
UNIT 3 MATTER AND FORM

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

The problem of “One and Many” or “Unity in Diversity” has been one of the important themes of philosophical thinking and discussions from the inception of the subject itself. It is of course the fact of change that we notice in the nature around us that presents us with this problem. The problem of change, however, is only one of the issues connected with the problem of One and Many. For soon the attention of a philosopher like Parmenides fell on the notion of being, outside of which there is simply nothing. Everything in every phase is being. However his monistic outlook on the nature of being contradicted the facts of experience. Hence there has to be a different solution to the problem of One and Many or Unity in Diversity. To find a solution it is also important to look at the whole issue of limitation in the order of existence. Aristotle seems not to have paid much attention to the metaphysical problem of multiplication and limitation of existence but he contributed indirectly in solving the problem by evolving the doctrine of potency and act, whereby he accounted for the unity-in-diversity involved in change. Aquinas, a medieval philosopher, extended this doctrine to the problems in the order of existence. Aquinas was able to synthesize the platonic doctrine of participation and the Aristotelian theory of potency and act. He then concluded that all finite beings are intrinsically composed of Being and essence as co-principles ordered to each other in a potency-act relationship. He went on to prove that Being and essence are really distinct in all beings except one – God. God's essence is identical with His Being. Now according to Aquinas beings which are multiplied in existence are all totally alike in so far as they are and totally unlike in so far as each is what it is. Further, this means every being which is limited in being possesses an intrinsic principle whereby it is limited. It should be noted that these two principles

are perfectly proportioned to each other. The essence specifies and limits Being to be the Being of this finite individual. Being, on the other hand, actuates the essence so that it is an existing essence. Thus we can arrive at a solution to the problem of One and Many in the order of Being by stating that beings are limited and multiplied in the order of being in as much as the act of being is received into diverse essences. Our objective here would be:

- to examine what exactly these essences are. In trying to explain what essences are we will discover that there are two intrinsic principles in the essence of limited beings: Matter and Form.
- to present matter and form as a solution to the problem of individuality of beings.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Matter is the stuff (substrate) out of which something is made or fashioned. The word, *matter* is derived from the Latin word, *materia*, meaning *wood*. *Materia*, itself, traces back to the word, *mater*; meaning *mother*. Thus considered, matter is the ‘mother-substance.’

At a peripheral level form is the external shape, appearance of a thing. At a deeper level form is that which specifies matter to be what it is. In metaphysics form is the active, determining principle of a thing as distinguished from matter, the potential principle.

The words ‘matter’ and ‘form’ have been used in a number of ways throughout the history of philosophy. For Anaxagoras (500-428 B.C.) matter is eternal. Originally it is a confused mass containing all the ultimate particles or seed mingled together. The static state of the confused mass was, at some point, disturbed by a rapidly rotating motion which disentangled the seeds bringing about eventually the things of the world and the heavenly bodies. In fact the dualism between matter and form was introduced by Anaxagoras by his concept of *Nous*, which according to him is “the thinnest of all things”. It might be true to say that with the notion of *Nous* Anaxagoras attempted to describe a spiritual reality in the inadequate material terms of his time. For this reason, Aristotle termed him as being the only “sane man among drunkards”, referring to the absurdities of his predecessors.

Plato applied the term ‘form’ to identify the permanent reality that makes a thing what it is, and for him it belonged to the real world. Whereas, matter was finite and subject to time, change, multiplicity and belonged to the shadow world. Matter is essentially inferior to the forms. It can never be reducible to the other. Hence there is a dualism between the two. Matter lacks stability and unity. It is responsible for all the imperfections and disorders in the world. It is non-real and in this sense, it is non-being. It is not ‘non-existent’; rather it has a lower form of existence. Any reality it has is due to the reality of the forms. The world is the result of the inter-play of the forms and matter. The Platonic concept of form had its origin in the Pythagorean theory about numbers. Number is the ultimate element of reality; all reality is made of numbers. In this Plato found inspiration for his theory of “eternal form”, the immutable essence that is “imitated” by material, sensible things existing in the world of shadows.

