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Religious Language: A New Defense of Complete Univocity

Abstract. Various theories concerning how to speak positively about God have been proposed. One such theory, the theory of complete univocity, states that although the mode of existence between God and human beings is different, there are, in principle, ontological commonalities between God and humans in existence and His attributes. These ontological commonalities make it possible to attribute a single meaning to both God and human beings univocally. In this article, it is attempted to both explain and defend the theory of complete univocity, while also critiquing the theory of partial univocity, a theory which believes solely in semantic univocity and ontologically assumes that God is absolutely different and separate from humans. Further, as the commonality of meaning between God and humans requires the existence of an ontological commonality between them, the theory of analogy is also not acceptable. Because, firstly, the denial of shared attributes between God and humans has many unsatisfactory theological implications. Secondly, there is no middle term between univocity and equivocality. Therefore, the only theologically defensible theory is that of complete univocity.

Key words: religious language, univocal language, partial univocity, complete univocity, equivocality, analogy

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Религиозный язык: новая защита полной однозначности

Аннотация. Были предложены различные теории о том, как положительно говорить о Боге. Одна из таких теорий, теория полной однозначности, утверждает, что, хотя способы существования Бога и людей различны, в принципе существуют онтологические общности между Богом и людьми в существовании и его атрибутах. Эти онтологические общности позволяют однозначно приписать единый смысл и Богу, и человеку. В этой статье делается попытка объяснить и защитить теорию полной однозначности, а также критиковать теорию частичной однозначности, теорию, которая верит исключительно в семантическую однозначность и онтологически предполагает, что Бог абсолютно отличен и отделен от Бога. Далее, поскольку общность значений между Богом и людьми требует существования онтологической общности между ними, теория аналогии также неприемлема. Потому что, во-первых, отрицание общих качеств между Богом и людьми имеет множество неудовлетворительных богословских последствий. Во-вторых, не существует среднего термина между однозначностью и двусмысленностью. Следовательно, единственная богословски обоснованная теория – это теория полной однозначности.

Ключевые слова: религиозный язык, однозначный язык, частичная однозначность, полная однозначность, двусмысленность, аналогия

Introduction

There are various theories available on how to speak meaningfully and positively about God. In the Middle Ages, the main debate was between the ideas of Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas held that the words which were applied to both God and human beings have two senses, with their only being a similarity between them [Aquinas, ST, I, q. 19, a 6]. However, Scotus disagreed with this and held that God is conceived not only in a

concept analogous to the concept of a creature, that is, one which is wholly other than that which is predicated of creatures, but even in some concept univocal to Himself and to creatures [Scotus, 1987, 19]. So, in order to ascribe an attribute to God, the imperfection associated with that notion in creatures must be removed, and then, by retaining the core notion and ascribing the highest degree of perfection to it, attribute it to God. For example, the notion of “wisdom” or “intellect” is first simply considered in itself and absolutely; for in this state, it neither indicates imperfection nor limitation. Then the imperfections associated with it in creatures must be removed and by retaining the core meaning of “wisdom”, we attribute it to God in a most perfect sense. Consequently, every inquiry regarding God is based upon the supposition that the intellect has the same univocal concept which it obtained from creatures, but God owns these attributes to the highest degree [Scotus, 1987, 25].

However, univocal language has two main explanations:

1. Partial Univocity: According to this explanation, the attributes of humans are applied to God in the same sense, but there is no ontological commonality between God and human being. Thus, God is a ‘wholly other being’.

2. Complete Univocity: This theory maintains that, in addition to the fact that semantically the attributes of God and humans have the same meaning, there are also ontological commonalities, in some respects, between God and human beings.

In this article, firstly, the theory of complete univocity will be explained, then its two main competing theories i.e., “analogy” and “partial univocity”, will be criticized. Lastly, the criticisms against the theory of complete univocity will be answered.

Complete Univocity

The complete univocity theory contains two basic principles:

Attributes ascribed to God and human beings have a semantic core and are applied to both univocally. When we ascribe the attributes of perfection to God, we do not use these concepts in a separate and different meaning, but we consider God to have the attributes of perfection in the same sense that humans conceive.

