GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

THE LOGIC OF REFORMATION:
THE METAPHYSICAL BASIS OF JOHN WYCLIF'S THEOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

I first heard of John Wyclif in the context of Wycliffe Bible Translators, an organization that has undertaken the task of translating the Bible into all of the world's languages.[1] Founded in 1942, Wycliffe Translators has no direct connection to the fourteenth-century Oxford don; it borrows his name because Wyclif is generally credited with instigating the first translation of the Latin Vulgate into Middle English vernacular. It is a testament to Wyclif's enduring legacy as a forerunner of the Protestant Reformation that a twentieth-century evangelical missionary agency understands itself as continuing a cause he championed.

Like most stories that have developed over centuries, Wyclif's has undergone some embellishment. The first generations of English Protestants saw in his travails with the fourteenth-century ecclesiastical establishment an archetype of their own struggle, and filled the gaps in the history of his life with something very much like the hagiography lavished upon the saints of the early Church. In 1548 John Bale described Wyclif as "the most strong Elias of his times" who was "the first after the loosening of Satan to shine the light of truth in that age of darkness." Bale went on to bestow upon Wyclif the epithet by which he would be known to later generations: the "morning star" of the Reformation.[2] John Foxe compiled an extensive chronicle of the acts of early Lollard preachers whom Wyclif supposedly trained and sent out clad in russet

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1. At the time of this writing, Wycliffe Bible Translators had identified 6860 distinct languages, of which at least some portion of Scripture had been translated into 2565.

2. John Bale in his *Illustrium majoris Britanniae scriptorum, hoc est, Angliae, Cambriae, ac Scotiae Summarium* appears to have been the first to invoke the phrase "morning star" in application to Wyclif in 1548. John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* is largely responsible for the portrayal of Lollards burned for heresy as continuing in the tradition of Christian martyrs. By the 1730's Daniel Neal had minted Wyclif the "morning star of the Reformation" in his *The History of the Puritans or Protestant Non-Conformists*. See Margaret Aston, "John Wycliffe's Reformation Reputation," *Past and Present* no. 30 (1965).

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robes. Despite the fact that Wyclif died peacefully from natural causes, Foxe even lists him first in his list of martyrs.[3]

However, it is not my purpose to evaluate the validity of early Protestants' claims on epistemological kinship with Wyclif. Certainly there are similarities between their theological positions. Just as certainly there was a strong motivation for those early rebels to find a historical precedent for the novelty of their rebellion, and Wyclif had already been blamed for the first native English movement of open religious dissent. I am interested in Wyclif's honorary and posthumous Protestantism only inasmuch as it has provided the avenue by which his memory has come down to the current day. He is remembered as a heresiarch and an instigator of rebellion, yet he spent most of his life studying and teaching at Oxford University. He was a scholastic metaphysician and theologian, and most of his extant writings are so couched in both Latin and scholastic jargon that they are only a little less accessible to the general public today than they were in his own time. Nevertheless, the austere doctor managed to create enough controversy both in life and death that his body was exhumed after nearly 40 years so that it could be burnt and his ashes scattered in the River Swift. His extant writings were purged from Oxford's libraries in 1409.[4] Wyclif's writings spread to Bohemia, and were influential with the leaders of what would become the Hussite Church. The accusation—very probably unfounded—that John Hus was sympathetic to Wyclif's views of the Eucharist was enough to earn him a death

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3. John Foxe, "Acts and Monuments of Matters Most Speciall and Memorable." The Variorum Edition. (hriOnline, Sheffield) http://www.hrionline.shef.ac.uk/foxe/ (accessed March 24, 2011). Foxe's 1563 edition contains a calendar associating various martyrs with days of the year. Wyclif's is the first name given for January 2nd; he is described as a "preacher and martyr."

4. David R. Holeton, "Wyclif's Bohemian Fate: A Reflection on the Contextualization of Wyclif in Bohemia," *Communio viatorum* 32, no. 4 (1989).

sentence from the Council of Constance in 1415.[5] Groups of religious non-conformists known as "Lollards," who traced their theological heritage to Wyclif were active in England throughout the fifteenth century.[6]

I am interested in the connection between Wyclif's life as a benign scholar and his reputation as a dangerous rebel, because I am fascinated by the prospect that ideas could be so thoroughly dangerous. There is no doubt that he was a divisive figure in his own day, but what might be called his career as a revolutionary barely spanned the last ten years of his life. At about the age of 50, Wyclif crossed from harmless metaphysical speculation into the much more tumultuous climate of theology and politics. When he had done so, his opinions generated immediate controversy.

Wyclif left scant autobiographical information in his writings, but one short passage from the beginning of his treatise *De Dominio Divinio*, written at roughly the same time as his transition into political theology, gives a fascinating insight into the don's motivations:

> Since any Christian and especially a theologian ought to die virtuously, because (just as was concluded by St. Augustine in On Christian Doctrine) *he will not be able to die badly who has lived well*, it is time for me for to devote whatever time remains in my life not so much to the speculative as to the practical, and to lean on virtue according to the measure which God will grant, in order that I might learn how to die happily.[7]

Herein I will demonstrate that several of Wyclif's most famous theological positions were direct applications of his prior metaphysical work. In my first chapter, I will describe Wyclif's basic metaphysical platform and locate his ideas within the context of late fourteenth-century Oxford.

5. Gordon Leff, "Wyclif and Hus," in *Wyclif in His Times*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 184.

6. Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

7. "Cum quilibet Christianus et specialiter theologus mori debeat virtuosus, quia (iuxta conclusionem beati Augustini in De Disciplina Christiana) *non poterit male mori qui bene vixerit*, tempus est mihi per totum residuum vite mee tam speculative quam practice, secundum mensuram quam Deus donaverit, inniti virtutibus, ut sic salubrius discam mori." John Wyclif, *De Dominio Divino Libri Tres*, ed. Reginald Lane Poole, (London: 1890), 1.

The subsequent three chapters are essentially three separate case studies, which demonstrate how Wyclif's metaphysical views influenced the development of those theologies for which he is still remembered. Chapter 2 will address Wyclif's views on the interrelationship of church and state, which simultaneously earned him the protection of high ranking officials in the English government and embittered many more against him. Chapter 3 will examine his theology of Holy Scripture, which was uniquely colored by his realist metaphysical stance, and itself effected a galvanization of Wyclif's increasingly bold radicalism. Finally, Chapter 4 will detail the don's most controversial foray into speculative theology, his doctrine of the Eucharist, which more than anything else he ever wrote cost him both friends and political support.

