

DESCRIBING GOD

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The philosophical problem of describing God arises at the intersection of two different areas of inquiry. The word ‘describing’ makes it clear that the issue is in part a logical one – in the broad medieval sense of ‘logic,’ which includes semantics, the philosophy of language, and even some aspects of the theory of cognition. It is the problem, first, of forming an understanding of some extramental object and, second, of conveying that understanding by means of verbal signs. But the word ‘God’ also indicates that the logical problems involved in description are exacerbated, or perhaps that new problems arise, because of the nature of the extramental object that we are seeking to describe.

Given the enormous ingenuity with which logical problems were debated in the Middle Ages, it is not surprising that the problem of describing God would be worked out in detail – and that many thinkers would lose sight of the specifically theological context in which the problem was ostensibly set. We see here a familiar phenomenon. Once philosophers (even scholastic philosophers) have fully domesticated a problem, discussions of the problem seldom lay bare the practical urgency that alone made the question worth pursuing in the first place; it becomes a technical question, answerable by technical means. Yet, though it is not always in evidence, the practical upshot of the issue is never entirely forgotten, as John Duns Scotus reminds us in his curt dismissal of the view that we can at best say of God what he is not: “We do not have supreme love for negations” (*Ordinatio* I.3.I.1–2 n. 10).

Attempts to resolve the problem of describing God are ultimately efforts to “save the appearances”: to accommodate within a philosophically defensible framework both the data of what are taken to be divinely revealed texts and the linguistic practices of believers. The appearances to be saved of course differ somewhat from one religious tradition to another. The Christian tradition, for example, faces distinctive problems that arise in understanding and describing

the triune nature of God.¹ Yet, despite these differences, the broad contours of the problem of describing God are recognizably similar in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The chief reason for this similarity is that mainstream philosophical opinion in all three traditions was united in its view of those features of God that resist understanding and, consequently, expression. Philosophers taught that God is simple, which means that he lacks not only physical structure but also the *metaphysical* structure that our ordinary subject–predicate language implies. He is also far removed from the ordinary objects of the senses, which are the most accessible objects of knowledge and (for Aristotelians, at least) the ultimate source of the concepts that give meaning to our language. Finally, God has nothing in common with the objects of our ordinary experience; he shares no feature with them and belongs to no genus that includes them. Consequently, it is hard at first glance to see how any concepts or words that apply to the objects of our ordinary experience could also apply to God.

ANSELM

Anselm's approach to the problem of describing God makes a useful introduction to the topic, because Anselm sees the issues involved clearly and offers a resolution that does not depend on the more elaborate semantic theories to which later writers would appeal.² The issue initially arises for Anselm in the context of his natural theology in the *Monologion*. Noticing that his arguments all involve relating or comparing God to creatures – God is best, highest, and greatest; he is the creator and sustainer of all other things – Anselm asks whether he has yet managed to say anything about the *substance* of God: that is, about what God is in himself, rather than how God is related to other things (ch. 15). So he excludes relative terms from consideration and divides all other predicates into two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive classes. For any feature F, either (a) what has F is, as such, better than what lacks F, or (b) it is not the case that what has F is, as such, better than what lacks F. Following later medieval usage, let us call the features that fall in class (a) “unqualified perfections” (*perfectiones simpliciter*). The predicates that name the unqualified perfections – such predicates as ‘living,’ ‘wise,’ ‘powerful,’ and ‘just’ – can all be applied to God. Moreover, they do not express merely what God is *like* (*quale est*), but what

¹ The scholarly literature has paid scant attention to how frequently medieval Christian writers situate their discussions of religious language in an explicitly Trinitarian context.

² The reading of Anselm's theological semantics presented here is defended at much greater length in Thomas Williams and Sandra Visser, *Anselm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

God *is* (*quid est*): in other words, these perfections are not merely predicated of God but are actually identical with God's nature. This follows from a general principle for which Anselm had already argued (in chs. 1–4): that for any F, if God is F, God is F through himself. Hence if God is just, for example, and whatever is just is just through justice, it follows that God is himself justice.

