

DUNS SCOTUS'S THEORY OF UNIVOCITY

(presented at IMC Leeds, 13th July 2005)

My main aim in the time reserved for my presentation will be to explain in some Scotus's general theory of univocity which underlines his notorious particular position concerning the concept of being. However, since this underlining theory has actually been spelled out in fullness and precision only by later members of the Scotist school, especially the protagonists of the "golden age" of Scotism, which occurred roughly about the half of the 17th century (I may mention such figures as Claude Frassen, John Punch, or the "prince of the Scotists", Bartholomew Mastri), I will draw heavily on the explications of these disciples of the Subtle doctor. For that reason I should perhaps rather have mentioned "Scotistic" rather than "Scotus's" theory in the title of my paper.

The object of our speculation shall therefore be the notion of *univocal concept*: What is it? For the sake of brevity I will laid aside all the tangled history of the originally Greek term "synónymos" and its Latin successor (rather than translation) "univocus" and start with the famous explication given by Scotus himself. In his *Ordinatio* I, d. 3, pars 1, q. 2, n° 26 Scotus gives the following definition, or rather criterion, for univocity:

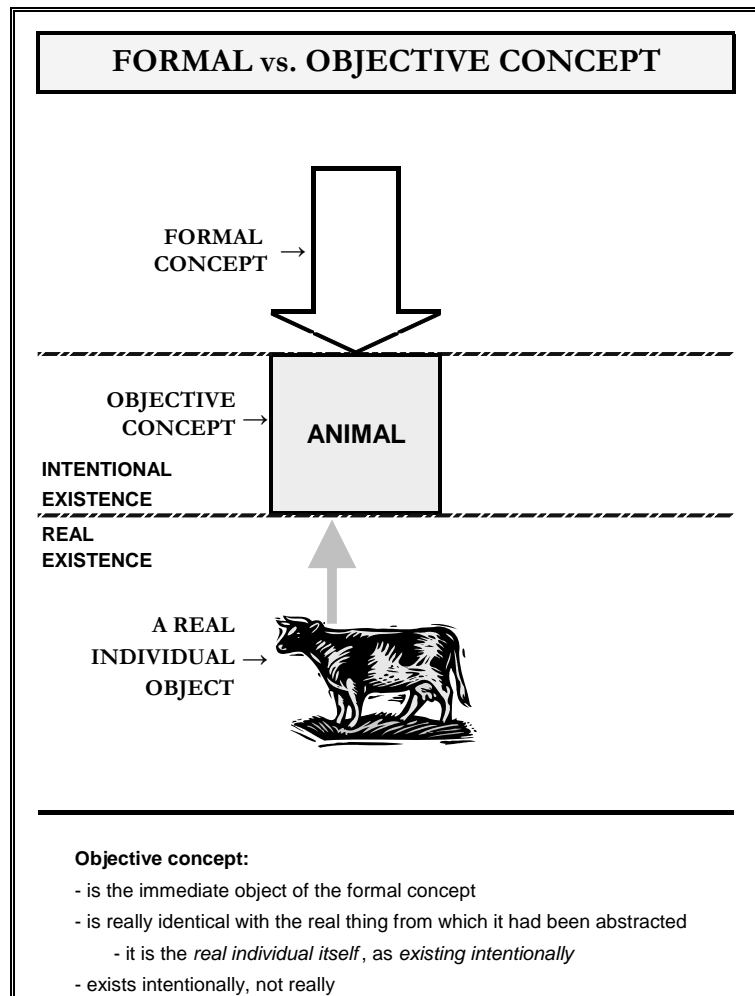
And lest there be any contention concerning the term "univocity", I declare that I call "univocal" a concept that is one in such a way, that its unity is sufficient for a contradiction to arise, in case it is asserted and denied of one and the same [subject]; and that the unity is also sufficient for the concept to play the role of the middle term of a syllogism, to the effect that it is possible to conclude without committing a fallacy of equivocation, that the extremes united by means of a middle term possessing such a unity are themselves united with each other.