Few periods in Western history are as thoroughly alien to the modern mind as that inhabited by the late medieval scholastics. Their disputations on subjects as seemingly pedantic as the number of angels able to stand on the head of a pin have become cliché examples of the stillborn narcissism that can take hold when the mind is kept insulated from practical concerns. It is enticing to discover Wyclif in the mainstream of this group supposedly devoid of intellectual vitality. Despite his reputation as an instigator of rebellion and reform, he was very much a man of the schools. He wrote exclusively in Latin, and revered Aristotle as a greater teacher than many of the saints. After Scripture, he accepted no authority greater than St. Augustine, and like many of his contemporaries he never seems to have encountered a problem so simple it couldn't be made more complicated. In short, Wyclif was a product of his times. In that capacity, he demonstrates to us that there were undercurrents of devotion and reform in an age that seems from our perspective to have been so nearly dead and ossified.

In many ways, Wyclif represents the best of the scholastic period. His writings give voice to the great ideas that had been developing over centuries in the medieval schools. His life casts a

spotlight on the possibility for dangerous ideas to threaten the very foundations of medieval Europe's socio-political system. Perhaps more than anything else, however, Wyclif's work demonstrates the potential of the Gospel to manifest and assert itself in surprising ways, for Wyclif almost certainly did not set out to become a rebel when he began his study of logic and metaphysics.

CHAPTER 1 – METAPHYSICS

The debate between nominalists and realists was a central issue in fourteenth-century thought.[1] Within the context of John Wyclif's life, it is useful to characterize nominalism as a critique of traditional Augustinian Neo-Platonism, and realism as a conservative reaction against that critique.[2] As with any dichotomy made out of something as fluid as human thought, there is a certain amount of artifice in the distinction. One does not find nominalists devoid of realist tendencies, nor realists who are not influenced by the approach and methods of the *Via Moderna*.[3] Thomas Aquinas is famous for his attempt to synthesize reason and faith (a realist's undertaking), but ended by dividing the two into complementary spheres (a nominalist's conclusion).[4] William of Ockham is often presented as the father and chief exponent of the nominalist school, but he maintained a sort of conceptual-realism as regards the objective reality of the objects of mental cognition. Wyclif himself is usually represented as the archetypical realist, but this realism is by his own admission a reaction against what he perceives as the dangers of the nominalist position.[5] Though Wyclif's realism is galvanized by his distaste for

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1. Robson notes that it can be misleading to characterize the polarity between nominalists and realists as the sole issue of fourteenth-century thought, and suggests that the underlying issues that provoked the realist and nominalist solutions are at least as important as those solutions themselves. See J. A. Robson, *Wyclif and the Oxford Schools*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought (Cambridge University Press, 1961), 18-24.

2. Augustinian realism was enjoying something of a revival at Oxford in the second half on the fourteenth century. Wyclif himself seems to have been both a product and the chief exponent of this resurgence. See William J. Courtenay, *Schools and Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 307.

3. I follow Heiko Oberman's identification of the *Via Moderna* with the nominalistic school of the late medieval period as contrasted with the tradition Augustinianism of the *Via Antiqua*. See Heiko Augustinus Oberman, "Via Antiqua and Via Moderna : Late Medieval Prolegomena to Early Reformation Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48, no. 1 (1987).

4. Robson, *Wyclif and the Oxford Schools*, 19.

5. The nearly unique exception to the view the Wyclif was an extreme realist is an article by Michael Wilks originally published in 1969 in which he undertakes to present Wyclif not as an extreme realist, but as a moderate Christian Aristotelian. The argument has gone unreferenced and unanswered so far as I have been able to discover.

nominalism, his arguments must still address its particular concerns. In this way the dialogue between nominalists and realists is a conceptual singularity; the one cannot be described apart from the other.

1.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The disagreement between realists and nominalists centers around the concept of the *universal*. A universal may be defined ontologically as a thing shared in common by multiple individuals, or linguistically as a thing predicated upon multiple entities simultaneously.[6] Thus one might speak of "the planet Venus" referring to one bright point in the sky and "the planet Mars" referring to another. Likewise one may truly say that "Mars is a planet" or that "Venus is a planet." The word "planet" may be predicated upon Mars, Venus and a number of other celestial bodies, but to what sort of thing does the phrase "to be a planet" refer? Put another way, what is it that these bodies share in common that makes them all planets and not stars? What is it that makes true the predication of the term "planet" upon their proper names? The answer, according to medieval metaphysics, is the universal "planet" or "planetness" that is somehow "shared in" by all things properly known as planets. That entity—whatever sort of thing it may be—is the referent of the term "planet" in the sentence "Mars is a planet."[7] It is Mars' participation in that referent that guarantees the truth of the predication. Thus the function of universals is defined both by the requirements of human language to name the similarities that

See Michael Wilks, "The Early Oxford Wyclif: Papaist or Nominalist?," in *Wyclif: Political Ideas and Practice*, ed. Anne Hudson (Oxbow Books, 2000).

6. P. V. Spade traces the ontological definition of the universal back to Boethius' commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*, and the linguistic approach to Peter Abelard. See Spade's Introduction in John Wyclif, *Tractatus De Universalibus*, ed. Ivan Mueller, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

7. By "entity" I mean only a discernable referent of the term. For some, a universal term may reference only the state of affairs holding between mental concepts.

the mind discerns between individuals, and by the impulse of epistemology to find substance in those observations.

It is much less controversial to describe the function of universals than to characterize their nature. In his *Isagoge,* Porphyry was wary enough of the debate to forego a direct discussion of ontology.[8] Those who followed him largely ignored his caution. Thus the question "what sort of things are universals?" was central to medieval philosophical dialog. *Realists* posited some kind of metaphysical substratum to the universe wherein universals existed as real entities distinct from the particular individuals sharing in them. These types of universals are known as *universalia ante res*. Conversely, *nominalists* denied the prior existence of any real thing shared in common among individuals. Instead they held that nothing was truly universal beyond the mere linguistic *term* representing a particular individual. Such universals, whose existence follows after the individuals upon which they are predicated and depends upon an act of mental abstraction, are called *universalia post res*. A mediating view between allowed for the real existence of universals as a common form shared among individuals, but denied any separate existence of the form apart from its individual supposits. These universal forms were not understood as distinct things from the individuals in which they inhered, but were supposed to be *really indentical* with them. Universals of this sort were known as *universalia in rebus* and allow for a sort of moderate realism that avoids some of the difficulties of postulating a separate metaphysical substratum.