Anselm emphasizes, however, that our ability to use ordinary language to express the simple divine nature should not be taken to imply that there is any ontological overlap between God and creatures. God's being is utterly unique, because he alone has all his being from himself, whereas all other things have their being from him. And since every non-relative term that signifies God at all signifies God's being, every predicate we apply to God will have a very different significante in its theological and non-theological uses.³

To say that these predicates have a very different *significate* is not, however, to say that they have a very different *meaning*. Anselm does suggest, provisionally, that “if anything is ever said of [the supreme essence] in words that are common to other natures, their meaning is in no way common” (*Monologion* 65). But he cannot fully endorse this suggestion, since such discontinuity of meaning would (as he clearly sees) make all the arguments of his natural theology founder on the fallacy of equivocation. So he locates the discontinuity not in the meaning of our words, but rather in the nature of the connection between mind and world that signification establishes. He distinguishes between two ways in which a word might signify or bring something to mind: *per se* and *per aliud*. When a word signifies something *per se*, it brings that thing to mind directly or straightforwardly; when it signifies something *per aliud*, it brings that thing to mind only in virtue of some additional knowledge or some other feature of the context of utterance. The names that express unqualified perfections signify *per se* the perfections that we experience in creatures; they signify God *per aliud* by “hinting at” the divine nature “through a certain likeness” (*ibid.*). Our knowledge of God derived from Scripture or natural theology is the only reason that such names bring God to mind at all; even then, they do so only obliquely.

AL-FĀRĀBĪ AND AVICENNA

Classical Arabic philosophy puts particular emphasis on the claim that God is *intellect*. Both al-Fārābī and Avicenna connect God's intellectual nature with his immateriality. As al-Fārābī puts it,

³ It is this point about God's metaphysical uniqueness, rather than any skepticism about the success of theological language, that Anselm means to convey when he says that “if God ever shares any name with other things, undoubtedly a very different signification must be understood” (*Monologion* 26).

Because the First is not in matter and has itself no matter in any way whatsoever, it is in its substance actual intellect; for what prevents the form from being intellect and from actually thinking is the matter in which a thing exists. And when a thing exists without being in need of matter, that very thing will in its substance be actual intellect; and that is the status of the First.

(*Perfect State* I.1.6, tr. Walzer, p. 71)

He adds that, since matter is also what stands in the way of intelligibility, God is also intelligible. Since God is by nature actual intellect, and he cannot depend on anything outside himself to be what he is, it follows that God thinks himself. Avicenna offers a similar account of God as self-understanding intellect, but he argues explicitly for a claim that was merely implicit in al-Fārābī: namely, that God's self-understanding does not entail any duality in God. As Avicenna puts it, "a thing's being an intelligible does not necessitate that it is intellectually apprehended by some thing, that thing being another" (*Metaphysics* VIII.6.10, tr. Marmura, p. 286).

For al-Fārābī, much of what we can say about God is reducible to claims about God's intellectual nature. "God is knowing," "God is wise," and even "God is living" all mean the same thing: that God "understands the most excellent intelligible through the most excellent intellect" (*Perfect State* I.1.10; tr. Walzer, pp. 75, 77). Avicenna offers a more complex theory, according to which we can describe God in three ways. First, we can speak of God on the basis of his unique, individual, and necessary existence. Second, we can negate any likeness between God and creatures. Third, we can attribute to God relations to creatures as their first cause. Avicenna explains these three kinds of predication as follows:

[It is evident] that, if you ascertain the truth about him, [you will find] that, after [the fact] of his individual existence, he is only described by means of negating all similarities of him and affirming to him all relations. For all things are from him, and he shares nothing in common with what [proceeds] from him. He is the principle of all things, and he is not any of the things that are posterior to him.

(*Metaphysics* VIII.5.14, tr. Marmura, p. 283)

On the basis of God's individual existence we can say that God is perfect, since he is not deficient in any way, and that he is intellect, since he is immaterial. We can also say that God is good, because the good is what everything desires, everything desires existence, and God is perfect existence. Negative and relative predications include the concept or notion of God's unique necessary existence and add to it some negation or relation. For example, if "one, without due respect, says of the First that he is a substance, he would not mean [anything] but this existence with the negation of his being in a subject." And "if he says of

him ‘powerful,’ he would mean by it only that he is the Necessary Existent, to which is added that the existence of [what is] other than him truly comes about only from him in the manner that has been mentioned” (*Metaphysics* VIII.7.13, tr. Marmura, p. 296).

