We commonly attribute two basic features to our everyday objects: on the one hand, every such object is a singular, individual object, distinct from every other thing; on the other hand, there is hardly an object that does not—at least potentially—resemble something else. Even more, some resemblances are so strong that we talk of things of the same kind. For Henry of Ghent, these two features, sameness and individual difference, are due to two different metaphysical principles. Things resemble each other and belong to (natural) kinds because they have the same specific form or nature and one thing differs from another through its individuating principle.

In this contribution I will use Henry’s discussion of individuation as a point of entry into his ontology. This may come as a surprise since there does not seem to be a clear consensus among interpreters about what exactly Henry’s account of individuation amounts to. In some sense Henry himself can be regarded as the source of the confusion, for in different texts he emphasizes different factors involved in individuation. I shall try to show, however, that Henry does have a consistent account (I.). Henry’s views about the relationship between the individuating principle and that which it individuates will put the spotlight on the general question of the extent to which individual objects can be considered as ontological composites. I shall explore this question further by looking at Henry’s arguments for why creatures can be considered as composites of an essence and existence (II). As we will see, Henry not only defends the somewhat traditional distinction between essence and existence, but also distinguishes between essence and a special mode of being proper to

essences themselves: the so-called being of essence (esse essentiae). After we will consider what Henry has in mind by referring to the being of essence or essential being (III.) I will turn to the question of why Henry thought it necessary to introduce this special mode of being in the first place (IV.). I will end with some general remarks about Henry’s ontology and its reception (V.).

Henry developed his metaphysical views in debate with his contemporaries and defended his views against their criticism. It is therefore almost impossible to write about Henry of Ghent without also writing about Thomas Aquinas, Giles of Rome, and Godfrey of Fontaines, among others. His polemical exchanges with the latter two in the period around Quodlibet X and Quodlibet XI (1286/1287) are notorious. Unfortunately, I will have no space to explore these fierce debates in their own right. I will only allude to them to the extent to which they help to clarify Henry’s views. In any case, the criticism of his colleagues did not make Henry change his mind.2

I. Individuation

Let’s start with a simple case: human beings. According to Henry, we are human beings because each of us shares a specific form, i.e., the form that accounts for the ‘humanness’ (humanitas) of that which it informs.3 In this sense one can say that such a form is distributed or divided among all the individual human beings. However, this form is

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3 I use the term ‘specific form’ in its literal meaning as form that belongs to/is constitutive of a species.