per eam non intelligitur individuum’. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. John of Jandun, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 22: ‘Item, si intellectus intelligeret individuum seu singulare, ut Socrates secundum quod Socrates et huiusmodi, aut intellectio Socratis secundum Socrates est eadem cum intellectione hominis secundum quod homo, aut alia et diversa. Si eadem, hoc videtur inconveniens, quia tunc singulare directe intelligeretur, quod videtur impossibile, quia singulare non intelligitur directe … ut communiter allegatur … Si autem dicatur quod intellectio Socratis secundum Socrates sit alia ab intellectione hominis secundum quod homo, tunc Socrates secundum quod Socrates habet aliqua in se praeter ea quae pertinent ad hominem inquantum homo, quod videtur inconveniens, quia sic Socrates non esset quid unum simpliciter et per se et per consequens non esset in genere’. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. John of Jandun, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 22: ‘… singulare sensibilem intelligitur per speciem eius quidditatis. Sed illa species habet in se duo: ipsa enim est repraesentativa quidditatis, et sic est principium intelligendi quidditatem; et est conformis alicui fantasmati singulari, et sic per eam intelligitur individuum vel singulare’. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Cf. John of Jandun, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 22: ‘Quid igitur erit illud additum in Socrate, aut substantia aut accidens? Non est accidens, quia iam loquimur de Socrate circumscriptis per intellectum omnibus accidentibus. Si vero diceretur quod est substantia, tunc in Socrate erit aliqua substantia praeter eam quae est homo … quod est absurdum … Et iterum, illa substantia quam includeret Socrates ultra hominem, aut est materia, quod est absurdum, quia una substantia naturalis sufficit uno individuo, aut est forma substantialis, quod est contra communem doctrinam, quae non ponit in uno individuo nisi unam formam substantialem, et hoc est contra naturam rei, ut videtur.’ John of Jandun belongs to a tradition of Parisian masters of Arts, which rejects as anti-Aristotelian the multiplicity of substantial forms. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Cf. John of Jandun, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 22: ‘Item, quae esset operatio propria illius formae individualis diversa ab operatione animae humanae? Non posset assignari nisi forte fingeretur.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. John of Jandun, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 22: ‘… Socrates secundum quod Socrates circumscriptis per intellectum omnibus accidentibus non includit rem aliquam ultra ea quae sibi debentur ad hoc quod sit homo. Et propter hoc credo quod eius intellectio ut sic non sit alia realiter ab eius intellectione secundum quod homo.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. John of Jandun, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 22: ‘… substantia individualiter existens sumpta cum suis accidentibus intelligitur intellectione alia ab intellectione solius quidditatis, et haec intellectio non est simpliciter una et individualis, sicut nec res quae sic intelligitur … Unde si sunt aliqua entia individualiter vel singulariter existentia quae non sunt coniuncta aliquibus accidentibus, nunquam conceptus talis individui est alius a conceptu suae speciei, sicut in substantiis separatis a materia et a magnitudine.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. John of Jandun, *In De an.*,l. III, q. 22: ‘… res non est actu universalis, nisi secundum esse in intellectu; esse autem rei in intellectu non est formalis ratio obiecti ad movendum primo ipsum intellectum … Modo nullum inconveniens est quod res quae singulariter existit et corporaliter comprehendatur universaliter per intellectum separatam a materia, sic quamvis singulare non sit universale formaliter ut singulare est tamen illud quod est singulare secundum esse extra animam intelligitur’. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For Scotus on singular thought, see also Bérubé, *La connaissance de l’individuel*, pp. 134–175; Giorgio Pini, ‘Aquinas versus Scotus on the Cognition of Singulars’, in Klima and Hall eds., *The Daemonic Temptations*, pp. 45–56. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See, e.g., Peter King, ‘Duns Scotus on the Common Nature and the Individual Differentia’, *Philosophical Topics* 20 (1992): 50–76; Richard Cross, ‘Medieval Theories of Haecceity’, The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2014 Edition, Edward N. Zalta ed., https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/medieval-haecceity/. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See Giorgio Pini, ‘Scotus on the Objects of Cognitive Acts’, *Franciscan Studies* 66 (2008): 281–315. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Duns Scotus, *In De an.*: 235: ‘… agens intendit assimilare patiens sibi, et hoc specialiter est verum in cognitione quae fit per assimilationem; sed principium assimilandi non est singulare ut singulare est … sed magis natura communis in qua singularia conveniunt; igitur singulare ut singulare non est principium agendi nec in sensu nec in intellectu.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Cf. Duns Scotus, *In De an.