William of Ockham famously challenged the necessity of a real ontology for universals. Ockham was concerned with ontological parsimony, a view summarized in his dictum "Entities

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8. "For example, I shall beg off saying anything about (a) whether genera and species are real or are situated in bare thoughts alone, (b) whether as real they are bodies or incorporeals, and (c) whether they are separated or in sensibles and have their reality in connection with them. Such business is profound, and requires another, greater investigation" from Porphyry's *Isagoge* in Paul Vincent Spade, *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of* Universals*: Porphyry, Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Ockham* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 1.

are not to be multiplied beyond necessity." He objected to both the concepts of *universalia ante res* and *universalia in rebus*. Ockham found the former to be an unnecessary extravagance whose existence added little value to semantic theory. His critique of moderate realism was aimed at the notion of the extramental existence of *universalia in rebus*. He objected that for a universal to be shared in common among many individuals while simultaneously being identical to particular individuals entailed a logical contradiction. Ockham averred instead that universals were mere objects of the mind's intellection. He argued that the truth of the statement "A is a B" need not be dependent upon the inherence within A of some universal B that was somehow really distinct from A, and yet essentially predicated upon it. It would suffice to assume that there existed some individual in the world that could be represented by either of the terms A or B. For example, the statement "The human person is an animal" is true because there exists some entity who might on one occasion be called a "human" and on another an "animal." Thus for Ockham, predication is purely a grammatical construction. Nothing is predicated except terms, and nothing is really shared in common by distinct individuals. Universality is only a product of the mind's intuitive knowledge. However, because reality serves as the immediate cause of our conceptual framework so that we may have confidence that the world "out there" is not wholly other than we perceive it.[9]

The realism of Walter Burley is of particular relevance to the development of Wyclif's metaphysics, both because of the former's direct influence on the formation of the latter's realist ontology and also because Ockham's critique of moderate realism was aimed primarily at Burley's early views.[10] Burley initially espoused a form of moderate realism that asserted the

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9. Philotheus Boehner, "The Realistic Conceptualism of William of Ockham," *Traditio* 4, (1946).

10. Ibid.

real, extramental existence of *universalia in rebus*, but revised his views in response to Ockham's attacks. He sought to avoid the pitfalls of moderate realism by postulating an elaborate inner metaphysical structure of reality wherein all sensible entities were to be understood as macroscopic constructs of metaphysical objects. These macro-objects were the unions of primary substances with a number of categorical forms (*universalia ante res*), which adhered "around" the primary substance. Burley considered the primary substance itself to be identical neither with the categorical forms, nor the entire macro-object itself. Thus he sought to avoid Ockham's observation of the logical contradiction inherent in making *universalia in re* the direct referents of generic terms.[11]

The adherence of these accidental forms was the basis of Burley's theory of *real predication*, upon which Wyclif is generally considered to have based his own theory of predication.[12] According to Burley, linguistic predication is based upon the reality of metaphysical predication. The macro-objects that comprise Burley's universe may be understood as complex states of affairs. Whiteness is really predicated upon Socrates when the concrete accident "this whiteness" adheres with the primary substance of Socrates. For Burley, real predications were the immediate significants of linguistic utterances.[13]

1.2 THE PLACE OF UNIVERSALS IN WYCLIF'S REALISM

Universals take the preeminent role in Wyclif's metaphysics. Though he embraced nominalism in his youth, at some point in his early academic career he underwent a sharp

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11. Alessandro D. Conti, "Ontology in Walter Burley's Last Commentary in the Ars Vetus," *Franciscan Studies* (1990): 140.

12. Alessandro D. Conti, "Analogy and the Formal Distinction: On the Logical Basis of Wyclif's Metaphysics," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 6, (1997): 140.

13. Conti, "Ontology in Walter Burley's Last Commentary in the Ars Vetus," 125.

conversion to philosophical realism. Indeed, Wyclif advocates for the importance of the real universal with the zeal of a convert; his existing writings are peppered with barbs against the "doctors of signs", whose ignorance about the nature of universals he believed threatened the integrity of the Church. Indeed, Wyclif claimed that all moral error could be traced to a lack of proper understanding of universals.[14] While his views developed over time, I take his writings from volumes IV and V of his *Summa De Ente* – the *Purgens Errors Circa Universalia* and *Tractatus De Universalibus* – as representative of his developed position on the issue. The *Tractatus De Universalibus* in particular has been responsible for something of a revolution in Wyclif scholarship in the last 25 years. Though it is now generally recognized as the most important and mature of Wyclif's philosophical works, it was unavailable to most scholars until Ivan Mueller's critical edition was published in 1985.[15] Since its publication, it has become possible for scholars to go beyond broad generalizations about the extravagance of Wyclif's realism and describe the mechanics of his metaphysical system.[16]

Despite the importance of universal realism in Wyclif's metaphysics, he does not argue for the self-subsistence of universal forms apart from the particular entities in which they adhere. He seems to have been as aware of Ockham's critique of the reality of extramental universals as Burley had been when he revised his own realism. Wyclif describes his own project as an

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14. "Thus, beyond doubt, intellectual and emotional error about universals is the cause of all the sin that reigns in the world. That more universal goods are better than private goods is clear from this, that what is more universal is prior by nature to its inferior. The inferior is ordained for the maintenance of the universal, for it is something naturally prior, and a greater object of concern to God, that there should be human beings at all, that that there should be this particular man, and so in other cases." Wyclif, *De Universalibus*, 22.

15. Williell Thomson, *The Latin Writings of John Wyclyf* (Toronto, CA: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983), 21.

16. For example, Gordon Leff began a generally disparaging evaluation of Wyclif's theological positions by describing the extremism of Wyclif's metaphysics: "As we have said Wyclif became a realist, and one of such extremity that he believed in the self-subsistence of universal concepts…" See Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages: The Relation of Heterodoxy to Dissent, C. 1250-C. 1450* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), 501.

attempt to find a mediating position between the nominalists' ontological parsimony and the more traditional realist approach to the reality of universals: "I, for my part, take a middle way, reconciling the extremes; I agree with the first opinion that every universal is particular, and vice versa though the two are formally distinct from each other."[17]

Wyclif is concerned to preserve the meaningfulness of language. He is convinced that by describing universal forms as mere objects of the mind's intellection, nominalists have severed the connection between human language and reality, and likewise therefore between understanding and truth. His "middle way" is an attempt to establish the extramental reality of universals without positing a separate ontology for universal forms. To do so, Wyclif develops a complex metaphysic involving a novel application of Robert Grosseteste's hierarchy of being, an expanded system of classification of the notion of a universal, a modification of Water Burley's notion of real predication, and a refinement and reapplication of Duns Scotus' formal distinction. I will briefly summarize each element of Wyclif's unique philosophical synthesis in order to demonstrate how he arrives at his goal of being able to say that the universal concept is really identical with a particular entity, even though it is formally distinct from all individuals and founded ultimately not in human intellection, but in the mind of God.

