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OCKHAM'S RAZOR, OR THE MURDER OF CONCRETENESS. A VINDICATION OF THE UNITARIAN TRADITION¹

abstract

The notion of de re truth (Conte, 2016) is put to work in this paper (§ 1). It introduces us to a confrontation between a metaphysics of desertic landscapes, as presented in a stunning poem by Achille Varzi and Claudio Calosi, The Tribulations of Philosophy (§ 2), and an ontology of the lifeworld, as a long-term project based on the key concept of bonds (De Monticelli, 2018). The rich and structured objects of the everyday world are infinite sources of information and cognitive adventure (§§ 3, 3.1., 3.2). Or so I will claim against Varzi's skepticism about ordinary language, common sense, and ontological realism (§ 4). Far from encouraging our minds to stick to concrete individual things, Ockham's Razor has been the murder weapon in the dismissal of concreteness and the sensible world from the intellectual horizon of Modernity (§§ 5, 6). The "Unitarian Tradition" is a half-playful denomination of a quite real, albeit ignored, alternative theory of individuality (and hence concreteness), brilliantly represented by Boethius, Duns Scotus, and Leibniz. Classic phenomenology quite independently revived it and brought it up to modern analytic standards of rigor and formality (§ 7).

keywords

unity, integrity, individuality, abstract and concrete entities

¹ Partial versions of this paper were presented at the Philosophy Department of Columbia University (2017), IAS Paris (2020), Corpus Christi College; all my gratitude to Achille Varzi, Anna Marmodoro and many of my students for insightful comments. A special thank to Achille Varzi for allowing me to quote Varzi and Calosi, 2014, also from the not yet published English translation, *The Tribulations of Philosophy - A Metaphysicall Comedye wherein 'tis told of the Errors & the Paynes of Helle*.

The distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* truth is a piece of classical, Aristotelian analysis. However, Amedeo G. Conte goes remarkably deeper into it by making it the starting point of his sparkling book on the nature of truth (Conte, 2016). Let us follow Conte's worked-out distinction. *De dicto* truth is the ordinary predicate of propositions, as we know it from Frege and Tarski. What about *de re* truth?

Not surprisingly, it is a predicate of things. It comes, Conte argues, in two kinds, exemplified by contexts such as "astrology is not a true science" or "a rhetorical question is not a true question," on the one hand. On the other hand, "the true surname of Tarski is Tajtelbaum" or (my example, entirely fictitious): "the Oxford variant is not the true *Divine Comedy*." Conte provides application conditions of either *de re* truth predicate:

(E) x is a true P IFF x corresponds to P 's *eidos*

(where P can refer to any sortal predicate: tiger, person, statue, seminar, banknote, paper, number);

(I) x is the true y IFF $x = y$

The two conditions refer to what Conte calls "eidological" and "idiological" *de re* truth. In the rest of this paper, we shall mainly deal with the "eidological" kind, without entirely disregarding the "idiological."

**1. Structure of the Argument:
Reversing Conte's Direction of Explanation**

Now, intuitively, the "eidological" kind of truth does not seem far from ordinary parlance: a true thing is a good token of its type. A true workshop allows for discussion, a true warrior is brave, and so on. Indeed, Conte's concept of *de re* truth provides us with a highly familiar and intuitive approach to the realm of the ideas or *eide* (to stick to the Greek and Husserlian technical term). This is why, in this paper, I shall reverse his direction of explanation: no longer from *de re* truth (*explanandum*) to *eidos* (*explanans*), but from *eidos* to *de re* truth. For everybody knows what a true table is; but few are acquainted with *eide*, and most of those familiar with the notion reject it as queer, made up, illusory – in short, a Platonistic unnecessary entity, that Ockham's razor should shave off. By this Contian detour, I hope to show that, on the contrary, a world without *eide* is not the world of *concrete* things we all inhabit, the world of true chairs and true mountains, true people and true towns, true

institutions and true books.

Of course, the notion of *de re* truth will not be just taken for granted: on the contrary, we shall go through a phenomenology of *de re* truth (Section 3). In other words, since many exemplars surround us we would call true things, we shall have a chance to verify conceptual description with fresh intuition and flesh out the more exoteric notion of *eidos* with original presence, as phenomenology requires. By putting *de re* truth to work, we shall kill two birds with one stone: we shall start from the things themselves, not to explain *eide* away, but to go deeper into their nature of *unitary foundations* (Husserl, 1900-1901). That is, bonds on possible (co) variations of a thing's features, by breaking which that thing is disfigured, or dis-integrated, or deformed: in short, it ceases to be a good token of its type. (De Monticelli, 2018). At worst, it loses its specific identity, whatness, or nature: it ceases to be what it was.

To sum up, if Conte is correct, and there are no true things without *eide*, shaving off *eide* from one's ontology is murdering concreteness. Far from shaving off abstract entities, an Ockhamist metaphysics wipes away true reality, the concrete things of our life world.

Very deep metaphysical problems have a strange fate: the fundamentals of a classic debate remain unchanged in time, no matter how wildly the cultural context and the state of scientific and practical knowledge differ. This is undoubtedly the case with the Nominalism-Realism Debate. By "Ockhamist metaphysics" I refer, in fact, to some contemporary varieties of Post-Quinean Nominalism.

