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John Duns Scotus' Univocity of Being: A Unified Concept for Other Senses of Being in Metaphysics

Ejike, Emeka Cyril

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

Univocity of being is a doctrine introduced by Scotus which holds that the concept of being is applied to God and creatures in the same way and in the same sense. However, this Scotus' view is considered as anathema to the analogical concept. The contention is that Scotus' doctrine of univocity would imply that God and creatures have absolute perfection in common, thereby contradicting Anselm's arguments for God's existence and undermines Divine transcendence. Against this background, this paper demonstrates that Scotus' univocity does not only make Anselm's argument for God's existence based on analogical predications possible, but also unite other senses of being in metaphysics. Method of analysis is used to explore and examine Scotus' univocity of being. The paper discovers that being is fundamentally univocal since being is 'whatever is' (being is opposed to nothingness). The fact that being is opposed to nothingness justifies the univocal concept of being. The univocal concept is logically and ontologically prior to other divisions of being in metaphysics. The conclusion is that univocal concept binds together all existent forms of being in metaphysics without undermining the essence of any being.

KEYWORDS*: Scotus, univocity, being, analogy, metaphysics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The dominant thought in medieval era before Scotus is that the concept of being is analogical. Anselm establishes an argument for God's existence based on this analogical concept of being. Other scholastic philosophers also follow him in applying the concept of being to God and creatures analogically. It is therefore not surprising that Scotus' doctrine of univocity is greeted with scathing attacks. It is widely believed that the acceptance of univocal concept of being would damage the metaphysical and natural theology which scholastic thinkers have laboured to construct.

Scotus follows Aristotle and Avicenna in maintaining that the subject matter of metaphysics is 'being as being' (*ens inquantum ens).* He argues that, strictly speaking, the object of metaphysical study should be reality in general which includes the study of the transcendentals which transcend the division of being into finite and infinite, as well as the ten Aristotelian categories (Williams 2015: para. 28). The transcendental include being, attributes of being such as 'one', 'true' and 'good', and "what is signified by disjunctions that are coextensive with 'being' such as 'finite' or 'infinite', and 'necessary' or 'contingent'" (Hause n.d: para. 9).

For Scotus, we are naturally suited to have the knowledge of finite and infinite, material and immaterial beings. His assertion is implicit in the statement that Aristotle made in the opening

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remark of his work entitled 'Metaphysics' that all "men by nature desire to know'' (Aristotle, as cited in Copleston 2003a: 287). However, he points out that "in the present state of human existence, man does not have a direct and natural knowledge of God since his intellect is directed to sensible objects" (Omeregbe 2011:160). Scotus rejects the claim that metphysics is properly about God or substance on the grounds that we lack a direct access to immaterial substance, given that, for him, "our thoughts are restricted to individual things in experience" (Stumf and Fieser 2003:185).

Besides, the primary object of metaphysical study must be reality in general. God, for instance, cannot be primary object of metaphysics, for everything is not God. The primary object of metaphysics cannot also be substance, for substance does not deal with accidents. He explains that there is a sense in which anything capable of real existence is a being. Therefore, being, broadly conceived is, for Scotus, the proper subject matter of metaphysics. God, creatures, and substances are all studied in metaphysics simply because they are beings. Accordingly, Scotus holds that being must be a univocal term. In his view, it is this univocal notion of being as applied to God, creatures, substances, and accidents that makes the study of being *qua* being possible.

However, this view of Scotus is considered as anathema to the analogical concept, which is the prevailing notion in metaphysics held by medieval philosophers before Scotus. The contention is that Scotus' doctrine of univocity would imply that God and creatures have absolute perfection in common. It therefore contradicts the arguments of Anselm and other scholastic philosophers for God's existence and undermines Divine transcendence. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the univocal concept of being does not only make Anselm's argument for God's existence based on analogical predications possible, but also unify other senses of being in metaphysics. To this end, the paper explores Scotus' univocity of being and examines it in order to lay bare its metaphysical import.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs the method of analysis. According to Ome and Amam (2004:9), analysis "involves the method of mental division of a whole - either an actual whole or some mental construct – into its components. In this way, the parts which at first are known implicitly in their undivided unity are singled out and known explicitly." This method enables the researcher to explore and examine Scotus' Univcity of being in order to show its metaphysical import. Both primary and secondary data are used for this study. Data are collected from textbooks, journal articles and internet sources.

3. UNIVOCITY OF BEING

Univocity of being is a doctrine introduced by Duns Scotus which holds that the concepts of being as applied to God and creatures are univocal, that is, they are applied in the same way and in the same sense. Scotus believes that being is undefined since it is simplest of all concepts and it embraces the concept of anything that exists. He thinks of being essentially as an indefinable concept of that in whose existence there is no contradiction. This applies, for him, to being in all its modes – including God, individual created things, and concepts. Being thus includes that

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which has extramental being and that which has intramental being, and it "transcends all genera" (Scotus, as cited in Copleston 2003b:500).

