

The Unique, the Singular, and the Individual

Edited by
INGOLF U. DALFERTH and
RAYMOND E. PERRIER

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The Unique, the Singular, and the Individual

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edited by
Ingolf U. Dalferth and
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Preface

The theme of 39th Philosophy of Religion Conference in Claremont in 2018 was *The Unique, the Singular, and the Individual*. The topic was chosen because while we talk a lot about plurality, diversity, multiplicity and variety, we sometimes forget the importance of the opposite ideas of uniqueness, singularity, and individuality. They are challenging ideas, for a number of reasons. In the horizon of Western thought, despite all postmodern attempts to pluralize and relativize the subject, one still cannot talk seriously about God in philosophical and theological contexts without making God's uniqueness the subject of discussion. And quite correspondingly, despite all constructivist attempts to conceptualize cosmic singularity and human identity in plural terms, one cannot avoid taking into account the concrete individuality and singularity of complexly determinable individuals. The focus on divine uniqueness, cosmic singularity and human individuality therefore determines the debates documented in this volume.

We are grateful to the *Udo Keller Stiftung Forum Humanum* (Hamburg) who has again generously provided eight conference grants to enable doctoral students and post-docs to take part in the conference and present their work on the theme of the conference. Five of those papers are published here along with the other contributions to the conference. We could not do what we do without its support. We gratefully acknowledge the support of Claremont Graduate University, Pomona College, and Claremont McKenna College and the assistance of the Collegium Helveticum in Zurich in handling the *Forum Humanum* competition. We are indebted to the contributors to this volume, to Mohr Siebeck who has accepted the manuscript for publication, and to Marlene A. Block (Redlands) and Trevor Kimball (San Luis Obispo) who helped to get the manuscript ready for publication.

Ingolf U. Dalferth
Raymond E. Perrier

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Introduction: The Unique, the Singular, and the Individual

INGOLF U. DALFERTH

1. Framing the Discourse

D. Z. Phillips used to tell a story about a meeting of the University's Philosophical Society in Swansea/Wales where a young philosopher gave a paper on individuals in which he extensively belabored the point that as singular individuals we are absolutely different from others because our individuality marks us off from everybody else. Rush Rees, who as a student at the University of Rochester was expelled for insolent questions, listened patiently but then opened the discussion by asking the speaker: "Yes indeed, each of us is a unique individual. But this is what we all share, isn't it?"

There seems to be something paradoxical about terms like 'unique', 'singular' or 'individual' that we can use to mark us off from everything else and at the same time to state what is true of all of us. They function differently from concepts or sortal terms like 'human' or 'student' that we use to ascribe (sets of) first-order attributes to us or to others. We cannot construe *uniqueness* as class-membership, for example, because this results in confusion or even paradox. So how can we talk meaningfully about the unique, the singular and the individual, which – after all – are not the same? Is the classical distinction between transcendental and categorical terms enough to point a way towards a good answer?

Moreover, whereas individuality is discussed ubiquitously, uniqueness is rarely explored in depth. Singularity discourses, on the other hand, have multiplied in recent years. Besides longstanding debates in philosophy and theology, the past decades have seen a growing number of singularity discussions in a variety of fields. There are discipline specific debates in mathematics, system theory, cosmology and physics. Mathematics studies singularity as a value at which a function is not defined. Algebraic geometry investigates singular points that manifolds may acquire by a number of different routes. In system theory singularity refers to a large effect caused by a small change. Cosmology explores space-time regions where gravitational forces produce singularities such as black holes. And in physics a mechanical singularity is the position of a mechanism whose subsequent behavior cannot be predicted.

