

Wyclif on Transcendentals

In their entry on “The Medieval Theories of Transcendentals” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Wouter Goris and Jan Aertsen († 2016) write that “the Medieval theories of the transcendentals present an explication of the concept of ‘being’ (*ens*) in terms of the so-called ‘most common notions’ (*communissima*), such as ‘one’ (*unum*), ‘true’ (*verum*), and ‘good’ (*bonum*), and explain the inner relations and order between these concepts”. Furthermore, they propose a three-fold division of the various medieval doctrines of the transcendentals grounded on the different relations between “the transcendental and the transcendent” and not on the differences in the internal connection of the transcendental concepts. As a consequence, they distinguish among a Thomas Aquinas’ model of transcendentals, a Henry of Ghent’s and Meister Eckhart’s model, and a Duns Scotus’ one. The three models are identified by the different relations between the notions of being and God, and precisely by whether the notion of being can be considered as ordered over the notion of God or not. According to Aertsen and Goris, in Aquinas’ view, transcendental being extends only to created beings; in Henry of Ghent’s view, God is the first known; and finally in Duns Scotus’ view, the transcendental being is indifferent to finite and infinite being, and so univocally common to God and creatures.

In this paper I would like to take a step toward clarifying a different model, namely Wyclif’s model of transcendentals, based on an original conception of the relations among the transcendentals themselves. In building up his theory, Wyclif takes some aspects from Duns Scotus’ conception of being, but he reverses the relationship between being (*ens*) and the true (*verum*), and expounds the relations among being, God, and creatures in a bit different way. Actually, (1) the cornerstone of Wyclif’s metaphysics is the notion of being (*ens*) as a truth (*veritas*) which can be signified by both simple and complex expressions. (2) The general principle which leads him in his description of the inner structure of the reality is that of the homology of language and the world, according to which our thought (and therefore our language) spontaneously models itself on reality. In the first section of my paper I shall describe Wyclif’s notions of being and truth in their mutual relationship, trying to explain the novelty of his conception, while the second section will be dedicated to Wyclif’s theory of analogy, which is the logical counterpart of his doctrine of being *qua* truth. In the conclusion I shall try to draw some more general inferences about the significance of Wyclif’s view of transcendentals.

I

In Wyclif's opinion the concept of being is the main object of our intellect, but unlike any other author of his times he also states that this concept, the most general, is matched by an extramental reality of the same extension as the concept, and so proper to everything: God and creatures, substances and accidents, universals and individuals (cf. *De ente in communi*, ch. 1, pp. 1-3; ch. 2, p. 29; *De ente praedicamentali*, ch. 1, pp. 2-3, and 13).

The constitutive property of these *entia* is the capacity of being the object of a complex act of signifying (*omne ens est primarie signabile per complexum verum et econtra, et per consequens communius quam est ens non est possibile quicumque esse* – cf. *De ente in communi*, ch. 3, p. 36; and *De ente primo in communi*, ch. 1, p. 70). Hence Wyclif extends the set of referents of the term 'ens' to include in addition to the categorial beings (*entia praedicamentalia*), namely substances, both universal and singular, and accidental forms, many other types of entities: all that is *in potentia* in its causes; all the intelligible beings which are only in God as something producible by Him; non-categorial (*extra genus*) principles, like God, the unity, and the point; privations; collections and groups of things, like villages, towns, cities, lands, and religious orders; states of affairs, both atomic (like **p** or $\sim\mathbf{p}$) and molecular (such as **pvq** or $\mathbf{p}\cdot\mathbf{q}$); past and future states of affairs (*praeteritiones* and *futuritiones*), not seen as *something* that have been real and will be real, but regarded as something real in the present as past and future truths; those states of affairs which are signified by negative true sentences; hypothetical and tautological truths; and finally such *res* as death, sin, and the false (*falsitas*) itself (cf. *De ente praedicamentali*, ch. 1, pp. 2 and 5; see also *Purgans errores circa veritates in communi*, ch. 1, pp. 1-3, and 10). If only what can be signified by a complex expression is a being, then, given that whatever is the proper object of a complex act of signifying is a *veritas*, being is nothing but truth (*omne ens est veritas* – cf. *De ente in communi*, ch. 3, p. 36).