I shall largely ignore the differences between sorts of Nominalism, such as "austere" Nominalism (Devitt, 1980), "resemblance" Nominalism (Pereira, 2002), tropes Nominalism (Campbell, 1981), and "mereological" Nominalism (Lewis, 1991). These are denominations for different strategies Nominalists adopt to give their accounts of generality (or the apparent common properties of things) once they have given up "abstract" entities.

Let us call "Brother Ockham" my proxy for any of these variants. However, my Brother Ockham does not claim to be the historical Ockham. It is, rather, an ideal Ockham, enacting an intellectual attitude that brings to its extreme ontological consequences a highly widespread scientific naturalism. Achille Varzi has brilliantly expounded this attitude in a treaty on mereology (Cotnoir & Varzi, 2021), informal books and lectures (Varzi, 1999; 2010; 2015), and a most remarkable poem (coauthored by Claudio Calosi) written in Dante's Tercets: *Le tribolazioni del filosofare. Comedia metaphysica ne la quale si tratta de li errori e de le pane de l'Infero* (Varzi & Calosi, 2014, p. 246). This poem is Brother Ockham's most vivid and vibrant legacy: it will provide the point of departure for our discussion.

Let us recall a modern version of the principle of ontological parsimony through a very popular quotation from Quine: "Wyman's overpopulated universe is in many ways unlovely. It offends the aesthetic sense of us who have a taste for desert landscapes" (Quine, 1948/1953, p. 4).

My opponent to this most famous dictum by Brother Ockham is no Platonist but a representative of what I called "the Unitarian Tradition."¹ Not surprisingly, he turns out to be a classical phenomenologist. Provided by "phenomenology" one does not mean a theory of consciousness, but essentially an ontology of the everyday world, as *given* to consciousness and experience. The motto opposing Quine's taste for desertic landscape is borrowed from Moritz Geiger, a phenomenologist who wrote admirable pages on the aesthetics of landscapes, by the way: "In order to show what is given, one should have rather emphasized the sentence that

2. Who is the Murderer? Variations on Desert Landscapes

¹ This notion is introduced in De Monticelli (2013).

'entia praeter necessitatem non esse diminuenda' (Geiger, 1996, p. 99).²

Varzi's poetical variation of Quine's metaphor appears in the final Canto of his poem, where the Poet and his Guide, Socrates, approach the light of truth and its desert, out of the hell of philosophical illusions and delusions:

E oltre quel confin, oh, qual intorno!
Com' empie li occhi e il cuor la meraviglia!

Qui lucono le stelle in pieno giorno,
l'amorevol natura de le cose
deposita la polva tutt' attorno

e piano, in ampie foglie e silenziose.
Sotto le povertà d'un solo fiato
nascondonsi abbondanze polverose.

È tutto quiete e soffio dislungato,
una semplicità fatta purezza.
*È il fine, è il deserto illuminato.*³

In the hell whose exit opens out that luminous desert, the place of us phenomenologists and our illusions is very well delimited: we occupy the Second Circle, with its three Rings of the Simpletons, who share the illusions of Common sense:

Ring I. Faithful to the senses;
Ring II. Faithful to language;
Ring III. Faithful to pliant myths.

The most sinful among us, though, lie further down in the five Rings of the Third Circle, that of the Lustful Realists, who foolishly believe:

Ring I. In universals
Ring II. In abstract entities
Ring III. In the levels of reality
Ring IV. In the robust structure
Ring V. In values.

Are phenomenologists at home in these two Circles? Quite so, I suggest, except for the different description we shall provide of our alleged belief in universal and abstract entities. The origin of (what I call) the Unitarian Tradition should not be looked for in a remote past,

² Geiger, a former student of Alexander Pfänder, was a very refined phenomenologist of the emotions and one of the founders of phenomenological aesthetics.

³ Varzi and Calosi (2014, p. 246). "And pass'd beyond the verge, oh, what a land! /Oh, what a wonder fill'th my eyes and heart!/Here shine the skyey stars in full daylight;/the loving-hearted character of things/allwhither, wide and far, layeth the dust,/and slow and in silential leaves enlarged./Beneath the povertyes of one sole breath/pulverulous abundances behyde./Aywhere is quietude, a longsome breeze,/simplicity into purity becom'd./The end is this - the desert luminous."