1.2.1 Universals According to Order of Being

Wyclif lists in one place five, and in another three, different types of universals. These categories are descriptive, rather than prescriptive. The different types of categorization highlight the structure of his metaphysical system and the role of universals within it. He borrows the five-

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17. Wyclif, *De Universalibus*, 28.

fold classification from Grosseteste.[18] It begins with (1) the eternal forms or ideas existing in the mind of God. These forms are indestructible and coeternal with God. The second sort (2) is a peculiarity of medieval cosmology, and refers to those notions of God's mind as they are reflected in His agentive powers though which He administers the world. Next (3) are the common forms shared among particular individuals, such as the human species or the genus "animal." These are roughly equivalent to the standard *universalia in rebus*, and are mirrored in the human mind's conceptual schema of reality. (4) The universal concepts through which the mind understands the world are constructed by the mind's intellective faculties through a process of abstraction from individuals. Nevertheless, these *universalia post res* are in isomorphic correspondence with the *universalia in rebus* upon which they are based. The close correspondence between these middle layers of reality are important to Wyclif's epistemology, since they guarantee the truthfulness of our perceptions and the meaningfulness of our thoughts. (5) The lowest level of what Wyclif considers universals are the linguistic signs and other symbols given to universal concepts. These he is willing to call universals only in the equivocal sense, and remarks derisively that they are the only kind of universals the nominalists consider to exist.[19]

Many scholars have read a tendency toward determinism into Wyclif's hierarchy of being, for if one begins with the notion that all entities have their highest level of being as eternal concepts in the mind of God, one can not seem to escape the conclusion that God perceives creation as a fixed set of objects. God must have definite foreknowledge of every action committed by every created being for all eternity, and none could have ever acted differently

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18. Anthony Kenny, "The Realism of the *De Universalibus*," in *Wyclif in His Times*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 23.

19. Wyclif, *De Universalibus*, 13.

unless God's own being had been other than it is. Thus Wyclif has been accused of effectively eliminating the possibility of free will.[20] More recently, Anthony Kenny has rejected the notion that Wyclif went further than his scholastic contemporaries in denying human free will. Kenny points out that, far from denying altogether the free agency of human will, Wyclif seems to have gone out of his way to protect it by defining as many as nine different variations of contingency and necessity entailed by God's relationship to creation.[21]

Determinism is not a distinctive feature of Wyclif's theology, as he seems to have made similar assumptions about the omniscience and omnipotence of God's being as did many of the scholastics, and did as much as or more than others to attempt to carve out some space for the freedom of created wills. Whether or not he did so convincingly or successfully is immaterial. Determinism was not the motivation for his theological radicalism. Wyclif did draw unique conclusions about the immutability of categorical being that I will argue were influential in his doctrines of Scripture and the Eucharist, but neither of these depend directly on determinism.

1.2.2 Universals According to Metaphysical Function

Beyond the five-fold classification, Wyclif further categorizes universals by their function role within his metaphysical system. This set of three categories does not contradict the five-fold classification already described. Rather, the three categories of universal functionality describe the interrelationship of entities and the means of universality by which the entity is considered universal.

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20. Robson, *Wyclif and the Oxford Schools*, 155.

21. Anthony Kenny, "Realism and Determinism in the Early Wyclif," in *From Ockham to Wyclif*, ed. Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks, Studies in Church History (Oxford: Published for the Ecclesiastical History Society by B. Blackwell, 1987).

Members of the first set are called universals *by community* because they are shared in common by other entities. Humanity is a universal by community with regard to individual humans. The genus "animal" is a universal by community with regard to all individual animals.[22] Such a characterization was commonplace in scholastic thought. The novelty of Wyclif's use of the category becomes apparently only when it is integrated with his entire metaphysical system. Wyclif stresses the reality of universals by community so that he maintains there exists a real entity—which we call "humanity"—that exists in common among all human individuals. We recognize different human individuals as human because the universal form of humanity adheres among them in common; the being of the entity "humanity" in no way depends upon human recognition of its adherence.

The second functional classification consists of universals *by representation*. These are universal by means of representing or signifying multiple individuals in one-way or another. On the most basic level, the arbitrary signs of language are universals by representation, because they signify various distinct individuals. More esoterically, Wyclif describes God as a universal of representation for the whole of creation, since "God most distinctly represents everything and is the intellectual of ideal being of every creature."[23] This illustrates that what he terms universals by representation are not necessarily identical with those members of the lowest order of being, which are called universals only equivocally.

Wyclif calls the members of his third category of universal functionality universals *by causality*. These are perhaps the most novel innovation of his realism. He considers any entity that directly or indirectly causes another to be universal of causality with respect to its effects.

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22. By the Aristotelian taxonomic system "animal" is a genus.

23. Wyclif, *De Universalibus*, 1.

Wyclif cites God as the first cause of creation and therefore a universal by causality with respect to creation.[24] Furthermore, it seems that every entity involved in the chain of creation is a universal of causality with respect to all entities it affects. Species and genera considered as *universalia in rebus* act as universals of causality with respect to the mental notions that reflect them.

Stephen Lahey has recently argued that universals by causality provide the connective tissue that joined Wyclif's political theology to his realist metaphysic. In short, Wyclif believed that God's lordship over creation functioned as the universal cause of human lordship relations.[25] The correspondence indicated a natural similarity between the two concepts that allowed Wyclif to base his argument on the ideal nature of human political structure on his theology of divine lordship. I will treat the topic in detail in the next chapter.

1.3 REAL PREDICATION

The core of Wyclif's philosophy lies in his doctrine of real predication, and the correspondence between real propositions and the articulations of human language. If universal entities serve as the lexicon of the real propositions, then the varying types of predication constitution the grammar of reality itself. As with Burley, these real propositions are the true significants of all linguistic utterances.[26] Hence their ontological reality is essential to the truth of human language. As indicated already, truth itself is the Wyclif's central concern.

