THE DOCTRINE OF UNIVOCITY IS TRUE AND SALUTARY

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I shall confine my attention to the one Scotist doctrine that seems to be singled out as especially worrisome, the doctrine of univocity. In the first part of the paper I argue that the doctrine of univocity is true. So even if the doctrine has unwelcome consequences, we ought to affirm it anyway; it is not the job of the theologian or philosopher to shrink from uncomfortable truths. In the second part I argue further that the doctrine of univocity is salutary. That is, it does not have the deplorable consequences that have been attributed to it. It should be noted that by "consequences" I mean logical consequences. What historical consequences the doctrine may have had are beside the point: if people have been led astray by false inferences from the doctrine of univocity, the proper remedy is to correct their inferences, not to reject univocity.

I. The Doctrine of Univocity is True

a. What the Doctrine of Univocity is
Before arguing that a philosophical view is correct (or indeed incorrect), it is wise to lay out what exactly the view in question *is*. Already on this point the defenders of Radical Orthodoxy are notably careless. Pickstock is not alone in treating the doctrine of univocity as containing, or perhaps entailing, ontological doctrines that Scotus explicitly disavows—and on the basis of quite sophisticated arguments. The doctrine of univocity is a semantic doctrine, and although Scotus does associate some ontological claims with that doctrine, it is highly misleading to talk, as Pickstock does, about a "univocalist ontology".

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The misconstruals of Scotus that plague Pickstock's writings are perhaps not surprising. One notices a dearth of actual quotation. We do see references in footnotes, but it is often hard to see in the referenced passage the view that is ascribed to Scotus in Pickstock's essay. Take, as just one example from among many that I could discuss, the following statement:

> The position of the analogical, as a third medium between identity and difference, whereby something can be like something else in its very unlikeness according to an ineffable co-belonging, is rejected by Scotus because it does not seem to be rationally thinkable.

I confess that I do not know what it would mean for something to "be like something else in its very unlikeness according to an ineffable co-belonging", and I suspect that no one else does either, for I suspect that this phrase is, in the strictest sense, unintelligible. It would therefore not at all surprise me, and certainly not distress me, if Scotus too regarded this as not "rationally thinkable". But when we look at the text of Scotus, we find that what he rejects in the cited text is something quite different.

In *In Praed*. 4, nn. 27–29, Scotus says that other authors recognize three sorts of analogical predication. (And notice from the outset the crucial phrase *in vocibus*: he is clearly talking about semantics, not ontology here.) In the first sort, the term primarily signifies a single *ratio* that characterizes different things in different ways. In the second sort, the term signifies one thing in a prior way and other things in a posterior way. The basis for this sort of analogy is that "signifying follows understanding. So if x is understood in a prior way to y, then if x is signified by the same term as is y, it is signified by that term in a prior way" (n. 28). In the third sort, the term is imposed on one thing properly and is then transferred improperly to signify some other thing that bears some resemblance to the first. The text to which Pickstock refers concerns Scotus's arguments against the second sort of analogy:

> The second mode of analogy described above seems impossible. For it can happen that what is unqualifiedly prior is unknown when the name is imposed on what is posterior, given that what is unqualifiedly posterior can be prior with respect to us, and thus be understood and signified in a prior way. Therefore, if the term in question is imposed second on what is unqualifiedly prior, it is obvious that it will not[1] signify in a posterior way that on which it was first imposed; given that it once signified the latter primarily, it will always signify the latter primarily. For after a term is imposed, it is not changed with respect to signifying that on which it is imposed. Therefore, an ordering in things does not imply an ordering in the signification of words. (n. 32)

What Scotus is doing here is insisting on a distinction between semantics and ontology. He does not reject ordering *per prius et posterius* in things; and

if it makes any sense to talk about something's "being like something else in its very unlikeness according to an ineffable co-belonging", he is not reject-ing that either, because that too is an ontological rather than a semantic matter. Rather, he is saying that "the ordering . . . cannot be captured in the signification of individual words".[2] The other text Pickstock cites, *In Soph. El.* 15, argues for substantially the same doctrine, though it is elaborated in greater detail.