In addition to semantic univocity, there is an ontological commonality between the attributes of God and human beings. God has knowledge, power, etc., attributes that human beings are also said to possess; thus, there is an ontological commonality between God and human beings in these attributes. However, the difference is that despite such ontological commonality, divine attributes are necessary and absolute, while human attributes are defective and contingent.

Among Muslim philosophers, “Mulla Sadra” has advanced the theory of complete univocity. He, however, has proposed two distinct theories concerning God and existence called “the gradation of existence” and “the individual unity of existence”; The latter has been considered by some to be a kind of pantheism and has a fundamental difference with the first one. I do not intend here to discuss which one is Mulla Sadra’s final view, but, according to the first one, God exists and has attributes like power, knowledge, life, etc., in the same sense we generally use them, but the difference is that these concepts are realized defectively in the case of human beings, but concerning God, we must purify these concepts from contingent and imperfect features and then attribute them to Him. Therefore, God has ontological commonalities with human beings in terms of existence and attributes, but there are also fundamental differences between them in the mode and intensity of existence, which are not quantitative, but existential. According to the view of Mulla Sadra and his proponents, the theory of the gradation of being, existence is an extended reality that includes various instances; some of them (creatures) are contingent, while God is necessary, but all instances exist in the same sense, and are ontologically joint in principle, in existence and attributes [Sadra, 1981, 35–39; Sabzavari, 1991, 77–87; Yazdi, 1999, 535–536].

Analogical Language Theory

From among the positive theories of religious language that contrast the theory of absolute univocity, is the theory of analogy that was notably propounded by Thomas Aquinas. He holds that the transcendence of God requires that no name attributed to Him can belong to creatures in that very same sense. Likewise, the names applied to God and creatures are not in a purely equivocal sense. Because if that were so, it follows that from

creatures nothing could be known or demonstrated about God at all. Therefore, it must be said that these names are said of God and creatures in an analogous sense, i.e., according to the proportion between God and His creation [Aquinas, ST, I, q. 13 , arts 5-12].

James F. Ross, advocating the Aquinas's position, holds that this type of univocity results in anthropomorphism. If the predicates applied to God and creatures are univocal, then God will be anthropomorphic, since all predicates we have are derived from experience and are primarily used of limited or finite things. And the context of all our language supposes that part of the meaning of the predicate terms is the *mode* of existence of the entity to which the property is attributed. Thus, if God is to have such properties as self-existence and omnipotence, He must be a significantly different kind of thing from anything in our experience [Ross, 1961, 498].

Partial Univocity

Partial univocity is another alternative to the theory of complete univocity. According to this theory, the attributes applied to God and His creatures are univocal, yet ontologically completely different¹. Some mediaeval philosophers have defended this view. For example, William of Ockham accepted the univocal language in the sense that the words applied to God and other creatures denote common concepts, yet there is no likeness between them. The essence of God and his attributes like goodness and wisdom are dissimilar to those of the creation [Ockham, 1964, 119–120].

Arguments in Favor of Complete Univocity

As explained, complete univocity has two premises, each requiring separate arguments. The first premise was that the words applied to God and human beings have the same meaning. The arguments supporting this premise are:

Our intuitive understating of the attributes of God is that He has these attributes in the sense we normally use, though the mode of being of them in God and human beings is different. Sacred texts also ascribe various attributes such as life, knowledge, power, etc. to God without changing their meaning. People's apprehension of these attributes is that they have the same meaning (although these attributes in God are infinite and absolutely perfect). The apprehension of people regarding these attributes is not that these concepts contain different meanings, but rather the same meaning is understood from them. However, in order to ascribe these attributes to God, we must separate the defective characteristics of contingents from them and then ascribe the most perfect sense of it to God.