Et ne fiat contentio de nomine univocationis, univocum conceptum dico, qui ita est unus quod eius unitas sufficit ad contradictionem, afirmando et negando ipsum de eodem; sufficit etiam pro medio syllogistico, ut extrema unita in medio sic uno sine fallacia aequivocationis concludantur inter se uniri"

From this passage it is clear that Scotus generally reduces univocity of a concept to the unity of it; which is then being further characterized. Now the concept of unity is one of the most fundamental metaphysical concepts, and in Scotistic metaphysics the role of this concept is even more crucial. In general, unity belongs among the so-called "transcendental properties of being"; which means that unity of a thing is something closely associated with its *entity*: whatever *is*, is in certain way *one*, and everything *is* to the extent and in the manner it is *one*. If we therefore wish to enquire about what the unity of a concept might be, we must base this enquiry on an enquiry concerning the *entity* of a concept; in order to find out what does it mean for a concept to be *one*, we must first find out what it means to *be* a concept; in short, we must answer the question, what a concept is.

By way of an answer to this question I am going to present a theory of concept that eventually became, of course with certain variations among the different schools, some of which I will mention later, a shared property of the entire "realist branch" of late, and especially so-called "second" scholasticism of the 16th and 17th centuries. It is my belief that the basic conception is not different from Scotus's own; rather, it is an elaboration and clearer and more precise statement of ideas contained already in Scotus's own work.

In order to understand properly this developed “realist” theory of concept, it is necessary that we first come to grasp an important distinction between two different meanings the term “concept” can bear: on the one hand the schoolmen distinguish on the one hand a *formal concept*, and on the other hand an *objective concept*.



Formal concept is something we would nowadays call an *intentional act*: in the scholastic terminology it is an individual accidental form inhering in reason, by means of which the reason conceives or makes present for itself (“represents”) some portion of outer reality; it is the mental result of the Aristotelian “first operation of the intellect”, the so-called “simple apprehension”. It is *that by which* one conceives something, a formal cause of someone conceiving something.

Formal concepts are not very problematic entities, and their existence is commonly accepted even by the most radical nominalists; according to the nominalists however, there is no need to posit any other kind of theoretical entities to explain intellectual knowledge, even *universal* intellectual knowledge. According to the nominalists, some of our mental intentional acts are simply “universal in representing” (*universalia in repraesentando*), that is, they are immediately related to more than one individual things as their object they represent or “stand for”. Thus, for nominalists, there is no entity that would be “universal in its being” (*universale in essendo*) – for according to their *being (esse)*, formal concepts are as individual as any other real accidental form.

Duns Scotus, of course (and with him all the realists), would however strongly protest against such a view; for he holds as true the principle that *every (created) intentional act*

receives its formal determination from its object; and therefore the nature of the act depends strongly on the nature of its object. This principle reflects the distinctive thesis of philosophical realism and objectivism, namely that cognition is *receptive* in nature, that it consists in objects “entering” and “imprinting” their determinations into the cognitive faculty, the objects *inform*, that is *imprint a form* in it. But if it is so, then it appears as impossible that a *universal act* might be immediately related to an *individual* object (or objects). For in such a case, the nature of the act would not correspond to the nature of the object, which goes against the aforementioned Scotus’s principle.

On the basis of this thesis of mutual correspondence of an intentional act and its object, the realists are forced to posit some entity that could play the role of the immediate object of a universal intentional act: and that entity is that which is called an *objective concept*. Now it is very important to understand correctly, what an objective concept is, since it is a key notion of the whole theory and very liable to being misunderstood.

From one point of view, we can say that the objective concept is nothing but the real object of the intentional act (formal concept), *as conceived* by that act. In other words, there is no distinction in reality between the real thing that is conceived, and the objective concept itself. Objective concepts are no Cartesian “ideas”, no representations or “mental pictures” of things – they are, fundamentally speaking, the things themselves. We do not grasp some fabrications of our mind, but reality itself. If anything in the scholastic theory can be called a “mental picture” or “mental representation”, it is the *formal* concept, the intentional act inhering in the intellect, not the object of this act.

