

# Introduction



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Some philosophical problems, by virtue of their importance relative to a philosophical system, are widely discussed by those safely within the parameters of the system—solutions are contested, distinctions are generated, and the promise of eventual resolution is entertained by all. Once the system comes under attack, however, leading either to its piecemeal or even wholesale rejection, those problems formerly of consummate importance may reduce to minor irritants mainly of antiquarian interest. Examples of this phenomenon are easy to find even, or perhaps especially, in our own century: Witness, to take just one case, the disappearance in the literature of discussions as to whether two persons can experience the same sense datum, a worry of underwhelming significance once the theory of sense data has been discarded and one that for the most part is of concern only to the historian of early twentieth-century philosophy.

One issue constituting the theme of this volume apparently shares the same fate, namely, the problem of individuation (or, more accurately, the cluster of related problems discussed under that heading) whose contending solutions were debated with much vigor during the medieval era,<sup>1</sup> but to which only passing reference is made by philosophers in the early modern period.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while Francisco Suárez in 1597 devotes 150 pages to the problem of individuation in his *Disputationes metaphysicae*,<sup>3</sup> the seminal work in early modern philosophy appearing a mere forty-four years later, Descartes's *Meditations*, not only fails to advance Suárez's discussion but refuses to acknowledge the existence of the problem. Although this neglect is rectified to an extent elsewhere in Descartes and in the later Cartesians, the problem of individuation is never restored by the Cartesians to the place of prominence it formerly held in medieval philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

And when one turns to the empiricists the situation is, if anything, even more peculiar: the problem of individuation is duly noted and then resolved, usually within the confines of a single sentence.

"All Things, that exist, being Particulars . . ."5

"But it is an universally received maxim, that *every thing which exists, is particular.*"6

"'tis a principle generally receiv'd in philosophy, that every thing in nature is individual."7

What was once a matter of intense debate is now dismissed by appealing to a maxim or received principle not meriting discussion.

An abrupt change in philosophical fashion of this magnitude is perforce a matter of interest to the historian of philosophy on at least two counts. First, one concerned with intellectual history, an enterprise broader than the pursuit of answers to philosophical questions, may inquire into the reasons why a philosophical problem no longer attracts widespread interest. In the present case the reasons no doubt involve a combination of factors, ranging from a redirection of philosophical preoccupation induced by the emergence of the New Science to a simple belief that the problem of individuation need no longer be discussed at length since it had long ago been solved.<sup>8</sup> Second, since philosophers in the early modern period were for the most part systematic, presenting ontologies rivaling their medieval counterparts in comprehensiveness if not in detail, one can ask how within their systems the problem of individuation could or should have been resolved even where explicit discussion of the issue is minimal.

While both inquiries have a role to play in developing our understanding of early modern philosophy, the authors in the present volume for the most part focus on the second or strictly philosophical issue, with excursions into intellectual history taken only when necessary to make intelligible the strategies of the philosophers under study. Despite the official view, characterized and partially endorsed in the above paragraphs, that discussions of individuation in early modern philosophy lack the prominence accorded to the issue by medieval philosophers, the chapters in this volume demonstrate that lack of prominence is not to be confused with pathological neglect.

Even leaving aside Leibniz and Wolff, neither of whom can be accused of ignoring the problem of individuation, Descartes, Malebranche, and Spinoza certainly present, or are forced to adopt under the pressure of positions taken on other philosophical problems, intriguing if not entirely satisfactory solutions to the problem. Nor, as Lennon shows in his chapter, should the contributions of the minor Cartesians be ignored in writing the history of individuation in the early modern period.

Although Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are less than preoccupied with individuation, the second issue constituting the theme of this volume—identity through time—does receive their attention, beginning with Locke's rather lengthy discussion in the *Essay* and ending with Hume's notorious and anxiety-ridden struggle with the problem of personal identity in the *Treatise*. The shift in focus by the empiricists, of course, does not eliminate the problem of individuation, since an account of an object (or person) remaining the same object (or person) through time presupposes that the object (or person) in question at each moment in time be different from all other objects (or persons).

