

Lecture 7 – Duns Scotus, Analogy and Univocity

Introduction

Today I want to look at the notion of univocity that Deleuze introduces as an alternative to the analogical notion of being that we looked at last week. The notion of analogy was taken up in medieval theology, particularly by Thomas Aquinas, for similar reasons to those that led Aristotle to introduce it (the problem of the highest genus). Aquinas holds to Aristotle's account of species and genera, and we can go as far as to say that analogy is a consequence of this form of understanding, as we will always have difficulty explaining the highest genus. Moving away from the concept of analogy will therefore involve moving away from the Aristotelian understanding of the world, and opens the possibility of formulating a more comprehensive concept of difference. The Aristotelian view of the world, in terms of species and genera, is, at its root, the belief that the structure of judgement accords with the structure of the world, and hence to reject the Aristotelian view is to reject the fundamental structures of representation, the idea of a particular subsumed under a universal category (S is P). In introducing the notion of univocity, Deleuze is therefore proposing to provide an alternative understanding of the world which will fundamentally depart from notions of judgement, genus and species, essence and identity. For this reason, Deleuze writes that univocity is 'the strangest thought, the most difficult to think, if it has ever been thought.' (Deleuze / *Anti Oedipe Et Mille Plateaux*, 14/01/1974, taken from www.webdeleuze.com).

This week, I want to look at the concept of univocity formulated by John Duns Scotus, one of the most important medieval theologians. Scotus was born in Scotland near the border with England in some time before 1266, and died in 1308. He was therefore writing a few years after Thomas Aquinas, who died in 1274 (although in fact his key interlocutor is Henry of Ghent who also developed an analogical theory of being). He was known as the subtle doctor, and as we shall see, his philosophy skates very close at points to heresy. While Duns Scotus develops a univocal conception of being as an alternative to Aquinas and Aristotle's analogical conception, as we shall see, this is a purely formal notion of univocity, which is why Deleuze claims that Scotus 'only *thought* univocal being.' (DR 49) This is in essence a consequence of Scotus' need to maintain a difference between God and man to avoid heresy. While Scotus therefore only presents a limited account of univocity, he does introduce several key notions such as the intensive in his account of the infinite, which will be taken up in (or at least will be paralleled in) later thinkers of univocity, such as Spinoza and Nietzsche.

Medieval Conceptions of God

Before discussing Scotus, we need to look at the conception of God presented by traditional analogical theology. The central point to note is that there seems to be a fundamental difference between finite things that we find around us, and an infinite being such as God. According to medieval theologians, God's nature is essentially simple (it is not composed of parts), whilst at the same time, it possesses every perfection (God is infinitely good, infinitely wise, etc.). This highlights a fundamental limitation on our understanding of God because when we look at objects that we have access to, objects in the finite world, we see that an object having several properties is a complex

object. Aquinas writes that 'It seems that the perfections of all things are not in God. For God is simple...whereas the perfections of things are many and diverse.' (ST Ia.4.2., arg. 1) So there is a fundamental difference in nature between the infinite simplicity of God and the diversity present in the world. Now the very fact that when we use a term like 'good' to describe an object or person in the world or to describe God operate in these different ways implies that when we use this term, we are equivocating. That is, that the same term names two different concepts, good-for-God, and good-in-the-finite-world. This is an equivocal conception of religious language, which would ultimately hold that no knowledge is possible of God. Such a position has certain advantages, in that it makes clear that God is a transcendent entity that cannot be adequately understood according to our categories of thought, but is ultimately untenable as it renders any relation to or understanding of God at all impossible. It is here that Aquinas brings in the notion of analogy. As we saw with Aristotle, analogy allows us to relate terms that have something in common (a focal meaning), but yet differ, as the different meanings of healthy differ from one another, but are clearly related. In his early writings, Aquinas adds another form of analogy called the analogy of proportionality. Rather than terms being related to a focal meaning, terms are analogous in that they hold the same relations to something else. As Deleuze notes, (14/01/1974) this is like the mathematical analogy, as 3 is to 6, so 4 is to 8. The analogy is formed by the relation between terms ('What infinite goodness is to God, finite goodness is to man.'). While Deleuze focuses on the analogy of proportionality in his lectures, in fact Aquinas was not happy with this formulation, as the relation of God's properties to his being, i.e., his nature as simple, was precisely what was at issue, ground of the analogy problematic. Instead, he relies in the *Summa Theologica* on an analogy of proportion, much like Aristotle's original analogy, based on likeness of cause and effect (our goodness is caused by God, so there must be some analogy between infinite and finite goodness, as effects resemble their causes).¹ In this instance, therefore, God's goodness is the focal meaning by which finite goodness gets its own meaning. Henry of Ghent puts it as follows:

