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IDOLATRY AND RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Richard Cross

Upholding a univocity theory of religious language does not entail idolatry, because nothing about univocity entails misidentifying God altogether—which is what idolatry amounts to. Upholders and opponents of univocity can agree on the object to which they are ascribing various attributes, even if they do not agree on the attributes themselves. Neither does the defender of univocity have to maintain that there is anything real really shared by God and creatures. Furthermore, even if much of language is analogous, syllogistic argument—and hence theology's scientific status, as accepted by the scholastics—requires univocity.

1. *A Theological Problem: Idolatry*

The argument from univocity to idolatry crops up a lot in recent theological literature. As Burrell nicely shows in "Creator / Creatures Relation," the argument is based on a theological intuition—about illegitimately importing the creaturely into the divine realm—that has a long and distinguished theological history. For all that, the charge looks to be a mistake, seeming to rest on a confusion between two different ways of understanding the nature of a certain sort of theological error—specifically, on a confusion between two different ways of understanding that claim that God fails to have a certain attribute. The confusion is easily described. Let ϕ be any alleged attribute proper to the God of the Abrahamic religions, such that creatures fail to be ϕ . Suppose the upholder of univocity wants to assert that God too fails to be ϕ —as she will on occasion want to, since she believes that there are some words that can be predicated in the same sense of God and creatures. What she intends to claim is that the God of the Abrahamic religions is not ϕ . This may be a theological error, but it is not idolatry. The claim is *de re*—that the God of the Abrahamic religions is not ϕ . To be guilty of idolatry, the theologian would at the very least need to understand the claim *de dicto*: that it is not the case that God is ϕ —perhaps because a statue is God, or a tree is: genuinely idolatrous claims. But the *de re* assertion does not entail the *de dicto* one. So upholding univocity does not entail idolatry, because upholding univocity does not entail misidentifying God altogether—which I take it is what idolatry amounts to.

So the dispute between the upholder of univocity and her opponent is genuinely theological, and it is genuinely about one and the same God—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But setting aside the rather extravagant rhetoric of idolatry, there is a substantive point to the opponent's



riposte, and it is that the upholder of univocity makes a serious theological error, denying of the creator of the universe attributes which should be proper to him, and, by the same token, ascribing to him attributes which should be proper to his creation—thus blurring the distinction between creator and creature. Even thus described, it is not clear to me that the upholder of univocity is guilty. Typically, the upholder of univocity maintains that there are some words that we use of God and creatures that have the same meanings in these two applications. The two major medieval Christian protagonists in this debate, at least as presented in the modern literature, are Aquinas and Scotus, and these two theologians agree that meanings of words are concepts (I will return to this below). So the univocity position amounts to the claim that there are some concepts under whose extension both God and creatures fall. Concepts are typically held by medieval theologians to be merely mental entities, and the defender of univocity does not generally accept that the view that there are concepts under whose extension both God and creatures fall entails that there is something extramental really common to, or shared by, God and creatures. Now, some upholders of univocity may do this: Burrell cites Mary Beth Ingham's slightly ambiguous claim that there is "something common to God and the created order." Since Scotus believes that, in order to account for the fact that things of the same kind fall under the extension of some one species-concept, we need to posit some kind of common nature, really shared by things of that kind, it might be thought that he should generalize from this and claim that, to account for any case where things fall under the extension of some one concept, we need to posit some kind of real commonality between them. But there are clear counterexamples to this more general claim. 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. The concept *animal* is a vicious abstraction. Nothing is just an animal. Things are animals in virtue of being particular kinds 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 an animal. I will return below to the question of whether positing some real commonality entails undermining the distinction between God and creatures.