The structural linkage between the problems of identity and individuation is obvious, but what is perhaps less obvious and of greater interest is that common to both the Cartesian and empiricist approaches to individuation and identity is the increasingly altered role accorded to substance in early modern ontologies. Indeed, it is the various modifications and/or rejections of one traditional doctrine of substance that lead to what is novel in recasting the problems in this period. And it is this matter that I wish to address in this brief introduction.

### A SKETCH OF THE PROBLEM(S)

Objects in a perceptual field, to take the simplest case, are complex: they have several qualities (at a minimum, shape and color). Examples of such objects are quite ordinary; persons, trees, and books all may appear in one's visual field. These ordinary objects have four very general features that, in turn, generate four corresponding philosophical problems. (1) Such objects are, as one would say, individuals possessing a variety of qualities and, hence, complex. (2) Yet despite the observed complexity each individual is *one* thing, a unity, since the qualities in question are all attributed to the same individual (e.g., Socrates is both short and bald). (3) Furthermore, an individual is different or distinct from all other individuals appearing with it in the visual field. (4) Some of these individuals may also appear to endure through time, to have a continued existence as the *same* individuals even though undergoing various kinds of change, including change of quality and change of relation with respect to the other objects.<sup>9</sup>

The task of an ontological analysis is to present a catalogue and classification of the constituents of these individuals; if the analysis is successful then the commonplace features of complexity, unity, difference, and continuity through time are preserved insofar as various

items in the ontological inventory are said to account for or to explain those features. The explanation is secured by showing that items in the catalogue, or inventory, have certain broad, categorial dimensions that allow their classification into ontological kinds.<sup>10</sup> Of the features to be accounted for only difference and continuity through time (identity) are of direct concern in this volume. A successful account of difference (the problem of individuation) would consist in locating at least one constituent of an individual that is not present in any other individual; a successful account of identity would consist in isolating at least one constituent of an individual that endures unchanged throughout the history of that individual. The tradition under attack in the early modern period solves both of these problems neatly with one entity: substance.

Before turning to the solution under attack, however, it is worth noting that complementary to the ontological enterprise there is an epistemological task: How do we know (perceive, apprehend) the complexity, unity, difference, and continuity through time of objects?<sup>11</sup> Again, with respect to the present volume only epistemic issues affecting difference and identity are of direct relevance although, as should be obvious, any simple demarcation into nonoverlapping issues is inaccurate both philosophically and historically.

These two concerns, ontological and epistemological, are uneasily linked in the history of philosophy. In an ideal world, philosopher's heaven as it were, the marriage of ontology and epistemology would be completely harmonious in that all the entities catalogued and classified by the ontologist would meet with approval by the epistemologist and in turn all items on the epistemologist's short list of knowable entities would be sufficient for the ontologist's account of the world. In a less than ideal world, however, the two concerns are often at odds; the epistemologist complains about the cavalier attitude of his ontologically inclined brethren who generate entities and distinctions in an unconscionable manner, while the ontologist in turn dismisses the epistemologist as one blinded to the richness of the universe through a neurotic fixation on a few favorite sense organs.

Less dramatically, but more sharply focused, epistemology and ontology can be related in two ways. On what I call the *Strong Model* of their relation, epistemological considerations serve as criteria for the adequacy of an ontological system: putative candidates for inclusion in the catalogue of existents must first pass a test for knowability and, once included, their classification in terms of categorial features must again meet the same rigorous standard. Failure to pass these tests is, or ought to be, sufficient reason for discarding all or parts of the ontology

in question, no matter how firmly entrenched the latter may have been in a philosophical tradition. On what I term the "weak model," epistemology and ontology are understood to be parallel methods of investigation having in common only the fact that their respective inquiries are directed toward the same classes of objects. While the ontologist asks what it is *in objects* that *individuates* those objects, the epistemologist searches for features *in experience* that allow us to *discern* the difference among objects. The results of the two investigations need not be the same. Aquinas, for example, employs designated matter to solve the ontological problem of individuation and appeals to place to account for our ability to discern the difference among objects. Since on the weak model epistemology does not function as a control for ontological claims, the disparity in accounts embarrasses neither enterprise.