From the semantic point of view, this means the collapsing of the fundamental distinction of the common Aristotelian theory of meaning, that one between simple signs or expressions (like nouns) and compound (or complex) signs or expressions (like sentences/propositions). From the ontological point of view this entails the uniqueness in type of the *significata* themselves of every class of categorematic expressions (*De logica*, ch. 5, p. 14):

“Proposition, broadly speaking, is a being which signifies in a complex manner. Therefore everything which is can be called a proposition, since everything which is signifies in a complex manner that it is <something real>“.

“Proposicio large loquendo est *ens complexe significans*; et sic, quia omne quod est significat complexe se esse, omne quod est satis bene potest dici proposicio”.

Because of this form of ‘pan-propositionalism’ (as Laurent Cesalli has appropriately called Wyclif’s theory), within Wyclif’s world it is the same kind of objects that both concrete terms and sentences refer to, as the individuals themselves have to be regarded as a sort of states of affairs. According to him, from a merely metaphysical point of view any singular substance, for example a certain human being (*iste homo*), is nothing but a real proposition (*propositio realis*), where the actual existence in time as an individual (*ista persona*) plays the role of subject, the common nature, i.e. human nature (*natura humana*), plays the role of predicate, and the singular essence (*essencia istius hominis*), that is what by means of which this individual is a man, plays the role of the copula, as it connects the common nature with the individual as such and makes *an individual of a certain type* (a man or a cat, and so on) of an indeterminate individual thing (a simple *hoc aliquid* – cf. *De logica*, ch. 5, p. 15):

“Real proposition is <something> like *this man, this stone* and so on, as in *this man* there is a subject, a predicate, and the copula just as in <any> other proposition: this individual, which is a part of the <whole> substrate <of existence> of the human species, is the subject; the human nature, which is essentially present in this man as his <characteristic>, is the predicate; and the essence of this man is the real copula which connects this man with his nature. And as in the artificial proposition the predicate is said of the subject, so in the real proposition at issue this man is essentially and really the human nature”.

“Proposicio realis est, ut *iste homo, iste lapis* etc. quia sicut in alia proposicione est subiectum et predicatum et copula, sic in *isto homine* est dare istam personam, que est pars subiecta speciei humane, que est tamquam subiectum; et est dare similiter naturam humanam, que essencia-liter inest isti homini tamquam predicatum, et realiter predicatur de isto homine. Et est dare essenciam istius hominis, que est realis copula copulans istum hominem cum sua natura. Et sicut in proposicione artificiali predicatum dicitur de subiecto, sic in ista proposicione reali iste homo est essencia-liter et realiter natura humana”.

By the way, in the later *Materia et forma* Wyclif develops at greatest length the idea that in all things the essence corresponds to the Godhead, the matter to the Father, the form to the Son, and the compound to the Holy Spirit; and calls matter, form, and the compound taken together “the created trinity.” So in a certain way translating into an Aristotelian language (and world) the Augustinian idea the *the soul* of man is an image of the Holy Trinity.

Wyclif’s pan-propositionalism is closely connected with his theory of the meaning and truth of sentences. It derives from Grosseteste’s doctrine (see Grosseteste’s *De veritate*, especially pp. 135-36), that Wyclif interprets in the light of his notion of being as *significabile per complexum*. According to him, a proposition (*propositio*) is a well formed and complete speech, which signifies the true or the false, and can be perfectly understood. Like Grosseteste, Wyclif maintains that every proposition has a twofold signification: natural and artificial. In its natural signification a proposition means nothing but its own existence, and therefore it is always true; in its artificial signification

a proposition signifies what is or what is not, and it may therefore be true or false. In Wyclif's view, there are five kinds of propositions: (1) mental, (2) spoken, (3) written; (4) real, and (5) the signified proposition (*et quinta propositio est sic esse sicut propositio significat*). The real proposition is nothing but any individual thing in the world, while the signified proposition seems to be any actual situation connected with individual things (cf. *De logica*, ch. 5, vol. 1, pp. 14-15). A sentence is true if and only if it describes how things are arranged in the world; in other words, if and only if its own primary *significatum* is an actual truth. On the other side, the primary significate of both simple and complex signs is that which the sign at issue is chiefly taken to mean (see the *Logicae continuatio*, tr. I, ch. 1, vol. 1, p. 76).

