

# **The Demonic Temptations of Medieval Nominalism**

Edited by

**Gyula Klima and Alexander W. Hall**

**Proceedings of the Society for Medieval  
Logic and Metaphysics**

**Volume 9**

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**  
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
**PUBLISHING**

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**This book first published 2011**

**Cambridge Scholars Publishing**

**12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library**

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**ISBN (10): 1-4438-3374-6, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3374-5**

# UNIVERSALISM AND THE ARGUMENT FROM INDIFFERENCE\*

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Are the most immediate entities of perception particular or, rather, universal? Call PP the thesis that those entities are particular and UP the thesis that they are universal. In this paper I advance an argument for UP, which elaborates on a version of what Gyula Klima labeled 'the argument from the indifference of sensory representation' or, for short, 'the argument from indifference', which Klima attributes to John Buridan.<sup>1</sup> This argument bears significant analogies with some cases discussed in the recent literature on hallucinatory experience – (Johnston, 2004) and (Siegel, 2004) – and in the literature on intrinsic properties, such as (Lewis, 2009); furthermore, it clearly relates to Descartes' skeptical hypothesis of an evil daemon and to Putnam's brain in a vat thought experiment. However, in comparison to those, it is striking for its uncanny simplicity and greater plausibility, besides the fact that it historically precedes each one of them. For these reasons, I shall only concentrate on that argument here.

## §1 Preliminaries

Define universalism as the view according to which the sole denizens of reality are universals. And define universals as repeatable entities with a qualitative character.<sup>2</sup> Repeatable, in that universals can exist *more than*

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\* I am much indebted to Gyula Klima, Sebastian Watzl, and Adam Wood for the ideas here discussed. Preliminary versions of this paper were presented at the Eighth National Conference of the Italian Society for Analytic Philosophy (Bergamo, Italy, 25-28 September, 2008) and at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Medieval Logic and Metaphysics (Creighton University, October 31-November 2, 2008); I thank the organizers and the participants for the precious suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> See (Klima, 2008, esp. §4.4.)

<sup>2</sup> For a defense of this account, see (Borghini, 2010.)

*once*, which is to say that their numerical identity is dissociated from their existence. With a qualitative character, in that being a certain kind of properties, their existence makes a difference as to *what* there is. When I watch Fido the dog, the three universals *Being a dog*, *Being brown*, and *Being loud* are those which explain what my experience is of: it is of a dog, it is of brownness, and it is of loud barking. What we thus experience is a character of reality. Universals are what provide reality with *that* character, whether we are capable of grasping it or not.

Universalism is certainly a controversial view and, among the many questions you may direct towards it, one concerns the theory of perception that may go with it. Indeed, as it is fairly standard to maintain that some denizens of reality are particular, it is also fairly standard to explain sensory perceptions in terms of those particulars. That is, most accounts of perception have it that particulars are responsible for triggering our perceptions, not the universals they (supposedly) exemplify. However, universalists cannot sanction explanations of this nature, as they deny the existence of particulars. The aim of this paper is to bring plausibility to an account of sensory perception that is compatible with universalism.

The central question I'm going to address can be thus expressed:

Q: What makes a difference to our perceptual experience?

Q has multiple facets. For a starter, there may be some 'internal' factors that make a difference, such as attentiveness and the individual's perceptual abilities. 'Where' your attention is focused certainly makes a difference as to what you perceive. Also, the acuteness of your eyesight, smell, or hearing will affect your experience. On the other hand, there are a number of external factors that may make a difference too, such as environmental conditions – a particular light, a certain noise level, the presence of persons, plants or animals that facilitate or obstruct the perception. However things may stand with respect to these details, here I wish to focus barely on the ontological status of what ultimately triggers our perception. That is, what is the status of those entities, which are typically regarded as the *objects* of perception? My goal is to bring plausibility to the thesis that universals are what make a difference.

## §2 The Argument

The argument is first raised in Scotus's *Ordinatio*,<sup>3</sup> and deepened in Ockham's *Quodlibetal Questions*, in Buridan's *Questions on Aristotle's De Anima* and in his *Quaestiones in Aristotelis Metaphysicam*. It was also recently studied by Gyula Klima, in his monograph devoted to the French medieval philosopher.<sup>4</sup> Here is how Ockham summarizes the argument:

... it does not seem that an intuitive cognition is a proper cognition, since any given intuitive cognition is equally a likeness of one singular thing and of another exactly similar thing, and it equally represents both the one and the other. Therefore, it does not seem to be more a cognition of the one than a cognition of the other.<sup>5</sup>

What is offered in the sequel is a reconstruction of the argument, which is primarily driven by theoretical interests rather than exegetical accuracy. The aim is to put forward a version of the argument that supports universalism.