Broadly speaking, the weak model is dominant in medieval philosophy. Epistemological concerns are subordinate or at best parallel to ontological concerns. The existents, beginning with God, are given as are the categories available for their analysis. The task of the epistemologist is to support not to challenge the schema, and any attempt to reverse the subordinate role assigned to epistemology (or to advocate the Strong Model) would have been regarded not as an indication of philosophical acumen but rather as a potential source of heresy.

By 1641, however, the strong model has replaced its weaker medieval counterpart. In the opening paragraphs of the *Meditations* Descartes announces that he will suspend belief in the existence of anything not known with certainty. Ontological claims concerning the existence of material objects, of God, and even of the self, must be subjected to a most rigorous epistemological scrutiny before one (or at least Descartes) is entitled to accept those claims.

The reasons for the ascendancy of the strong model are various. The theological chaos engendered by the Reformation is certainly a contributing factor; competing and conflicting religious claims require adjudication, that is, rival beliefs must be shown to be false while one's own views demand proof of their truth. Reliance on mere probabilities is insufficient when the question is one of salvation. It is not surprising, then, that epistemological questions, especially the search for certainty, are promoted to the first rank of issues demanding resolution.

Nor are matters helped by the advancement of scientific theories wherein the real constituents of the physical realm are atoms, invisible to perception and hence unknowable by ordinary or commonplace standards. Thus the physical realm and God share an uncomfortable feature: both are transcendent in the sense that neither can serve as objects of perception. Securing knowledge of God and physical objects,

then, becomes an epistemological project requiring great skill, a project difficult in the best of times and one apparently doomed at its inception in early modern philosophy by the concomitant revival and promulgation of skeptical arguments designed to show the impossibility of the enterprise.<sup>12</sup>

However fascinating the details of the genesis of the shift from ontological to epistemological concerns may be (and a number of these details are indeed discussed in this volume), the importance of the shift, for our purposes, lies not in its genesis but in its impact on the problems of identity and individuation. Aside from the obvious textual point, already noted, that discussions of identity and individuation become more abbreviated in the early modern period, the epistemological turn is significant for its effect on the *content* of those discussions. What could plausibly count as solutions to those problems is restricted by the imposition of new criteria; solutions formerly held to be uncontroversial are rendered puzzling, incomprehensible, or in conflict with newly discovered “truths” about the world.

By way of illustration, consider the impact of the epistemological turn on a standard (though by no means universally held) treatment of individuation and identity prior to the early modern period. One entity, substance, allegedly solves both problems; this is possible because substance is a complex entity, one part of which (matter, for example) becomes the principle of individuation while another part (form, nature, or essence, for example) accounts for, among other things, identity through time in the sense of explaining why an individual remains the same kind of individual despite undergoing changes of various kinds.<sup>13</sup> These two aspects of substance, the individuating principle and the continuity principle, if I may so put it, are linked in such a way that neither could function in the required way without the other. First, insofar as the nature or essence is something shared by many individuals, the individuating principle is needed to make sense of the claim that there are or can be many individuals of the same kind. Second, the continuity principle, that is, that an individual may remain the same individual through time, requires that the individual in question at each moment of its existence be distinct from all other individuals. In other words, merely securing the possibility of there being more than one individual with the same essence does not by itself guarantee the identity through time of an individual having continued existence unless the individuating principle is operative *at each moment* of the continued existence. Third, the individuating principle must not only be present at each moment but must remain itself the *same* individuating principle throughout the individual's existence.<sup>14</sup> Fourth, the con-



tinued existence of the same individuating principle by itself would not be sufficient for the continued existence of the same individual; without the attachment of the same essence to the individuating principle Socrates could change into a rock, a case in which one would be reluctant to say that it is the same individual. While this solution presents problems of its own (What is the sense in which a substance is complex? What is the sense in which designated matter and form are parts of such a complex? What is the relation between these parts?), nevertheless the theory fulfills the formal requirements for a solution in that the analysis offered reveals constituents whose job is to account for the various features of ordinary experience.

