The discussion of the problem of the knowability of substance is one that begins in the High Middle Ages and continued until the emergence of Modern philosophy. Though the topic is broached in various ways by different authors at different periods, I would like to trace here the discussion as it takes place in the second half of the thirteenth century and leads in the direction of the thought of Duns Scotus.¹ I shall focus upon five authors—Eustachius of Arras, Giles of Rome, Richard of Mediavilla, James of Viterbo and Vital du Four—who gave the topic of the knowability of substance considerable thought and who were part of an on-going conversation. As we shall see, their texts indicate that within this tradition the later authors knew the earlier authors’ opinions at least in outline and had such views in mind as they subsequently formed their own opinions. In this sense, the present essay gives an overview of the issues raised regarding the knowability of substance down to the time of Scotus, concentrating, for most part, on authors who are either Franciscans or Augustinians. This is not to suggest, however, that Dominicans and secular masters were not involved in the discussion; to the contrary, they no doubt were, but I have selected these Franciscan and Augustinian authors whom I have named because they contributed novel positions to the development of the particular tradition that I wish to examine.

The essay begins its historical excursion by tracing the immediate background to the discussion of the knowability of substance in the thought of Thomas Aquinas and Roger Bacon. Aquinas’ thought served as a stimulus and template for the issues discussed by providing a clear synthesis of the Aristotelian psychology, while not resolving precisely the issues involved in the knowability of substance. Bacon’s

account of the multiplication of species, in turn, was extremely influential upon how both sensible and intelligible species were understood by thirteenth and early fourteenth-century thinkers. Indeed, the first author whom I shall treat, Eustachius of Arras, seems to have taken over Bacon’s theory of species and resolved the problems associated with the knowability of substance by relying upon it mainly, if not exclusively.

Before beginning my historical survey, I shall give a systematic overview of the positions taken by the various authors, which will help readers to follow the historical development of the discussion. All of our authors agree, as do the majority of philosophers in the High Middle Ages, that our intellectual knowledge of sensible substances—indeed, for many of them all human intellectual knowledge—begins in the senses, including both internal and external senses. Yet they also universally agree that the senses themselves only grasp accidental features and properties, while our intellects grasp the essences of the substances to which those accidental features belong. This situation suggests that there is a gap between what the source of our knowledge provides and what the object of our understanding is.

The problem of substance might be thought of as focusing upon one of two different issues, each having its own metaphysical aspects. One systematic issue that might arise is whether it is really possible for us to understand the substances of things, given the exclusively sensory basis of our knowledge. We might call this issue the ‘epistemic dimension of the problem of the knowability of substance’. This issue may be further analyzed at two different levels: (1) how is it possible for us to know substance-in-general (as opposed to accident)?; and (2) how is it possible for us to know a specific type of substance, say dog or horse, either in its specificity or as an individual? In the main, with the exception of Richard of Mediavilla and perhaps Vital du Four, our authors are not much interested in this epistemological dimension of the problem and none shows any inclination towards drawing the skeptical consequences seen in some fourteenth-century authors and quite commonplace among many Modern philosophers. Obviously, if the problem is understood in its epistemic dimension as focusing upon how it is possible for us to know a specific substance as an individual, the problem of the knowability of substance merges into the oft-studied matter of our intellectual knowledge of singulars, something noticeable in the texts in terms of the placement of the questions