plunged in a mist of archaic religion and myth. It is *here and now*. It is the source of novel information flowing from whatever is now present to our senses. This tradition’s motto was put in words pretty late, but it has probably implicitly inspired its champions all along: “Back to the things themselves.” It voices a principle of priority of data over constructions, that phenomenologists – the latest upholders of the tradition – share with empiricists. Yet Empiricism, according to Phenomenology, fails to be true to the given, which is why confrontation with Nominalism first and Empiricism later is so crucial to this tradition. This much for the Second Circle, that of us Simpletons, whose refined analyses address the ways in which the solid world of the natural attitude is given to experience and common parlance, surely not to question its reality but to enlighten its phenomenological content. What about the Third Circle? Phenomenologists are indeed lustful realists as well. Brother Ockham suggests that ordinary language and common sense might be in the grip of ordinary hallucinations (Varzi, 2010). So he blames us: you believe in universal, abstract entities, in a multi-layered reality emerging from the physical to the social and personal, each level with an irreducible ontological novelty – you believe in even in values! But what are all these creatures? Where do we put them in our world of facts? Normative entities or properties, holding pluralities together or requiring perfection, are too queer for our modern tastes. They are quite embarrassing things: they recall to our minds that ghostly *realism of universals* that modern thought seemed to have definitely thrown out of the civilized paths of rational thought. What should we do with these hybrid monsters? These *universalia in rebus* are midway between the *universalia ante rem* (of a Platonist scholasticism) and the sheer *conceptus mentis*, concepts of the mind, or even *flatus vocis*, i.e., linguistic meanings (as Nominalism has them). Indeed, these queer creatures look like mental things, constructs or concepts instead of real, concrete things. What sort of realism can be one not about concrete things? Won’t it be realism about ghosts? Are we not proposing to return to Simplicius (the ridiculous scholastic metaphysician in Galileo’s *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*)? Won’t there be a theological presupposition, or maybe a magic illusion, at the heart of a theory of *eide*? These doubts are compelling. It is a matter of intellectual honesty. They *cannot* be put aside. More precisely, if we keep within the frame of current ontology, they cannot. By “current ontology,” I mean the one adopted even by modern anti-nominalists or realists: the frame of discussion almost universally accepted in the Latin of our days. Inherited from Ockham through British Empiricism, it finally comes down to Quine or Lewis, with all its tacitly and universally accepted presuppositions. Many questions are still disputed within this frame. But the frame itself is not. Let us call it the Standard Ontological Partition, defining Concrete and Abstract Entities. Within this frame, Essences and Values necessarily end up on the right side of the Partition, which is the “abstract” side. In fact, the wrong side. Here is this familiar frame:

The Standard Ontological Partition

<i>Ens individuum</i>	<i>Ens commune</i>
Concrete Objects	Abstract Objects
Individuals – Non-instantiable – Tokens	Universals – Instantiable – Types
Obviously among what there is (also <i>extra mente</i>)	Not obviously among what there is (also <i>extra mente</i>)
Paradigm-objects: Material particulars (substances, tropes)	Paradigm-objects: properties, relations, numbers, sets
Having all their properties-relations contingently (Parts, Classes in Extensional Mereology)	Having necessary properties and relations (Sets, mathematical objects)

Once the Standard Ontological Partition is accepted, there is no escape for such lustful realists as we phenomenologists. We are damned to the errors and the pains of Brother Ockham's metaphysical hell. Unless we discover something wrong with the Partition itself.

3. The Dispute on the Universals and the De Re Truth Approach

Let us recap. Nominalism (both classic and post-Quinean) presents itself as a metaphysics of concreteness. Ockham's razor is put to the service of a robust sense of concrete reality, shaving away abstract entities from the domain of what there is. Lustful realists have their backs to the wall unless they discover a fresh approach to the whole dispute on the universals. The *de re* truth approach is exactly what we need. Its advantage is to change our perspective on the dispute. We no longer focus on universals, wondering whether, by chance, they *also* exist outside the mind or not. We focus now on the things themselves, the things surrounding us, that we would call true chairs, true tables, a true workshop, a true speaker, a true audience. What do we mean by "a true P"? As suggested above, I shall at least temporarily leave aside Conte's suggestion concerning eidological *de re* truth:

(E) x is a true P IFF x corresponds to P's *eidōs*

Instead, we shall try a phenomenological analysis of an object that might work as a paradigm of what we would call "a true P." By considering variants of it, we should reach a general criterion of application for a *de re* truth predicate.

3.1. Phenomenology of De Re Truth

In front of the Philosophy Department at Columbia University, we can admire a bronze statue, a nude male figure of heroic size sitting on a rock. Its pose is one of deep thought and contemplation, leaning over, his right elbow placed on his left thigh, holding the weight of his chin on the back of his right hand. It may strike you as a familiar image – you may wonder where you have seen something similar. Suddenly it crosses your mind: *The Thinker*! It is a very iconic sculpture indeed. You may have seen it in Paris. Of course, it is August Rodin's most famous sculpture. Now you start wondering: is it a true Rodin?

It certainly is. A quick look at the web informs us that *The Thinker* was originally designed in 1880-82 as the central figure at the top of his monumental set of doors, *The Gates of Hell* (so, it was originally *The Poet*, representing Dante). The first life-sized versions of *The Thinker* were cast in 1903. After Rodin's death in 1917, his studio continued to produce bronze casts in his name using the sculptor's original models. Columbia's replica of *The Thinker* was commissioned in 1930 by then-President Nicholas Murray Butler from the Musée Rodin, and it was cast in bronze by Alexis Rudier, Rodin's preferred foundry.

Is *The Thinker* of Columbia University this same Rudier's cast? If so, this statue satisfies Conte's condition for *idiological de re* truth. The causal chain leading back to the sculptor's original model grants authenticity. However, "a true Rodin" means more to us than the traceability of this token sculpture up to its origin. It means a recognizable aesthetic pattern, expressive of Rodin's unique style. A true Rodin has to "correspond" to what Husserl would have called an "eidetic singularity": the concerned *de re* truth, in Conte's terms, is also an *eidological* truth.

Both conditions are necessary and only jointly sufficient for artistic authorship, for a style can be counterfeited, and a causal chain need not lead back to an artwork.