In the Late Middle Ages there were three predominant approaches to the problem of truth: ontological (proper to authors such as Augustine, Anselm, and Grosseteste), epistemological (proper to authors such as Thomas Aquinas and Giles of Rome), and linguistical (proper to Nominalist thinkers such as Ockham and Buridan). According to the first theory, the truth is a thing's being in accordance with the corresponding (specific) idea in the mind of God. According to the second, the true and the false are properly not in things, but are about things, as the truth is the result of an act of judgment of the intellect which states the combinations or separations found in things themselves. According to the linguistical approach, defining truth is identical with indicating the rules for establishing the truth of propositions, since only propositions are the bearers of truth-value.

Wyclif's theory is not just a new formulation of the theory of the *complexe significabile*, a 14th century theory (mainly due to Adam Wodeham and Gregory of Rimini) which combines the ontological approach with the epistemological one. It is true that that, in Gregory of Rimini's view, the *complexe significabile* is not *one* thing in the world, but an arrangement of things in the world, and in order for there be a *complexe significabile* it is sufficient that there is one thing in the world, since the existence of that thing gives rise at least to this state of affairs (or situation): that that thing is. And it is true that this state of affairs differs from that thing, though it is not another entity, properly speaking. Yet, according to the supporters of the *complexe significabile* theory, the same *res* which are signified by simple concrete terms are signified, in a different way, by complex expressions (that is, by propositions). In Wyclif's thought, on the contrary, there are no simple things in the world which correspond to simple concrete terms, but simple concrete terms designate *real propositions*, that is, things that are at the same time atomic states of affairs.

As a matter of fact, Wyclif derives the notion of real proposition from Walter Burley. Nevertheless, his view is sensibly different from that of the *Doctor Planus et Perspicuus* for some aspects.

According to Burley the *propositiones in re* are the ultimate *significata* of statements, just as individuals (both substantial ones and accidental ones) are the *significata* of discrete terms and universal forms the *significata* of common abstract terms. On the contrary, Wyclif's real proposition is everything which is, as everything save God is compound (at least of potency and act), and therefore can be conceived of and signified both in a complex (*complexe*) and in a non-complex manner (*incomplexe*). When we conceive of a thing in a complex manner we think of that thing considered according to its metaphysical structure, and so according to its many levels of being and kinds of essence. From this point of view, even the abstract forms, like humanity (*humanitas*), are a sort of states of affairs, because of their own inner organization and make up (e.g. humanity is equal to the "sum" of the form of animality and that of rationality, which combine as potency and act respectively). As a consequence we can refer to the same entity by means of various types of terms: abstract nouns (like "humanity" - "*humanitas*"), concrete nouns (like "man" - "*homo*"), infinitive expressions (like "being a man" - "*hominem esse*"), and complex expressions (like "universal humanity" - "*humanitas communis*", "universal man" - "*homo in communi*", and "the species of man" - "*species hominis*"), which therefore are synonymous (*Tractatus de universalibus*, ch. 3, pp. 70 and 74 - Kenny's trans, pp. 19 and 21):

"Every universal is a form, a truth, or state of things capable of being signified by a complex, just as being a man is a common nature in which all men, in virtue of their species, resemble each other, and correspondingly with other things. That is why professional philosophers have called universals by abstract names, like "humanity" "equinity" and so on for other species. ... So someone who wants to be made acquainted with the quiddity of universals has to think confusedly and abstractly, by genus and species, of the same thing as he first thought of by means of a complex whose subject is the specific or generic term; thus the species of man is the same as there being a man, the genus of animal is the same thing as being an animal. And each of these is common to its suppositis".

"Omne universale est forma, veritas vel dispositio significabile per complexum, ut esse hominem est natura communis in qua omnes homines specificiter conveniunt, et correspondenter de aliis. Unde periti philosophantes vocaverunt universalia nominibus abstractis, ut 'humanitas', 'equinitas', et ita de aliis speciebus. ... Volens igitur manuduci in notitiam de quidditate universalium debet intelligere confuse et abstracte idem per genus et speciem quod intelligit primo per complexum, cuius subiectum est terminus specificus vel terminus generis, ut idem est species hominis et hominem esse, idem genus animalis et esse animal. Et utrumque illorum est commune suis suppositis".

