CHAPTER 7

Contingent Suppositors and Contingent Substances

In the last two chapters I have argued that Scotus thinks that some integral parts of material substances—paradigmatically organs of organisms—are composites of matter and at least one substantial form. For example, Scotus thinks that the heart of Mole is a composite of matter and a substantial form of the heart. Does it follow from this that a heart is a substance? If it does, it follows straightaway that a material substance can have material substances as integral parts—a view alien to a common way of interpreting the theory of substance offered in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* VII.¹ I think it does, and I think Scotus thinks it does, for the very simple reason that a composite of matter and substantial form just is a substance. But the issue is not quite as simple as it appears. A substance is supposed to be that which exists *per se*, where *per se* can be understood in a literal way as *through oneself, by oneself*, or *on its own*. Even if a heart *can* exist *per se*, for example if it is removed from the body and stored under the right conditions, it apparently does *not* so exist while it is a fully functioning part of a living organism. Not only does the heart, while it is a part, depend on the organism (or perhaps other parts of the organism) for its existence and functioning, but in a deeper sense its existence and functioning seem wholly for the sake of the organism; it is ordered to the existence of something else in a way in which the organism itself is not so ordered. Could it be, then, that a heart is *contingently* a substance—not a substance while a part of an organism, but a substance when it is not?

The short answer is probably not, but the reason is not what you might expect. You might expect that a heart is not contingently a substance because no substance is contingently a substance. Being a substance, you might think, is a necessary feature of a thing in the sense that for any *x*, if *x* is a substance then if *x* ceases to be a substance *x* ceases to be. This is not Scotus’s reason, however. Scotus thinks—and I will argue for this claim in this chapter—that being a substance is a contingent feature of at least some substances. One and the same thing might first not be a substance, and then become a substance, or might first be a substance and then cease to be a substance. He also thinks, and I will also argue that he thinks, that *any* substance can be a part of another substance, if only by divine power. This implies that being a supposit—that is, being the sort of substance that is not a part of any other substance and is a

member of a determinate Aristotelian kind, such as an individual human being—is also a contingent feature of at least some substances; any created supposit can cease to be a supposit but not cease to exist, and some non-supposites can become supposites and continue to exist. So the full story about Mole’s heart is rather more complicated than first appears. It is a substance, a composite of matter and substantial form; under certain (tragic) conditions it might cease to be a part of Mole while continuing to be the very substance it is. But because a heart is a substance by nature disposed to be a part of an organism it is not a member of a determinate Aristotelian kind; it therefore fails to be a supposit even when removed from Mole’s chest, and probably cannot become a supposit. On my reading, then, Scotus’s doctrine of the substancehood of integral parts includes the claim that some substances are not supposites.

In this chapter I expand this reading and defend some additional claims about substances and supposites. Not only are some substances not supposites, but being a supposit is a merely contingent feature of some substances, and being a substance is a merely contingent feature of some things. I begin by providing some further defense of my claim that Scotus thinks that some substances can be parts. I then turn to Scotus’s metaphysics of the Incarnation to defend the claims that Scotus thinks that not every substance is a supposit, that any created supposit might not be a supposit but still exist, and that some non-supposites can become supposites. Finally I examine Scotus’s metaphysics of continua to support my claim that Scotus thinks that being a substance is a merely contingent feature of at least some substances. Along the way I examine some relevant texts from Ockham to illuminate Scotus’s views by comparison and contrast.

First, however, it is worth pointing out that early in his career Scotus apparently held that a part of a substance is or can be a substance only in an equivocal sense. In Quaestiones super Praedicamenta Aristotelis q.15, Scotus asks whether the parts of substances are substances. He endorses the first argument that they are not, according to which,

Substance in the most general sense is a being per se; [but] no part of a substance is a being per se while it is a part of a substance, because then it would be a hoc aliquid, and one substance would be from many hoc aliquid, which does not seem true.²

² Quaestiones super Praedicamenta Aristotelis q.15, n.1 (Bonaventure I, p. 383). Quod non, videtur: Quia substantia ut est generalissimum est per se ens; nulla pars substantiae est per se ens dum est pars substantiae, quia tunc esset “hoc aliquid”, et una substantia esset ex multis hoc aliquid, quod non videtur verum.