To acquire a more definite notion of an individual aesthetic pattern or style, art critics invite us to compare a given artwork with other ones by the same author and with works by different authors that seem to exemplify the aesthetic qualities of the original differently. Let us provide some examples. Consider the all-pervading expressive quality, making up the unique individual physiognomy of *The Thinker*: this blend of majesty, struggle, tension, and concentration. By exploring the web, we can easily discover how the aesthetic pattern changes

with small changes in any of these qualities. Compare *The Thinker* with Michelangelo's *Il penseroso*, adorning Lorenzo de' Medici's tomb in San Lorenzo, Florence. Then compare it with Michelangelo's *Atlas Slave*, one of the 'Prisoners,' the series of unfinished sculptures for the tomb of Pope Julius II, now held in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence.

In phenomenological terms, this is an exercise of eidetic variation upon a given aesthetic value made up of the expressive qualities we mentioned. Interestingly enough, expressive qualities, especially if bound to a classic iconography, can even resist variations of means and technique: consider Michelangelo's self-portrait as the prophet Jeremiah, on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, or again, the portrait of Michelangelo as Heraclitus in Raphael's *School of Athens*. In this second exercise, we become aware of all the differences between three-dimensional sculptural and two-dimensional pictorial space, with the different opportunities and challenges they offer to expression and creation. This way, we jump to *de re* truths of higher generality: we learn what a true *sculpture* is, how it differs, for example, from a *trompe-l'oeil* or a true *painting*.

These few hints at a phenomenology of *de re* truth may suffice to outline an answer to the question: what do we mean by a "true" P in general (where "P" ranges over sortal predicates whatsoever)? We would thereby keep the promise of not taking the notion of *de re* truth for granted (Sect. 1). However, the issue is concreteness (and its two competing ontologies, Brother Ockham's and the lustful realists'). So, we shall limit ourselves to P ranging over ordinary middle-sized dry objects of the everyday world.

Something is a true P if and only if it has:

- a) Richness of matters (contents, "moments")
- b) Structure (unity, integrity, or coherence of contents or "moments").

In other words, to deserve being called a "true" P, something needs to satisfy two correlative conditions: showing both a plurality of matters (contents), by which a thing is an infinite source of (always new) information, and integrity, or coherence, or unity of these matters or contents, by which each one appears as "part" of the thing as a whole, holding somehow together with other parts or contents.

This statue, for example, must have stuff, shape, dimensions, aesthetic qualities, and an artifactual origin; its unity or integrity is how all these matters hold together in one token of its type, e.g. *The Thinker*. Its type – the model – admits of (co)variations in all its "moments," as exemplified by different versions of *The Thinker* (in plaster, in smaller dimensions, etc.). Let us climb two more degrees of generalization. A true Rodin preserves its *de re* truth (its specific identity) through much wider variations of its "moments," as in *Adam* (Musée Rodin Paris) or *The Kiss* (Musée Rodin Paris). A true sculpture preserves it through wider and wider variations (e.g., by missing "naturalistic" features, as from Rodin to Henry Moore). However, not *all* arbitrary variations would yield a true sculpture. No sculpture could be constituted of liquid stuff or scattered sand.

By putting *de re* truth to work, I promised, we would have killed two birds with one stone. The first bird was Brother Ockham's blame on *eide* as a version of *universalia in rebus*, those strange creatures midway between mental constructs and real things. Instead of defining *de re truth* as the correspondence of a thing to an *eidos*, we displayed some phenomenological criteria for things to be called true – true sculptures (houses, chairs): they must enjoy richness and structure of matters (contents). No concrete thing in the surrounding world lacks such plurality and integrity (this is a challenge for the reader to produce a counterexample). Here comes the second bird: *eide* revisited, or defined in turn, in terms of *de re* truth. *Eide* are

3.2. *Eide* revisited

unitary foundations in the sense of Husserl's Third Logical Investigation (§21).⁴ The previous phenomenological analysis by variation should have given the reader an intuitive grasp of this concept. Unitary foundations are bonds on possible (co)variations of a thing's features, by breaking which that thing is disintegrated: in short, it ceases to be a good token of its type, a "true" exemplar of its kind. (For a less informal take on unitary foundations and *eide* see references in the previous footnote).

**4. The Scene
of The Crime
Unveiled: A
Metaphysical
Crossroads**

In the following sections, I shall argue that Brother Ockham's razor does not shave off abstract entities but cuts bonds of unity, thereby killing concreteness (here is his perfect crime). The concept of bonds of unity provides the rationale for vindicating what I call the Unitarian Tradition, whose legacy, I submit, is revived by phenomenologists and/or lustful realists. Our phenomenology of *de re* truth has shown that we take a "true" token of its type to have a plurality of aspects whose unity is *in re* – and not only in our thought, like arbitrarily formed sets or sums. *De re* truth sorts out those beings that cannot have numerical unity without having a "less than numerical unity" – to quote Duns Scotus⁵: a constraint on partial changes, a law on possible alterations – one is tempted to say: an inner destiny. There are as many ways to hint at this unity of foundation⁶ distinguishing *true beings* from fictitious or imaginary ones as there are representatives of the Unitarian Tradition. Plato's term is *synechein*, literally *holding together*. The "soul" of the world "holds it together" (*synechein* was translated by the Latin *contineo*) – in such a way that the world is "contained" by its soul, and not viceversa⁷. In Boethius's last work, the *Consolation of Philosophy*, Lady Philosophy will utter the most general and fundamental unitarian claim about being: whatever *is* there, keeps on *being* as far and as long as it *is one* (Boethius, 2009, p. 40).⁸ Aquinas generalizes the idea with its usual terseness: God is "in" all things by "containing" them all.⁹ Leibniz will go to the heart of this enological ontology: "Ce qui n'est pas véritablement un être n'est pas non plus véritablement un être" (Leibniz, 1988, p. 165). A claim Leibniz develops into a distinction of degrees of unity/existence, that is of integrity, or ontological perfection. It is not just speculative philosophy. For one thing, degrees of existence are popular in social ontology. Which degree of existence does the European Union possess?¹⁰ That it does *not* exist is false;