Thomas William put forward the following argument in favor of univocity: "When we apply these attributes to God, do these expressions have the same sense that is predicated of creatures? If it does, we have arrived at univocal predication. If it does not, we must ask whether we can specify the sense that the substituted expression has when applied to God. If we cannot, it leads to unintelligibility of divine attributes. If we can, then we have a second order substitute expression, and it leads to a regress. This regress in substitute expressions must terminate somewhere, or else we have fallen into an infinite stutter and thus, again, into unintelligibility. Therefore, to avoid unintelligibility and regress, we must accept univocity" [Williams 2005, 579].

The argument for the second premise is that the semantic commonality of attributes between God and humans shows that there are ontological commonalities between God and humans, since factual concepts refer to, and are abstracted from facts in the external world. However, this similarity does not extend all the way, such that God's similarity to contingent beings would render God contingent. For it is clear that God's being is necessary, immaterial and unlimited, but despite the fundamental differences between God and humans, there are some commonalities between them. God, in the same semantical sense we use, exists, is omniscient, is omnipotent, is alive, and so on, but the difference is that God and His attributes are infinite, absolute, and necessary. God is *a being* who does not have any defects in his essence. In fact, the semantic commonality of the attributes of God and man implies some commonality in their being and their attributes, but it does not mean that God is like contingents, because the being and attributes of God, unlike human beings, has no limitations or finitude.

From the above, it should have become clear that we attribute "existence" and attributes such as "knowledge" and "power" to both God and human beings. Considering this ascribing, if someone says that there is no commonality between God and human beings, the question would then arise as to how a single concept (such as "knowledge" or "power")

can be abstracted from referents having no commonality? If we can abstract a single concept from various referents, it indicates that there must be some sort of commonality between the referents. Considering some other “gradational concepts” would help us in understanding this point better.

Gradational concepts are those concepts that have a common ontological core in all referents, but the mode of existence, in the referents is different, like “light” or “motion”. “Light” is a gradational concept. i.e., in all instances of light, there is a shared being of light, but some lights are bright, while others are dim. Similarly, “motion” is another gradational concept. Some motions are long and some are short, but all motions share the core reality of motion; this ontological commonality leads to the abstraction of the single concept of “motion” from different referents.

Like these examples, the concepts of “existence” and attributes such as “knowledge”, “power” etc., are also gradational. That is, there is a kind of ontological commonality between, say, the power of God and human beings, leading to the abstracting of a single concept of “power” and attributing it to both God and human beings. However, in addition to this ontological commonality, God’s power is unlimited and absolute, whereas human power is limited and weak [Tabataba’i, 2003, 18].

A Critique of the Analogical Language Theory

Analogical language encounters many problems and cannot be accepted. The first problem with this theory is the assumption that there is no commonality between God and man. As what has become clear from the previous discussions, the lack of any commonality between God and human beings will make it impossible for us to ascribe any of the attributes of perfection to God. For example, does God have knowledge in the manner that we understand?

A: If God has no knowledge in the sense that we understand, it follows the denial of an attribute of perfection from God, which is in conflict with pure divine perfection.

B: If God has knowledge in the sense that we understand, it follows the acceptance of univocity. The view that God is a wholly other being cannot be accepted. Aquinas’s presumption is that since the mode of being of God is different from ours (for example, we are finite, while God is infinite), there must not be any commonality between God and His creation. This presumption, as explained, is incorrect.

Likewise, the problem with Aquinas’s theory is that the conceptions of univocity and equivocality are jointly exhaustive, and there is no middle between the two. Hence, if human attributes are applied to God in the same sense, it is univocity; otherwise, it is equivocality. There is no middle concept. Let us consider here the example of “being faithful”. It is an attribute contended that when applied to both human beings and animals is used analogically, but the fact is that when we apply it to a man and an animal, it is not done so with the phrase having two different meanings, rather the phrase being faithful has a single meaning which is gradational. Being faithful in human beings has more intensity, while it is weaker in animals. Thus, this example shows the gradation of existence in which all instances are shared in one reality and therefore, there is a semantic core applicable to all of them. This example does not allude to the analogy of language, but rather that there cannot be anything between the jointly exhaustive conceptions of “univocity” and “equivocality”.