Aristotle was the first to distinguish between matter (**hypokeimenon** or **hyle**) and form (**eidōs** or **morphe**). He rejected the abstract Platonic notion of form and argued that every sensible object consists of both matter and form, neither of which can exist

without the other. To Aristotle matter was the undifferentiated primal element; it is that from which things develop rather than a thing in itself. The development of particular things from this germinal matter consists in differentiation, the acquiring of the particular forms of which the knowable universe consists. Matter is the potential factor, form the actualizing factor. (Aristotle further posited the existence of a prime, or unmoved, mover, **i.e.**, pure form separate from matter, eternal and immutable.)

Thus according to Aristotle, the matter of a thing will consist of those elements of it, which, when the thing has come into being, may be said to have become it; and the form is the arrangement or organization of those elements, as the result of which they have become the thing which they have. A favourite example of Aristotle’s is the case of a house made out of bricks. The bricks are the matter of the house, but bricks all by themselves do not account for the house, as opposed to a pile of bricks. The form is a cause in the sense of that it is constitutive of the thing it is the form of, just as the matter is constitutive of the thing. But form has a certain priority and explanatory value because the form accounts for the matter being in a certain configuration while in that configuration, something that matter cannot do.

Aristotle’s notion of form combines with his teleological viewpoint to give the conclusion that formal development has a direction and may have a goal and that some things are more informed than others. Bricks are more in-formed than clay and a house more than bricks.

According to Plotinus (205-270 A.D.) matter is the lowest of all the emanations. If the One (Transcendent Absolute) can be regarded as the light which diffuses itself, then matter is the last extremity to which the light extends. It is the dimmest part. In relation to the One it is unilluminated darkness, the privation of light, the anti-thesis of the One. In itself matter is unconscious. It lacks all form and intelligibility. It gets its intelligibility from form and from being an integral part of bodies as their substratum. Matter is also the principle of evil in so far as when the soul is in contact with matter, or with the external world, it forgets its origin and being engrossed in the world of matter it degrades itself more and more.

Plotinus does not hold that matter is evil in itself. He studies matter not so much in itself as in its relation to form. Matter is that which remains after all the formal principles have been removed. Hence, any activity and goodness that it has, is not due to itself but due to a foreign principle, namely, the form to which it is unified. Hence it cannot diffuse itself. Matter strives after form and goodness but it can never hold on to it. Matter is in constant change and movement. Hence it is the principle of multiplicity.

Immanuel Kant treated form as if it is a property of mind; he held that form is derived from experience. In other words, he said, it is imposed by the individual on the material object.

Check Your Progress I
Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.
1) Define/describe Matter and Form.
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2) Explain the development of the notion of Matter and Form

3.2 ESSENCES AS SUBSTANCE AND ACCIDENTS

The term ‘essence’ primarily refers to the substance and in a qualified sense to the accidents. For the present our focus is on the term essence as referring to the substance. The substantial essence is known and defined in terms of its characteristic modes of activity. A human being, for example, is a substance having vegetative, sensory, and intellectual activities. On the basis of these activities he/she can be defined as a corporeal, sentient, rational, and living substance. All human beings have the same definable types of activity. They are alike, therefore, in their specific notes: they are the same in species. The definition of a human being expresses this specific essence, and is predictable univocally of each and every human being, in so far as he/she is a member of the human species. However, for the very reason that it is truly universal, the definition does not express the individuality of the members of the species. Krishnan and Husain are alike as men, and yet they are completely diverse as individuals. How can this be?

3.3 THE PROBLEM OF INDIVIDUATION

Aquinas insists upon locating the principle of this diversity within the essence of the individual being. The source of this diversity lies within and must therefore be represented by something in the individual essence. This in turn acknowledges the fact that each member of the class is a limited expression of all the conceivable perfections which could be attributed to the common essence of the class as a whole. It would amount to the view that each individual must be said to “participate” or possess in some degree the perfections of its class. It would further lead us to the need to place within the very essence itself of each member of the class an additional principle of limitation for the essence. Here it is the essence that is being limited and the principle of limitation can be termed as “prime matter” (material prima). The actual essence thus limited is called the substantial form. It should be noted that only the essences of material substances are thus limited.