In the course of his discussion of describing God, Avicenna (unlike al-Fārābī) seems at times to understand the claim that God is intellect as meaning no more than that God is immaterial. He writes that if someone says God is “intellect, intellectual apprehender, and intelligible, he would mean in reality only that this pure being [is such that] the possibility of mixing with matter and its attachments is negated of him,” and he identifies God’s intellectuality with “the negation of matter from him” (*ibid.*). But since Avicenna holds that God knows genera and species (though not particulars), and that God’s knowledge is creative, it is clear that there is more to God’s being an intellect than simply lacking matter. The emphasis on immateriality in Avicenna’s discussion of divine intellect simply reflects the basic Aristotelian requirements for intellectual cognition and his conviction that those requirements are perfectly fulfilled only in God.⁴

MAIMONIDES

For Moses Maimonides, it is the oneness of God – his uniqueness and simplicity – that systematically frustrates our ability to represent God in thought and to speak meaningfully about God. Maimonides discusses five kinds of affirmative predication. (1) We cannot predicate any *definition* of God, since “there are no previous causes to his existence, by which he could be defined” (*Guide of the Perplexed* I.52). (2) We cannot predicate a *part* of a definition, since God has no parts. (3) We cannot predicate any *qualities* of God, since God is not a substratum for accidents distinct from himself. (4) We cannot predicate any *relations* of God, for two reasons. First, such predications contradict the simplicity of God. (Maimonides thinks of relations as real accidents inhering in their subjects [*Guide* I.52].) Second, such predications contradict the uniqueness of God by implying that God is a member of a larger class of objects; to say

⁴ The focus on divine intellect that we find in the Arabic Aristotelians from al-Fārābī onward is perhaps surprising, given the insistence of Islamic theology on the oneness of God. The best philosophical text on the oneness of God is al-Kindī’s *On First Philosophy* chs. 3–4, which offers arguments reminiscent of Plato’s in the *Parmenides* for the claim that God is the true One. For these arguments and their Platonic–Plotinian background, see Michael E. Marmura and John M. Rist, “Al-Kindī’s Discussion of Divine Existence and Oneness,” *Mediaeval Studies* 25 (1963) 338–52, and Peter Adamson, *Al-Kindī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) ch. 3. (I am grateful to Deborah L. Black for impressing upon me the contested place of divine intellect in this tradition, and more generally for her help with this whole section.)

that God is more powerful than human beings is to place both God and human beings together in a single class of powerful beings (*Guide* I.56). Consequently, there is no similarity between God and creatures, and there is no truth at all in the affirmative predications that imply such similarity: “The man who affirms an attribute of God knows nothing but the name; for the object to which, in his imagination, he applies that name does not exist; it is a mere fiction and invention, as if he applied that name to a non-existing being, for there is, in reality, no such object” (*Guide* I.60).

There is only one permissible kind of affirmative predication concerning God: (5) we can predicate *actions* of God. Such predications do not purport to describe God as he is in himself; they merely attribute certain effects to the divine activity. Hence, the fact that many such predications are possible – owing to the multiplicity of God’s effects – does not derogate from divine simplicity. Other affirmative predications are legitimate only insofar as they are taken as disguised negations. Negative predications do not imply plurality in God, and they “are necessary to direct the mind to the truths that we must believe concerning God” (*Guide* I.58). We can say, for example, that God exists, meaning that his non-existence is impossible, or that God is living, meaning that he is not inanimate like the four elements. Since human knowledge of God is limited to negations, which “do not convey a true idea of the being to which they refer” (*Guide* I.59), the best and most becoming response to the divine nature is silence.⁵

THOMAS AQUINAS

“We cannot know what God is,” Aquinas says, “but only what he is not” (*Summa theol.* 1a 3 proem.). In saying this Aquinas appears to embrace a position very close to that of Maimonides, and many contemporary interpreters, especially (though not exclusively) those influenced by Martin Heidegger, read Aquinas as a largely apophatic thinker. But in fact Aquinas accommodates both affirmative and negative predication about God, although the transcendence and simplicity of God entail that our affirmative predications are inevitably problematic.

Aquinas was definitely influenced by Maimonides, however, and it is instructive to consider first the grounds on which Aquinas rejects Maimonides’s view.

⁵ See further Hilary Putnam, “On Negative Theology,” *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997) 407–22; Kenneth Seeskin, “Sanctity and Silence: The Religious Significance of Maimonides’ Negative Theology,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76 (2002) 7–24; and Diana Lobel, “‘Silence is Praise to You’: Maimonides on Negative Theology, Looseness of Expression, and Religious Experience,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76 (2002) 25–49.