This idea has been taken up and elaborated by computer-related technology. In the study of exponential revolutions in the wake of Moore's law, singularity has become a major topic of technological research. Singularities are points or events of no return, or rather interpretations of events of no return, that completely and definitively change a situation because the rules and laws that govern a particular set of phenomena are annulled so that no reliable predictions about future behavior or developments on the basis of previous behavior or probability calculations are possible anymore. Thus, the Singularity University at the NASA Research Park in Silicon Valley focuses on emerging technologies (nanotechnology, artificial intelligence) that are expected to fundamentally change and reshape the economy and society over the next decades. Each year the progress made in artificial intelligence is discussed and assessed at the Singularity Summit of the Machine Intelligence Research Institute. In particular, there has been a controversial debate for some time about the possibility or even likelihood of an imminent technological singularity when artificial intelligence will have become greater and more powerful than any human intelligence. The creation of self-regulating thinking machines or human/machine combinations that are significantly more powerful and intelligent than we are today is said to end human history as we know it and will open up a future nobody can foretell. As Ray Kurzweil put it who estimates that the Singularity will occur around 2045: "There will be no distinction, post-Singularity, between human and machine."¹ Just as we cannot imagine what humanity looked like before we developed the capacity for language and linguistic communication, so we cannot imagine what human life will look like when we become completely embedded in the networks of information and communications technology (ICT) and controlled by artificial intelligence that affects and directs our capacities, wishes, motivations, interests, and decisions.²

This raises interesting questions for philosophy and theology. If singularity marks the beginning of the end of humanity as we know it, can the idea still be used to understand becoming a singular individual to be one of the highest human achievements? And if singularity becomes problematic as a human virtue, can it still meaningfully be defended as a divine attribute? No doubt, philosophy, theology and technology use the terms 'singularity', 'singular' and 'the singular' in different senses. But will it still be possible to strive for ethical singularity after technological singularity? What could it possibly mean to become truly human as a singular individual when machine intelligence has superseded human intelligence?³ Is there anything the debate about techno-

¹ R. KURZWEIL, *The Singularity is Near* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 9.

² Cf. R. HANSON, *The Age of Em: Work, Love and Life when Robots Rule the Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³ Cf. J. KOBEK, *I hate the Internet: A Novel* (Los Angeles: We Heard You Like Books, 2016).

logical singularity can learn from philosophical studies about singular individuals or from theological debates about the unique or from hermeneutical explorations of ways of speaking about the unique, the singular and the individual?

2. Singularity

In Philosophy, singularity has been an important topic for some time. Plotinus' transcendent *Hen* or One, Scotus' *thisness*, Leibniz's monads, Schleiermacher's individuals, Kierkegaard's singular individual or Hartshorne's universal individual are all contributions to this debate. Plotinus' transcendent One is not the first of a series but that without which there wouldn't be any series of anything. Scotus' *thisness* is the non-repeatable feature that individuates uniquely. Leibniz' monads are irreducibly simple microcosmic mirrors of the universe. For Schleiermacher individuality is not an ontological given, but the highest ethical value to which humans ought to aspire. For Kierkegaard, too, singularity is an achievement term. We are all part of a multitude, and we become singular only by moving beyond the limitations imposed on us as particulars of the specific multitude to which we belong. And in metaphysics and philosophical theology Charles Hartshorne argues that if there is no god but God, then God is unique, not only in the sense of being the only one worthy to be worshiped, but in a sense that makes it impossible for us to comprehend God conceptually.

The reason for this is not only due to God's uniqueness, but also to our limits. Conceptual thinking is a powerful tool for orienting ourselves in the world. But all conceptual thinking simplifies, and all our conceptual schemes and distinctions flounder when it comes to thinking the utterly simple, individual, singular, or unique. Whatever we mean by them, they seem to slip through the cracks of our networks of terms and escape our distinctions. This not only has epistemological implications, but also ethical and hermeneutical ones. If only God is unique, then uniqueness is nothing for which we could strive. Our aim can at best be to become singular individuals. In one sense we are all unique by being different from everybody else. Others can replace us in our professional functions and social roles, but not as individual persons. As persons we are all different from each other, but none of us will ever be unique in the sense of being utterly unlike anything else. Isn't the unique not merely distinct from everything else in some respect or another, but something that does not share anything with anything else? But how can anything be radically different from everything else and still be a reality for us? How can we meaningfully communicate about the unique, the singular, the utterly simple and the strictly individual?