3.4 MATTER AS PRINCIPLE OF LIMITATION

Matter can be said to be the principle of limitation in the essence, which is itself a principle of limitation of act of existing. The actual essence which is limited by being received into the limiting matter principle is called substantial form. This doctrine of matter-form composition of the essence in the material substances of our experience is known as hylemorphism, a conjoined Greek term for matter and form. Accepting matter as the limiting principle in the essence gives us a rational explanation for the multiplication of many similar essences in the class or species.

3.5 MATTER AND FORM IN AQUINAS' METAPHYSICS

In Aquinas' Metaphysics matter principle is the first intrinsic potential principle of limitation in the essence of the material substance whereby each individual in such a class is distinct or individuated from every other member of its class or species. And the substantial form in material substances is the first intrinsic actual principle which renders the potential material principle actual, thus making the whole essence capable of receiving the act of existence. Using hylemorphism as a rational explanation of how there can be many distinct individuals who are nevertheless members of a single class is the special contribution of Aquinas. Taken together both are in potentiality to their act of existing, the principle by which the whole composite is actuated. Neither the matter nor the form has a separate act of to be. Rather one act of to be is received into both principles of the composite essence together. It is clear, however, that this actuation is received through the substantial form. Surely, the substantial forms cannot act in any way independently of their material principles. In other words, matter and form co-act. Thus from matter and form we get a unit, without any external bonding uniting them. Here we can note the force of the axiom: *Oneness of being follows its to be*. The material principle is constituted in its very nature as an essential relation to form. Form, in turn, is constituted as an essential relation to the material principle. They are correlatives in the same way the principles of essence and existence are in the being as a whole. They are co-causes of their actions too. It is right to conclude then that since the matter and form cannot act independently of one another they cannot exist too independently of one another. Hence the formula: No matter without form; no form without matter.

3.6 DISTINCTION BETWEEN MATTER AND FORM

From what we said above it must be evident that there is a real distinction between the matter and form principles. This is not only because they are related to each other as potency to act but also because matter is a principle of limitation in the essence. It is as if matter is saying, "this much and no more" in the essence for this being. If the limiting principle in the essence were not really distinct from that which it limits, then one material substance in a class would not be really distinct from another in the class. In a word, it would not be really individuated. Besides, in an essential change the form can be separated from the matter. Of course, the matter must instantaneously receive a new form. Thus the matter is separated from this particular form and immediately receives a new form. As is clear, separability is one of the simplest and best tests of real distinction. We should also note that matter represents limitation of such perfections as pertained to the common essence representing the whole class, whereas, form represents this unlimited aspect as the common essence in the individual. It, of course, pertains to the class or specific perfections. Matter pertains to the peculiarly individual perfections which separate one member of the class from all others, so-called individual differences. For instance, a human being's form (soul) represents such perfections as his/her human class possesses; his/her matter (body) represents the individual differences peculiar to him/her alone in his/her class. Indirect predication, however, is possible. Matter has form. Form has matter. Hence, matter is not form. Form is not matter. Therefore they are really distinct. The distinction, however, is a minor real distinction. For, here we are dealing with two principles of being rather than two distinct beings.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Describe the role of matter and form in Limitation.

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2) Explain the distinction between matter and form.

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3.7 ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF QUANTITY IN
INDIVIDUATION

At first sight it would seem obvious even to an ordinary person that an individual in its class is recognized by its various particular appearances: its peculiar size, shape, colour, fixed quantity, and the like. Such observation certainly is not off the mark. But there is a hitch and we need to go beyond. The problem of individuation is not at all the usually simple one of how the individual is recognized. Rather it is one of finding a rational explanation of how the individual is metaphysically constituted as an individual in its very being. What is it within the being by which it is constituted undivided in itself and separated from all other beings?

It is evident that it is by the proper accident of the quantity of a material substance (in which the other accidents, such as colour, shape, weight, and the like, first inhere, and then, through the quantity, in the substance itself) that the individual is so recognized. Quantity is thus a very profound modifying factor, though still of an accidental character, in all material substances. Such substances are often designated as *quantified beings*. It is for these and other reasons, that Aquinas insists, that quantity exercises an auxiliary role with the essential principle of matter to complete the principle of individuation. It is by the principle of individuation that the individual being is distinct from similar beings belonging to a class. In Chapter two of his metaphysical work *On Being and Essence*, Aquinas writes: “We must realize that matter which is the principle of individuation is not any matter whatsoever, but only signated matter (*materia signata*). By signated matter I mean matter considered under determined dimensions.” According to commentators of his work, the reference to “determined dimensions” is to the accident of quantity which possesses certain dimensions in space.