In its simpler formulation the argument is composed of two premises and a conclusion. Each premise constitutes a sharp tool to fine-tune the ultimate justification of one's position in the Nominalism vs Realism debate; and, in a sense, it is to this effect that Buridan – a strenuous advocate of Nominalism – introduced it. Let us, hence, view a preliminary version of the argument, to be refined in the following sections.

### First Premise

(P1) If the entities of perception are singular, then one ought to be able – at least in principle – to distinguish between the perceptions of two distinct particular entities.

This premise sets the standards of individuation, requiring that – at least in principle – no two particulars are indiscernible *in perception*. Thus, if in perceiving *this* dog – Rubi – you are perceiving a particular, then you ought to be able – at least in principle – to distinguish the perception of

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<sup>3</sup> According to (Klima, 2008: 288, n.67.)

<sup>4</sup> (Klima, 2008.)

<sup>5</sup> (Ockham, 1991: 65.)

Rubi from the perception of any other distinct particular, such as – say – *that* dog, Lilli.

To expect a parallel among the metaphysical and epistemic discernibility of entities is, clearly, a stark demand. To deem otherwise, however, would immediately open the door to the possibility of indifferent particulars, those that can be swapped without the perceiver being able to tell of the exchange. But, indifferent particulars are unwelcome, as they mine at its foundation the trust that perceptual experience is a reliable guide to the individuation of particulars.

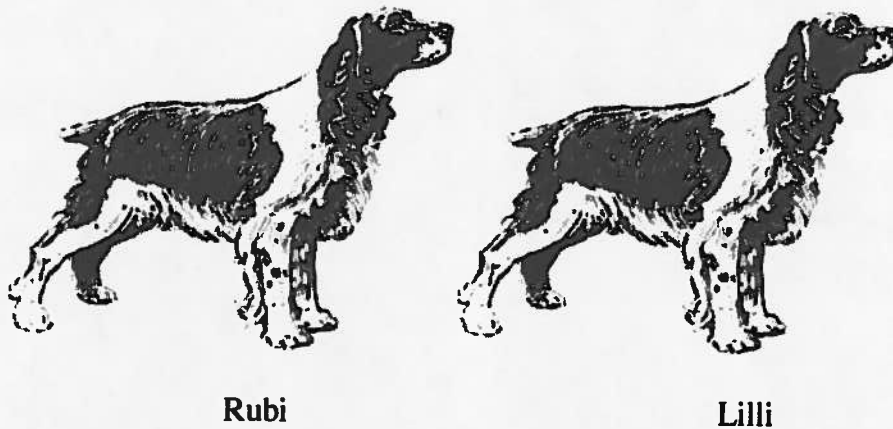
In other words, if perception is indifferent to particulars, then – in the worst scenario – any case of perceptual knowledge could result in a mismatch: in this situation, for any particular *X* triggering a perception, the perceiver would be misled in thinking to be perceiving a metaphysically different, but perceptually indifferent, particular *Y*. Since we could not rule out to be in such a situation, we could not rule out that our perceptual knowledge is dramatically wrong. Hence, we should reject the hypothesis that there may be some different indifferents.

But, are we really in a position to rule out different indifferents?