He offers three reasons.⁶ First, if all our affirmative predications are disguised negations, we will have no reason to affirm some things of God in preference to others. If we can say “God is alive” to express the claim that God is not an inanimate object, why can we not equally well say “God is a body” to express the claim that God is not pure potentiality, like matter? Second, it would follow that all affirmative names predicated of God would be said of him only in a derivative or secondary sense. Third, this is simply not what people mean when they speak affirmatively of God: “for in saying that God is alive, they intend to convey more than just that . . . he differs from inanimate bodies” (*Summa theol.* 1a 13.2c).

To this last point Maimonides could well respond that people who say “God is alive” do indeed intend to convey more than a mere negation, but that is only because they are confused. Aquinas, however, believes he can save more of the phenomena than Maimonides could, accommodating not only what believers do when they talk about God but also what they take themselves to be conveying by such talk. The positive content that believers intend to convey in their ordinary practice of affirmative predication is grounded in a genuine relation of similarity between God and creatures.⁷ Any perfection in an effect must be found in its cause: either according to the same intelligible character (*ratio*), if the cause is a univocal cause, or in a more eminent way, if it is an equivocal cause. God is the first efficient cause of all creatures, and he is an equivocal cause. So all the perfections of creatures “preexist in God in a more eminent way” (*ibid.*, 4.2c). Consequently, “every creature represents God and is like him insofar as it possesses some perfection” (*ibid.*, 13.2c).

Our power to describe things rests on our power to know them. Since creatures represent God and are like him, we can come to know God, and hence describe him, on the basis of creatures. But creatures represent God incompletely, in a fragmentary and deficient way, so both our knowledge of God and our names for God will be fragmentary and deficient as well. The deficiency of our names for God entails that no name can be predicated univocally (with exactly the same meaning) of both God and creatures. When we predicate ‘wise’ of a human being, “we signify a perfection that is distinct from the human being’s

⁶ Aquinas uses these same three arguments (though with different examples) to oppose the view that affirmative predications about God are disguised relative predications: that to say “God is good,” for example, is really to say that God is the source of the goodness of creatures. Aquinas found this view in Alan of Lille’s *Regulae celestis iuris*.

⁷ It is, to be sure, a one-sided relation: creatures bear a relation of similarity to God, but God does not in turn bear any relation to creatures. The denial of real relations *ad extra* in God is standard in medieval Christian thought. By contrast, Maimonides assumes that any genuine relation is *reciprocal*.

essence, and from his power and being and so forth” (ibid., 13.5c). In that way, the predicate ‘wise’ delimits an isolable aspect of the thing signified and brings that aspect fully under the sway of our understanding. Things are otherwise when we predicate ‘wise’ of God. In that case we do not intend to signify any perfection distinct from the divine essence, since there is no such thing in God. So even when we represent and name God as wise, God remains beyond our comprehension. Accordingly, we do not predicate ‘wise’ of God in the same sense (*secundum eandem rationem*) in which we predicate it of a human being.

In the technical language of thirteenth-century logic, our perfection terms have a “mode of signification” (*modus significandi*) that does not apply to God (*Sent.* I.22.1.2; *Summa theol.* 1a 13.3; *Summa contra gentiles* I.30). All of our concepts derive from composite creatures, in which the thing that has a form is distinct from the form itself. So our perfection terms either signify the form as simple but non-subsistent, as ‘justice’ does, or else signify the thing having the form as subsistent but not simple, as ‘just’ does, for instance, when it signifies a person who is just. Consequently, Aquinas says, “as far as their mode of signification is concerned, [our perfection terms] are not said properly of God; for they have a mode of signification that is appropriate for creatures” (*Summa theol.* 1a 13.3c). But this fact is not sufficient to render *all* our language equivocal when applied to God. The similarity between God and creatures that is grounded in God’s causal activity means that the external nature signified (*res significata*) by our names for God does exist in God, although in a more eminent way than in creatures.

Thus, our names for God are neither purely univocal nor purely equivocal; they are analogical.⁸ Analogical predication is intermediate between univocity and pure equivocity.⁹ It happens when a single word is said of two things in a prior and a posterior sense. In the case of religious language, God is prior in reality, since creaturely perfections reflect the divine perfection. Accordingly, the names of perfections are predicated in a prior way of God, and indeed are said more properly of God than of creatures (*Summa theol.* 1a 13.6) – even though

⁸ The proper characterization of Aquinas’s doctrine of analogy is endlessly disputed. The interpretation given here is strongly influenced by E. J. Ashworth, “Signification and Modes of Signifying in Thirteenth-Century Logic: A Preface to Aquinas on Analogy,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 1 (1991) 39–67, and “Analogy and Equivocation in Thirteenth-Century Logic: Aquinas in Context,” *Mediaeval Studies* 54 (1992) 94–135, as well as by Ralph McInerney, *Aquinas and Analogy* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998).