Being does not therefore belong to God univocally...nor purely equivocally...but in a middle way, namely, by analogy, because it signifies one thing primarily and principally and the other as in some way ordered, related, or proportional to what is primary...And in this way, being in the most common sense primarily signifies God... secondarily creature. (Ghent, *Summa*, taken from Tonner, 142)

Analogy therefore has three key advantages going for it:

First, it preserves God's transcendence by ensuring God is seen as having a different nature to his creatures.

Second, it allows us to fulfil the conflicting demand of developing knowledge, albeit inadequate, of God.

A third issue that we haven't looked at is that it solves the problem of the highest genus. The problem here would be that if being was taken as a genus, then it would be prior to both man and God. To give being priority in this way would obviously be heretical. As God and finite things exist in fundamentally different ways, they do not share a common genus: man and God *are* in fundamentally incommensurate ways.

¹ C.f. Stanford Encyclopaedia, *Medieval Theories of Analogy*

Univocity

It is against this view that Scotus develops his own position: a univocal theory of religious language. He defines univocity as follows:

I designate that concept univocal which possesses sufficient unity in itself, so that to affirm or deny it of one and the same thing would be a contradiction. It also has sufficient unity to serve as the middle term of a syllogism, so that wherever two extremes are united by a middle term that is one in this way, we may conclude to the union of the two extremes among themselves. (Scotus, *Philosophical Writings*, 20)

To take an example of the first of these criteria, for Aquinas, it is clear that 'good' can be predicated and not predicated of a man at the same time, insofar as good can refer to finite and infinite goodness. The second criterion asserts that a univocal term can be used to make inferences. The fact that a feather is light (as in weight) does not entail that it is not dark (as in colour). The reason why we cannot make the inference in this case is because 'light' is being used equivocally.

Scotus has two main reasons for supposing that Being fits this category of univocity. First, it is the case that we can believe that God exists without knowing anything further about him, even whether he is finite or infinite. Second, the alternative theory of analogy suffers from a key problem: in order for the analogy to work, we seem to require some knowledge of the relationship between God's nature and his attributes. Without this, a statement like, 'what infinite being is to God, finite being is to man' is uninformative. Such an analogical argument seems to presuppose some form of understanding of God's nature.

Scotus therefore takes being to be univocal, or in his own terms, a transcendental (a concept that is 'indifferen[t] to what is infinite and finite' (*PW*, 2) or in other words, a concept which applies to both). If we look at the three reasons why analogy was introduced, then also univocity allows us to explain our knowledge of God, but this leads to a problem with the first criterion, the need to preserve a distance between man and God.

Because I say: being is univocal, this means: there is no categorical difference between the assumed senses of the word "being" and being is said in one and the same sense of everything which is. In a certain manner this means that the tick is God; there is no difference of category, there is no difference of substance, there is no difference of form. It becomes a mad thought. (14/01/1974)

This view is clearly heretical, and it also appears to be the case that as being is somehow prior to finite and infinite beings, being appears to operate as a genus, with finite and infinite beings as its species. Thus being would seem to occupy a place higher in the Porphyrian hierarchy than God, a claim which is also a heresy. Finally, we might want to ask how Scotus is able to explain the simplicity of the nature of God, given that God's nature seems to now be a compound of two different attributes: being and infinitude.

Finitude and Infinitude

In order to understand how Scotus resolves these difficulties, we need to look at how he understands the concepts of finitude and infinity. To return to Aquinas for a moment, in the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas defines infinity as follows:

[S]omething is said to be infinite from the fact that it is not limited. Now matter is in a certain way limited through form, and form in a certain way through matter. Matter is in fact limited through form inasmuch as before it receives a form, matter is in potency to many forms, but when it receives one, it is limited by it. Form however is limited through matter inasmuch as a form considered in itself is common to many things, but by being received in matter it becomes the form determinately of this thing. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, qu. 7, ar. 1, co., tm. 4, p. 72, taken from Tomarchio, 176)

The concepts of finite and infinite are here *relational* concepts. The infinite is defined by not being limited, whereas the finite is defined through limitation (by matter). This is a reasonably common conception that we also find, for instance, in the dialectic of infinity in Hegel. If the finite and infinite are understood in these terms, it is clear that we are going to end up with being as the highest genus, or at best an analogical conception of being, as these two terms are contraries. Rather than finitude being defined by relation to a limit, Scotus instead therefore introduces the notion of an 'intrinsic degree' of being.