This insistence on a distinction between semantics and ontology is absolutely crucial to Scotus's account of univocity, and every reliable inter-preter notes it.[3] Yet even where Pickstock acknowledges this crucial feature of Scotus's account, she proceeds immediately to talk in a way that makes me wonder whether she has at all understood it. Consider the following passage:

> Scotus' refusal, in contrast to Aristotle and Aquinas, to conceive of a semantic analogy within grammar and logic inevitably influences his conception of the metaphysical field also, since the new autonomy which he grants to the semantic is itself a metaphysical move: purely logical existence, including purely punctiliar essential univocal being *in quid* now belongs entirely to the real and can always be "virtually distin-guished" within its more complex concrete binding together with other elements *in quale*.

But the whole point, the very core, of Scotus's separation of the semantic from the metaphysical is precisely the claim that our possession of a concept under whose extension both God and creatures fall does *not* imply that there is any feature at all in extramental reality that is a common component of both God and creatures—let alone that there is such a thing as "purely punc-tiliar essential univocal being *in quid*", whatever that would be. Scotus has a number of exceedingly complex and subtle arguments to show that such an inference from univocal concept to ontological overlap is invalid. If the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy can show that his arguments fail, well and good. But in the absence of such a showing, the charge that Scotus's doctrine of univocity destroys the transcendent uniqueness of God and thereby intro-duces idolatry is a gross libel.

The drive to ascribe to Scotus a "univocalist ontology" is therefore partic-ularly regrettable, because it shows so little attention to the argumentative details of Scotus's actual doctrine. As Scotus says in explaining Aristotle's dictum that "equivocations lie hidden in a genus" (*Physics* 7.4, 249a22-23),

> This is not equivocation in the logician's sense, which involves positing diverse concepts, but in that of the ontologist, because there is no unity of nature in such a case. . . . This is how all the authoritative passages one might find on this topic in the *Metaphysics* or *Physics* should be inter-preted: in terms of the ontological diversity of those things to which the

concept is attributed, which is compatible with there being one concept that can be abstracted from them.[4]

This passage indeed suggests a capsule summary of the doctrine of univocity as Scotus holds and defends it:

> *Univocity*: Notwithstanding the irreducible ontological diversity between God and creatures, there are concepts under whose extension both God and creatures fall, so that the corresponding predicate expressions are used with exactly the same sense in predications about God as in predications about creatures.

From here on out by "the doctrine of univocity" I will mean precisely the doctrine as stated in this capsule summary. Having now fixed the content of that doctrine, I can proceed to argue for its truth.

b. Argument in Favor of the Doctrine of Univocity

Let us consider two predications:

(GW)   God is wise.
(SW)   Socrates is wise.

The question is whether "wise" has the same sense in (GW) that it has in (SW). Three answers seem like live options. First, we might say that it has altogether different senses in the two predications. In this vein we find Anselm saying (unwisely), "if any word is ever applied to [God] in common with others, it must undoubtedly be understood to have a very different meaning" (*Monologion* 26). Second, we might say that it is being used in different but related senses. And third, we might say that it is being used in exactly the same sense. These three options are of course equivocity, analogy, and univocity. I will argue that these three options in fact reduce to two: either unintelligibility or univocity.

Take equivocity first. We can presumably specify the sense that "wise" has in (SW). Can we, in a similar way, identify the altogether different sense that "wise" has in (GW)? If the answer is no, we literally do not know what we are saying when we say that God is wise, and have just as much reason to say that God is unwise or that God is floopy as we have to say that God is wise: I mean, in fact, that we have no reason at all to say any of these things, because all these pseudo-predications are simply sounds devoid of intelligible content. They no more constitute assertions than would a belch or a D-major chord.