In fact, Scotus is clear throughout his discussions that he wants to claim no more than that there are concepts under whose extension both God and creatures fall—not that there are common real properties really shared by God and creatures. Still, this claim of *conceptual* commonality is itself the so-called "onto-theological" position that Burrell and others find so objectionable, the claim that allegedly undermines the distinction between God and creatures. It is not clear to me, however, that this assessment is correct. One common way of developing the argument is to make another assertion of idolatry: namely, that in positing some such concept—say *being*—the univocalist is idolatrously placing something real higher than God—namely, Being. But this is clearly misguided. Scotus, for example, is committed to no such thing. Concepts are not things in the real world, and there is no need to posit any real thing (such as a common nature or universal) other than the individuals realizing the concept. And this

seems to refute the objection that univocity somehow undermines the distinction between God and creatures. God is not *wholly* unlike creatures, after all. But in positing the possibility of univocal concepts, a theologian is not *ipso facto* making God just another creature. The semantic theory is neutral on the question of the degree of real, ontological likeness between God and creatures. As it happens, Scotus accepts the traditional view that creatures imitate God by being, in their way, representations of him: God is the exemplar cause of creatures, and they are “measured” by him (see Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, d. 3, p. 2, q. un. [Vatican, 3:180]). This, presumably, allows for univocity without an appeal to shared attributes common to God and creatures.

Perhaps the alleged problem is that accepting univocal concepts requires accepting that God can somehow be grasped by the human intellect—and that this makes him less transcendent. I suppose we here bump up against apophaticism, and different senses of what it might be cognitively to “grasp” God. I am sure that the univocalist would want to say of God what we understand that God is good, and more besides, and that the univocalist would not want to say that God is merely the “more besides,” and none of what we understand of what goodness is—which I take it is the burden of the serious apophaticist. But apophaticism as serious as this is not theologically required in order to maintain the distinction between God and creatures. After all, everyone agrees that creatures resemble God in certain ways, and in order to maintain the distinction between God and creatures, it is not required that we be unable to specify any of the ways in which creatures resemble God. Neither is it required that we identify God with his own act of existence. There are plenty of other ways of identifying God as necessary and creatures as contingent—and this identification seems sufficient for the relevant distinction—for “the Distinction,” as Burrell puts it. Scotus himself takes pains to show just how his view is compatible with divine perfection—and, indeed, how opposing views are vulnerable to the objection that they diminish divine perfection, by denying that things that it is better to be than not to be—pure perfections—are in God. The argument is that we can find such perfections in creatures. If God fails to have them, then he fails to be wholly perfect. Since the perfections are the same, the concepts representing them must be univocal (see Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1–2 [Vatican, 3:25]). I will return to the notions of the “same” perfections and “same” concepts below.

In fact, not even a more realist account of the properties had by God and creatures need undermine the distinction between God and the world. Suppose, just for the sake of argument, that we were to accept that there are universal properties shared between God and creatures. Would this make the property more absolute than God? Would the world of the creature somehow impinge on the divine world? On the first of these, the property would only be more absolute than God if we were to accept some kind of Platonic theory according to which universals are prior to the individuals that exemplify them. But this is a minority theory, I would judge; most philosophers who accept universals take the more Aristotelian line that universals are parasitic on individuals, and not *vice versa*. Neither would the view entail holding that the world of the creature somehow impinges on God. We would not have to accept that the relevant universals

are automatically creaturely; they could be wholly divine in their divine exemplifications and wholly creaturely in their creaturely exemplifications. Suppose that there were real genus-universals—animality, for example, shared by cats and dogs. Asserting that the property is shared does not entail that something proper to cats is somehow impinging on the dog world, or *vice versa*. Something instantiated by cats is instantiated by dogs too. Considered in abstraction from its instantiation, we would need to say that animality is neither cat-like nor dog-like. *Pari passu*, considered in abstraction from its instantiation, any property shared by God and creatures is neither divine nor creaturely—though of course it needs to be realized in one or other of these (God or creatures): it is never instantiated without these, and neither are they instantiated without it. Still, I discuss this theoretically merely, because it is not clear to me that there are any theologians who consciously and deliberately accept this view.