Accidents, the causes of lesser determinations in a being, are as it were “con-created” or produced with the production of the essence or substance. Without them the substance would not be fully equipped for existence. Hence they are called “proper” accidents. They are said to flow as it were from the essence or substances necessarily, though not of the essence. Such an accident is quantity in material substances. Quantity is generally described as that proper intrinsic and absolute accident having dimensions inhering primarily in the material principle of a substance. When a material substance is said to be perfected by quantity in accordance with its role as an accident, it is done necessarily under certain determined dimensions.

Quantity by its nature is equipped to perform this auxiliary role. It is essentially divisible and, as such, is the basis of numerical designation. Moreover, without its proper accident of quantity with determinate dimensions, prime matter is not equipped of itself to exercise its essential function of making a material substance fully individual in its class or species. The reason for this is that of itself matter is undetermined and common to all material substances. Matter must itself, therefore, receive a certain determination or perfection. Such determination or perfection comes from quantity, which is its proper accident. This does not in any way mean that quantity can become a co-constituent with the material principle in the individuation of the substance. It should be carefully noted that what is to be individuated is neither the matter nor the quantity but the received act of existence.

3.8 INDIVIDUATION IN ARISTOTLE

Aristotle’s doctrine of individuation uses the similar terms of matter and form. Aristotle did not reject his teacher Plato as much as it sometimes thought. For Aristotle matter seems to be the principle of individuation. He says in his *Metaphysics*, “What is numerically different has matter; for one and the same concept, humanity for instance, belongs in many. Socrates however is one.” For Aristotle, as for Plato, not only was the conceptual or universal and unchangeable essence the only object of science and true knowledge, but it was also ultimately identical with the real essence in the individual. In view of this the matter as principle of individuation cannot be a part of the individual essence even though Aristotle frequently says matter is part of the whole composite substance. Indeed the matter has its own existence, as has the form. Therefore the difference between John and Simon, for instance, is due entirely to the fact that the one unchangeable universal form of man is received in one case by this flesh and these bones (matter) and in the other by these other flesh and bones. However, since these two human individuals agree with each other not only in having a form (soul) but also in having a body (the matter of the form), Aristotle even grants that there must be universal matter including bones and flesh in general. In Aristotle the Idea or Form exists immanently in numerically different individuals as many times as it is itself received unchangeably into the various parts of changeable and divisible matter. Reception of the Form into this matter implies only an unessential individuation. No real limitation is involved. There is no individual being in the full sense of the term. Aristotle failed to give a rational explanation of the real and distinct individuality of each existing being because he failed to consider the act of existence as a distinct principle in finite beings. Therefore he was in no position to answer the second and auxiliary question of individuation of such individual beings within a species in view of the similarity of their respective individual essences. The complete absence of any doctrine of participation in Aristotle, in any full sense of that term, is the source of his failure on both counts.

3.9 INDIVIDUATION IN JOHN DUNS SCOTUS

Scotus followed Aristotle in identifying being primarily with essence. He rejected the general metaphysical principle of potency limiting act and thus refused to accept Aquinas’ doctrine of participation, with its consequent real distinction between essence and existence in all finite beings. He also rejected the matter-form doctrine of individuation as Aquinas presented it, and in these respects he followed Aristotle. Scotus also opposed the unicity of substantial form in material substances and insisted on a plurality of formally distinct forms corresponding to the several grades of being in the thing (for example, the vegetative, sensitive, and rational forms in the human substance). He further held for a final form by which every material substance is distinct from every other member of its class. It is known as the form of “thisness” (*haecceitas*). The real distinction of individuals presupposes that each of them contains “realities” which differ. They do not differ in their common nature. Therefore some “reality” is added to the common nature by individuation. Scotus expresses this doctrine as follows: “Besides the nature there are accordingly in this individual and in that one some primarily different entities by way of which this one and that one differ; that is, that entity in that individual and this entity in this one. Thus they cannot be negations ... nor some accident. Therefore they are certain entities of themselves positively determining the common nature.” It is therefore by this unique individual property that matter in itself becomes this numerically one thing. The “*haecceitas*” or “thisness” form also renders quantity and all accidents individual.