*: 234: ‘… nulla potentia nostra, nec intellectiva nec sensitiva, potest cognoscere singulare sub propria ratione singularitatis. Quia potentia cognoscens aliquod obiectum sub propria ratione potest ipsum cognoscere et ab aliis distinguere, circumscripto quocumque alio non habente illam rationem … nec sensu nec intellectu possumus distinguere inter duo singularia, circumscripta distinctione accidentali quae est per locum, figuram, tempus, magnitudinem, colorem, et sic de aliis. Exemplum: si ponantur visui duo alba vel intellectui duo singularia quaecumque quae in rei veritate essent distincta essentialiter, si tamen haberent omnino consimilia accidentia ut locum … et haberent figuram omnino consimilem et magnitudinem et colorem et sic de aliis, nec intellectus nec sensus inter illa distingueret, sed iudicaret esse unum; igitur neutrum eorum cognoscit quodlibet illorum singularium secundum propriam rationem singularitatis.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See Pini, ‘Scotus on the Objects of Cognitive Acts’, 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Duns Scotus, *In De an.*: 237–238: ‘… tertio, reflectendo considerationem naturae ad circumstantias signatas ad ipsam (per illas determinando) individuum signatum possumus intelligere, utpote quia est hic et nunc et cum tali figura et magnitudine et colore et ceteris. Descriptio autem talis quam possumus habere in via de singulari, vel conceptus quicumque, non repugnat contradictorie, sed conceptus proprius sub propria singularitate alteri repugnat … Dictus autem modus intelligendi singulare non est simplex … sed est compositus ex conceptibus multarum circumstantiarum universali conceptui additarum. Et hoc patet experimento: sicut enim res intelligimus, sic eas significamus et aliis exprimimus … Unde dicimus “Socrates est unus homo albus, crispus, longus, blaesus” et huiusmodi, ut quilibet experitur in seipso et ceteris.’ This is the third way in which species can represent individuals. In the first way, they can represent individuals as vague individuals, e.g., when we see a man from afar and we know it is an individual thing but we don’t know yet it is a man. In the second way, the can represent individuals as instances of a common nature, e.g., when an individual man is closer so that we recognise him as a man, but still cannot tell which man. In the third way, the one in the quotation, species can represent determined individuals, e.g., when a man is close enough so that we can give a determining description of him. For this, see Deborah Black, ‘Avicenna’s “Vague Individual” and its Impact on Medieval Latin Philosophy’, in Robert Wisnovsky et al. eds., *Vehicles of Transmission, Translation, and Transformation in Medieval Textual Culture*, Leiden: Brill, 2011, pp. 259–292. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. For this principle, see Jennifer Ashworth, ‘Aquinas, Scotus and Others on Naming, Knowing and the Origin of Language’, in Jakob Fink, Heine Hansen and Ana María Mora-Márquez, *Logic and Language in the Middle Ages. A Volume in Honour of Sten Ebbesen,* Leiden: Brill, 2013, pp. 257–272. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Cf. Duns Scotus, *In De an.*: 236: ‘… sensus tantum cognoscit singulare intuitive et non abstractive, sed intellectus utroque modo’. Cf. *Op. Ox*. 4, d. 49, q. 12, n. 6, where Scotus tells us that abstractive and intuitive cognition differ in kind, because in each case a different object causes the act. In the former, the cause is a species similar to the object, in the latter, the cause is the object in its own right. See also Robert Pasnau, ‘Cognition’, in Thomas Williams ed., *Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 285–311. Scotus admits that we have intuitive sensory cognition in this life, i.e., the sensory knowledge in which we grasp present sense-objects that exist as existent and present; he, however, is hesitant about intuitive intellectual cognition of the individual in this life; see Pini, ‘Scotus on the Objects of Cognitive Acts’, 311–314. For intuitive cognition, see Bérubé, *La connaissance de l’individuel*, pp. 176–187. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. John Buridan, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 8, § 23: ‘… dicta opinio apparet mihi deficere in assignando tantum quod intellectus cognoscit universaliter et sensus non nisi singulariter, scilicet quod hoc est propter immaterialitatem et inextensionem intellectus, et propter materialitatem et extensionem sensus. Nam licet concederetur intellectus inextensus et immaterialis et sensus extensus et materialis, tamen ex hoc non videtur sequi talis modus diversus modi apprehendi, scilicet singulariter et universaliter, quod apparet quia Deus est summa immaterialis et inextensus, non tamen intelligit modo universali, quia talis modus intelligendi est confusus et imperfectus.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. For an exhaustive analysis of the change in the Franciscan tradition from a primordiality of universal intellection in Bonaventure to that of singular intellection in Ockham, see Bérubé, *La connaissance de l’individuel.* Bérubé’s thesis is that precisely the concern that God and other immaterial substances could not now individuals singularly led the Franciscan tradition to posit the unequivocal primordiality of singular intellection. Buridan lives in a time when the primordiality of singular intellection has already taken the upper hand. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Cf. John Buridan, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 8, § 26: ‘Tunc igitur accipimus quod res extra animam singulariter et diversim existens de eadem specie vel eodem genere habent ex natura sui similitudinem seu convenientiam essentialem maiorem quam illae quae sunt diversarum specierum et diversorum generum … quod propter hoc patet quia in ipsis inveniuntur accidentia naturaliter convenientia essentiis eorum, magis similia et magis convenientia in hiis quae sunt eiusdem generis vel speciei quam in aliis.