2. A Philosophical Problem: Religious Language

Burrell makes a further and more general point, less theological, about the irresistably analogical nature of much of our language. As he puts it, “the shoe ends up on the other foot: it is univocal rather than analogical usage which requires explication.” Well, a lot of this depends on one’s general semantic theory, and this is not the place to enter into a discussion of such vexed territory. I will offer one small observation. No medieval thinker accepted anything other than what we might loosely label an “ideational” theory of meaning—meanings are ideas or concepts (whether concepts be understood as mental objects [of thought] or as mental acts [of thought]). Aquinas summarizes this as follows: “Words are signs of thoughts, and thoughts are likenesses of things” (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 1). These thoughts or concepts are representations (Aquinas here calls them “likenesses”) of things. They are distinct from the real properties and relations of which they are concepts, in the sense of being mental representations numerically distinct from the real items which they represent. But in so far as the concepts are representations of things, they convey *informational content* about the things they represent, and this informational content exactly corresponds to the extramental properties or relations themselves. In this context, Aquinas talks about the *res significata*, the thing signified by a word (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 3). When doing so, he wishes to draw attention to the fact that the relation between word, concept, and thing is such that, in virtue jointly of a word’s signifying a concept and of a concept’s representing a thing, we can claim that the word signifies the thing too. So when Aquinas talks about the *res significata*, the thing signified, he means to talk both about the extramental perfection, and about the concept representing that perfection. This is important, because Aquinas is happy to identify the meaning of a word predicated of ‘God’ and of ‘creatures’ as one *res significata* (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 3)—one concept, representing one perfection. Now, according to Aquinas’s well-known teaching in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 5, words are used univocally when they signify identical conceptual contents—one *ratio*—and they are used equivocally when they signify many “totally distinct” *rationes*. Words are used analogically when they signify many *rationes* related by some kind

of “community,” “order,” or “proportion.” Since Aquinas identifies the meaning of a word predicated of ‘God’ and of ‘creatures’ as one *res significata*, the whole teaching seems to entail that one concept can include many related *rationes*: many related conceptual contents or meanings.

Views similar to this—though developed at greater length and in rather different directions—motivated Scotus to accept some requirement of univocity in this context. Underlying Scotus’s move is a very simple thought, elegantly expressed by Burrell:

if *theologia* is to be a *scientia*, then it must proceed by argument, and Socrates showed us that any responsible argument demands that the key terms “stand still”; they cannot be shifting meanings midstream, as it were. Fair enough.

Scotus states the thought thus:

I call that concept univocal which is one in such a way that its unity is sufficient for a contradiction when affirmed and denied of the same thing, and also is sufficient for a syllogistic middle term, such that the extremes are united in the middle term which is one in such a way that they can be united between themselves without the fallacy of equivocation. (Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1–2, n. 26 [Vatican, 3:18])

What worries Scotus is that the way of proceeding adopted by his opponents makes it impossible to give a *philosophically* accessible account of the individuation of concepts, and thus of the meanings of words. And without an account of the “same” meaning, we cannot reason syllogistically. (I add “*philosophically* accessible” because we could insist not only that theological propositions but also the logical relations between them are revealed by God, and thus that we can individuate the relevant concepts on purely theological grounds; but I know of no thinker who would hold this.) On the contrary, Scotus insists, we believe that theology is scientific, and if we believe this, then in turn we ought epistemically to accept that that the words it uses have the same meanings. But notions of the same meaning (the same *ratio*) themselves become meaningless in an account that can allow one and the same concept (*res significata*) to embrace different meanings or different conceptual contents (*rationes*)—at least if it be thought, as it is on the accepted ideational theory of meaning, that the meanings of words just *are* concepts of the sort alluded to. What Scotus’s account shows is that, at the very least, given an ideational theory such as that which both he and Aquinas accept, scientific argumentation requires univocity: the notion here that meanings, conceptual contents, and concepts all coincide. If we were to accept, for example, a “meaning-as-use” kind of semantic theory, the position might be very different: the notion of univocity might, indeed, lose all purchase, much as Burrell suggests. But Burrell’s argument is primarily historical, and so too is mine. Note that none of this requires that we deny that much language is irresistibly analogical, much as Burrell maintains. But Scotus’s point is that there are still significant theological *loci* where univocity is required, at least on the semantic theory accepted by him and Aquinas.