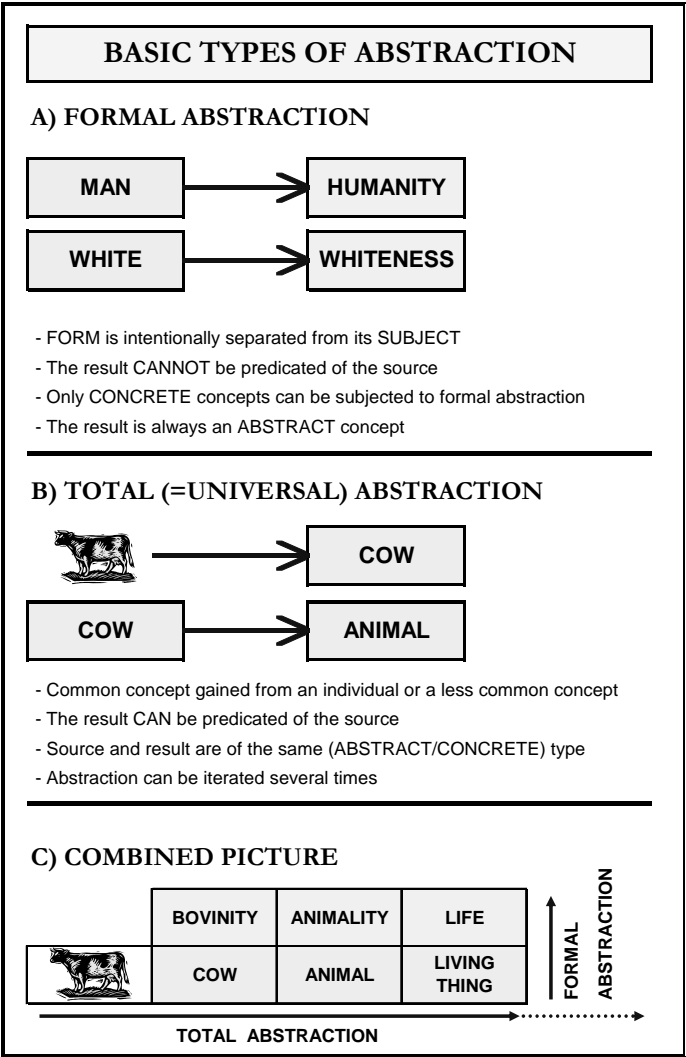
And yet there is *some* difference between the objective concept, and the real object of the intentional act: for every real object is individual (so much even the radical realist as Scotus concedes), whereas objective concepts were introduced precisely in order to save the correspondence of the universal act and its object, therefore, they must be universal [and namely universal *in essendo*, if the act is universal *in repraesentando*].

If therefore there is a distinction between the real individual object(s) of an intentional act, and the universal objective concept, but it is not a real distinction in the broad sense (*distinctio a parte rei*), then it remains that the distinction must, in some way, be a result of the activity of the conceiving intellect – and this is precisely how the theory goes. We may imagine the process in a following way: the intellect conceives some individual thing in a universal way: that thing thus becomes the object of the intentional act of the intellect. However, because there holds the principle of mutual correspondence of the intentional act and its object, the individual thing cannot become an object of a universal act *immediately*; it must undergo certain kind of *transformation* by the intellect – by conceiving universally a thing, the intellect transforms it in certain way. The result of this transformation is the objective concept. It does not differ really from the original object, because the transformation was not a real one: it was merely *intentional*, it happened to the object not really, but only inasmuch as it became conceived by means of an intentional act. The scholastics would put it so that one and the same thing received, by being conceived by the intellect, some other kind of existence in addition to its real existence: they call it *esse obiectivum*, *esse conceptum* or *esse intellectum*, „being conceived“ or „being grasped“, and we will use another common term here, *intentional existence* or *intentional being*. The real identity of an objective concept with its real fundament is also a reason, why the objective concept can be *predicated of* that real fundament (e.g. *Socrates is an animal*); for predication, as understood by most of the Aristotelians, is certain kind of intentional *identification*.