The entity in question (substance), when examined under the newly ground epistemological lens employed in early modern philosophy, is found to contain discomfiting flaws of a magnitude unsettling even to those wishing to countenance its existence. When Descartes in the "Second Meditation" engages the question (1) of *what* we can know about material substance (e.g., a piece of wax) and the question (2) of *how* we know what we know about substance, he discovers that the answer to (1) is a resounding *less than previously thought*, while the answer to (2) is *not by our usual sources*. The senses, it turns out, yield information only about properties and reveal nothing about substance itself. What can be known about substance is furnished solely by reason, or the understanding, and what can be known by reason is restricted to just one aspect of the formerly complex entity, namely, the essence or nature of substance (extension in the case of material substance). The other aspect, matter, which had been the principle of individuation for material objects, disappears, leaving Descartes with the twin difficulties of having no principle of individuation and of having to equate, untenably, substance with essence.<sup>15</sup> The novel if not entirely satisfactory solutions to the problem of individuation presented by Descartes and other Cartesians are the understandable result of attempting to retain an entity considerably reduced in stature by the new epistemological constraints.

While Descartes, by conspicuous omission, casts doubt on the knowability of the individuating principle in the case of material objects, the difficulty is by no means restricted to the latter but is also replicated in the realm of mental substance. Many minds allegedly share the same essence (thinking) and yet are distinct from one another even though here, too, substance is equated with essence. What, then, is the principle of individuation for these nonspatial entities? Although it may be to Descartes's credit that in his single-minded pursuit of grand epistemological truths he refused to be sidetracked in

the *Meditations* by various enigmas generated by his line of argument, nevertheless the options left for a resolution to the problem of individuation are clear: (1) adopt some version of monism, wherein the problem of individuating substances disappears, a move consistent with the equation of substance and essence but not a move palatable to most; or (2) secure another principle of individuation, one that is both epistemologically respectable and sufficient to accomplish the task. Not surprisingly, the second option dominates discussion, however limited that discussion may be in some cases, during the early modern period.

When one turns to Locke, the epistemological suspicion cast on the utility of substance for solving the problems of individuation and identity is baldly stated and overwhelming. Locke retains, inconsistently with his epistemological principle that all ideas must originate in experience, a vestige of the individuating constituent in substance. But this vestige, substratum, becomes an "I know not what" and is relegated to a limited ontological role, that of providing support for qualities.<sup>16</sup> For individuation, Locke casts about in search of less problematic, less ephemeral entities.

The other element in substance, form or essence, also undergoes a transformation due to epistemological considerations. Unable to secure an experiential foundation for the classical notion of essence—real essence—Locke abandons it. Its replacement, nominal essence, becomes a collection of experienced qualities, a collection subject to change through addition or subtraction as our knowledge (experience) increases. And since nominal essence lacks the stability of real essence, it cannot be relied on to provide an account of identity through time.<sup>17</sup>

The epistemological focus in Descartes and Locke, or what I have called the "strong model" of the relation between ontology and epistemology, is incompatible with the substance solution to the problems of identity and individuation. Interestingly this is the case even though Descartes and Locke do not employ the same epistemological principles, the former relying on innate ideas and reason for securing knowledge while the latter, rejecting innate ideas, accords a significant role to sensory experience.