To see how such a concept can be formed, we can follow the account Richard Cross gives in his account of Scotus.² For Aristotle, an infinite magnitude can only ever be potential, as we can always add something more to a actual magnitude. Scotus asks us to imagine what such a magnitude would look like, however:

We might imagine that all parts [of the magnitude]...remained in existence simultaneously. If this could be done, we would have an infinite quantity because it would be as great in actuality as it was potentially. And all those parts which in infinite succession would be actualised and would have being one after the other would be conceived as actualised all at once. (Scotus, *Quodlibetum* 5 n. 2, taken from Cross, 41)

He then asks us to apply this model of extensive infinity to a qualitative perfection, such as goodness. The central claim is that much as we can determine spatial magnitudes, we are also capable of ranking perfections in such a way that we can conceive of an infinite perfection. In the case of a perfection, however, it cannot be constituted of parts in the way that the extensive magnitude is. An infinite extensive magnitude is constituted from an infinite number of finite extensive parts, but a perfection would not be infinitely perfect if it were composed of finite (and hence imperfect) qualities. The notion of infinity that Scotus is developing is therefore of an intensive, indivisible form of infinity, rather than the extensive, divisible form that Aquinas favours.

So God is not superior to man in the quantitative extension of his being, but rather in the qualitative nature of being's intensity. This ultimately allows Scotus to solve the two difficulties of the highest genus and the simplicity of God. Instead of understanding infinity and finitude as species of being, they are rather modes or ways in which being subsists. Scotus gives the following example in terms of colour:

When some reality is understood along with its intrinsic mode, that concept is not so absolutely simple that it is impossible that this reality be conceived apart from this mode, although it is then an imperfect concept of a thing. For example, if there were whiteness in

² Cross, *Duns Scotus*, 40

the tenth degree of intensity, however simple it may be in reality, it is nonetheless possible that it be conceived under the concept of so much whiteness, and then it would be conceived perfectly by means of a concept adequate to the thing itself. Or, it is able to be conceived precisely under the concept of whiteness, and then it is conceived according to a concept that is imperfect and lacking in perfection in the thing. But the imperfect concept is common to this and that white, and the perfect concept is more proper. (Scotus, *Ord.* I, d. 8, pars 1, q. 3 n. 138-9, taken from Hall, *TAJDS*)

Infinite being is therefore like infinite whiteness in this example. Finite being in turn is like a finite degree of whiteness. In neither case are the notions relational. Infinite whiteness is not defined by a lack of limitation, but positively, in terms of its own intensity. Likewise, a finite degree of whiteness is not defined in relation to some other quality, but is intrinsic to the colour itself. The fact that finitude and infinity is a mode, rather than a property of being will be important in explaining how Scotus is able to avoid the various heresies which appear to result for a univocal understanding of being.

Formal and Real Distinctions

When we looked at Aristotle's theory of species and genera, we saw that in both cases, Aristotle defines these as what is given in response to the question, 'what is it?'. That is, Species and genera define what something is. So man is defined by the genus, animal, and the difference, rationality. As Aristotle says, differences are, and so we can make a real, existential distinction between rationality and animality. The fact that there is a real distinction between these two terms means that man shares something with another animal, such as a horse, whilst differing in another respect (rationality). If this kind of distinction was applied to the two forms of being, then being would be the genus of God and man, as the identity under which they are distinguished. In this case, being would be higher than God. Likewise, the distinction cannot be a purely conceptual distinction. While we can distinguish between, for instance, Eric Blair and George Orwell, these two terms still refer to the same person. If we employed this kind of distinction, then the being of God and the being of man would existentially be the same, leading once again to a heretical understanding that denies God's transcendence. Deleuze claims in *Difference and Repetition* that Scotus applies a formal distinction at this point to the difference between being and infinity. By formal distinction, would imply that although the two terms are existentially inseparable, they are nevertheless not identical. In fact, Scotus applies an even weaker distinction called a modal distinction (Deleuze distinguishes these two forms of distinctions in the big *Spinoza* book). To see how this works, we need to return to the example of whiteness as intensive difference. Clearly there is a difference between whitenesses of different degrees of intensity. When we look at the concept of the intensity itself, however, it should be apparent that this notion of intensity cannot be grasped as really distinct from the whiteness itself. If we take away the concept of whiteness, we simply have the concept of 'degree', which is meaningless on its own – 'degree of what?' For a similar reason, it cannot even be a formal distinction. Nevertheless, the degree clearly does distinguish different 'whitenesses'. We can note however, that it is possible to formulate a concept of whiteness that does not make reference to its degree of intensity. Such a concept would, however, be 'an imperfect concept of a thing' as whiteness always shows itself with a given intensity. It should be clear that we can apply this conception to the notion of being. Scotus' claim would then be that being always presents itself with a given degree of intensity. We can therefore formulate a concept of being that is univocal, that is, which applies in the same way to God and to finite things, but such a concept, without a reference to intensity, will be inadequate.