So on the assumption of equivocity, we would do well to say that we *can* identify the sense that "wise" has in (GW). To do so would involve the substitution of some expression (most likely, although not necessarily, a composite expression) that we take to have the same sense as "wise" has in (GW). This expression too will be drawn from the repertoire of expressions we use

in order to talk about creatures. And so we must ask again: does this expression have the same sense when predicated of God as when 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, the earlier argument stands, and we have fallen into unintelligibility. If we can, then we have a second-order substitute expression. This regress in substitute expressions must terminate somewhere, or else we have fallen into an infinite stutter and thus, again, into unintelligibility. ("By 'God is wise' I mean that God is *F*, by which I mean that God is *G*, by which I mean that God is *H* . . ."; if there is in principle no end to this, then I quite literally have no idea what I mean by "God is wise", which is another way of saying that I mean nothing by "God is wise.") And clearly only univocal predication will terminate the regress, since equivocal predication always introduces either unintelligibility or an additional, putatively equivalent expression.

But someone will here object that my conclusion (and indeed much of my argumentation to this point) ignores that *via media* so beloved of my fellow Anglicans: analogical predication. The point is well-taken, so let us return to our two predications and explore this third possibility. Suppose we say instead that the sense of "wise" in (GW) is different from, but related to, the sense of "wise" in (SW). We must then ask: are we able to state explicitly either (i) the sense that "wise" has in (GW) or (ii) the relation that the sense of "wise" in (GW) has to the sense it has in (SW)? If we can do neither, then we have in fact fallen into equivocation, and the earlier arguments apply. (For if we have neither an intrinsic nor a relational grasp of the sense that "wise" has in (GW), we have no grasp of its sense at all. Granted, the denial of univocity does entail that we always know of one relation that holds between the two senses, namely the relation of *non-identity*. But to know merely that the sense of "wise" in (GW) is not identical with the sense of "wise" in (SW) is not to know what the sense of "wise" in (GW) actually *is*.) If we can avail ourselves of option (i), we are back on the regress described above, and we already know that such a regress must terminate in univocal predication. If we can avail ourselves of option (ii), we will be able to substitute a composite expression for "wise" in (GW) that will include the sense that "wise" has in (SW) plus some relational expression. If the relational expression has exactly the same sense in the rewritten version of (GW) that it has in our ordinary discourse, we have now rewritten (GW) using univocal predication, with no loss of meaning. If, however, the relational expression has an altogether different sense (or a different but related sense) in the rewritten version of (GW) from the sense it has in our ordinary discourse, we are back on our regress, and with the same results: we come in the end always either to univocity or to unintelligibility.

Strictly speaking, if my argument is successful, it does not show that the doctrine of univocity is true, but rather that *either* the doctrine of univocity

is true *or* that everything we say about God is in the most straightforward sense unintelligible—that is, that we literally do not know what we are saying when we say of God that he is good, just, wise, loving, or what have you. Now I take it that an acknowledgment of the unintelligibility of all language about God is simply not a live option, and so I am convinced that the doctrine of univocity is true. (It is also, if I may anticipate the argument of the second section, salutary, since what could be less healthful to the human soul than to be unable to say anything at all of God? For if we were to keep silent the very rocks would cry out. *Vae tacentibus de te, quoniam loquaces muti sunt.*) But I do sometimes wonder whether the insistence on analogical predication as we find it in the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy is not really a plea for obscurantism—or, if a more august term be demanded, for a thoroughgoing apophaticism.[5] If indeed the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy see themselves as defending apophaticism, their resistance to univocal predication is perfectly understandable, and it sheds further light on the strategic importance of Scotus's beginning his discussion of univocity by arguing against a purely negative theology. I do not have room here to say more in favor of an unapologetically kataphatic theology beyond the Dominical and Augustinian hints I have already dropped. But at least the options before us have been drawn in the starkest possible relief.

II. The Doctrine of Univocity is Salutary

The proponents of Radical Orthodoxy rarely if ever argue that univocity is false. They argue instead that it has various disastrous consequences for theology and philosophy, and for society and culture generally. Now as I said at the beginning of this essay, it is not the job of the theologian or philosopher to shrink from uncomfortable truths. Having argued that the doctrine of univocity is true, I am now honor-bound to embrace whatever consequences follow from the doctrine, however unwanted they may be. But I wish to argue further that the doctrine of univocity is not only true but salutary. The further doctrines that it entails are altogether wholesome and beneficial, and the disastrous effects that have been blamed on the doctrine of univocity do not in fact follow from it at all. I note first two salutary consequences of the doctrine, and then I turn to its supposed deleterious consequences.

a. The Doctrine of Univocity Has Welcome Consequences
I have already noted one salutary consequence of the doctrine of univocity: it entails that we can speak intelligibly of God, and its denial entails that we cannot. I regard this as a matter of such importance that I would be happy to rest my case for univocity on this alone.