The responses of Descartes and Locke to traditional ontological problems are of course echoed by other philosophers in the period. The obvious examples are Berkeley, who rejects material substance, and Hume, who rejects both material and mental substances; in each case epistemological concerns are a major factor in the rejection and in each case other principles of individuation and identity are consequently required. And while the list could be extended, it has been my intention in this introduction to suggest but not exhaust the possibili-



ties for understanding individuation and identity in this period. The impact of epistemological considerations on ontological themes outlined above is elaborated in several chapters in this volume even though they are not and were never intended to be restricted to the framework sketched in this introduction. The philosophical tradition in the early modern period is too rich and diverse to be understood solely as a reaction to one model of substance in recasting solutions to the problems of individuation and identity, just as the medieval period itself would be misrepresented were one to claim that philosophers and theologians then were uniformly committed to a resolution of those problems using the model of substance outlined above. And, finally, while the epistemological turn does affect the content of ontological discourse, not all early modern philosophers are equally preoccupied with epistemology, and even those most under its sway are to various degrees influenced by other philosophical problems as well as by theological, scientific, social, and political concerns.

#### NOTES

1. Although the views of Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham on individuation have been prominently featured in the scholarly literature, the issue was certainly not invented by those philosophers. For a detailed treatment of individuation in the earlier medieval period, see Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Introduction to the Problem of Individuation in the Early Middle Ages*, 2d ed. (München and Wien: Philosophia Verlag, 1986).

2. Obviously such a sweeping claim requires equally sweeping qualifications. While Berkeley's references to individuation may be fleeting, the same is clearly not true of Leibniz nor for the most medieval of early modern philosophers, Wolff.

3. Francisco Suárez, *Disputio metaphysica V*, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 25, ed. Carolo Berton (Paris: Vivès, 1861).

4. I do not want to suggest that there is no continuity between the medieval and early modern traditions. In the case of Descartes the connection has been quite thoroughly explored. The seminal work in this area is Etienne Gilson, *Etudes sur la rôle de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système cartésien* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1951).

5. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), III, 27.3, p. 409.

6. George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, in A.

Luce and T. E. Jessop, *The Works of George Berkeley* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948), 2:192.

7. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), I.I.VII, p. 19.

8. Julius Weinberg, in discussing Hume, notes that the reasons for the principle that everything that exists is particular are found articulated in Ockham. Without accusing Hume of having read Ockham, he rather suggestively claims that this is a case in which a philosophical principle has been firmly entrenched long after the supporting arguments have been forgotten. See Julius Weinberg, *Abstraction, Relation, and Induction* (Madison and Milwaukee: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), pp. 52–53.

9. This is not the only formulation of the problems nor do I claim that the formulation given here is unproblematic. Twentieth-century discussions, beginning with Moore and Russell, are as varied as their historical counterparts, and are too numerous to mention here. For a comprehensive overview of the most important literature in this century, see Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Individuality: An Essay on the Foundations of Metaphysics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

10. Extension or attribution of these commonplace features and their categorizations to nonperceptual objects (e.g., mathematical entities and God) creates additional puzzles, some of which are of course relevant to understanding the ontologies in both medieval and early modern periods. Furthermore, note that while I speak of these issues as ontological, philosophers in this period of course would have classified them as metaphysical since the word 'ontology' was not then in vogue. I intend this terminological anachronism to be harmless.

11. It should be noted that for the early modern period a satisfactory understanding of epistemological theories would require a detailed examination of the roles played by abstraction, innate ideas, and perception, including the various causal models of perception employed by those philosophers.

12. See Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum & Comp. N. V., 1960).

13. It should not be thought that this resolution of the problem is the only or even the dominant one in medieval philosophy. For a discussion of the various gambits entertained by those philosophers, see Gracia, *Introduction to the Problem of Individuation in the Early Middle Ages*, especially Chapter 1.

14. Pierre Bayle notes that under the Cartesian doctrine of the continual creation of substance by God a different substance could be created at each moment having the same modifications as its predecessors without any mortal being the wiser. See Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (selections), trans. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 204.

15. For a thorough criticism of the epistemological and ontological consequences of the identification of substance with essence, see Richard A. Watson, *The Breakdown of Cartesian Metaphysics* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1987), especially Chapter 14, "Descartes Knows Nothing."
16. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II.XXIII.2, p. 295.
17. *Ibid.*, II.XXVII.12, p. 337.