II

As we have seen, being is a reality. If so, it is then clear that it is impossible to affirm its absolute univocity. Duns Scotus thought of being as simply a concept, therefore he could describe it as univocal in a broad sense (one name, one concept, and many natures). Wyclif, on the contrary, is convinced that the *ens in communi* is an extra-mental reality, the first of creatures, so he works out his theory at a different level in relation to Scotus: no more at the intensional level (the *ratio* connected with the univocal sign, or *univocum univocans*), but at the extensional level (the *res* signified by the sign, considered as shared by different items according to different degrees). For that reason, he cannot utilize Aristotelian univocation, which hides these differences in sharing. He prefers to use one of the traditional notions of analogy, since the being of God is the measure of the being of the other things (*Ipse enim est metrum aliis, ut sint, et ut tante sint*) which are drawn up in a scale with the separate substances at top and matter at bottom (cf. *De ente praedicamentali*, ch. 3, pp. 25, 27, and 29). Therefore he qualifies being as a *genus ambiguum*, borrowing an expression already used by Grosseteste in his commentary on Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* (cf. Robertus Grosseteste, *Commentarius in Posteriorum Analyticorum libros*, I, ch. 5, pp. 118-19). Wyclif denying the univocity of being does not mean, however, that the analogy of being implies an ordered multiplicity of correlated meanings, as in Thomas Aquinas (cf. *In I Sent*, d. 19, q. 5, a. 2). Since Wyclif hypostatizes the notion of being and considers equivocity, analogy, and univocity as real relations between things, and not as semantical relations between terms and things (cf. *De ente praedicamentali*, ch. 2, p. 15), his analogy is partially equivalent to the standard Aristotelian univocity. In fact, according to the common interpretation of the opening passage of the *Categories*, equivocal terms are correlated with more than one concept and refer to a multiplicity of things sharing different natures, whereas univocal terms are correlated with only one concept and refer to a multiplicity of things sharing one and the same nature. Within Wyclif's system, what differentiates analogy from univocity is the way by which a certain nature (or property) is shared by a set of things: the *analogia* share it *secundum magis et minus* (or *secundum prius et posterius*), the *univoca* share it all in the same manner and at the same degree of "intensity". This is the true sense of his distinction between *genera ambigua* (such as *ens* and *accidens*) and *genera logica* (such as *substantia* – cf. *De ente praedicamentali*, ch. 4, pp. 30 and 32). So he admits three main types of equivocity: by chance (*a casu*), analogical (which is similar to the standard deliberate equivocity), and generic - only the generic one compatible with the univocity proper to the *genera logica*. Equivocals by chance are those things to which it happens that they have the same name, but with different meanings and/or reasons for imposition. Those things are analogical which have the same name and are subordinated to

a single concept, but according to different ways. Analogical things therefore share the nature signified by that name according to various degrees of intensity. For this reason they differ from generic equivocals, which share the same generic nature in the same way, but have distinct specific natures (cf. *De ente praedicamentali*, ch. 2, pp. 16-17, 18-19, and 21). As is well known, the division of the equivocals into *aequivoca a casu* and *aequivoca a consilio* is due to the Neoplatonic commentators of Aristotle. It was introduced into the Latin world by Boethius (see his commentary on the *Categories*, cap. de *aequivocis*, col. 166B-C). The semantical structure of the two groups of equivocals is the same (one name, many concepts, many natures), but in the case of the deliberate equivocals concepts (and therefore natures) are related to each other, so there is some (good) reason for the homonymy. In the late Middle Ages a new kind of deliberate equivocality was worked out, much more similar to Aristotelian univocity than to the standard Neoplatonic deliberate equivocality, and substantially identical to analogy by priority and posteriority (*per prius et posterius*), as it was based on the following semantical structure: one name, one concept, one nature, but shared according to different ways. More specifically, Wyclif appears to depend here on Burley's last commentary on the *Physics*. In the prologue of this commentary, the *Doctor Planus et Perspicuus* affirms that the term 'being' is at the same time univocal and equivocal. It is univocal broadly speaking as a single concept is associated with it; it is equivocal, but not most strictly, because the categorial beings "share" the concept in different ways: directly substances and secondarily accidents. Unlike Burley, Wyclif hypostatizes the notion of being, and does not seem to allow a distinction between deliberate equivocality using two concepts and the kind of equivocality which involves only a concept. On the other hand, he keeps the same explanatory scheme, since he also confines the Aristotelian definition of equivocality to chance equivocality and considers the other forms of equivocality as equivalent to the Aristotelian univocity. According to this account, the *ens in communi* is the basic component of the metaphysical structure of each reality, which possess it in accordance with its own nature, value, and position in the hierarchy of created beings. Unfortunately Wyclif's theory is weak in an important point: he does not clarify the relation between the *ens in communi* and God – the crucial point for distinguishing the Medieval ways to transcendentals according to Goris and Aertsen. On the one hand, being is a creature, the first of all the creatures (cf. *De ente praedicamentali*, ch. 5, appendix prior, p. 44; *Tractatus de universalibus*, ch. 6, p. 122), on the other hand, God should share it, as being is the most common reality, predicated of all, and (2) according to Wyclif to-be-predicated-of something means to-be-shared-by it (cf. *Tractatus de universalibus*, ch. 1, p. 17). As a consequence, a creature (the *ens in communi*) would in some way be superior to God.