There is a second salutary consequence that Scotus explicitly affirms (and that Pickstock herself seems to acknowledge). Univocity allows for the pos-

sibility of a demonstrative argument for the existence of God. Indeed, in her drive to distinguish Aquinas from Scotus on this point, Pickstock is betrayed into the far-fetched suggestion that Aquinas regards the arguments for the existence of God (and, presumably, those for the various divine attributes) as dialectical rather than demonstrative. As it happens, we need not speculate about whether Aquinas regards his arguments as demonstrative, because he explicitly asks whether the existence of God is demonstrable in *ST* 1a 2.1. His answer is yes. He states this in the *sed contra*, repeats it in the *responsio*, and for good measure affirms it again in each of the three responses to objections. And when he comes to the discussion of equivocal predication in 1a 13.5, Aquinas writes that if everything predicated of both God and creatures were predicated equivocally,

> nothing could be known or demonstrated concerning God on the basis of creatures. Instead, one would always commit the fallacy of equivocation. And this is contrary both to the philosophers, who prove by demonstration many things concerning God, and to the Apostle, who says in Romans 1, "The invisible things of God are perceived through understanding the things that have been made".

That Aquinas thought we can demonstrate the existence of God is no matter for subtle interpretation; it is a simple matter of taking him at his oft-repeated word. To deny it is sheer irresponsibility.

b. The Doctrine of Univocity Has No Unwelcome Consequences

Not only does the doctrine of univocity have salutary consequences of the very highest importance, but the various worrisome consequences for which univocity has been blamed simply do not follow from that doctrine. Now at this point it becomes important to engage in a brief discussion of argumentative method. Suppose someone says that p entails q. How do I go about showing otherwise? That is, how I do establish that p does not entail q, but is consistent with the denial of q? The only decisive way is one that is seldom available, namely, to show that p in fact entails not-q.[6] The second best way is to show, empirically or in some other way, a case in which p and not-q are both true together. Least satisfactorily, the best one can usually manage is to establish that the arguments that purport to derive q from p are unsound. Strictly speaking, of course, this last approach establishes only that one's opponent has not proved that p entails q, not that p does not in fact entail q. But the burden of proof certainly falls on the person who has attempted to show that p entails q, and if it can be shown that the burden of proof has not been met, one is entitled to continue to hold p and deny q.

The various unsavory consequences that the defenders of Radical Orthodoxy attribute to Scotus's doctrine of univocity seem to me not to have much to do with univocity one way or the other, so I would not expect to be able to argue that univocity in fact entails the denial of those consequences. It is

also hard to see how one could point to a case in which univocity is true but its purported consequences are not. So it appears that the best I can do is to establish that the arguments that purport to derive pernicious consequences from the doctrine of univocity are unsound. The burden of proof is on the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy, so if I can show that their arguments are unsound, I am entitled to continue to accept univocity without fear of being committed to any of the views that they deplore.

It is a noteworthy feature of the Radical Orthodoxy literature that quite breathtaking inferences are made from the doctrine of univocity with little or no argumentative support. Pickstock's essay, for example, repeatedly says that univocity underlies a shift to a view of knowledge as representation, but we are never shown any conceptual connection between the two views. It remains, therefore, an open question why anyone might suppose that the doctrine of univocity leads inevitably to (or even makes marginally more attractive) a view of knowledge as representation. (Worse, it is never made clear exactly what knowledge as representation amounts to, or what exactly is wrong with the view.[7]) Pickstock also suggests that univocity leads to voluntarism, but we are given no reason to suppose that this is so, and even I—an ardent proponent of both univocity and voluntarism—can discern no connection between the two. (I find this a shame, since I would love to have a really good argument for voluntarism. Given that I take myself to have a really good argument for univocity, a showing that univocity entails voluntarism would be a most welcome development.)