4 The concept of a *pregnant whole* is defined there through that of unitary foundation, as a structure of contents bound by constraints on their possible covariations, constraints "rooted in the nature" of those contents themselves. Cf. De Monticelli (2014; 2018; 2020; forthcoming).

5 "minus quam numerica unitas", cf. Duns Scotus (1973, *passim*, pp. 391-410). This unusual expression denotes the unity of a nature. It is not a numerical unity, otherwise the nature of a thing would have a separate existence, like each one of the chairs sharing this nature, "chairhood." But the many chairs are instances of "one and the same" prototype, "holding together" all the relevant features of a chair.

6 A fateful if stupid mistake in the English Translation may have compromised the correct understanding of this crucial passage, where *Einheitliche Fundierung* is translated into English as a *single foundation*, and *die Einheitlichkeit der Fundierung* as the *singleness of the foundation*. Husserl (1970, p. 35). So, a better translation would be: "We understand by whole an aggregate of contents comprised by a unitary foundation, without any appeal to further contents. Talk of the *unity of the foundation* implies that *every content is foundationally connected, whether directly or indirectly, with every content*" (italized by Husserl).

7 Plato, *Timaeus*, 34b.

8 A variation on this claim makes it feel even more vividly the existential sense of a statement that Boethius meditates before his death. "Everything remains existent so long as it keeps its unity, but perishes in dissolution as long as it loses it", *ibid.* For the Neo-Platonic origins see Proclus (1963), proposition 13 in *Supplement*, p. 106; and *Supplement*, p. 92, [point 5](#). The scholastic formula sums up: *ens et unum convertuntur*.

9 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I Primae, Q. VIII, Art. 1 ad 2: "licet corporalia dicantur esse in aliquo sicut continente, spiritualia autem continent ea in quibus sunt, sicut anima continet corpus. Unde et deus est in rebus sicut continens res".

10 For a nice development of the concept of degree of existence see De Vecchi (2016).

that it meets *all* the identity conditions of a State, and enjoys its causal power, is also false. We can point out the one concern expressed by all these authors: the difference between physical *parthood* and *containment*, mereological sums and integral wholes, pieces and moments. All these philosophers crave, as it were, a formal theory of unity – as the one Husserl provided with his notion of unitary foundation in his Third Logical Investigation. Their concern is concreteness, not abstract entities: they all see it as *integrity*.

The murder of concreteness is a type of crime eternally happening at the center of the metaphysical cities. The crime’s scene is a crossroad, worn and torn by generations of masters and students crossing it again and again over many centuries. There are tokens of it in ancient Athens, Rome, Paris, Oxford... and New York (the Murderer appears to be a serial killer). Elsewhere,¹¹ I traced the idealized story of a fateful sequence of intellectual moves, each performed at a metaphysical crossroad by cutting a bond of unity and pulverizing things into sums of atomic last parts (Varzi’s “pulverulous abundances”). The crossroads display the alternative ways out of what came to be called the dispute on the universals, but this very title was imposed on it by its winners, Ockham’s heirs and modern Empiricism. The issue was not the nature of universals, but that of individuals. It is not by chance that its culminating point, the dispute between Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, is resumed by the two branches of Scotus’ Crossroads, maybe the most celebrated treatise *On the Principle of Individuation* in the entire history of philosophy.¹²

Not surprisingly, the Unitarian Tradition hosts the great metaphysicians of *intrinsic* individuality, or *haecceity*: Boethius, Scotus, Leibniz, Husserl, and Scheler.

The very core of concreteness is individuality. Who would not grant this? But what happened attests to the power philosophy may have on words. It happened that the view which ended up prevailing took over and *shaped the language of individuality* in such a way as to make the alternative view ineffable and inconceivable. More yet, it made the essence of individuals invisible, so it was lost as an intellectual and moral thought object. In this very sense, the murder of concreteness was, in fact, that of individuality – or at least its “moral” killing: its ban from the domain of meaningful discourse. Or such is my claim.

To sum up: the core of the dispute on universals turns out to be a dispute on the nature of the individuals. This was crystal clear around the Twenties of 1300, when Scotus wrote his treaty *On the Principle of Individuation*. However, without reproducing the detailed analyses of that treaty provided elsewhere,¹³ I shall present a simplified and updated version of the dispute, in terms of what we learned about *de re* truth.

The only question of this simplified version in Contian terms would be:

(Q) Is there any *de re* truth?