It will come as no surprise that for a metaphysician objective concepts are much more interesting object of study than formal concepts: for in studying them, the philosopher *eo ipso* studies the reality itself. In most of the cases when a metaphysician, such as Scotus, speaks of concepts, he means primarily *objective*, not *formal* concepts, although in Scotus’s

case we may often neglect the distinction, due to his strong adherence to the object-to-act correspondence thesis. At any rate, because of this strong dependence of formal concepts on objective concepts in Scotism [so strong that Scotus does in fact deny that the objective concept is, strictly speaking, *produced by* the formal concept], the unity of a formal concept will always be derived from the unity of the corresponding objective concept. Therefore, it is the objective concept where we must start looking for the criteria of its unity, in order to explain the Scotistic notion of univocity.

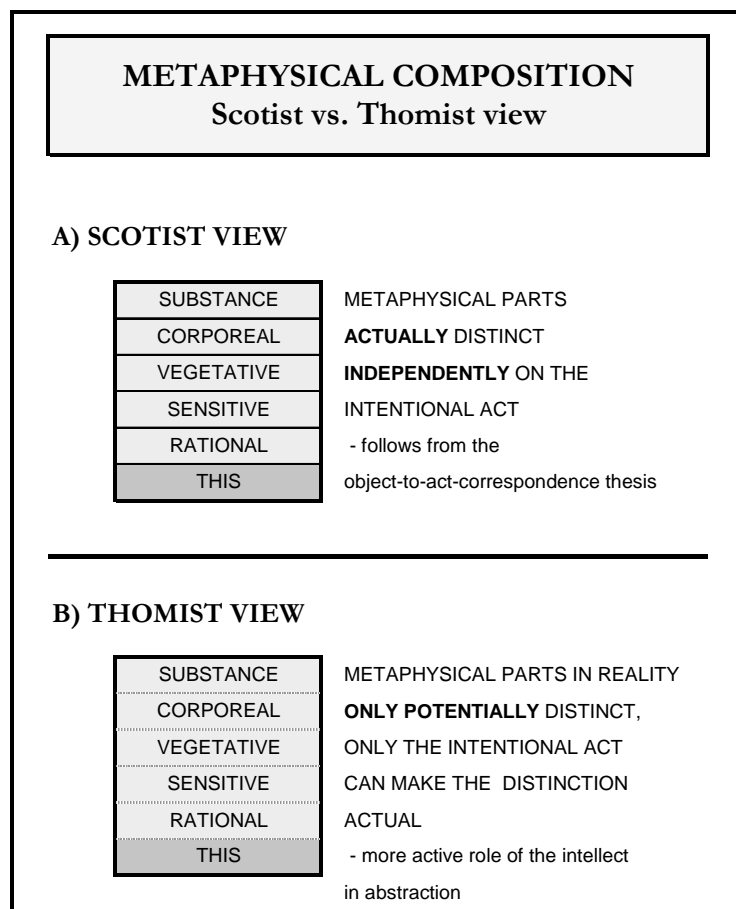
We can enter the problem right away by asking: what is that strange kind of transformation by means of which we can produce universal objective concepts out of individual things? The most of you can probably already guess that it is nothing else than what is otherwise called *abstraction*. Now my aim in the rest of the time is to show, how the unity of a concept and abstraction are interconnected, and how the Scotistic notion of univocity stems from certain understanding of the process of abstraction.