One final part of Scotus' account of univocity that needs to be mentioned is the relations between these different levels of intensity. Intensity as it stands is purely a difference in the degree of something's being, and is also pre-categorical. As such, it does not constitute the kind of distinction that would allow a proper separation between God and man. Such a position in fact is the one that Deleuze wants to develop in his own philosophy. In his 1974 lecture, he describes the position as follows:

[B]eings which are distinguished solely by the degree of their power are beings which realize a single univocal being, except for the difference in the degree of power or its withdrawal. So between a table, a little boy, a little girl, a locomotive, a cow, a god, the difference is solely one of degree of power in the realization of one and the same being. It's a strange way of thinking, since once again it consists in saying to us: the forms, the functions, the species and the genera are secondary. Beings are defined by degrees of power and there you are. Insofar as they are defined by degrees of power, each being realizes one and the same being, the same being as the other beings since being is said in one and the same sense, except for the difference in degree of power. At this level, there are no longer any categories, no longer any forms, no longer any species. (1974)

For Scotus on the contrary, the difference in degree between God and his creation becomes a difference in kind once we recognise that infinite intensity is simply incommensurate with any form of finite intensity. The gap between finite and infinite is therefore still a chasm which allows the dogma of the separation of God and his creation to be maintained. While being can conceptually be said univocally, in practice, we always encounter being with a given intensity, and so in reality being is always encountered in different forms:

As said of the ten categories, neither metaphysically nor naturally does the term 'being; signify one concept; and being is not a genus of these, neither naturally nor metaphysically. However, logically speaking, being is univocal (*In De an.*, q. 22, n. 33).³

The univocity of being is therefore purely thesis of logic. In actuality, we always encounter being modified with a certain intensity, that is, as finite and infinite. Furthermore, finite being is immediately divided up into the various categories, and so at the level of finite being, Aristotle's categories still hold true. Indeed, these categories are themselves related to one another analogically. So Scotus' point is not that analogy is problematic, but rather that analogy presupposes a prior univocal conception of being. In doing so, he restores the validity of the categories.

Conclusion

So ultimately Scotus reintroduces the notion of analogy and with it the categories. In spite of this, he comes to an important logical conclusion that analogy presupposes univocity. Deleuze makes use of a corollary of this claim. It is also the case that intensive difference is prior to categorical difference. Next week, I want to look at how this break is played out in Deleuze's philosophy by going through Deleuze's comments on two further thinkers of univocity that Deleuze puts forward, Spinoza and Nietzsche. For now, it's worth drawing out two of the key implications. First, intensive difference is

³ Quotation from Scotus' *Questions on De Anima*, taken from Alex Hall, 'Confused Univocity?', in *Proceedings of the Society for Medieval Logic and Metaphysics*, 7:2007, 18-31

prior to the notions of species and genera, and as a result of this, it is also prior to the structure of judgement. This puts it outside of representation. In fact, it is the ground for representation. This brings us to one of the central conceptual distinctions in Deleuze's work, between the virtual and the actual. Just as in that case, representation is grounded in an intensive conception of difference. Second, the question emerges, how are we going to differentiate entities from one another if not through the concepts of species and genera? The first part of the response to this claim is present in Scotus' position: intensive difference allows us to understand entities as separate from one another without relying on Aristotelian logic. Deleuze will take up this notion without introducing the radical difference in kind present in Scotus' own account. The second part emerges to a further question, how do we recognise different degrees of intensity of being? Deleuze's response to this question will be that intensity of being is determined by the degree to which a body can affect and be affected by other bodies. This is the root of Deleuze's assertion that 'between a racehorse and a draft horse, which belong to the same species, the difference can perhaps be thought as greater than the difference between a draft horse and an ox.' (1974)

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