Recall Conte’s condition of eidological *de re* truth:

(E) *x* is a true *P* IFF *x* corresponds to *P*’s *eidōs*

Given our explanation of *eide* in terms of unitary foundations as bonds of integrity, by violating which things lose *their specific identity*, (Q) can easily be rephrased in modal terms:

5. A Simplified Version of the Dispute on Individuals

11 De Monticelli (2020-21).

12 Duns Scotus (1973; 1994).

13 De Monticelli (2004; 2020-21).

(MQ) Do any individuals have *de re* necessary properties?

We can easily figure out the crossroads this question originates.

Brother Ockham's answer would be: NO. And, of course, the Unitarians', the lustful realists', the phenomenologists' answer would be: YES.

Let us have a comprehensive look at the rationale of each answer. Both Brother Ockham and the Unitarian take individuality to be the core of concreteness. However, for the Unitarian, individuals are integral wholes (*non-dividua*). They are rich and structured creatures whose contents hold together in lawful ways, for example, patterns of unfolding in space and time, that are, of course, *de re* necessary properties, since things would lose their specific identity without them. Individuals have a unitary foundation. Let us paraphrase in Leibnizian terms: they enjoy monadicity.

For Brother Ockham, on the contrary, individuals are stardust: mereological sums (or parts of them); by definition, they lack any bonds of unity, hence any specific identity. Their properties can be necessary only *de dicto*, depending on the description we arbitrarily chose for them. That Socrates is described as a featherless biped or a rational creature is up to us, and each description will imply a different set of *de dicto* necessary properties. In themselves, individuals are bare particulars: their ultimate feature is atomicity. No description is grounded *in re*, all are subjective or conventional, just linguistic and social constructions.

As usual in metaphysical disputes, part of the issue is arbitrarily decided by choosing what you *want to call* an individual. Since the word is likely to be applied to both sorts of creatures in this large world, we shall not take any such decision. We shall take sides with the Unitarian by claiming that *some* individuals enjoy *de re* properties – in short, *there are de re* truths.

However, to complete our simplified version of the dispute, we have to take a closer look at the individuation principles of the disputers.

Unitary foundation is the Unitarians' Individuation Principle. It defines a power of integrating the circumstances of existence of the individual in the unity of a whole, be it endogenic, as in living creatures or persons, be it exogenous, as in artifacts or non-animated things.

Such a power operates whenever a type individuality unfolds, as in *The Thinker* at Columbia University. This sculpture's individuality is not only defined by its space-temporal location, but also by the unique physiognomy of its model. It is an individual unitary foundation of moments, for which the scotistic term *haecceity* is most suitable.

I must insist on this crucial discovery nourishing the Unitarian tradition: what Unitarians call *essences* or *natures*, and Husserl calls *eide*, are global structures first intuitively given in actual encounters with individuals. Individual identity (haecceity) and specific identity (nature) are inseparable (no nature can be anywhere else than in actual individuals).¹⁴ Natures are discovered, not invented. They can be conceptualized, but are conceptually inexhaustible. However, they do not fit in the ontological frame of the Standard Partition. Nothing possibly being “only in the mind” is a given source of information, let alone an infinite source, as what is worth the name of real. Notice that type individuality is quite irreducible to tokens'. Melodies, plastic models like *The Thinker*, literary works like poems or novels, and even

¹⁴ By the way, this “inseparability,” described by Husserl as defining “undetachable” parts, or moments, corresponds to Scotus' “formal distinction”: neither a *real distinction*, like two numerically different objects, nor a *distintio rationis*, an only conceptual distinction. “Inseparability” appears in the title of Ideas I, §2. *Matter of Fact. Inseparability of Matter of Fact and Essence* (Husserl, 1984, p. 7).

simple letter-types are individual essences. They have both individuality and instantiability. The Standard Partition, where individuality and instantiability are disjointed, cannot fit this datum.¹⁵ We do possess a notion of individuality – and, “founding” or fulfilling it, an experience of individuals, as recognizing visages and melodies – that is not captured by the opposition particular/universal.

This is why several phenomenologists independently rediscovered Avicenna’s dictum on essences, neither particulars nor universals.¹⁶ Two interesting examples are Max Scheler on personal individuality¹⁷ and Roman Ingarden on the “super-individuality” of musical works (1973, last chapter, *passim*).

Brother Ockham’s Individuation Principle is bare existence in space-time, or situation. Individuality comes with existence. It is a primitive notion. Whatever exists is individual just by being there (individuated by circumstances of existence). In William of Ockham’s terms, opposing Scotus, individuality has *no* “positive and intrinsic” nature.¹⁸ It just boils down to non-instantiability. As you can easily verify, the Standard Ontological Partition is built on this opposition between instantiable and non-instantiable entities, universals and individuals.¹⁹ This is not surprising, since the British Empiricist – Locke,²⁰ Berkley,²¹ Hume²² – followed Ockham’s branch of the crossroads, and so did most metaphysicians, in the XXth century: Peter Strawson,²³ Nelson Goodman,²⁴ Jorge J.E. Gracia,²⁵ Peter van Inwagen²⁶ (not to mention Quine, Lewis, or Varzi).

Where exactly does Ockham’s razor slash its mortal wound?

In classical terms, it shaves off “natures” from individuals. But of course, in the ontological frame of the Standard Partition, this move only wipes out would-be entities, chimeras

6. Anatomy of a Crime

15 For a more detailed argument in support of this claim see De Monticelli (2008; 2014).

16 “Animal in itself is a certain thing and the same whether it is an object of sense or understood in the soul. In itself, however, it is neither universal nor singular. For if it were in itself universal in such a way that animality as such (*ex hoc quod est animalitas*) were universal, then it would necessarily be the case that no animal is singular, but rather every animal would be universal”. *Logica tertia pars* (Avicenna, 1508, f. 12ra), cit. in. Noon (2006, p. 103).