Just like the notion of univocity, also the notion of abstraction is Aristotelian in origin (Aristotle spoke of “*afairesis*”); and in the course of history it underwent many metamorphoses and became subject of different interpretations. In late scholasticism however 2 different basic kinds of abstraction came to be recognised: First, the so-called *formal abstraction* consisting in “pulling off” a form or determination from its subject and giving rise to abstract concepts such as *humanity* or *whiteness*; this kind of abstraction we

will leave aside for the sake of brevity. Second, the so-called *total* or *universal* abstraction, which is the process of gaining a common universal concept from an individual or a less-common concept (such as *animal* from Socrates or *man*, or *coloured* from Socrates or *white*). In other words, we are speaking here of the basic process of concept-formation; *total abstraction* is in fact nothing more than the “objective part” of *simple apprehension*. It is the process through which really existing individual things are transformed into intentionally existing universal objective concepts.

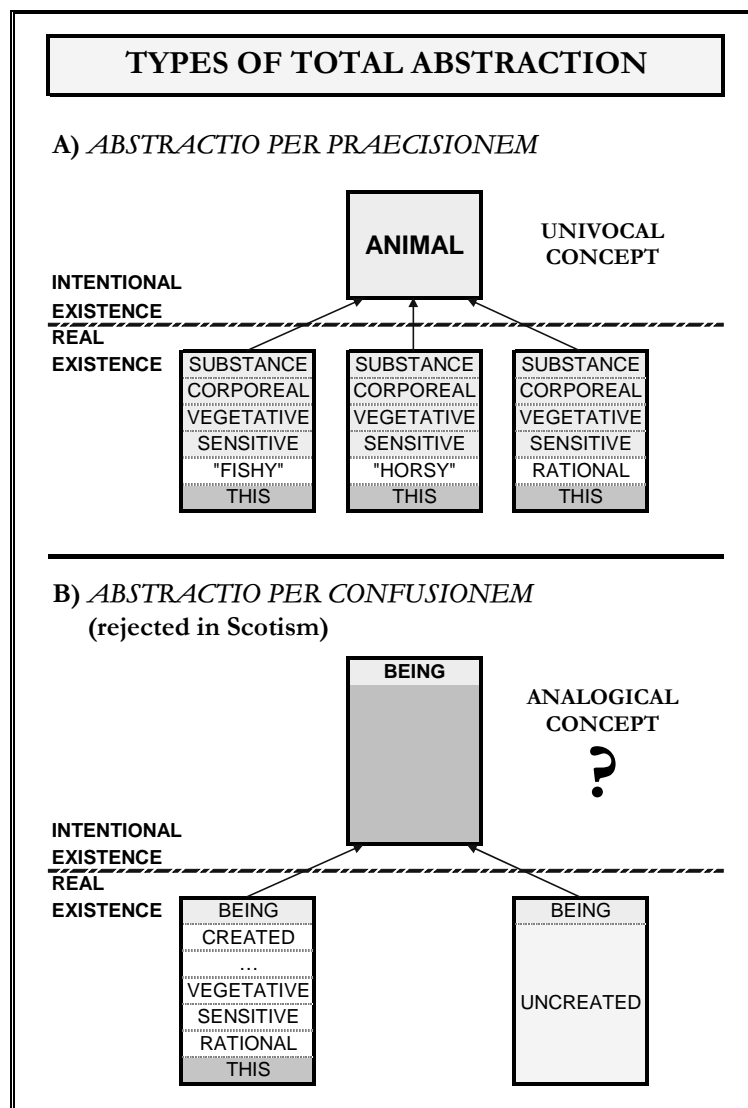
Now if we recall Scotus’s criterion for univocity of a concept, we may notice that it does not leave any room between univocity and equivocality: if a concept satisfies the criterion, it is univocal, if not, it is clearly equivocal – no room here for any “intermediate” kind of “analogical concepts”. I will now show that this is an immediate implication of the fact that Scotism recognises just one single kind of *total abstraction*, called *abstraction by precision*, “*abstractio per praecisionem*”, and only one kind of unity, namely a unity of a concept, unity that is in a sense perfect. Let’s look at this kind of total abstraction a little closer.