Evidently Scotus is forced to his position on individuation by his exaggerated realism, which seeks to safeguard the objective validity of our abstract and scientific knowledge. He overstates the reality of the common or universal form, making it something real on the part of the thing instead of having the so-called formal nature only in the mind. Every grade of perfection in the being, represented by a common form, is individualized by this ultimate form of thisness. It is unnecessary and really irrational to posit “thisness” to explain individuation.

3.10 POSITION OF FRANCISCO SUAREZ

Suarez stated that the abstract universal representing the common aspect of the class to which the individual belongs is contracted by an individual difference to constitute the individual. As realized in the individual, this abstract common nature is identical with the entire entity of the individual substance. The same is true of the conceived difference. Accordingly the intrinsic principle of individuation, or the entity existing in the individual and making the realized specific nature incommunicable is only logically distinct from this realized, abstractly conceived nature. In reality, it is identical with the realized common nature or with the entire substantial being of the existing individual.

Suarez’s position is deeply influenced by his theory of knowledge. His extreme emphasis on the fact that the existing individual is the only genuine reality is a truth. However, it should not be isolated from the problem of knowing the individual. Suarez claims that the active intellect can completely spiritualize the image so that its entire content in all its particularity is rendered intelligible. Thus this spiritualized species or form represents the individual in the intellect in the same way it is represented in the senses by the particular image. In this way the intellect knows the individual immediately and directly, he insists. Here Suarez is being far too optimistic about the power of the human intellect, making it in certain respects equal in power to the intellect of purely

immaterial substances (angels, for instance). Thus his position on the principle of individuation, which is the result of his extreme claims for the power of the human intellect, inherits all the weakness of his very doubtful principles of knowing.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Describe the role and importance of quantity in Individuation.

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2) Briefly state the views of Aristotle, Scotus and Suarez on individuation.

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3.11 LET US SUM UP

Every individual within a species intrinsically possesses a principle whereby it is totally individual and a principle whereby it has the same essential determinations as every other member of the species. By virtue of the principle of sufficient reason, each individual of a species has within itself that whereby it is totally like every other member of its species, and that whereby it is totally unlike every other member. For everything which exists has that whereby it is what it is. That element in each member of a species whereby it is like every other member is a principle which accounts for its substantial or essential determinations. For it is precisely in the common possession of the same substantial determinations that the likeness lies. This principle is thus the principle of substantial form, the metaphysical principle which intrinsically determines a being to its essential mode of existence. But since substantial form accounts only for the essential likeness of all individuals within a species, there must be another principle in the order of essence by which the beings differ from each other. This difference consists in the fact that the substantial form exists in different subjects. The principle of difference, therefore, is a principle in the order of essence capable of receiving and possessing substantial form and one which of itself confers no positive determinations. It is therefore a principle of potency in the order of essence. This is the principle of prime matter, that metaphysical principle whereby a being is capable of being determined to its essential mode of existence. Now these two principles – substantial form and prime matter – are very much related. They form a composition, since they make up a union of two distinct elements, which do not actually include each other. This is a

real composition, since the elements are really distinct, outside the mind considering the composition. Since the two elements coalesce to form the essence of one being, they are not complete beings themselves, but metaphysical principles constitutive of a being. Substantial form is a principle of actuality since it confers the specific determination on the being. Prime matter is potency since it receives substantial form. Thus, the composition is a metaphysical one, of principles related to each other as act and potency. Prime matter plays a role in the individuation of an essence. Since of itself prime matter is completely indeterminate the principle of individuation is not merely prime matter, but rather prime matter marked by quantity. There are different views on individuation especially those of Aristotle, Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and Suarez.

3.12 KEY WORDS

- Hylemorphism** : It is the theory of the composition of matter and form.
- Individuation** : It is the limitation of an essence, which of itself is communicable to many individuals, to some definite singular realization.
- Quantity** : It is generally described as that proper intrinsic and absolute accident having dimensions inhering primarily in the material principle of a substance.
- Signated Matter** : Matter considered under determined dimensions.