⁹ So Aquinas expressly says at *Summa theol.* 1a 13.5, notwithstanding the incredulity of Kevin L. Hughes, “The *Ratio Dei* and the Ambiguities of History,” *Modern Theology* 21 (2005) p. 659 n. 7. The qualification “pure” is necessary because thirteenth-century writers classed analogical predication as a species of equivocation, corresponding to Aristotle’s *pros hen* homonymy.

God is posterior in our knowledge and those names are originally imposed on the basis of our experience with creatures.

Aquinas's account of theological language suggests a close connection between semantics and cognition: our ability to use language concerning God rests on our ability to understand God, and since our understanding of God is inevitably fragmentary and deficient, so too is our language about God. His account also suggests a close connection between semantics and ontology: the possibility of non-equivocal speech about God rests upon the real similarity of creatures to God, and the impossibility of univocal speech about God rests upon the irreducible ontological diversity of God and creatures. Later medieval thinkers will suggest loosening one or both of these connections. The remainder of this chapter looks first at the connection between semantics and cognition, and second at the connection between semantics and ontology.

NAMING AND KNOWING¹⁰

Henry of Ghent follows Aquinas in arguing that our knowledge of God is fragmentary and incomplete in ways that make our language about God problematic, but Henry does not tie naming God to knowing God quite so closely as Aquinas had. It is possible for us to have a more adequate understanding of something than we convey in speech. Imagine two people reciting, with full conviction, the so-called Athanasian Creed. One of them is a regular person in the pew; the other is a brilliant systematic theologian. The two of them speak with equal precision, but the theologian has a far richer understanding of what is being said. Moreover, individual knowers may be incapable of expressing something to the extent to which they understand it. For example, we can grasp the immensity of God more adequately than we can express it in language (*Summa* 73.10).

Where Henry is concerned with the ways in which our knowing is keener than our naming, Scotus emphasizes the possibility of naming God more adequately than we know him. He writes: "This proposition, which is common to many opinions – I mean that 'As God is understood, so too is he named' – is false if taken strictly, because it is possible for something to be signified more distinctly than it is understood" (*Ordinatio* I.22, q. un., n. 4). This has to be the case, since otherwise we would be unable to signify anything in the category

¹⁰ For additional thirteenth-century discussions of the connection between naming God and knowing God, see Alexander of Hales, *Summa theol.* I.2.1, tr. un. q. 1.1c; Bonaventure *Sent.* I.22, a. un. q. 1c; Giles of Rome *Sent.* I.22 princ. un. q. 1 ad 2; and Richard of Middleton, *Sent.* I.22.1c. See also E. J. Ashworth, "'Can I Speak More Clearly Than I Understand?' A Problem of Religious Language in Henry of Ghent, Duns Scotus, and Ockham," *Historiographia Linguistica* 7 (1980) 29–38.

of substance; we could signify only the feature of the substance on the basis of which the name was originally imposed. Thus, for example, the name ‘rock’ (*lapis*) would not signify anything in the genus of substance, but only something in the genus of action – namely, the ‘foot-hurting’ (*laesio pedis*) on the basis of which the name was imposed. And we can signify distinctly a particular substance that underlies accidents as ‘this being,’ even if our only quidditative concept of the substance is the concept of *being*, which is the most general or common concept available. In the case of religious language, a name proper to God, distinctly signifying the divine essence as “this essence,” might be imposed by God himself, or by an angel that knows God, or even by someone in this life (*Ordinatio* I.22, q. un., n. 10), even though we do not *know* God as “this essence,” but only as (say) “this infinite being that does not depend on anything” (*Lectura* I.22, q. un., n. 4).