Even where some attempt is made to show how univocity might lead to some conclusion or other, the arguments presented are thin and unconvincing. I certainly do not mean to single out Pickstock for special criticism here, since of all the writers associated with Radical Orthodoxy she makes the most sustained effort to offer reasons for thinking that univocity is a dangerous doctrine. Her essay for the present symposium offers arguments from univocity to a number of views: the theory of causality as *influentia*, epistemological and political atomism, a weakening of the doctrine of Creation, contractualism (as opposed to a recognition of a common good), authoritarianism (with regard to either the *magisterium* or Scripture), and a handful of others. I do not have space to consider all of these arguments, so I will look in detail at the one argument that is elaborated here most fully and clearly, the argument from univocity to epistemological and political atomism.

Pickstock writes:

[U]nivocity requires that God and creatures "are" in the same albeit spectral ontic fashion. Scotus' treatment of a vast range of issues from human freedom . . . to questions concerning Adam, Christ, Grace and the Eucharist all tend to show that this logical/ontological minimum still makes a considerable conceptual and practical difference. Common to all these instances is the idea that a being as self-identical and so recog-

nisable must be free from all internal relations (to adopt a later termi-
nology). It must be thinkable in abstraction from all that has caused it,
and from its constitutive co-belonging with other realities. It is this
position which tends to encourage both epistemological and political
atomism. If each finite position does not occupy the problematic (even,
one can admit) contradictory space of participation, then it is identical
with its own space. . . .

To show that this argument fails it is enough for me to point out that the
whole argument proceeds from the misunderstanding of univocity that we
find in the first sentence of the quoted passage. Epistemological and politi-
cal atomism is said to follow, not from univocity, but from this other doc-
trine that Scotus in fact denies.

But even leaving that problem aside, the argument still fails. For we are
given no reason to think that postulating an irreducible minimum common
element in a plurality of things requires one to suppose that each of those
things is thinkable in abstraction from all the others. (Indeed, there might be
a modest *prima facie* plausibility in just the opposite thought: that such irre-
ducible commonality would actually require one to think of things in terms
of their common element, and therefore in terms of the other things that
share that common element.) And even if there were reason to think this, it
would still not follow that in thinking an individual in abstraction from other
individuals I would thereby have thought everything that is true, or even
important, about that individual.

There are two senses of abstraction we might have in mind here. In one
sense, which I shall call "privative abstraction", one thinks of x in abstrac-
tion from other things when one simply thinks of x without thinking of other
things that might be related to x. In another sense, which I shall call "posi-
tive abstraction", one thinks of x in abstraction from other things by think-
ing that x in fact has no relations to other things. Now even a participatory
metaphysics allows for privative abstraction. The question is why a non-
participatory metaphysics requires us always to engage in positive abstrac-
tion. I can see no reason to suppose it does, since one can consistently
suppose (1) that, say, a given human being possesses human nature intrin-
sically, i.e., that no relation to any other being constitutes his being human,
and (2) that in virtue of possessing that nature the human being has, is
capable of having, or ought to have various relations. Aristotle, for example,
holds both (1) and (2), and no one would think to argue against Aristotle by
pointing out that he holds *both* that every human being possesses human
nature intrinsically *and* that human beings are by nature animals suited for
living in community.

So I take it that the argument that univocity leads to epistemological and
political atomism simply falls apart on careful inspection. Other such argu-
ments fare no better; indeed, I chose this argument to discuss precisely

because it seemed to have the best chance of succeeding from among all the arguments in the Radical Orthodoxy literature that purport to derive worrisome consequences from the doctrine of univocity. So I will let my criticisms of the argument from univocity to atomism stand in for a more general showing (which limitations of space prevent me from pursuing here) that the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy have failed to meet their burden of proof in showing that the doctrine of univocity entails, or even provides some reason to accept, any troubling consequence whatsoever. Since it has not been shown that the doctrine of univocity has any unwelcome consequences, and since it does have some salutary consequences of great importance, and since (most important of all) the doctrine is true, I conclude that the polemic against univocity must be rejected—and the name of the great defender and patron of that true and salutary doctrine should be held in high esteem.