According to the view of any realist scholastic, all created beings are characterised by several kinds of inner composition. We will leave aside the composition from so-called integral parts [such as arms and legs of a man], found in spatiotemporal material beings, and the composition of so-called physical parts, Aristotelian matter and form, and will notice the so-called *metaphysical composition*, which is a composition of the so-called *metaphysical grades* or *metaphysical parts*, which can be perhaps best understood as certain constitutive aspects on the part of the thing, that are the fundament of universal concepts which can be truly predicated of that thing. Now the *abstraction by precision* is understood as a process of conceiving of some of these aspects, while the others are left aside – they are

excluded from the comprehension of the arising objective concept, the concept is said to “precind” from them, they are “cut off”. And it is precisely this “precision” or “cutting off”, which accounts for the *unity* of thus formed objective concept.

Every unity is certain lack of division; therefore we will best understand the nature unity of a universal concept by contrasting it with the original division or non-identity of different individuals subsumed under that concept. Take as an example Alexander the Great and his horse: what is the reason for their non-identity, of the lack of unity between them? In the first place, they differ numerically – they are individually different; in scholastic language they have distinct metaphysical parts known as *individual differences*. Furthermore, they also differ specifically, they are of different species – this is due to their possessing other two distinct metaphysical parts, in this case the so-called specific differences. On the other hand, they are also similar in a generic respect – they are both animals, which, for a realist, implies that part of the essence of each of them is the metaphysical grade *animal*. This grade, however, is not responsible for the lack of unity between them: although Alexander and his horse have their “own” respective animalities, these two animalities are distinct only due to their coexistence with differences – specific and individual – which are proper to each of these animals. If, therefore, we managed somehow to “clean” the two animalities of their respective differences, they wouldn’t be two any more, they would become one.



Such cleaning, of course, is not possible to perform really: you cannot hew an essence into its metaphysical parts with an axe. However, it is possible to do so *intentionally*, and the process is precisely what *abstraction by precision* is supposed to be.

The resulting universal concept is one, because it has been purged of all differentiating elements, so-to-speak, *because it has been perfectly abstracted from the differences*. The unity of a concept, and in turn also its univocity, consists therefore in *perfect abstraction*, an abstraction where the differences are excluded from the comprehension of such a concept. For the univocity of a concept means, that the whole concept can in its integrity be predicated of and thus identified with any of the members of its extension: the entire objective concept of an animal can be as a whole identified with Alexander as well as his horse. And this would not be possible, if it had not been purged of anything that is found in Alexander but not in his horse, or vice versa: if the concept of animal contained the difference *rational*, it could not be identified with a horse as a whole, and if it contained the difference *irrational*, it could not be, as a whole, identified with a man. Thus univocity is based on unity, and unity on perfect abstraction or “precision”.

To conclude, I will add a very short account of a contrasting Thomist theory which seeks to find a room for analogical concepts after all – although you will hear more on that matter from Peter. The Thomist approach consists basically in allowing another kind of total abstraction – so called *abstraction by confusion* (*abstractio per confusionem*). In this kind of abstraction, the differences are not excluded from the concept, so that they are not present actually, but merely potentially, but they are only *confounded*, so that they are not distinguished from each other, while nevertheless remaining an *actual part* of the concept. It is clear that a concept thus resulting has a lesser degree of unity, because it latently contains contrary notes, contrary differences, that have been identified as the source of non-identity in reality; and also it is clear that it cannot be identified with the members of its extension in entirety: the “wrong” differences must be put aside, with each of the individuals the concept can be identified only partially. Only if such a kind of imperfect abstraction (and the corresponding kind of predication) is possible, did the Thomists succeed in finding a room for *analogical concepts*, a notion Scotus became to abhor.

Mgr. Lukas Novak
Faculty of Theology
University of South Bohemia in Budweis (Ceske Budejovice)
Czech Republic
lukas.novak@skaut.org