Likewise, Ross’s position that the theory of univocity leads to anthropomorphism does not seem to hold water. For anthropomorphism is if one believes that God has a body or material properties, or is positioned at a particular place etc., but to believe in some sort of commonality is not anthropomorphism, because, although God has something in common with human beings, the existential differences between God and human beings are very great and fundamental. An Infinite God is fundamentally different from a finite man, but that does not mean the invalidity of any commonality between God and a man. Although the attributes of perfection are first abstracted from limited instances, the human intellect can purify these concepts from human’s limits and then attribute them to God. This purification shows that human and divine concepts have two modes of existence, but the claim that a difference in the mode of existence leads to a difference in meaning is unsound; likewise, the differences in modes is not inconsistent with some commonality between God and His creatures.

A Critique of the Theory of Partial Univocity

Theory of partial univocity is, to some extent, reasonable. Since it accepts that divine and human attributes have a semantic core and are thus univocally applied to God and man in the same sense, but the main deficiency is that concepts refer to, and are abstracted from, facts. If there is a semantic commonality between two things, it is necessary that there be an ontological commonality between the two. The assumption that God is a wholly other being who has no ontological commonality with human beings and has an absolutely mysterious nature is incorrect. If there are semantical commonalities, it follows that God's Being (despite all the differences He has with human beings) has something in common with humans. Although God is never fully conceivable for creatures, this does not prevent us from knowing, to the extent of our capacity and understanding, some commonalities between us and God. Basically, the contention that there is a semantic commonality between God and man without ontological sharing, is a kind of contradiction; because the requirement of semantic commonality is ontological commonality.

Complete Univocity; Objections and Responses

There are many objections that have been raised, especially by Thomas Aquinas, against the theory of absolute univocity. They are explained and criticized below.

1. Objection. Ockham believes that the univocity has only a semantic implication, not an ontological one [Ockham, 1964, 119–120]. In terms of this position, Richard Cross argues that to account for any case where things fall under the extension of some concept, there is no need to posit some kind of real commonality between them. He contends that some examples would show it. For example, cats and dogs fall under the extension of the concept animal – but there is no reason to suppose that there is something real, animality, common to them, but rather the concept of animal is just an abstraction. Nothing is just an animal. Things are animals in virtue of being a particular kind of thing – cats and dogs, for example – and the fact that cats and dogs fall under the extension of the concept animal is explained simply by the fact that they are cats and dogs: anything which is a cat is an animal, and anything which is a dog is also an animal [Cross, 2008, 191].

Response. The problem of this argument is that factual concepts refer to, and are abstracted from external objects. Thus, the semantic univocity implies an ontological commonality. Two concepts fall under a general concept only when there is an ontological commonality between them. This ontological commonality lets us abstract a universal concept. But the ontological commonality does not mean that the animality exists separate from its instances (dogs, cats, etc.), but rather shows that they have an ontological commonality only in animality, which is a specific, common biological structure that distinguishes them from plants and inanimate objects. The commonality of dogs and cats is not only within their concepts, but that the concepts refer to the external world. This does not mean that animality exists separately from its extensions, rather it indicates that all instances of animals have something in common ontologically in the external world.

2. Objection. The acceptance of univocity requires accepting that God would be, to some extent, grasped by the human intellect, which contradicts divine transcendence.

Response. This argument seems to be flawed, as God's transcendence does not imply that He must be inconceivable. It can even be said that a being who is inconceivable does not deserve to be worshiped. Humans worship a necessary being who enjoys knowledge, power, and other attributes of perfection to the highest degree, but if humans have no knowledge of God, how can they worship an unknown being?! The transcendence of God simply means that God is the only necessary, infinite, and pure perfect being; not that humans have no understanding of Him.

What is important is that the concept of divine transcendence must be conceived precisely. This transcendence does not mean the negation of any common or shared attributes, nor does it indicate that we must be agnostic about His attributes, but it does show that we know, to some extent, God and His attributes, and, that despite the commonalities, nothing else could be a necessary, infinite and absolutely perfect being besides God.