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24. Ibid.

25. Stephen E Lahey, *Philosophy and Politics in the Thought of John Wyclif* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

26. Kenny, "The Realism of the *De Universalibus*," 18.

For Wyclif, reality was never simple. Complexity obtains at every level of his metaphysical world view. The relationships adhering between entities constitute a complex state of affairs that lies behind sensible reality. A table is not simply a table, but rather a place where one's family eats, the remains of a tree, a joining of some universal idea of "tableness" with its raw materials, an expression of existence itself and thereby a reflection of the divine nature. Objects to which one may refer simply, one may likewise refer in a complex manner. For Wyclif this complexity is no mere linguistic artifact, but a reflection of the internal nature of reality.[27] Human language—and therefore human thought— spontaneously models itself on reality. In his view, then, language may serve as an appropriate window into the truth of things, provided one has been properly instructed in philosophy.

The subject-predicate distinction of language is a mirror of the real predication that lies behind language. Wyclif takes his idea of real predication largely from Walter Burley.[28] In Wyclif's version of the theory, a particular object really exists as a sort of metaphysical sentence. The subject may be considered as the common name or non-complex way of referring to a given entity, whose metaphysical components are all predicated upon the subject by means of a series of identity relationships. A metaphysical entity literally "says" its own being. Every true thing that may be said or thought of a particular subject is really predicated upon that subject's being.

Wyclif describes three different types of predication: *formal*, *essential*, and *habitudinal*. These are identity relationships holding between metaphysical entities. One may think of them as a sort of metaphysical overlap. It is important that Wyclif intends these categories to be descriptive of the reality of real predication. His definitions do not prescriptively define all sorts

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27. Wyclif, *De Universalibus*, 2.

28. Ibid.

of predication that exist, but are rather intended to describe relations that are known to obtain between entities.[29] As with his three-fold classification of universals, it is possible that certain predications fit in more than one category.

Formal predication is the most straightforward and familiar among those that Wyclif sets out. It describes that situation in which a universal form adheres within a subject. It is typified by the sentence "Peter is musical," whereby we understand that the universal form of "musicality" adheres within the individual referred to as Peter. An entity's quiddity—or what-is-it-ness—is also formally predicated upon it. So an individual donkey is formally predicated by "donkey," "animal," "being" etc.

Habitudinal predication—also called relational predication—describes that situation in which the subject experiences a relational change without undergoing any essential change itself. As example, it is observed that "taller than Aristotle" is predicated of Socrates at one time, and "shorter than Socrates" is truly predicated later. The change need not be due to any alteration in Socrates, for Aristotle may simply have gotten taller. Similarly, Wyclif understands human predication of attributes such as "Lord" and "Creator" upon God to be habitudinal in nature. God within himself does not change.[30]

Essential predication is the most esoteric of those Wyclif describes. After stating that essential predication is that in which the same essence is both the subject and the predicate, he offers little help with apparently contradictory examples such as "God is human" and "the universal is particular." What then are we to make of statements such as "humanity is a donkey"? Certainly the same essence—animality—adheres in both the subject and predicate. Yet Wyclif

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29. Ibid., 25.

30. Ibid., 5.

explicitly states that he considers this a false proposition.[31] It is regrettable that Wyclif was not clearer in his explanation of essential predication, since it seems to do most of the heavy lifting in his metaphysical mechanic.[32] It is this mode of identity relationship that accomplishes half the task for which he has undertaken his treatise on universals: the establishment of a sort of identity between universals and particular beings.

In his introduction to Kenny's English translation of the *Tractatus De Universalibus,* P. V. Spade attempts to elucidate Wyclif's definition of essential predication by suggesting that we should add to its criteria the requirement that two essences be united in some really existing concrete basis (a *supposit*). If one accepts this requirement, it becomes clear that "God is human" because the divine essence and the human essence were both united in the Person of Christ.[33] Conversely, it is not true that "Humanity is a donkey" because there exists no individual that unites the essences of donkeyness with humanity. Robert Gaskin agrees that Wyclif's model of essential predication is difficult to interpret, but disagrees with Spade's proposed clarification. He argues that appending the requirement that two essences be united in a common supposit merely changes Wyclif's own definition from incomplete to altogether superfluous, since it will require an exhaustive knowledge of all the individuals in creation to discern whether or not to entities are essentially identical.[34] Gaskin appeals instead to linguistic supposition theory, arguing that "A human is a donkey" (false and not an example of essential predication) and "A

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31. Ibid.

32. Kenny, "The Realism of the *De Universalibus*," 21.

33. See P. V. Spade's introduction to the second volume of Wyclif, *De Universalibus*, vii-xlvii.

34. Richard Gaskin, "John Wyclif and the Theory of Complexly Signifiables.," *Vivarium* 47, no. 1 (2009): 82.

human is what a donkey is" (i.e. an animal, true and an example of essential predication) should be understood as referring to two different types of real proposition.

Gaskin admits that such a distinction is one Wyclif himself was unwilling to make, but sees no other way to preserve the usefulness of his essential identity. I am more inclined to agree with Spade that Wyclif had in mind a descriptive identity rather than a prescriptive one. It does not seem to me that Wyclif meant to provide an *intensional* definition of essential predication, but only to highlight types of identities he perceived as holding among entities in the world, and the idea that one need refer back to the particular grammar of a linguistic utterance to differentiate between real propositions seems to undercut the very heart of Wyclif's notion of real predication.[35]

1.4 FORMAL AND ESSENTIAL DISTINCTION

Wyclif's reality consists of complex metaphysical entities whose structures overlap to varying degrees. At the most general level, all entities share collectively in the reality of "being."[36] Real predication describes the relationships between differing metaphysical entities. These relationships are characterized by a hierarchy of distinctions that describe the nature of overlap of metaphysical components. Wyclif describes three different types of distinctions that hold between entities.[37] The first he describes as a real and essential distinction. This describes

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35. An *intensional* definition delineates the members of a category by means of a rule. This is in opposition to an *extensional* definition, which defines the members of a category by listing them exhaustively. My contention is that Wyclif provided neither type of definition with regard to essential predication, providing instead a necessary but not sufficient condition intended to highlight an aspect what he believed was important. Here I agree with P. V. Spade against Robert Gaskin.