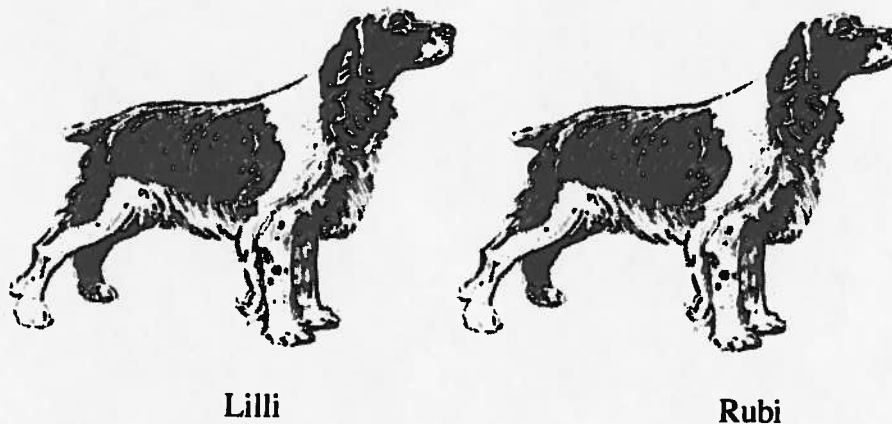
### Second Premise

- (P2) However, we can devise cases in which one would not be able to individuate the particulars in front of her, as she would not be able to distinguish whether she is perceiving particular entity *a* or particular entity *b* (where *a* and *b* are distinct.)

To illustrate this premise, we may start by imagining a far-fetched example. Consider two dogs, Rubi and Lilli (figure 1.) Suppose that Rubi would be instantaneously swapped places with Lilli, which looks exactly like Rubi; you would not be able to realize the swapping and thus you would fail to distinguish your perception of Rubi from the one of Lilli. Thus, in figure 1, the label under the dog on the left is 'Rubi' and the one under the dog on the right is 'Lilli.' But, how can we rule out that a swapping took place as in Figure 2? Perhaps it already occurred and we should swap labels as well?



*Figure 1.*



*Figure 2.*

If this example sounds too exotic to you, consider cases of hallucinatory experience, which have been at the center of much attention in the recent literature on perception.<sup>6</sup> While the hallucination is taking place, a mismatch of particulars is occurring. Typically, a mismatch of properties is drawn in as well. Yet, while the latter mismatch can be sorted out on the basis of a mismatch in the causal roles of properties (they fail to 'behave' as they should), the mismatch of particulars seems not to be discoverable on a basis that is independent from properties. You could, indeed, imagine two different indifferent worlds, indiscernible with respect to all their properties, one of which is inhabited by a wide array of particulars

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<sup>6</sup> See (Johnston, 2004), (Siegel, 2004), (Martin, 1997), (Martin, 2002.)

triggering all perceptual experiences, while the other is but the result of the hallucinatory activity of a mind. How could the perceiver be able to tell the two worlds apart? How can we tell that our world is not one such?<sup>7</sup>

Or, consider some of the minutest particles that we can perceive, such as the molecules composing a gas. By definition, these are indiscernible: a swarm of different indifferent entities. We may 'observe' any singular one, but we would not be able to distinguish it from any other, thereby failing to satisfy the requirement set in P1.

Considerations along these lines suggest that particulars play a vacuous role in perceptual content. This lesson is arrived at upon pondering another result of Buridan's argument: unless we postulate a parallel between the metaphysical and epistemic discernibility of particulars, we open the door to serious skeptical doubts.

### Conclusion

∴ Therefore, the entities of perception are not singular, but universal.

Another way of stating this conclusion would be to say that – in cases such as the one of Rubi and Lilli – we are incapable of grasping the alleged particularity in front of us, but we can only represent what we perceive through some concepts. Buridan thus expresses this point:

And thus, in the end it seems to me to be said that no concept is singular, unless it is a concept of a thing [conceived] as existing in the presence and in the view of the cognizer, in the way that thing appears to the cognizer as designated by an act of pointing; and some people call this sort of cognition intuitive.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Descartes' hypothesis of an evil deceiver and Putnam's brain-in-a-vat example raise a similar doubt, regarding different indifferent scenarios. Cast in a non-hyperbolic fashion, Buridan's formulation strikes as more incisive; it is also revealing of the different degrees of doubt, which may involve one particular only, or two, or ... or every particular.

<sup>8</sup> (Buridan, 1964: VII, 20, f. liiii ra–va.)



This, however, would establish a further link between concepts and universals, with respect to which I prefer to stay neutral here.

Buridan's exposition of the matter is lucid and insightful. While seemingly favoring universalism, it forces a Nominalist to re-think the reasons in support of her position. As we shall see, the French philosopher's reasons to postulate the existence of particulars lie elsewhere than in the characterization of perceptual content – they rest on the explanation of the apparent singularity of perception.

### **§3 Rejecting the Argument?**

Fast and disruptive, the argument has a paradoxical flavor, which induces the reader to withhold assent. Here, I will consider three major lines of objection to the argument. Two point at certain hidden premises that ought to bring us to reject the second premise. The third one accepts the second premise, but rejects the first one. While I will resist each one, some lessons should be drawn from them.