17 “Essence, as we mentioned earlier, has nothing to do with *universality*. An essence of an intuitive nature is the foundation of both general concepts and intentions directed to *particulars*. It is only when we refer an essence to an object of observation (“the essence of something”) and inductive experience that the intention through which this reference occurs becomes something that pertains to either a universal or a particular. Therefore there are essences that are given only in one particular individual. And for this very reason it makes good sense to speak of an individual essence and also the individual value-essence of a person”. Scheler (1973, p. 489).

18 “Every singular thing is singular by itself. I argue this as follows: singularity immediately pertains to what it belongs to. Therefore, it cannot pertain to it through anything else.” Ockham, Question 6, 105, in Spade (1994, p. 171).

19 Even modern haecceitism, featuring in the context of XX Century modal logic, has *not* revived Scotistic individual essences, but on the contrary Ockhamist bare particulars. “A thisness is the property of being identical with a certain particular individual – not the property that we all share, of being identical with some individual or other, but my property of being identical with me, your property of being identical with you, etc. These properties have recently been called ‘essences’, but that is historically unfortunate; for essences have normally been understood to be constituted by qualitative properties, and we are entertaining the possibility of *nonqualitative thisnesses*” (Adams, 1979, p. 6).

20 “All things, that exist, being Particulars [...]” (Locke, 1975, III.xxvii.3, p. 409).

21 “But it is an universally received maxim, that *every thing which exist, is particular*” (Berkeley, 1948, 2, p 192).

22 “‘tis a principle generally receiv’d in philosophy, that every thing in nature is individual” (Hume, 1739/1958, I.i.7, p. 19).

23 “For instance, in mine, as in most familiar philosophical uses, historical occurrences, material objects, people and their shadows are all particulars; whereas qualities and properties, number and species are not” (Strawson, 1963, p. 2).

24 “An individual may be divisible into any number of parts: for individuality does not depend on indivisibility. Nor does it depend on homogeneity, continuity, compactness, or regularity” (Goodman, 1972, p. 158).

25 “Non – instantiability as the only criterium of individuality” (Gracia, 1983, p. 45; see also Gracia, 1988).

26 “In my view, there are only particulars and universals, and all particulars are substances: substances are the only representatives of the category “particular thing” (or individual)” (Van Inwagen, 1995, opening page).

or ghosts. There is nothing to blame for it. Not surprisingly, since the Partition itself was originated by that slash. Through it, “natures” become nothing else than “representations in the mind” or “concepts”.

So, what is wrong with that? My answer will run in two inseparable steps: the phenomenological and the ontological.

Much is wrong from a phenomenological point of view.

Sensible reality as an infinite source of structured information is hidden from our ontological sight. The infinite but not indefinite, not arbitrary, not imaginary flux of the experienceable is truncated as a source of *de re* knowledge. The *cognitive* adventures of perception, emotional sensibility, and personal acquaintance are removed from our intellectual horizon. The everyday world, so crowded with value-laden individual facts, is lost for philosophy, maybe left over to sophistry and rhetoric, hardly interested in *de re* truths.

To see all this, let us return in front of Rodin's sculpture at Columbia University. I consider the very *whatness* of this bronze statue, as I imagine different shapes this stuff could have taken. I also consider the circumstances of *this* statue, its situation in the middle of the campus, the snow covering it right now, the visual aspect of the bronze shining under the snow. There is absolutely nothing arbitrary in this eidetic exploration of given contents of the sculpture. I learn a lot about possible structures, proportions, meanings, and aesthetic values, and I would learn more if I had received more learning in sculptural crafts. You cannot really cut away the essential nature of the given thing without doing away with the definite and infinite source of information it is as a true sculpture. On the other hand, I could not learn more unless I kept some exemplar of the thing before me, refreshing my grasp on all these contents by perception. Ockham razor cuts this relation, letting *The Thinker* there in its bare numerical unity, deprived of all its “less than numerical unity,” that is of any contents and constraints on possible arbitrary variations. Once this relation is broken, the razor incongruously sticks “into my head” all the flowing information the statue contained and presented to me. But no source of information can reside “in my mind.” Or I would be omniscient.

Let us move on to the ontological step of my argument.

Ockham's slash cuts off one of the two complementary intuitions of an individual we have.

For we do associate two distinct but *inseparable* intuitions to the notion of a *concrete* individual. (Differently from Peter Strawson (see above), we simpletons would not ascribe individuality to a person's shade in the sun or its reflection on water).

One intuition is that of a concrete individual's (relative) ontological independence, the one to take care of which Aristotle had introduced the notion of substance and the distinction between substance and accidents. Something can exist “in itself” or “in” (as a part of) something else. Aristotle would say, as a substance or as an accident.²⁷ The other intuition involved is that of situation, i.e. what, quite independently of its properties, mostly shared by other individuals, allows an individual to be distinguished from any other one. The situation (from *situs*, site) makes an individual a “*tode ti*,” which is something ostensively or indexically given: this one, here. Ockham's move is way less innocent than we used to think: it cuts off one of the two complementary intuitions of an individual we have. It exclusively keeps to the other one, adopting as the only criterion of individuality the property of being a *tode ti*: having a position in space time. Non-instantiability becomes the defining character of this “ineffable” or non “communicable” being (*individuum ineffabile, incommunicabile*).