36. Kenny notes that existence and being are not identical concepts for Wyclif. Particular existence is only one sense in which an entity may be considered to "be." Anthony Kenny, *Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

37. Wyclif actually gives different accounts of the type and number of distinctions in different writings. His most mature schema is found in *De Universalibus*. A partially parallel, but inconsistent description is given in his

two entities that do not adhere together within a singular essence. An example would be Socrates and Plato, who are distinct individual essences and do not collectively constitute anything more concrete than themselves. The second, and more elusive distinction Wyclif refers to as "real, but not essential." He offers as examples memory, reason and will, which adhere together within the human soul. These three powers of the soul are essentially all identical with the soul itself, but with regard to one another they are really distinct. This is also how Wyclif describes the distinction between the three Persons of the Trinity. He considers the Father, Son and Holy Spirit each to be identical with the divine nature, but still really distinct from one another. The third distinction is the formal distinction, which in Wyclif's own words describes the relationship whereby two entities differ from one another by means of a form. He appears to have in mind here the distinction between the general and specific, such as is found in the distinction between Abraham Lincoln and humanity as a species. While essential predication allows Wyclif to claim the identity between the universal and particular, it is the formal distinction that allows Wyclif to preserve their difference:

> In a similar manner the contradictory remarks of later philosophers are to be reconciled. Some of them deny that universals are distinct from particulars, and others say that no universal is particular. What the first mean is that no universal has any essence by itself outside of particulars, as they imagined Plato to say. The second group meant, correctly, that no universal is formally a particular in respect to the aspects which make them universal, because that would mean that being able to be common was being unable to be common, which is a contradiction.[38]

This is the heart of Wyclif's metaphysics. Regardless as to whether or not he was successful, he believed he had managed to articulate a realist position that was safe from the nominalist critique

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Purgans errores circa universalia. See S. Harrison Thomson, "A `Lost' Chapter of Wyclif's Summa De Ente," *Speculum* 4, no. 3 (1929).

38. Wyclif, *De Universalibus*, 31.

of ontological extravagance. In doing so he employed an impressive mastery of the most sophisticated devices available to scholastic thought.

1.5 ANALYSIS

The modern reader will likely find Wyclif's relentless efforts to shore up the fault Ockham perceived in realist ontologies to be confusing. Why could such an obscure point matter so much? How could someone honestly claim that all moral error could be traced back to a philosophical point of disagreement on an obscure topic most people would never even consider? In part the following three chapters are an attempt to answer the first question. As to the second, Wyclif never had in mind that the uneducated should be schooled in the reality of universal forms. His contention was with those who understood his terms well enough to know that he disagreed with them. He believed that an improper understanding of universals on the part of theologians led to the articulation of bad theology. In particular, he believed that nominalist incredulity as to the extramental reality of universals resulted in an improper emphasis on sensible reality. This, he argued, would manifest itself in a love of inferior goods over superior ones. For example, he offered that it was the preference of individual humans over humanity itself that led to the sins of nepotism and cronyism, wherein people preferred their family and friends over the stranger.[39] The more general the object, the closer it was to God, who was the most general and highest good of all.

Wyclif worried that the nominalists had severed human life from its intrinsic correspondence with the divine order, and that the resulting chaos was made manifest in multitudinous ways. In the next three chapters I will elaborate on three of those areas in which

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39. Ibid., 22.

Wyclif's criticism has historically made the most impact. These examples are by no means exhaustive, and I have overlooked many worthy focal points of Wyclif's theology. However, I believe my selection will grant the reader an understanding into the complexity of the relationship between Wyclif's metaphysics and his practical critiques. In each instance it will be seen that his realist impulse is at the heart of his challenge to the status quo of his day. Following a rough chronology of the order in which the don developed his views, I will turn first to politics.

CHAPTER 2 – POLITICAL THEORY

John Wyclif first began to upset the ecclesiastical hierarchy when he started writing about the relationship between the church and the state.[1] In the late fourteenth century, church officials were often embedded within the medieval system of vassalage. Although some had begun to challenge the traditional fusion between bishoprics and their temporal investments, nearly one-third of English lands were still held by clerical officers. Building upon rhetoric that had originally been crafted by supporters of the papal hierocracy, Wyclif laid out an argument that justified the right of secular power to seize ecclesiastical holdings within its dominion. Relations between England and the Avignon popes had never been friendly. Wyclif's arguments coming as they did in the midst of the Hundred Years' War and only a few years before the Great Schism, found a ready audience among some members of the English aristocracy. Most notably, John of Gaunt seems to have taken an interest in the Oxford don sometime in the early 1370's. Gaunt's patronage afforded Wyclif the political cover he needed to escape immediate censure, and allowed him time and space to develop his more radical doctrines. Largely because of his involvement with Gaunt, and also owing to the perennial cynicism surrounding political debates, recent scholars have called into question the motivation behind Wyclif's unorthodox political advocacies. Some have cast him as a political shill who acted out of anger at having been passed over for promised promotions.[2]

It is difficult if not impossible to read back into the psychology of a man who died nearly 600 years ago, let alone one like Wyclif who left so few autobiographical details in his extant

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1. Throughout this paper, I use the term "Church" with a capital 'C' to refer to any definite entity, such as the institutional (i.e. Roman Catholic) Church or the universal Church supposed by Wyclif's metaphysics. The miniscule 'church' I reserve for adjectival phrases (e.g. church officials) and those few occasions on which I refer to an indefinite or local church body.

2. K. B. McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity*, Men and Their Times (London: The English Universities Press Ltd., 1952), 55.

writings. That said, I intend in this chapter to demonstrate that there exists a demonstrable link between Wyclif's life as a realist metaphysician, and his more infamous career as a political polemicist. Simply put, Wyclif interpreted the political landscape of his time very much through the philosophical lens he'd already crafted. There is no disconnection between his realism and his political ideology.

In the first and second sections, I will describe the historical context of Wyclif's involvement in politics. As already indicated, the 1370's were a tumultuous decade in an already troubled century for England. Neither Wyclif's radicalism nor the debate behind its motivations may be easily understood in isolation from the ongoing struggle for political power between the papacy and young nation-states in the late medieval period. In the third section, I will discuss Wyclif's doctrine of lordship and its ramifications for ecclesiology and the relationship between church and state. In the fourth section I will review and summarize scholarly debate from the past century that has centered on the connection—or lack thereof—between Wyclif's metaphysics and his politics. Finally, in the fifth section I will summarize my case for the consistency of Wyclif's political and philosophical positions. I will demonstrate that far from his life as a political theologian being at odds with his scholastic origins, Wyclif's metaphysics is deeply imbedded in every important aspect of his discourse on lordship. Indeed, he could not have written what he did had he not been such a thoroughgoing realist.