Since the beginning of modernity, the debate has focused on ontological, epistemological and ethical issues. Leibniz' monads are microcosmic mirrors of

the universe of irreducible simplicity. Each monad is a basic center of force, subject to its own laws, an eternal and completely determined individual distinguished from all other monads. The totality of its distinctions from everything else in the universe constitutes its unmistakable identity. But this is fully known only to God whereas we can know it only by approximation.

Schleiermacher turned this into an ethical project for human beings. Individuality is not an ontological given, but something to be achieved. It is the highest ethical value to which humans ought to aspire. The distinctiveness of an individual cannot be reduced to the particularity of a general essence. We are human and each human being represents humanity in his or her own particular way. But in order to achieve a true individuality we must not merely live as particular human beings but acquire a distinctive individuality, that is to say, become a unique microcosmos of the universe, different from all others and related to all others in a unique way.

Kierkegaard used this view of singularity to rethink the idea of the self. He requested no other inscription on his grave than *that single individual*. For him, singularity was an achievement term. All humans have the potential to become single individuals but not all actually do. We are all part of a crowd, and we become singular only by moving beyond the limitations imposed on us as particulars of the specific crowd or multitude to which we belong. In working out this view Kierkegaard systematically distinguished between *particular* and *general*, *individual* and *universal*, *singular individual* and *selfish individual*. The first marks the difference between one and the many in the sphere of the external relations or the world, the second the difference between the finite and the infinite in the sphere of the God-relation, the third the difference between living as a self in the world by being true to the God-relation or not. None of these relations and their corresponding distinctions can exist on their own or in isolation from the others. But they must be distinguished in order to avoid confusion by mistaking the God-relation for a case of the world-relation (as in theistic metaphysics) or of the self-relation (as in transcendental metaphysics), and vice versa.

3. Philosophy of Religion and the Concept of Individuality

In metaphysics and philosophical theology, we find Charles Hartshorne arguing in a similar way:

“Is God then not a ‘particular’ individual? No, certainly not; he is the universal individual. What do I mean here by ‘individual’? I mean the unity of a sequence of concrete states of consciousness each connected with the others in the most truly ideal way by omniscient memory and steadfastness of purpose. This is plainly analogous to ‘individual’ in the everyday sense, except that this individual, being universal in his role, is unique and

without competitor. Being non-localized, he occupies no place from which he excludes other beings, as each of us does at every moment. There is no function exercised by God which any other being could take over in his stead. He is the sole non-competitive, non-exclusive, conscious agent – in his necessary essence quite a general as being itself, but in his contingent actuality containing all the exclusive particularity and concreteness of the real.”⁴

Hartshorne restates in his own way classical philosophical and theological convictions. If there is no god but God, then God is unique. If God is unique, then God is strictly singular. If God is strictly singular, then God is not only the only one worthy to be worshiped, but essentially simple, not merely in the negative sense of not being complex, but in the positive sense of being so lucid that nothing is easier to comprehend than God. Not all agree. There are those who deny divine uniqueness and/or divine singularity and/or divine simplicity. Some draw anti-Trinitarian conclusions from belief in divine singularity, others insist that divine uniqueness can only properly be understood in Trinitarian terms, and again others find belief in divine simplicity to be incompatible with belief in God. God is not easier to comprehend than anything else, but greater than anything we can comprehend. If it were so easy to comprehend God, then why do so few comprehend anything at all about God and why do so many insist that God is above all comprehension? Even if it was true that even the devil knows that God exists, would he know what he knows when he knows this?