However, Metaphysics cannot attain to an understanding of the true nature of being as such, since human intellect or reason is limited and deals with the natural order and sense experience. It therefore follows that we can only apprehend God through the concept of being in general. For Scotus, all features of the world that pass beyond the physical – which are included in Aristotle's categories – are transcendentals. He distinguishes between finite beings (creatures) and infinite being (God); being is common to both.

He distinguishes also between convertible attributes (*passiones convertibiles*) and disjunctive attributes (*passiones disiunctae).* The former includes notions such as 'true; 'good', and 'one' which are convertible or interchangeable with being in that there is no real distinction between them and being, but there is a formal distinction, since they designate different aspects of being. The 'pure' perfections of God such as wisdom and omnipotence in whose definitions there are no limitations are also convertible attributes.

The latter, however, covers such concepts as necessity and contingency, and potentiality and actuality, which are not convertible with being if they are considered separately. But they are convertible with being if one takes them in pairs. For instance, not every being is contingent and not every being is necessary; but every being must of course be one or the other. Scouts adds that though no disjunctive attribute comprises all being or is interchangeable with the notion of being, "it does place an object in any definite genus or category, in the Aristotelian sense" (Copleston 2013:501). For instance, the fact that a being is contingent does not suggest whether the being is substance or accident.

Scotus contends that we can move from finite disjunctive attributes to infinite being, but not the other way round. In other words, we can show that if finite being exists, then infinite being exists, but we cannot show that finite being exists, if infinite being exists. Similarly, we can show that if contingent being exists, necessary being exists, but we cannot show that contingent being exists if necessary being exists. We only know that contingent being exists by experience. The point is that, for Scotus, we cannot deduce the existence of the less perfect disjunctive attribute from the more perfect. The reason is that man in his present state of existence cannot have a direct knowledge of God, for all his knowledge is derived from sense experience.

For example, Anselm's argument for God's existence based on the degree of perfection is derived from facts of human experience. We move from the known to the unknown. Thus, we need a simple concept common to both finite and infinite, material and immaterial, accidents and substance which are sensed directly and indirectly respectively. Without this simple concept, infinite being and substance would be entirely unknown. For instance, God would be unknowable, unless there is a concept common to both God and creatures. Only the univocal concept of being satisfies this condition. In other words, we can only attain the knowledge of both material and immaterial beings when the concept of being is applied univocally to both God and creatures. In the light of this Copleston (2013:501) explains thus:

> Our concepts are formed in dependence on sense-perception and represent immediately material quiddities or essences. But no concept of a material quiddity as such is applicable to God, for God is not included among

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> material things. Therefore, unless we can form a concept which is not restricted to the material quiddity as such, but is common to infinite being and to finite being, to immaterial and to material being, we can never attain a true knowledge of God by means of concepts which are proper to Him.

Accordingly, this deduction from contingency to necessity or from potentiality to actuality, according to Scotus, presupposes that 'being' is a univocal concept. By this he means that the concept, although applicable to different types of being, always has the same sense – referring to a universal nature. Of course, God is a being in a different way, but He and His creatures must have something sufficiently in common to allow a valid deduction from the existence of an attribute possessed by finite being to its predication of the infinite being – God in a perfect sense.

Scotus explains that a concept is univocal if the affirmation or denial of the concept of the same subject at the same time is sufficient to involve a contradiction. A word which is used in only one sense would be contradictory if it is affirmed or denied. For example, if one says that God is and that God is not, referring to real existence in both cases, there would be a real contradiction. To say 'God is' and 'God is not' is sufficient for the production of a contradiction. This is because 'is' is opposed to 'is not' (not-being). Therefore, there is a contradiction in saying that "God is opposed to nothingness and that God is not opposed to nothingness" (Copleston 2013: 502).

When Scotus applies the univocal concept of being to God and creatures, he is not denying the fact that God and creatures are actually opposed to nothingness in different ways. However, what he is saying is that if what we mean by 'is' is simply the opposite of not-being (nothingness), then we can safely use the word 'being' of God and creatures in the same sense. The point is that both creatures and God are opposed to nothingness, even though they are opposed to nothingness in different ways. Thus, a concept which involves a contradiction when affirmed or denied of the same subject at the same time can be predicated to both God and creatures univocally.

The application of a universal concept of being to both finite and infinite beings does not imply that there is a nature common to both God and creatures. In other words, these beings are not species of a single common genius. Finite and infinite are intrinsic modes of being, although they contain a universal concept of being as a component. This concept is not a generic one, for god is not a genus. Thus, Scotus (as cited in Copleston 2013: 505) writes: "I hold my middle opinion, that is compatible with the simplicity of God that there should be some concept common to Him and to the creature, but this common concept is not a generically common concept."