2.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *DOMINIUM*

The history behind Wyclif's political theology is essentially a history of the term *dominium*. The Latin word is typically translated into English as "dominion" or "lordship", and in its broadest sense connotes roughly the same concept: ownership, right of use, right of administration, natural lordship, etc. Wyclif used the word to describe the foundations of God's

administration over creation, the authority of the Church and the power of temporal rulers, but he spoke into a discourse that stretched back for centuries. By the end of the medieval period, the temporal power of the papacy was waning. The pope had been unable to effectively counterbalance the political might of Europe's burgeoning nation-states. In situations where the interests of the Church conflicted with the will of local rulers, debate often turned on the question of whether the pope's spiritual authority extended into the physical world. Proponents of either side sought philosophical and theological backing for their positions, and the resulting polemics constituted an extended discourse on the nature, implications and boundaries of *dominium*.

The history of *dominium* in Christian political discourse goes back to Augustine, who wrote concerning human lordship that it was antithetical to nature for one person to have dominion over another.[3] For the Bishop of Hippo, God's was the only true *dominium*. The state of humanity since the Fall necessitated human government, but that was a concession to human weakness and sin. Augustine himself never drew the conclusion that human government was rendered thereby illegitimate, but his ideas invited others to conclude that legitimate human authority depended on supernatural endorsement. Kings derive their right to govern only from the grace of God, and more particularly from His earthly representative: the pope. Charlemagne's coronation by Pope Leo III is the archetypical example of this mode of understanding lordship. Throughout the middle ages, this model was encouraged by popes and tacitly acknowledged by rulers who from it derived legitimacy in the eyes of the Christian populace.

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3. Augustine, *City of God,* bk. 19, ch. 15.

By the thirteenth century the Church had become wealthy and politically powerful. Bishoprics were often considered indissoluble from feudal office, so that a newly consecrated bishop simultaneously became a vassal of some regional lord and an overseer of the Church. Ecclesiastical offices were bought and sold or given away as political favors. Clerical absenteeism was a common complaint, as many men pursued church offices in order to collect money from tithes and boost their families' prestige. In the midst of this, many called for radical reform and a return to the ideals of primitive Christianity.[4] One such reform movement was called the Friars Minor, or Franciscans, after its founder St. Francis of Assisi.

It was the Friars Minor, who set out originally to live a simple life of poverty in the tradition of the apostles, who provoked the development of the concept of *dominium* that Wyclif employed in his attack on the Church's temporal holdings. The Franciscans articulated an explanation of their order's rule that differentiated their calling of apostolic poverty from the monastic common life traditionally practiced by Christian ascetics. They claimed to have divested themselves of all legal rights to property, whereas in the traditional model those rights continued to be held in common by members of a community. All goods donated to the Franciscan order theoretically continued to be owned either by their donors or else by the pope, with the friars exercising a proxy right of use. Franciscans argued that their practice was in imitation of that manner of life that had been practiced by Christ and his apostles.[5]

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4. A document called the *Donation of Constantine*, which recorded the endowment by the Emperor Constantine of the Western portion of the Roman Empire to Pope Sylvester I, was accepted as authentic throughout the middle ages. Though the document was later shown to be a forgery, it served as a focal point for critics of the Church's worldliness. For many—Wyclif included—the donation was the point at which the Church had begun to lose its way.

5. Bonaventure argued that Christ and the apostles had practiced a "double profession." The first and superior entailed the divestment of all property rights and a physical dependence on the use of whatever goods others would lend them. The second was the common life represented by Judas' moneybag, which served as a model for the institutional Church. James Doyne Dawson, "Richard Fitzralph and the Fourteenth-Century Poverty Controversy," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 34, no. 3 (1983): 316-328.

The Franciscans claimed to mean no disrespect for the institutional Church as they sought to legitimate the uniqueness of their order. Indeed, Pope Nicolas IV officially accepted their claim of following in the tradition of apostolic poverty and the legal explanation that they had renounced all claim on property while retaining only "simple use."[6] However, over the next generation the dramatic growth in the Franciscan ranks came to be seen as a threat to the established ecclesiastical hierarchy. Indeed, the notion that the Franciscans practiced a higher and separate way of life seems to imply they were a different sect altogether from the secular Church.

In 1302, Giles of Rome, an Augustinian friar, wrote *De Potestate Ecclesiastica* in defense of the universal authority of the Roman pontiff. In the tract he developed a theology of *dominium* that would color the next century of political discussion. Though Giles wrote to support Pope Boniface VIII in a dispute with Phillip IV of France, his rhetoric was also aimed at the Franciscan conception of apostolic poverty as a purer way of following Christ. Whereas the Franciscans saw Christ's instructions to take "neither a staff, nor a bag, nor bread, nor money" as the unction for their practice of apostolic poverty, Giles explained that this commandment had been given by Christ merely in order to train the apostles while he was still with them. Once Christ had departed physical possessions became commensurate with the Church's mission.[7]

For Giles, there was no real distinction between the natural, prelapsarian species of lordship the Franciscans had claimed to practice, and the political or civil lordship held by feudal lords. Civil rulers on behalf of the Church held temporal authority, but it was completely

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6. *Simplex usus facti* – a term invented by the Franciscans to refer to the mode of use excluding all legal rights. See ibid., 321.

7. See Luke 9:1-6 for Christ's instructions for the preaching journey. For Giles' take on the instructions see Aegidius Romanus, *Giles of Rome on Ecclesiastical Power: The De Ecclesiastica Potestate of Aegidius Romanus*, ed. R. W. Dyson, trans. R. W. Dyson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1986), 41-42.

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subservient to the spiritual power wielded by the Church. The pope, as the head of the Church was the *de facto* monarch of all Christendom.[8] The authority of church prelates was inherently superior to the authority of civil rulers.

Giles' treatise did two novel things that shaped Wyclif's use of the term *dominium*: (1) it described God's grace—albeit mediated by the pope's authority—as the universal font of all human *dominium* and, (2) it described property relations as a species of lordship, so that frameworks borrowed from traditional discussion about civil authority now became relevant to the dialogue on ecclesiastical poverty. Wyclif would also describe all lordship as dependent on grace, though he would turn the tables on ecclesiastical authority so that the papal office itself was contingent on its occupant's standing before God. Likewise did Wyclif view property relations as a type of grace-founded *dominium*, so that those lacking in grace had no real right to own property.