The problem may not (only) be on God’s side, but (also) on ours. We think not merely in concepts, but conceptual thinking is a powerful capacity for orienting ourselves in the world. It facilitates orientation in complex situations by blinding out some aspects and focusing on others. It may miss what is important in a given situation, and it might have been better if we had reduced its complexity differently. But all conceptual thinking simplifies. It abstracts some aspects from a given experiential manifold and combines them into a general structure that can be exemplified by more than one particular. Just as conceptual generality is the outcome of a generalizing procedure, so experiential particularity is the result of an exemplifying process. The difference between generality and particularity is not the only conceptual distinction we use. We distinguish between the particular and the general, but also between the individual and the universal, the concrete and the abstract, the complex and the simple, the actual and the potential. How do these distinctions differ from each other and cohere with each other? Ideas are not concepts, concepts are not individuals, individuals may or may not be abstract, not all possibilities can

⁴ C. HARTSHORNE, “Metaphysics and the Modality of Existential Judgments,” in *The Relevance of Whitehead*, ed. I. Leclerc (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961), 107–121, (<http://www.anthonypflood.com/hartshornemodality.html>).

become actual, and while reality is complex, it does not follow that it is also simple in some respect. However, all our conceptual schemes and distinction founder when it comes to thinking the simple, the singular, or the unique. Whatever we mean by them, they seem to slip through the cracks of our networks of terms and escape our distinctions.

4. The Unique and the Simple

If we want to make any progress here, we must pay attention to the discourses, fields of study and forms of life in which these terms and ideas are used. Where and why do we speak of the unique, the singular, or the simple? We debate about simple living styles, hold the simplest theory to be the most likely to be true, and criticize what some say to be much too simple to be true to the complexity of the case under discussion. We use the term 'simple' in descriptive and evaluative ways, and we do so in everyday, moral and religious situations as much as in epistemological and metaphysical contexts. Similarly with the terms 'singular' and 'unique'. For Hartshorne, only God is unique, and uniqueness is nothing for which we could or should strive. Our aim can at best be to become singular individuals. In one sense we are all unique by being different from everybody else. Others can replace us in our professional functions and social roles, but not as individual persons. As persons we are all different from each other, but none of us will ever be unique in the sense of being utterly unlike anything else. The unique is not merely distinct from everything else in some respect or other, but something that does not share anything with anything else. Some hold that this is not even true of God. If God were utterly and completely different from us, there would be no possibility to relate to God or even to talk about God. How can anything be radically different from everything else and still be a reality for us? If total otherness prevailed, we couldn't distinguish the utterly unique from nothing or secure that we are not merely gesturing with words when we talk in this way. How can we meaningfully communicate about the unique, if there is nothing it shares with anything else that can be expressed by a positive or negative conceptual or predicative determination? Is talking about the unique a way of undoing its uniqueness? But then how can we distinguish between the unique and nothing at all? How can we talk in a meaningful way about the unique, the singular, and the utterly simple and individual? And if we can, will technological singularity decisively change this situation, or should we rather re-think what we can expect and not expect from technological singularity in the light of divine uniqueness and human singularity?

These are some of the questions that need to be explored. The singularity debates pose epistemological, hermeneutical, metaphysical, ethical, and theo-

logical problems that we may ignore, but cannot avoid. The book is organized in the following way. In the first part we concentrate on problems posed by the uniqueness of God, in the second on questions raised by singularity and comparability, in the third on issues of concrete human individuality and ethical formation. We begin with exploring some influential contributions to our topic in the medieval period: The debate about the essence of God's names in Islam and Scotus' account of *thisness*. We then move on to discuss the topic from more contemporary Jewish, Christian (Trinitarian) and Islamic perspectives that engage in distinctly different ways with the philosophical issues and theological challenges of uniqueness, singularity and individuality. In the second part we discuss the problem from the post-modern perspectives of recent Continental philosophy and North American event metaphysics and delve into issues of cosmic comparability and incomparability and mystical loneliness. In the third part we turn to classical modernity and its construal of individuality in the traditions of Kant, Schleiermacher, Hegel and Kierkegaard and look into some of the ethical and practical issues that are intrinsic to our topic.

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