3.13 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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3.14 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) Matter is the stuff (substrate) out of which something is made or fashioned. At a peripheral level form is the external shape, appearance of a thing. At a deeper level form is that which specifies matter to be what it is. In metaphysics form is the active, determining principle of a thing as distinguished from matter, the potential principle.

- 2) The words ‘matter’ and ‘form’ has been used in a number of ways throughout the history of philosophy. For Anaxagoras (500-428 B.C.) matter is eternal. Plato applied the term ‘form’ to identify the permanent reality that makes a thing what it is, and for him it belonged to the real world. Whereas, matter was finite and subject to time, change, multiplicity and belonged to the shadow world. Matter is essentially inferior to the forms. It can never be reducible to the other. Hence there is a dualism between the two. Aristotle was the first to distinguish between matter (**hypokeimenon** or **hyle**) and form (**eidos** or **morphe**). He rejected the abstract Platonic notion of form and argued that every sensible object consists of both matter and form, neither of which can exist without the other. Matter is the potential factor, form the actualizing factor. According to Plotinus (205-270 A.D.) matter is the lowest of all the emanations. If the One (Transcendent Absolute) can be regarded as the light which diffuses itself, then matter is the last extremity to which the light extends. It is the dimmest part. In relation to the One it is unilluminated darkness, the privation of light, the anti-thesis of the One. Immanuel Kant treated form as if it is a property of mind; he held that form is derived from experience. In other words, he said, it is imposed by the individual on the material object.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) Matter (“prime matter”) is the principle of limitation in the essence. The actual essence thus limited is called the substantial form. It should be noted that only the essences of material substances are thus limited. Accepting matter as the limiting principle in the essence gives us a rational explanation for the multiplication of many similar essences in the class or species.
- 2) There is a real distinction between the matter and form principles. If the limiting principle in the essence were not really distinct from that which it limits, then one material substance in a class would not be really distinct from another in the class. In a word, it would not be really individuated. Besides, in an essential change the form can be separated from the matter. Of course, the matter must instantaneously receive a new form. Thus the matter is separated from this particular form and immediately receives a new form. As is clear, separability is one of the simplest and best tests of real distinction. Hence, matter is not form. Form is not matter. Therefore they are really distinct.

Answers to Check Your Progress III

- 1) It is evident that it is by the proper accident of the quantity of a material substance that the individual is so recognized. Thus quantity exercises an auxiliary role with the essential principle of matter to complete the principle of individuation. It is by the principle of individuation that the individual being is distinct from similar beings belonging to a class. Quantity by its nature is equipped to perform this auxiliary role. It is essentially divisible and, as such, is the basis of numerical designation.
- 2) Aristotle’s doctrine of individuation uses the similar terms of matter and form. For Aristotle matter seems to be the principle of individuation. The matter as principle of individuation cannot be a part of the individual essence even though Aristotle frequently says matter is part of the whole composite substance. In Aristotle the Idea or Form exists immanently in numerically different individuals as many times as it is itself received unchangeably into the various parts of changeable and divisible matter. Reception of the Form into this matter implies only an unessential individuation. No real limitation is involved. There is no individual being in the full sense of the term. Aristotle failed to give a rational

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explanation of the real and distinct individuality of each existing being because he failed to consider the act of existence as a distinct principle in finite beings. Therefore he was in no position to answer the second and auxiliary question of individuation of such individual beings within a species in view of the similarity of their respective individual essences. The complete absence of any doctrine of participation in Aristotle, in any full sense of that term, is the source of his failure on both counts.

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Suarez stated that the abstract universal representing the common aspect of the class to which the individual belongs is contracted by an individual difference to constitute the individual. As realized in the individual, this abstract common nature is identical with the entire entity of the individual substance. The same is true of the conceived difference. Accordingly the intrinsic principle of individuation, or the entity existing in the individual and making the realized specific nature incommunicable is only logically distinct from this realized, abstractly conceived nature. In reality, it is identical with the realized common nature or with the entire substantial being of the existing individual.