3. Objection. What is predicated of many things univocally is simpler than both of them, at least in concept. Now, there can be nothing simpler than God either in reality or in concept. Nothing, therefore, is predicated univocally of God and other things [Aquinas, 1955, 144].

Response. Simplicity is the sign of perfection of God when considered as factual. God's factual simplicity means that God has no composition in the external world, unlike material beings that have material parts and depend on them. But simplicity in concepts means that a general concept includes other ones. Divine perfection does not necessitate that the concept of God be more general and broader than other concepts, for many concepts such as "existence", "object", "substance", etc. would be more general, and include both God and creatures, but the generality of a concept never indicates real perfection or imperfection. What is philosophically necessary is that God be ontologically simple and have no composition, and it is this real simplicity that indicates the perfection of God, but the simplicity in a concept (the generality of it) is never a sign of perfection and thus is never a necessary attribute of God.

It should also be noted that it is not true that if a concept is more general than God, it precedes God. Rather, God ontologically precedes all beings, but human beings can abstract a general concept from God and His creatures that implies a shared attribute of both. God is the only ontologically absolute being, and all beings are ontologically later than Him. However, the human intellect has the ability to abstract the ontological commonalities of these beings and then create broad concepts from them.

4. Objection. An attribute like "wisdom" in creatures is a quality, but not in God. Now a different genus changes an essence, since the genus is part of the definition; and the same applies to other divine attributes. Therefore, whatever is said of God and of creatures is predicated equivocally [Aquinas, ST, I, q. 13, a 5].

Response. It should be noted from the outset that the general concepts applied to God and human are not genus, because according to classical logic, as propounded by Aquinas, "genus" and "difference" are components of a quiddity, and quiddity is abstracted from finite beings, while God is not finite. Therefore, no genus can be applied to God [Aquinas, ST, I, q. 3, arts 5-6; Avicenna 1983, 373]. However, there are general concepts, which are the attributes of being and existence, not quiddity, that can be applied to God and humans. Having noted this, it can be held that even though the mode of existence of an attribute like "wisdom" in God is different from ours, its main core, which indicates the "knowledge of something", is the same; our knowledge is a quality, while the knowledge of God is united with His simple essence; yet God is wise in the same sense that we are, though His wisdom is beyond our limitations.

5. Objection. God is more distant from His creatures than they are from each other. The distance of some creatures makes any univocal predication of them impossible [Aquinas, ST, I, q. 13, a 5].

Response. The mere fact that "God is more distant from creatures than they are from each other", does not entail the negation of any sort of commonality between God and His creatures. It could be held that these conceptions are gradational, creatures have a lower degree of them, whereas God has them to highest degree.

6. Objection. Every effect which is not an adequate result of the power of the efficient cause, receives the similitude of the agent not in its full degree, but in a measure that falls short. what is divided and multiplied in the effects resides in the agent simply. Thus, when any term expressing perfection is applied to a creature, it signifies that perfection distinct in idea from other perfections [Aquinas, ST, I, q. 13, a 5]. Consider the following example. The heat generated by the sun and the sun itself are not called univocally hot. Now, the forms of the things God has made do not measure up to a specific likeness of the divine power; for the things that God has made receive in a divided and particular way that which in Him is found in a simple and universal way. It is evident, then, that nothing can be said univocally of God and other things [Aquinas 1955, 143].

Response. Though creatures take their attributes of perfection from God through another mode of existence, but their attributes are not distinct perfections, they are the same ones but are weaker, lesser and defective within human beings. Both God and His creatures have these attributes, but the instance of them in creatures is composite (in the theological sense), while in God they are simple.

Further, the example of Aquinas is misleading. Heat is produced by the sun and is not univocal with it, but the sun's heat is univocal with the heat produced by the sun on earth because they share some commonality. Correspondingly, the concepts of God

and creatures are not univocal, but the existence, knowledge and power of God has some commonality with those of creatures.