#### **§3.1 First Reply From the Missing Premise**

It may seem to you that the argument makes a tacit assumption regarding the criteria of individuation of a particular. Indeed, P2 seems to presuppose that:

- (P3) In order to individuate a particular at one scenario, one has to be able to trace the particular across all the different scenarios in which it could exist (where 'could' varies over all metaphysically possible scenarios.)

Now, you may believe that P3 is too strong. It's not that, in order to capture – say – who's your father, you need to be able to recognize him in all different scenarios in which he may exist. Consider again the dogs' example. Here, Rubi and Lilli are completely indifferent to you, and *yet* you are able to tell them apart: Rubi is the dog to the left and Lilli is the dog to the right. Isn't this enough to claim an ability to individuate each of them? In other words, you could believe that:

- (P3\*) In order to individuate a particular at one scenario, one has to be able to distinguish it at *that* scenario, rather than at all scenarios.

I believe, however, that this line of objection does not dispel the major doubt raised in P2, which lies at the basis of Buridan's intuition. Let us grant that, in the case of Rubi and Lilli, you are indeed entertaining a thought which includes two particular representations. Still, *clearly* you don't know what entities each of those representations stands for: for all that you know, Lilli could be – right now – what you call "Rubi" and Rubi what you call "Lilli."

In other words, it seems that individuation requires the ability not just to *cognize*, but to *re-cognize*. This is – I take – an intuition regarding the individuation of contingent entities. After all, the very concept of a particular – one may argue – is rooted in the possibility that it could be/have been otherwise. Your car is not just what it is, but also what it could be: it is now standing still in a parking lot, but it could move; it is dirty, but it could be cleaned; it is red, but it could be turquoise. To individuate your car embeds not just telling it apart from other cars *right now* as you are watching it in a parking lot, but also being able to do so were the situation a different one. Along the same lines, your father is not just what he is *right now*, but also what he could be. You may claim to have individuated your father not simply when you are able to tell him apart while he is in front of you, but also when you would be able to tell him apart from others in other contexts.

Returning to our example – we fail to individuate Rubi and Lilli because they are contingent entities and, among their contingencies, there is the possibility that Rubi would have occupied Lilli's spot in the page, while Lilli would have occupied Rubi's spot. How do you know this is not, indeed, the case? P3\* attempts to set for too cheap a solution, which does not do any work in solving the problem raised in the argument.

At this point, one may be tempted to reason as follows. P3 sets standards for individuation which are too high; P3\* sets standards that are too low; shouldn't we try and set intermediate standards? For example, we may retain the tracking of essential properties as sufficient for individuation; or – say – the tracking of intrinsic properties. That is, we may thus modify P3:

(P3\*\*) In order to individuate a particular at one scenario, one has to be able to trace that particular across *all* the different scenarios in which it has the same essential properties.

(P3\*\*\*) In order to individuate a particular at one scenario, one has to be able to trace that particular across *all* the different scenarios in which it has the same intrinsic properties.

While P3\*\* and P3\*\*\* strike me as more palatable than P3\*, they dive us into the 'metaphysical jungle' of essentialism and intrinsic properties respectively. Indeed, we have now to sort out the essential properties of a particular in order to test whether we are able to individuate it; or, we have to figure out which of its properties are intrinsic – let alone the fact that intrinsic properties seem not to be capable of being perceived for reasons analogous to the ones provided by Buridan; see (Lewis, 2009), (Esfeld, 2003), (Langton, 1998).

This is not to say that one may not enjoy diving in such jungles, or even endorse the bold position drawn by P3\*. But, a universalist will not do so; and, I hope to have offered you some reasons that make this stance plausible.

### §3.2 Second Reply From the Missing Premise

You could believe that there is a second tacit premise in P2, namely:

(P4) All properties of what makes a difference to our sensory perceptions are – at least in principle – knowable.

Now, you may argue that P4 is false, by postulating that singular entities have undetectable properties that are key for their individuation, the so-called *haecceitates*. The *haecceitas* of a particular *X* is, roughly speaking, that unique property *Being X*, which *X* and only *X* enjoys. Clearly, it could be in virtue of such a property that the individuation of *X* is carried out.