Still, perhaps the medievals were wrong to think of theology as in any sense scientific—indeed, wrong to think of it even as a domain in which the use of syllogistic reasoning is permissible. But Scotus has another, more general concern, also expressed in the passage just quoted. Unless the meanings of the words are exactly the same, then certain apparent theological contradictions turn out not to be such. Scotus gives a well-known and very elegant example:

Every intellect that is certain of one concept and doubtful about others has a concept of which it is certain other than the concepts about which it is doubtful. . . . But the intellect of a wayfarer can be certain that God is a being while doubtful whether he is a finite or an infinite being, or created or uncreated. . . . For every philosopher was certain that that which he posited to be the first principle was a being (for example, one that fire was a being, and another that water was). But he was certain neither that it was first (for then he would have been certain of something false, and the false cannot be known), nor that it was not first (for then he would not have posited the opposite). (Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1–2, nn. 27, 29 [Vatican, 3:18–19])

What Scotus is claiming is that, if “God is a finite being” and “God is an infinite being” are contradictories, then ‘being’ is used univocally in the two cases. This looks plausible, and is sufficient to establish that there are some concepts—here, *being*—under whose extension both God and creatures fall (‘finite being,’ after all, is not obviously meaningless). It is worth keeping in mind that Aquinas himself accepts that univocity is required for the possibility of contradiction. At one point, he wonders whether or not the term ‘God’ is said univocally in the following two cases: “This idol is God” (uttered by an idolater), and “This same idol is not God” (uttered by a Catholic). Aquinas concludes that it is, and thus holds that the idolater goes wrong because he understands the sense of the word ‘God,’ but predicates it of something that could not be God:

Whence it is clear that the Catholic, saying that the idol is not God, contradicts the pagan who asserts that it is, because both use this name ‘God’ to signify the true God. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 10 ad 1)

Aquinas goes on to note in the same passage that when the Catholic *truly* says of the same idol “This idol is (a) god,” ‘God’ is then used homonymously with its use in the Catholic’s utterance “This idol is not God.” So univocity is required for contradictoriness.

I will return to a possible Thomist response to Scotus’s argument in a moment. But first, I want to dispose of a specious objection. It could be argued that the two claims are not contradictory because the two claimants might simply be talking about different objects altogether. This would be possible on the *de dicto* readings of the two claims: person *a* claims that God is an infinite being, and person *b* that it is not the case that God is an infinite being. In this case, person *a* and person *b* do not agree on the reference of ‘God,’ and so do not necessarily, or unambiguously, contradict

each other. But Scotus clearly has in mind the *de re* readings: the thing that is God is a finite being, or the thing that is God is an infinite being. Thus, person *a* claims of God that it is a finite being; person *b* claims of God that it is an infinite being. These *de re* claims are certainly contradictory, and the possibility that our two claimants can contradict each other seems to allow that *being* is univocal.

So what could Aquinas say in response? Fundamentally, given that he accepts that univocity is required for contradictoriness, and given that he denies that 'being,' predicated of God and creatures, is univocal, he would be constrained to deny that the two disputants in Scotus's example contradict each other. He will say instead that at least one of them is uttering something meaningless. If 'being' means "existence proper to creatures," then there are no infinite beings; if 'being' means "existence proper to God," then there are no finite beings. In the first sense, the claim that there is an infinite being is meaningless; in the second, the claim that there is a finite being is meaningless. Aquinas, in short, would deny that, if 'being' must be understood univocally, then anyone legitimately enquires whether God is a finite being or an infinite being. In short, the two protagonists do not contradict each other at all. We cannot legitimately make the Scotist enquiry, so we cannot conclude therefrom that 'being' is univocal. But we can certainly agree that contradictoriness is sufficient for univocity. Aquinas's denial of univocity in this context is not incoherent. But it can be seen on closer inspection to be counterintuitive; this attempted defense was an argument made up after the fact to support a position arrived at on quite different grounds.

I am not here defending a particular view of theological language. I am certainly not asserting that such language needs to be univocal. I am asserting that, given certain semantic and methodological assumptions made conspicuously by some medieval theologians, including Aquinas, univocity turns out to be required for all sorts of discourse, and particularly for theological discourse. It seems, then, that the question of the distinction between philosophical theology and philosophy of religion is one that needs to be decided not on theological grounds—in terms of a (specious) charge of idolatry—but on philosophical grounds: in terms of an evaluation of various rival semantic theories. And this is not likely to be an easy task, or one that is settled quickly—theories of concepts are as contested as ever, and there is by no means an established consensus on the matter.¹

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NOTE

1. I develop some of the material in this essay in much more detail in my article "Univocity and Mystery," in *Metaphysics as Scientia Transcendens*, ed. Roberto Hofmeister Pich and Jakob Hans Schneider (Louvain-la-Neuve: FIDEM, 2007).