However, to take care of our twofold intuition we do not need to stick to the category of substance, with all its heavy metaphysical implications, that we will not address here. The

²⁷ Aristotle, *Categories*, Ia 20.

crucial feature we do associate to “concrete” individuals is, as we saw, integrity, i.e., richness of contents, and structure that holds them together lawfully, not arbitrarily (concrete individuals are no “bunches” of qualities). Because of this “integrity,” a thing does not need another for (ontological) completion: it is self-contained. It is a whole, not a part of something else. So, Unitarians can do better than Aristotle. A suggestion is provided by Husserl, in that almost introductory § 2 of *Ideas I*, already mentioned above:

An individual object is not merely an individual object as such, a “This here,” an object never repeatable; as qualified “in itself” thus and so, it has its own specific character, its stock of essential predicables which must belong to it (as “an existent such as it is in itself) if other, secondary, relative determinations can belong to it (Husserl, 1984, p. 7).²⁸

As we know from Conte, the “stock of essential predicables which must belong to it” make up the truth of a true thing. Concrete individuals are things enjoying de re truth (the inverse implication may not be true).

In conclusion, I shall take the liberty of reproducing an outline of an ontological frame of language, alternative to the Standard Ontological Partition, which I found helpful in representing the Unitarian take on what there is. To make its rationale as intuitively clear as simpletons and lustful realists can afford, I shall also take over, with a few variations, a kind of sermon concerning the life world, whose essential contents may have appeared elsewhere.²⁹ In Brother Ockham’s ontological perspective, science (essentially, physics) is the only wisdom entitled to tell us what there is. Accordingly, our everyday world displays no “laws of essence”. There is no power to integrate given circumstances into a personal life’s unity. Nothing needs to be done to fulfil a personal calling, such as that of a pianist or a poet. There is nothing good or bad in itself, either; for in a world of facts, there is no place for essential properties or relations, for values, or for objective value-relations. It is a light world, resembling that of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, where anything might become anything else. Some contemporary poets, such as, for example, Italo Calvino or Milan Kundera, found that lightness congenial.³⁰ Unitarians think science only tells us what *else* there is, over and beyond the undisputable reality of our everyday world. Accordingly, nothing escapes that gift of intrinsic constraints that a true P (a mountain, a piece of music, a human being, a human civilization) has to meet: to keep in life or become a better exemplar of what it is. Concreteness is far from expelling the dimensions of ideals and norms – aesthetical, practical, ethical, legal, political. Our ontological table is two-dimensional because it distinguishes the logical dimension of universality/singularity from the ontological dimension of true things: their wholeness, moments, ontological dependences or foundations.

7. Reproposing a Sermon and the Two-Dimensional Table

LOGICAL AXIS	ONTOLOGICAL AXIS	
Generality/Instances	Unities of containment, which are	Bonds on (co)variations of contents
GENUS	ONTOLOGICAL REGION	LAWS OF ESSENCE
	CONCRETE SELF-CONTAINED	ABSTRACT NON SELF-CONTAINED
SPECIES	(INTEGRAL) WHOLE	PARTIAL CONTENTS

²⁸ I repeatedly quoted this passage in former papers and books, maybe to compensate the scarce attention it gets in Husserlian literature.

²⁹ Both the Table and the basic claims of the “sermon” appeared in De Monticelli (2020-21; 2021).

³⁰ See Calvino (2016, First Lecture: Lightness, 3-35) and Kundera (1984).

	INDIVIDUAL	EIDETIC SINGULARITIES (tropes, abstract particulars)
TODE TI (Token) This tone here	$A(p,t,d,l)$	Pitch p , Timbre t , Duration d , Loudness l

As Unitarians never ignored, essence has nothing to do with universality. An essence of an intuitive nature is the foundation of both singular and general descriptors: we find both of them on the Logical Axis (bottom-up).

The Ontological Axis vertically displays individuals as belonging to “material” ontological regions. Horizontally, it represents relations of ontological dependence between wholes and their inseparable partial contents (“moments”). Concreteness and abstractness are self-sufficiency and dependence. A concrete thing is a self-sufficient entity or a whole – it needs no integration to exist, as opposed to a color or the expression of a face. The Ontological Axis visualizes what Husserl takes to be the upshot of his formal ontology, from the *Logical Investigations* to *Ideas I*:

As a result, we arrive at important definitions of the formal categorial concepts of individuum, concretum, and abstractum. A non-self-sufficient essence is called an abstractum, an absolutely self-sufficient essence a concretum. A This-here, the material essence of which is a concretum, is called an individuum.³¹

We might also read these few lines as the legacy of the whole Unitarian Tradition: refuting Platonism by rejecting independent abstract entities, renouncing Aristotelianism by de-substantializing individuals and replacing substances with actualized structured wholes, escaping desert landscapes of Nominalism by discarding the Standard Ontological Partition in favor of a new ontology of concreteness, that we call Phenomenology.

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³¹ Husserl (1983, p. 29, § 15: “Self-sufficient and Non-Self-sufficient Objects. Concretum and Individuum”).

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