7. Objection. Whatever is predicated of many things univocally is either a genus, or species, or a difference, or an accident or a property. But nothing is predicated of God as a genus or a difference; and thus, neither is anything predicated as a definition, nor likewise as a species, which is constituted of genus and difference. Nor can there be any accident in God, and therefore nothing is predicated of Him either as an accident or a property, since property belongs to the genus of accidents. It remains, then, that nothing is predicated univocally of God and other things [Aquinas, 1955, 144].

Response. The source of division of the above concepts, i.e., “genus”, “species” and “difference”, is quiddity. In classical logic, as affirmed by Aquinas, quiddity is divided into two types, i.e., “substance” and “accident”. Due to the simplicity of God, God has no accidents. Likewise, a complete quiddity is called “species”. A species has two components: a common factor, which is called “genus”, and a distinguishing factor, which is called “difference”. From this division it becomes clear that concepts such as “species”, “genus”, “difference” and “accident” are attributed only to quiddities, and since it was held in classical logic that quiddity is abstracted from finite objects, any quiddity was denied of God [Aquinas, ST, I, q.3, art 5-8., Avicenna, 1983, 345–349]. But contrary to Aquinas’ argument, there are other concepts that have nothing to do with quiddity which are predicated of many things univocally. These concepts are related to existence and the attributes of existence. Concepts such as “existence” itself, “knowledge”, “power”, “possessing life”, etc. are concepts that are predicated of many things univocally, but they are neither “species” nor “genus” nor “difference” nor “accident”. So, Aquinas’ contention that univocity is applied solely to quiddities and their components is not true, but rather the univocity between the attributes of God and His creatures is related to existence and its attributes.

8. Objection. Everything that is predicated univocally of many things belongs, through participation, to each of the things that it is predicated of; species participates in the genus and the individual in the species. But nothing is said of God by participation, since whatever is participated is determined by the mode of that which is participated and is thus possessed in a partial way and not according to every mode of perfection. Nothing, therefore, can be predicated univocally of God and other things [Aquinas 1955, 144–145].

Response. Unlike Aquinas’ view, it would be held that God participates in existence. There is a broad concept of “existence” that includes a number of instances. There are numerous beings, all participating in existence. But the mode of existence of each one is different from the other. The modes of existence of creatures is that they are contingent and imperfect, but God has the most perfect mode of existence. Thus, God has a special mode of existence, which is the highest one, and does not participate in other modes which are defective.

9. Objection. Nothing is predicated of God and creatures as though they were in the same order, but, rather, according to priority and posteriority. Because all things are predicated of God essentially. For God is called being, as being entity itself, and He is called good, as being goodness itself. But in other beings, predications are made by participation, as Socrates is said to be a man, not because he is humanity itself, but because he possesses humanity. It is impossible, therefore, that anything be predicated univocally of God and other things [Aquinas, 1955, 145].

Response. Expressions such as “God is entity itself or goodness itself” are not accurate. Because “goodness” and “entity” are universal concepts which do not exist per se in the world. They are real, but they cannot, per se, be realized and actualized. Their realization is through their referents. Thus, there is no such thing as “goodness itself” or “entity itself”, and it does not make sense to say that God is “goodness itself” and “entity itself”, but what must be maintained is that concepts such as “goodness” and “entity” are general concepts that have numerous instances. Just as a man is an instance of these concepts, God is also an instance of these concepts, but the difference is that God is the highest being who has this attribute necessarily and in the most perfect mode.

Conclusion

Regarding religious language, the theory of complete univocity has advantages over the other theories. The theory of analogy faces the problem of advocating a middle concept between univocity and equivocate. This theory also leads to a kind of agnosticism about the attributes of God. The theory of partial univocity also is flawed, since semantic univocity requires ontological commonality. Therefore, the best theory in this regard is the theory of complete univocity. This theory provides a precise explanation of divine transcendence, according to which the human intellect, based on its capacities, can attribute some common attributes to God by eliminating their defective characteristics.

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¹ My definition of partial univocity in this article is different from the William Alston’s definition of it. Defending the functionalist approach to religious language, William Alston offers a different definition of partial univocity (Alston 1989, 64–80, 2010, 277–290, 2005, 242), which is not discussed in this article due to the detail of his view.