NOTES

1   There is no *non* here in the critical edition (Bonaventure 1:282, line 24), but there is good manuscript support for it, and without it this first part of the sentence blatantly contradicts the second half and indeed says the opposite of what Scotus needs here in order to make his point.

2   E. J. Ashworth, "Analogy and Equivocation in Thirteenth-Century Logic: Aquinas in Context", *Mediaeval Studies* Vol. 54 (1992), pp. 94–135, at p. 122.

3   See, for example, Stephen Dumont, "Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus" in John Marenbon (ed), *Medieval Philosophy*, The Routledge History of Philosophy Vol. 3 (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 319; Peter King, "Scotus on Metaphysics", in Thomas Williams (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 15–68, especially sections I.3 and VI; James F. Ross and Todd Bates, "Duns Scotus on Natural Theology", in *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, pp. 193–237, section II; and, most pertinently to our present concerns, Richard Cross, "Where angels fear to tread: Duns Scotus and Radical Orthodoxy", *Antonianum* Annus LXXVI Fasc. 1 (January-March, 2001), pp. 7–41, especially at pp. 12–24. It is worrisome to me that Pickstock's presentation of Scotus seems to have been in no way changed by Cross's work. Indeed, Pickstock observes that "Richard Cross is a critic of my own interpretation of Duns Scotus, although it is not so much that the two analyses of Duns Scotus stand in a hostile relation, but that the negotiations of these analyses differ greatly". Given that Cross offers extensive textual support and argument against almost every claim that Pickstock makes about Scotus, it is hard for me to understand how she can think his interpretation does not "stand in a hostile relation" to hers.

4   *Ord*. 1, d. 3, pars 1, q. 3, n. 163: "Non tamen est aequivocatio quantum ad logicum, qui ponit diversos conceptus, sed quantum ad realem philosophum, est aequivocatio, quia non est ibi unitas naturae. Ita igitur omnes auctoritates quae essent in *Metaphysica* et *Physica*, quae essent de hac materia, possent exponi, propter diversitatem realem illorum in quibus est attributio, cum qua stat tamen unitas conceptus abstrahibilis ab eis." The word "diversity" is of particular importance here. Two things are different when they have some real generic feature in common but merely diverse when they do not. The sorts of genera at issue in the Aristotelian passage are not the genera of living things, in which there is (according to Scotus) some real generic feature in common between things of different (*not* diverse) species—on this see Cross, p. 16.

5   Richard Cross notes the connection with apophaticism and speculates that the project of Radical Orthodoxy is "the exclusion of all argument from systematic theology" (Cross, p. 22). If this speculation is correct, my next section—which is devoted to showing that Pick-

stock's arguments from univocity to assorted regrettable theses are all failures—is otiose. But I cannot so much as imagine that anyone would really want to exclude all argument from systematic theology; at the very least, I should think that the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy intend to offer me *reasons* for abandoning my devotion to the Scotist cause.

6   Any analytically trained philosophers who read this essay will wish to be assured at this point that I am limiting the domain of the variable to propositions that are possibly true. For if p is impossible, we can easily derive from it both q and not-q for any given q.

7   It is in the realm of epistemology that some of the worst misrepresentations of Scotus, and of his relation to Aquinas, have been made. For example, in "Truth and correspondence", Pickstock states that for Aquinas "[a]n idea of a tree . . . is not in any way a mere representation or fictional figment, as it later became for Duns Scotus and William of Ockham" (in John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* [London and New York: Routledge, 2001], p. 9). But Scotus does not hold that the idea of a tree is a fictional figment; it is in fact the common nature of the tree existing *in esse intelligibili*. For an important corrective to such misrepresentations, see Timothy B. Noone, "The Franciscans and Epistemology: Reflections on the Roles of Bonaventure and Scotus", in R. E. House (ed), *Medieval Masters: Essays in Memory of Msgr. E. A. Synan* (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1999), pp. 63–90, where Noone argues that "Scotus's epistemology is in fundamental continuity with that of Thomas Aquinas" (p. 90).