If *haecceitates* are responsible for individuation, then P4 is rejected and, at once, the argument is blocked. However, there is a characteristic of *haecceitates*, which renders them unpalatable to lead the escape from the woods: they elude our sensory perception. The individuation invoked in the argument is not a purely metaphysical notion; we are not after something, which renders a particular *X* metaphysically distinct from any other entity; the individuation in question is, rather, at the intersection between metaphysics and epistemology: it wonders about the most immediate entities of human perception. Since *haecceitates* are not among those, they cannot be of help avoiding the conclusion of the argument.

### §3.3 The Reply From Causation

It is quite striking that nominalists such as Buridan and Ockham eagerly accepted premises P2, P3 and P4. That is, in a sense they both accepted that our perceptual experience may be blind to particulars, as it cannot keep track of certain kinds of swapping. Their nominalistic creed rested on a different ground, which embedded an objection to the argument from indifference that denied P1. More specifically, their reply came from an understanding of causation as a connection among particulars. It is to this topic, then, that we shall now turn.

To Buridan and Ockham, even supposing that we cannot properly entertain the thought of a particular does not entail that what makes a difference to our sensory perceptions are not particulars. On the contrary: each sensory perception has to be caused by particulars because it is the resultant of a causal process, and causal processes are always particular. *This* perceptual experience of Rubi is not *that* perceptual experience of Lilli, even if they are indiscernible content-wise. Here is how Ockham puts the matter:

I reply that an intuitive cognition is a proper cognition of a singular thing not because of its greater likeness to the one thing than to the other, but because it is naturally caused by the one thing and not by the other, and it is not able to be caused by the other.<sup>9</sup>

The view that causation is a relation (of some sort) among particulars is well-established and can be developed in different ways. A prominent one – advanced, for example, in (Davidson, 1967) – maintains that the causal relata are particular events. However, this remark simply suggests a plausible way out of the argument for the nominalist, rather than a viable objection to it. Contrary to the nominalist, the universalist will insist that causation is a relation among universals. Again, this is a fairly widespread view, which comes in different versions. Hence – the universalist claims – the argument goes through: what makes a difference to our perceptual experience are universals.

Actually, the universalist may have an edge over the nominalist when it comes to the explanation of the causal link between a perceptual

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<sup>9</sup> (Ockham, 1991: 66.)

experience and its prompt(s). Buridan had already come to see the problem: if perceptual knowledge depends on causal chains among particulars, singular cognition (that is, knowledge of a particular) is contingent on acquaintance. In order for Teresa to acquire a singular knowledge of the dog Rubi, she has to establish the right sort of causal link with it. However, when it comes to no longer existing entities, such as Leonardo da Vinci, a direct link cannot be established. Hence, the nominalist will have to resort to some kind of indirect causal chain, which would somehow preserve the singular character of the initial causal link.<sup>10</sup> The solution is mirrored in the contemporary 'causal-historical' theories of reference. But, it remains somehow mysterious how the singularity of a given cognition can be preserved in a 'mind-to-mind' transfer, as if certain linguistic expressions (e.g. proper names) would have the capacity to convey the distinctive information that – according to a nominalist – is contained in the particularity of a situation.

What the reply from causation seems to show is that the supporter of universalism needs to endorse an account of causation as a relation among universals. (A relation that, of course, does not take place in a mind-independent spatio-temporal manifold.) But, this is nothing new and it can be accomplished.

#### §4 Conclusions

Upon surveying the three objections to Buridan's argument, we are now in a position to restate it in a better articulated form (where P2 is now preceded by P3 and P4):

- (P1) If the entities of perception are singular, then one ought to be able – at least in principle – to distinguish between the perceptions of two distinct particular entities.
- (P3) In order to individuate (and thus distinguish) a particular at one scenario, one has to be able to trace the particular across all the different scenarios in which it could exist (where 'could' varies over all metaphysically possible scenarios).

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<sup>10</sup> Cfr. (Klima, 2008: 74-83.)

(P4) All properties of what makes a difference to our sensory perceptions are – at least in principle – knowable.

(P2) We can devise cases in which one would not be able to individuate the particulars in front of her.

∴ Therefore, the entities of perception are not singular.

As I tried to show, the argument depends on a certain understanding of three issues: (i) individuation, which has to be a thick enough notion; (ii) qualitative properties, which cannot include *haecceitates*; (iii) causation: which needs to be explained in terms of a relation among universals rather than particulars. I take it that these three requirements are at least *prima facie* plausible and compatible. But, if so, through Buridan's argument we have a straightforward account of sensory experience that agrees with universalism.

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