

Radical Orthodoxy, Univocity, and the New Apophaticism

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This paper was put together somewhat hastily, in the midst of preparations for moving, for a session on Radical Orthodoxy at the International Congress for Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in May 2006. I have borrowed a bit from “The doctrine of univocity is true and salutary,” but most of this is new. Obviously it needs a *lot* of further development, but it does sketch some lines of argument that I think are worth pursuing.

Imagine, if you will, that I am still at Notre Dame as a graduate student in the early 90s, when I am visited by a figure from the not-so-distant future. This figure tells me, a high-church Anglican with a particular interest in Duns Scotus, that within fifteen years one of the most consequential movements in theology will be led by high-church Anglicans with a particular interest in Duns Scotus. This movement, furthermore, will be closely associated with the thought of the Archbishop of Canterbury, who will himself be a theologian of some reputation — and will, for good measure, be a Welshman named Williams. Would I not have thought that the millennium was at hand?

But what this imaginary figure neglects to tell me is that Duns Scotus figures in this movement as an object of almost unrelenting scorn and opprobrium. He is the bugbear of the movement known as Radical Orthodoxy, which is difficult to characterize and, honestly, difficult for an analytically trained philosopher even to read with any great degree of sympathy. I had heard been hearing rumblings about Radical Orthodoxy for quite a while, especially from people who commended their writings to my attention because of their interest

in reviving a kind of Platonism that I might be expected to find attractive. What finally spurred me to look carefully at Radical Orthodoxy, however, was an invitation from the journal *Modern Theology* to participate in a symposium on the historical and contemporary relevance of Duns Scotus. The lead article was to be by Catherine Pickstock, one of the leading lights of Radical Orthodoxy, and would explain just what was wrong with the Subtle Franciscan.

It turns out that according to Pickstock, Scotus's thought was disastrous on several fronts — a reading consistent with the denunciations of Scotus that appear throughout the founding texts of Radical Orthodoxy. There was no way I could address all her criticisms, so I confined my attention to the one Scotist doctrine that seemed to be singled out as especially worrisome, the doctrine of univocity. I called that contribution "The doctrine of univocity is true and salutary."

Nonetheless, as I acknowledged in that paper, I didn't really argue that the doctrine of univocity is true. Rather, one of the key arguments of that paper — the argument that sets up what I want to say today — is that there is no middle ground for theological language between univocity, on the one hand, and complete unintelligibility, on the other. So, as I said there,

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.

Yet there is in certain circles a decided affinity these days for something that is, if not exactly an acknowledgment of the unintelligibility of all language about God, at least a decided preference for an oracular, obscure mode of utterance about God and a suspicion of the clear and confident kataphatic style of theologizing that prevails among contemporary philosophers of religion in the Anglo-American tradition. Those who are subject to what one writer has called “the current apophatic rage” will not be greatly troubled by the observation that the denial of univocity throws all theological language into unintelligibility. So I need to offer some considerations in favor of an unabashedly kataphatic theology and, correspondingly, some reasons to resist the current apophatic rage.

Let me start by making a distinction. My suspicion — though at this point it is no more than a suspicion — is that failure to make this distinction is at the root of a good deal of the resistance to clarity, confidence, and kataphasis. The distinction is between the *insufficiency* of theological language and the *unintelligibility* of theological language. The proponent of univocity need not say, and typically does not say, that our language about God is fully adequate to reveal the very nature of God, to tell us what God is in himself. Indeed, the proponent of univocity can go quite far not merely in acknowledging the ways in which our language about God is partial and misleading, but even in explaining precisely why and how it is misleading. Indeed, it is only if we can say to some extent what God is that we have any basis for saying that our language about God fails to express what he is. As Scotus observes, any negation presupposes an affirmation. Forget God for a second. Take the sentence, “Dogs

are not reptiles.” The only reason I can say this is that I have some positive idea of dogs first. And thanks to that positive idea I can then exclude other possibilities that don’t fit with that positive idea. If I didn’t have any positive idea of dogs, I wouldn’t be able to deny that they are reptiles — for all I could tell, they might just be reptiles. It’s the same thing with God. I can’t sensibly say “God is not a rock” unless I already have some positive idea of God, and that idea of God excludes the possibility that he is a rock. If I don’t have any such positive idea, then I can’t deny that God is a rock — for all I know, he just might be. Along these same lines, the proponent of univocity can (and I think should) argue that God is beyond our power to grasp *on the basis of* positive facts about God that we can know — however dimly and tentatively we might be said to know them.

Consider, by way of analogy, the concept of “a billion dollars.” There is an obvious sense in which I cannot really get my mind around a billion dollars. My own very limited experience with money does not give me any serious grasp on what a billion dollars is, on what it would be like to have that kind of money at my disposal. The usual sorts of images — imagine stacks of one-dollar bills piled up to the moon, or whatever — don’t really help. But even though in this sense a billion dollars is beyond my power to grasp, in another sense I can grasp it quite easily. For I can do math with it. I can successfully perform argumentation in which the concept of *a billion dollars* appears, and I can have good grounds for affirming the premises and for assessing the inferences as valid.