In contrast, William of Ockham’s treatment of the question is much more explicitly tied to his semantic theory. For Ockham, there are some words that signify extramental things directly – that is, not through any mediating mental conception. This is not to say that such words do not have to be associated with a concept to be meaningful, only that they directly signify (that is, supposit for) things, rather than for the associated concepts (see Chapter 11). Since this is the case, “anyone who can genuinely understand that one thing is distinct from another can impose a name for the purpose of distinctly signifying that thing” (*Ordinatio* I.22, q. un. [*Opera theol.* IV: 55]); the adequacy or inadequacy of the person’s conception of that thing is entirely beside the point. For instance, with the word ‘man’ I can distinctly signify someone who does not even exist yet. Or, I can impose the name ‘*a*’ to signify whatever animal I am going to run across tomorrow. For me, and for anyone else who is willing to adopt this imposition, ‘*a*’ will signify that animal, even though I do not distinctly understand the animal when I impose the name (and may well not distinctly understand it even when I run across it tomorrow). Accordingly, since human beings in this life “can genuinely understand and know that God is distinct from everything else” (*ibid.*), we can impose a name that signifies God distinctly. We can distinctly signify what we do not distinctly understand.

ANALOGY AND UNIVOCITY

The essential feature of Aquinas’s theory of analogy is that a single term is predicated *per prius et posterius*: of God in a prior way and of creatures in a posterior way. Henry of Ghent gives a more detailed account of religious language, but his basic approach is very much like Aquinas’s. Henry argues that perfection words are used in a prior way of God, reflecting the fact that

such perfections are in creatures only as effects of divine perfection. It is this metaphysical relation of participation or resemblance that both saves theological language from pure equivocity and also bars univocity. Henry goes a step further than Aquinas, however, by settling a question that Aquinas had left unresolved: is an analogical term subordinated to a single concept, or to more than one? Henry holds that in an analogical predication there are two distinct, though closely related, concepts.¹¹

Scotus is hostile both to predication *per prius et posterius* and to Henry's claim that a distinct concept is involved in predicating perfection terms of God. In his early logical works, Scotus argues against predication *per prius et posterius* in ways that do not depend on any specifically religious claims (*Quaest. super Praedicamenta* 4; *Quaest. super librum Elenchorum* 15).¹² But these arguments are nonetheless relevant to our topic, since they rule out analogy as a mean between univocity and equivocity. They thus provide the background to Scotus's later development of the doctrine for which he is best known: the claim that all unqualified perfections are predicated univocally of God and creatures.

Scotus has a number of arguments for univocal predication and against the doctrine of analogy (*Ordinatio* I.3.I.1–2, nn. 26–55). The most widely discussed is his argument that one can be certain that something is a being and yet uncertain whether that thing is a finite or an infinite being. Such a state is possible only if the concept of *being* is univocal between finite and infinite. (Compare: I can be certain that someone is a mother while being in doubt whether she is a good mother or a bad mother. This combination of certainty and doubt is intelligible only on the supposition that 'mother' is predicated univocally of good mothers and bad mothers.)

Moreover, according to Scotus, any recognizably Aristotelian view of concept formation entails univocity. Aquinas and Henry of Ghent agree that all our concepts are derived ultimately from our experience of sensible creatures. But, Scotus argues, if this is the case, then the concepts that give meaning to our language about God will also derive from creatures. They will not merely be *like* the concepts that come from creatures, as in analogous predication; they will have to be the very same concepts that come from creatures, which entails univocal predication. Either we have the same concepts for God and creatures, or we have no concepts of God at all, in which case it would be impossible to speak about God.

¹¹ For discussion and references, see Ashworth, "Analogy and Equivocation," p. 124.

¹² See Robert Prentice, "Univocity and Analogy According to Scotus's *Super libros Elenchorum Aristotelis*," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 35 (1968) 39–64, for a discussion of Scotus's early views.

In a similar vein, Scotus argues that univocity is necessary to preserve the character of theology as a science: that is, as an argumentative discipline. Just as our power to describe God rests on our having concepts under whose extension both God and creatures fall, so too our ability to draw inferences about God depends on the univocity of the terms in which we carry on argument and the unity of the concepts that underwrite the intelligibility of such language. Without univocity, any attempt to draw inferences about God will founder on the fallacy of equivocation.

Scotus's doctrine of univocity breaks the close association between semantics and ontology – between naming and knowing – that we have seen not only in Thomas Aquinas and Henry of Ghent but in their Muslim and Jewish predecessors as well. These other thinkers all insisted, in their various ways, that some change of meaning or conceptual slippage or linguistic indirectness had to result from our attempts to apply to God the words and concepts by which we name and understand creatures – precisely because creatures are irreducibly distinct from God. These divergences from ordinary usage were, so to speak, the semantic epicycles apart from which the appearances could not be saved. For Scotus, by contrast, our describing God requires no such epicycles. Ordinary words, with their ordinary meanings, apply straightforwardly to a metaphysically extraordinary God.