Scotus contends that Anselm and other natural theologians are committed to univocity. This is because they employ, in the first place, concepts such as 'wisdom', 'goodness', 'beautiful', and 'happiness' as found in creatures. They thereafter ascribe to these concepts the highest degree of perfection and then attribute them to God. For instance, in the case of wisdom, they remove from the idea of wisdom the imperfection of finite wisdom and attain to a concept of *ratio formalis* of wisdom (what wisdom is in itself). Then they predicate it of God in the most perfect manner (*perfectissime*). However, these concepts remain the same, irrespective of whether it is applied to God or creatures. The analogical are predications are possible only because these concepts are univocal.

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Again, Scotus does not reject St. Thomas' doctrine of analogy. He believes that God and the creature are completely different in the real order and that being belongs primarily to God. For him, however, we cannot compare creatures with God as *mensurata ad mensuram* (the imperfect with the perfect), unless there is a concept common to both. Man's knowledge of God is by means of concepts drawn from creatures, and, unless these concepts are applied univocally, we would not be able to compare creatures with God. Therefore, analogy, for him, presupposes a univocal concept of being.

4. KINDS OF DISTINCTION

If the univocal concept is applicable to God and creatures, then there is some real factor common to God and creatures. This seems to undermine God's transcendence. Besides, it appears that God could not be simple but a real composition of common and differentiating factor. The challenge facing Scotus then is to explain how his account of metaphysics can avoid these unwelcome consequences. In response, Scotus explains different kinds of distinction.

4.1. Real Distinction

A real distinction holds between two things that are separable, at least by divine power. This applies to actually separated things as well as to things and their potentially separated parts, whether the parts are physical or metaphysical. For instance, there is a real distinction between items *x* and *y*, if and only it is logically possible either for *x* to exist without *y* or for *y* to exist without *x*. Such a real distinction holds between Socrates and Plato, Socrates and his hands, my hand and my foot, my two hands, prime matter and substantial form, and so on. In these examples, each item can exist without the other. But there is also a real distinction when only one of the items in the pair can exist without the other. For example, God and creatures are really distinct, and while God can exist without any creature, no creature can exist without God.

4.2. Conceptual Or Mental Distinction

This is a distinction made by the mind without corresponding objective distinction in the thing itself. Here, our intellects create distinct conceptions of what is really the same. In other words, the distinction drawn by the mind does not mark any difference in the thing itself. For instance, our concept of the Morning Star is distinct from our concept of the Evening Star, and yet the Morning Star and Evening Star are really one and the same thing – the Planet Venus. There is also a conceptual distinction between a thing and its definition, say, between 'man' and 'rational animal'.

4.3. Modal Distinction

This is a distinction between an item and its intrinsic mode. It is a sort of extramental distinction which applies to items such as the colour red and courage. For examples, the colour red can be deeper or paler. Courage can be stronger or weaker. These items vary in the degree, quantity, or intensity of their perfection, that is, in their intrinsic mode. In other words, the items differ only in the degree or intensity with which they exhibit their characters. For instance, there may be

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variations in the depth of one's courage. But these variations do not create new species; they share the same former character – courage.

4.4. Formal Distinction

This is a distinction which is less than the real distinction and more objective than a virtual distinction; it is not merely conceptual, but not fully real either. Scotus argues that a formal distinction (*distinctio formalis a parte rei)* holds between entities which are objectively distinct, but inseparable from one another, even by divine power. According to him, *x* and *y* are formally distinct if and only if (1) *x* and *y* are really the same and (2) *x* has a different ratio (account or character) than *y,* and (3) neither ratio overlaps the other. For example, he states that there is a formal distinction between the divine attributes.

Although the divine justice and the divine mercy are inseparable, they are formally distinct. Each is identical with the divine essence, despite the formal distinction between them. Likewise, there is a formal distinction between man's rational principle and sensitive principle, for they are distinct formalities of one thing – the human soul. There is a formal distinction between the common nature (universal) and the individuator (particular), and between each person of the Trinity and the divine essence. Therefore, formal distinction, for Scotus, is a way of distinguishing between different aspects of the same thing.

5. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

We have stated that Scotus maintains that the subject matter of metaphysics is 'being as 'being' or 'being in general', for metaphysics studies both the corporeal and non-corporeal, the material and immaterial, and the finite and infinite beings. The univocity of being makes it possible for the being in general to be studied as the primary object of metaphysics. If there is no simple concept common to both finite and infinite beings, then we cannot outrightly study 'being as being' since "anything capable of real existence also falls under the heading of being *qua* being" (Hause n.d: para. 9).The reason, for Scotus, is that all human knowledge is obtained from sense-perception, for we do not possess any direct and natural knowledge of God and other immaterial substances. For instance Anselms's argument for God's existence based on the degree of perfection is inferred from the facts of human experience. We say that God is the 'most beautiful' based on the degree of beauty we observe in creatures. All other analogical predications presuppose that the concept of being is univocal. Thus, "every investigation concerning God supposes that the intellect has the same univocal concept, which it receives from creatures" (Copleston 2013: 504).