III

At first sight it seems that the peculiarity of Wyclif's theory of transcendentals lies in his replacing *ens* with *verum* as the basic transcendental notion. According to the common belief, among the transcendentals (*ens*, *res*, *unum*, *aliquid*, *verum*, *bonum*) being was the primitive notion that all the others stemmed from by adding some new determination or a specific connotation in relation to something else. For instance, *verum* was nothing but the *ens* itself considered in relation to an intellect, no matter whether divine or human. In Wyclif's view, on the contrary, *ens* is no more the main transcendental and its notion is not the first and basic, but there is something more elementary to which being can be brought back: the *veritas* (or *verum*). As we have already seen, only what can be signified by a complex expression is a being, and whatever is the proper object of an act of signifying is a *veritas*, therefore everything which is is immediately a truth (cf. *De ente in communi*, ch. 3, p. 36; *De ente primo in communi*, ch. 1, p. 70; *Tractatus de universalibus*, ch.7, p. 139). This implies that we can explain what is to be a being (*ens*) only in terms of being-true: for Wyclif, an *ens* is something which is true.

Yet, there is another important point in his conception that must be underlined. For him, being (namely, being-true) is *something real* shared by everything that is (was, will be, could have been) and not simply a concept which refers to everything that there is, there was, there will be, and that could have been. Thereby, being (or being-true) is a sort of basic stuff of the metaphysical structure of each reality, which posess it in accordance with its own nature and peculiar mode of being. But whereas God *is* in the strictest sense of the term, any other entity is (something true) only insofar as it shares the being of God according to different degrees (cf. *De intelleccione Dei*, ch. 5, pp. 97-100; *De materia et forma*, ch. 6, p. 213; *Tractatus de universalibus*, ch. 4, p. 89; ch. 7, p. 130; ch. 12, p. 279). This version of monism/pantheism rests upon a *hypostasizing* approach to semantic – a sort of componential analysis where things substitute for lexemes and ontological properties for semantic features, as also his convictions that whatever is is a real proposition shows. As a consequence, paradoxically the world itself is, for Wyclif, intrinsically linguistic: a semiotic system where everything is at the same time a *veritas* and *the* natural sign of itself (and of anything else really identical to itself), so that the reality could be described as a language of things. Just the opposite of Ockham's nominalism (his polemical target), based on a sharp distinction between things as they exist in the extra-mental world and the various forms by means of which we think-of and talk-about them.

Finally, a curious thing: a few years after Wyclif's death, two authors influenced by his philosophical thought, the English William Penbygull and the German Johannes Scharpe, tried to solve

the God-being aporia. Penbygull, whose metaphysical system is closer to that of Wyclif, denies that the property of being more general implies natural priority. According to him being is a more general reality than God, and so superior to Him, but in spite of this fact God is clearly naturally prior and infinitely more perfect than the being itself (cf. his *De universalibus*, pp. 200-01). On the contrary, Scharpe distinguishes between *communicatio* (that is, generality) and *participatio* (that is, ontological participation). He considers the latter simply as a sub-case of the former, since in his view a reality x is shared (that is, participated) by a reality y iff: x is more general than y , and x is the cause of y . Therefore, being would be more general than God, but its reality is not shared by Him, as the *ens in communi* is not the cause of God, but just the reverse (cf. in particular his *Quaestio super universalia*, pp. 11 and 106-10).