Though there are obvious disanalogies here, the proponent of univocity ought to say similar things about God. Though he “dwelleth in light inaccessible” and “passeth all

understanding,” though his thoughts are not our thoughts nor his ways our ways, still, we can know things about him, and we can, so to speak, do the math with the things we know. Now my own conviction, which I share with Duns Scotus, is that we can’t do the math — that is, we can’t carry on successful argumentation, and we can’t have even minimally intelligible theological language — without univocity. But even Thomas Aquinas, who was (obviously) incomparably more sympathetic to negative theology than Scotus was, thought we could do the math in this way. By reflection on creatures, he thought, we discover that there must be a first unmoved mover. And from there we can proceed by argument to quite a number of conclusions, both affirmative and negative, about God. Indeed, it is precisely because of the conclusions we reach in this way that we can know that God surpasses our power to know him. The first mover, we find, must be simple, subsistent, and perfect; and, as Aquinas argues, our experience gives us no way to conceive a simple, subsistent, and perfect being.

Indeed, perhaps the greatest frustration for the student of medieval philosophy and theology in encountering Radical Orthodoxy has nothing to do with Scotus. Rather it’s the fact that Radical Orthodoxy claims the patronage of Aquinas for a kind of obscurantism and apophaticism that is utterly at odds not only with Aquinas’s actual theological practice but also with his professed understanding of theology as a science — that is, as an argumentative discipline. Certainly there are those who call themselves Thomists who reject the notion that theology is principally (or perhaps even at all) a kind of inquiry that proceeds by way of demonstration. A couple of weeks ago, at a meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers, Richard Cross was arguing for the scientific character of theology. David Burrell, who I think

considers himself a Thomist and has certain sympathies with the program of Radical Orthodoxy, said that it's wrong to think of theology as a science. Theology, he said, is a dance. I confess I don't know how to respond to someone who says, with a straight face, that theology is a dance; he inhabits a world of thought entirely alien to my own. But I am not the Thomas whose mind is at issue here. The point is that *Aquinas* would not have known what to make of such a claim either. Anyone who claims the patronage of Aquinas for an anti-scientific, anti-demonstrative, anti-argumentative construal of the activity of theologizing is seriously mistaken.

I am, however, somewhat unclear about what the role of argument is supposed to be in Radical Orthodoxy. Richard Cross has speculated that the project of Radical Orthodoxy is "the exclusion of all argument from systematic theology."<sup>1</sup> But even if we accept the claim that univocity is a necessary condition for demonstrative argument, this seems too strong. First, the univocity that Scotus affirms and Aquinas denies is a univocity between God and creatures. That is, Aquinas's view is not that no term is ever used univocally in a plurality of uses (it hardly needs saying that he doesn't think *that*), but rather that terms predicated of both God and creatures are not predicated univocally in those disparate uses. So even if we accept the claim that univocity is a necessary condition for demonstrative argument, the most that will follow from Radical Orthodoxy's denial of univocity is that there are no demonstrative arguments from premises about creatures to conclusions about God, or (I suppose) from premises about God to conclusions about creatures. It will not follow that there are no

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<sup>1</sup>"Angels," 22.

demonstrative arguments from premises about God to conclusions about God, or from premises about creatures to conclusions about creatures. Insofar as theology concerns itself with inferring one fact about God from another — and that’s a lot of what systematic theology does — the denial of univocity does not involve “the exclusion of all argument” from theology.

But there is a second reason for supposing that Cross has spoken in too unqualified a fashion about Radical Orthodoxy’s rejection of argument, and that is the fact that the Radical Orthodoxy literature is full of arguments. Now perhaps this is just an inconsistency akin to the one that Scotus correctly diagnoses when he remarks that earlier writers who deny univocity in words accept it in practice, but I don’t think so. For the writers associated with Radical Orthodoxy surely mean to *persuade* us that various features of modernity are in tension with Christianity, to give us *reasons* for abandoning one tenet or another of opposing views and adopting one tenet or another of their own. In particular, I take it that they intend to give us reasons for rejecting univocity. Otherwise, I have trouble understanding what their whole project comes to.

Now granted, there might be some basis for Cross’s suggestion in the rhetorical mode of the Radical Orthodoxy literature, which often seems to favor denunciation over demonstration. But certainly there are inferences, or at least purported inferences, in the sense that certain claims are said to follow from other claims. It is indeed a noteworthy feature of the Radical Orthodoxy literature that quite breathtaking inferences are made from the doctrine of univocity, even though in many cases there is little or no serious effort actually to show that the consequences that are said to follow from univocity actually *do* follow from it. In the essay by

Catherine Pickstock that I mentioned earlier, for example, Pickstock 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.) 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.

And 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 symposium in *Modern Theology* 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. But as I have argued elsewhere, the

arguments all fail rather spectacularly to establish that the doctrine of univocity entails, or even gives some reason to accept, any troubling consequence whatsoever.

So I remain puzzled by what the role of argument is supposed to be in Radical Orthodoxy. There seems to be *some* connection between the denial of univocity and a style of theologizing that largely eschews careful argument of the sort that analytic philosophers are so fond of. But what the connection is is hard to say. If, as I have suggested, part of what underlies this rhetorical mode is a confusion between the insufficiency of language about God and the unintelligibility of language about God, we have some explanation — though how good an explanation I will leave to others to determine. But even if we have an explanation, we do not have a *justification*. Of course, to insist on a justification of this feature of Radical Orthodoxy is to insist on an argument, clearly laid out and stated with precision and rigor. And of course this is precisely what the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy seem unwilling to provide. Thus, I end up in a position sadly familiar to those of us who are in communion with Canterbury: unable to persuade my brethren, unable to be persuaded by them, unable even to agree on the terms in which persuasion would have to take place, but confident in my position as I read enthusiastically from the authoritative texts in ever-greater degrees of self-satisfaction.