Scotus' doctrine of univocity seems to threaten the traditional religious doctrine of divine transcendence – a doctrine Scotus himself supports. According to the doctrine, God is wholly different from creatures and He has no reality in common with the creatures. However, Scotus' teaching on univocity seems to imply that God and creatures have absolute perfections in common. This is because Scotus maintains that predicates such as wise, good, true, 'being' are predicated of God and creatures in the same way and in the same sense. Scotus argues that God's absolute perfections such as his being, goodness and wisdom, which are infinite, are completely diverse from that of intellectual creatures.

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However, by removing from our ideas of absolute perfections those features such as the modes of infinite or finite which make them proper to God or proper to creatures, we can form concepts of being univocally applicable to both God and creatures. The formation of such concepts, therefore, does not dispute the truth of divine transcendence.Given that our knowledge of God is by means of concept drawn from creatures, it seems that plausible to accept, that the concepts of being have to be univocal in the first place, before we ascribe the highest degree of perfection to the concepts and attribute them to God. In this way, divine transcendence is not undermined.

It is also plausible to assert that Scotus' doctrine of univocity is logically and ontologically prior to the division of being into finite and infinite, material and immaterial. In the first sense, it is logically prior because it is a fact of experience that we can form a univocal concept of being, without reference to finite or infinite being. The concept of being is abstracted from creatures and this concept is undefined and indeterminate. This implies that it is logically prior to the division of being into infinite and finite being. But there is no actually existent being which is neither infinite nor finite. In other words, every being must be either finite or infinite. The univocal concept of being, as logically prior to the division of being into finite and infinite, thus, possesses a unity which belongs to the logical order (Copleston 2013: 507).

In the second sense, given that the doctrine of univocity is meant to ensure an objective knowledge of God from creatures, one can contend that the univocal concept cannot be a mere *en rationis* (abstract logical entity) as Scotus thinks. It should have a real foundation in actuality. Although every actual being is either finite or infinite, every being is really opposed to nothingness. The fact that every being is opposed to nothingness, though in different ways, suggests that the univocal concept of being is founded on reality (Copleston 2013:507). The concept has an objective foundation in reality and that is why it could be abstracted from creatures. It is therefore a universal, common concept applicable to all beings, in so far as they are opposed to nothingness.

Thus, the univocal concept of being unifies other senses or divisions of being in metaphysics. Being simply means 'whatever is', that which is opposed to nothingness (non-being). Every being is really opposed to nothingness, regardless of whether the being is finite or infinite, material or immaterial. It is in this sense that we can safely apply the univocal concept to all beings, without undermining their nature. The univocal concept does not change the 'thingness' or quiddity of any being. The concept of being has to be univocal in the first place since being is essentially 'whatever is'. That being is opposed to nothingness justifies the univocal concept of being as applied to God and creatures and, by extension, all other existent forms of being.

For instance, St. Augustine states that there are categories of being and that God is the first in the hierarchy. He is the Uncreated Being from which other beings are derived. However, that God and other beings are opposed to non-being justifies their existence prior to their categorization as created or uncreated. This accounts for application of univocal concepts to all categories of being in the first place. Again, Heidegger uses being in three senses, namely, *Sein*, *Dasein* and *Seinde*. *Sein* is understood as the Being of all beings. It is that from which all beings derive their being and it is present in all beings" (Omeregbe 1996: 198). It is the Being of 'whatever is'. For Iroegbu (1995:223), "it is the *fundamentum* underlying the particular expressions of beings." *Dasein* simply means 'being-there'. It refers to man (human being). It is "a being in whose very

being itself is in question" (Omeregbe 1996:198). *Dasein*, in Heidegger's fundamental ontology, is an investigator who investigates *Sein* (Being) as well as itself since its being is also in question. *Seinde* refers to beings which are individual concrete beings. Irrespective of these three senses in which Heidegger uses being, the fact remains that these beings are opposed to nothingness and so univocal concept is applicable to all.

In conclusion, it is in virtue of being as 'whatever is' that all beings have something in common, so that the univocal concept can be applied to all existent forms of being. The application of Scotus' univocity of being to God and all creatures does not in any way alter or undermine the 'thingness' or essence of whatever that exists. The univocal concept of being and other ways in which being is conceived in metaphysics are not mutually exclusive. In this way, the univocal concept unifies all forms or senses of being in metaphysics.

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