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. John Buridan, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 8, § 25: ‘Si igitur volumus assignare causam unam, licet non sufficientem, quare intellectus potest intelligere universaliter, quamvis res intellectae nec universaliter existant nec sint universales, ego dico quod haec causa quia res intelliguntur non per hoc quod ipsae sint in intellectu, sed quia species earum, quae sunt similitudines representativae earum, sunt in intellectu.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Cf. John Buridan, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 8, § 28: ‘Ad solvendum illas dubitationes, debemus ex septimo Metaphysicae videre modum percipiendi rem singulariter, scilicet quod oportet eam percipere per modum existentis in prospectu cognoscentis.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. John Buridan, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 8, § 28: ‘Sensus igitur exterior quia cognoscit sensibile per modum existentis in prospectu suo secundum certum situm, licet aliquando false iudicaremus de situ propter reflexionem specierum, ideo cognoscit ipsum singulariter vel signate, ut hoc vel illud.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. John Buridan, *In Metaphysicam,* l. VII, q. 20: ‘Similiter etiam in somnio bene res concipimus singulariter, quia per modum existentium in conspectu nostro, unde apparent nobis signatae in conspectu nostro, sed saepe illi conceptus sunt ficti, quia non habent in re extra convenientem correspondentiam. Non est enim inconveniens quod sint conceptus singulares ficti sicut et communes.’ [In: *Quaestiones argutissimae in Metaphysicam Aristotelis*, Paris: 1518. Cf. Gyula Klima, ‘The Medieval Problem of Singulars’, in Klima and Hall eds., *The Daemonic Temptations,* pp. 57–80, at p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. John Buridan, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 8, § 29: ‘… esse credendum quod tu non potest cognoscere Aristotelem per modum simpliciter singularem, quia numquam novisti eum per modum existentis in prospectu tuo. Unde verum est quod tu bene cognoscis singulariter hanc vocem Aristoteles … quia audis eam per modum existentis in prospectu auditus tui. Sed rem significatam isto nomine tu non cognoscis per modum simpliciter et proprie singularem, quia tu numquam cognoscis distincte Aristotelem a Platone vel Roberto, nisi per circumlocutionem tibi factam ab aliquibus, ut quod Aristoteles fuit unus homo natus in Graecia, discipulus Platonis, consultor regis Alexandri, qui composuit tales libros etc. Modo talis circumlocutio non est secundum conceptum simpliciter singularem, quia ponamus, sive sit verum sive sit falsum, quod unus alter habuit consimiles conditiones, illa circumlocutio ita conveniret illi sicut isti, nec magis per talem locutionem intelligis unum quam alium.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. For singular terms in Buridan, see Lagerlund, ‘Singular Terms and Vague Concepts…’; Jennifer Ashworth, ‘Singular Terms and Singular Concepts: From Buridan to the Early Sixteenth Century’, in Sten Ebbesen and Russell Friedman eds., *John Buridan and Beyond: Topics in the Language Sciences, 1300–1700*, Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, pp. 121–151; Jennifer Ashworth, ‘Medieval Theories of Singular Terms’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2015) – https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/singular-terms-medieval/#BurTheSinTer .  [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. John Buridan, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 8, § 30: ‘… Socrates, Plato, Aristoteles etc., fuerunt proprie singulares habentes conceptus simpliciter singulares sibi correspondentes, quia imponebantur ad significandum res conceptas per modum existentium in prospectu imponentium, qui dicebant hoc vel hic puer vocetur nomine proprio Socrates. Sed illa nomina aliis qui non viderunt illos, non sunt iam singularia, nec habentia conceptus correspondentes simpliciter singulares.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Klima, ‘The Medieval Problem of Singulars’, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Klima says [in ‘The Medieval Problem of Singulars’, at p. 78] that ‘Buridan took a step back, in the direction of Aquinas, and attributed the singularity of cognitive acts not to their causal link alone, but to their content resulting from that causal link.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. John Buridan, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 8, § 29: ‘Modo proprissime, ille modus hoc album, hoc veniens etc. habet conceptus singulares sibi correspondentes quia illud pronomen demonstrativum ‘hoc’ non apponitur bene secundum modum significandi nisi sit cognitio rei per modum existentis in prospectu cognoscentis.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. John Buridan, *In De an.,* l. III, q. 8, § 30: ‘Haec enim circumlocutio sic dicitur singularis quia numquam convenit nisi solo homini. Sed non est singularis, quoniam esset innata aliis convenire, non enim fuisset impossibile quod fuisset alius talis. Sed cum dico “hic homo”, impossibile est quod alius sit hoc homo.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Cf. John Buridan, *In Metaphysicam,* l. VII, q. 20: ‘Verum est quod per memoriam bene concipimus rem singulariter per hoc quod memoramur hoc fuisse in prospectu cognoscentis, et per talem modum illud cognovisse. Et sic memorando de Sorte quem vidi, iterum concipio ipsum singulariter, licet ipsum non videam. Sed si eum non vidissem, non possem de eo formare conceptum supponentem pro eo solo nisi per congregationem circumstantiarum communium.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Kent Bach, ‘Getting a Thing into a Thought’, in Robin Jeshion ed., *New Essays on Singular Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 39–66. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)