Despite these similarities, Giles and Wyclif wrote with almost diametrically opposed goals in mind. The former desired to solidify the foundation of ecclesiastical hierarchy, the latter to overturn it altogether. In order to understand how two men with such different political inclinations came to make use of similar philosophical presuppositions, it will be useful to trace the development of *dominium* rhetoric through Richard FitzRalph, the Archbishop of Armargh.

In 1350 FitzRalph composed a lengthy treatise titled *De Pauperie Salvatoris* as a critique of the mendicant orders.[9] FitzRalph's work is a complex and circuitous attack on the rights of the

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8. Ibid., 43-48.

9. At the time, mendicancy was perceived by many to be growing in wealth and influence in England, and to be encroaching upon the livelihoods of the secular clergy. Though evidence from membership rolls of the mendicant orders demonstrates that their numbers were actually on the decline as a result of the plague, corresponding vacancies in the regular priesthood may have created the impression that the friars were taking advantage of the opportunity to increase their sphere of influence. See Dawson, "Richard Fitzralph and the Fourteenth-Century Poverty Controversy," 331-332.

friars to perform tasks generally reserved for the secular clergy, such as preaching and the hearing of confession. Like Giles, he began with the assumption that human *dominium* is "loaned out" by God to humanity on the basis of grace, but unlike his predecessor he preserved the distinction between original *dominium* and civil *dominium*. The former is the natural sort of lordship gifted to humanity by God at creation; the latter is a human convention necessitated by sin.

For FitzRalph, original *dominium* was essentially the same sort as divine *dominium,* as though God had granted humanity a sort of power-of-attorney over the Earth. It entailed both the rights of possession of creation and the use and enjoyment of its fruits. FitzRalph did not rule out the possibilities of a limited social hierarchy or of private possessions, but indicated communal equality would have been the norm. Rights of possession and use were to have been coextensive with necessity. The sort of natural lordship FitzRalph described was in fact very similar to that which Bonaventure had claimed for the Franciscan order.

Because natural *dominium* was dependent on grace, it had been lost when Adam and Eve disobeyed God. Reconciliation offered a partial restoration of that lost lordship, but humanity remained unable to actively enjoy its benefits. Civil *dominium* had come into being in the absence of true lordship and primarily for the purpose of restraining the violence of individuals against one another. It was a human innovation, but one that must be respected even by those who claimed to participate directly in natural lordship. At the same time, the obligations of natural lordship could not be negated by the technicalities of human laws. In other words, the privileges of the friars—who claimed apostolic poverty in keeping with a state of natural lordship—remained bounded at all times by the precepts of ecclesiastical and civil authorities, but those possessing material goods according to civil law were still obliged to share what they

owned with those in need. Private property as sanctioned and protected by law was strictly a manifestation of civic *dominium*.

FitzRalph also describes civic *dominium* as dependent on an individual's state of grace, but goes little further in investigating the implications of the dependency. Twenty years later, Wyclif would build an argument for the divestment of all the Church's temporal holdings on a similar point, but the Archbishop of Armagh was more concerned with the preservation of the rights of regular clergy against competition from the friars than with remaking society. James Dawson argues that FitzRalph's attempt to reconcile the rights of the institutional clergy with the claims of the friars was a failure, and that his exposition of grace-founded dominion served almost no function at all. By admitting the Franciscan position that possession of property was a function of human convention, FitzRalph made it almost impossible to justify the Church's wealth. For Dawson, the main function *De Pauperie Salvatoris* was to revive the Bonaventurian thesis that private property as such did not belong to the state of nature.[10] Indeed, FitzRalph's work managed to articulate an unlikely synthesis of the Franciscan concept of poverty with Giles of Rome's doctrine of grace-founded *dominium*.

FitzRalph's work was important for the eventual development of Wyclif theology of *dominium* for several reasons. First, there is no question that Wyclif studied it extensively. His first theological treatise, *De Dominio Divinio*, bears such a strong correspondence with FitzRalph's *De Pauperie Salvatoris* that R. L. Poole, an editor for the publication of many of Wyclif's Latin works in the nineteenth century, offered the opinion that "[Wyclif] has added no essential element to the doctrine which he read in the work of his predecessor."[11] In general,

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10. Ibid., 340-344.

11. See Poole's introduction in Wyclif, *De Dominio Divino*.

Poole was something of a hostile editor and tended to denigrate the originality of Wyclif's works. However, a formal dependence between the two texts is evident to even the casual reader.[12] Secondly, FitzRalph linked human sinfulness with the loss of lordship, a principle that Wyclif would later draw out to its logical conclusion.

2.2 THE OCCASION OF WYCLIF'S TREATISES ON *DOMINIUM*

Two important factors set the stage for Wyclif's entry into politics in the early 1370's. The first and foremost was England's ongoing tension with the papacy; the long running debate concerning the rights of taxation over clerical wealth reached a crisis point as both the king and the pope sought to refill their dwindling coffers. England and France were beginning the second round of their Hundred Years' War, while the French pope was attempting to raise money for a war against his enemies in Italy. Secondly, the extended senescence of Edward III coupled with the rapidly declining health of his heir-apparent, Edward of Woodstock, created a power vacuum at the highest levels of the English government. It is therefore difficult to say who was actually running the country at any given point within the decade.[13] By any account, however, John of Gaunt, Edward III's second son and Wyclif's patron was a force to be reckoned with. Thus, the 1370's was a decade in which old disputes were rehearsed anew amid a time of general national anxiety and confusion.

The clerical class in fourteenth-century England held approximately one-third of feudal lands, and received an annual income of as much as three times that of the king.[14] The wealthiest

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12. In addition to the general correspondence between their theologies of grace-founded lordship, Wyclif follows the same divisions as FitzRalph in enumerating the practical manifestations of lordship in human life.

13. McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity*, 25.

14. Herbert B Workman, *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church*, 2 vols. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1926), 215.

church officials often had annual incomes exceeding the nobility. The Church's great wealth frequently incited resentment among the lay classes, particularly when foreign papal appointees held that wealth. Both the English government and the pope desired to dictate which individuals would be appointed to higher offices; likewise both sought to collect tax revenues from the church income. During the extended war with France, the government had both withheld a yearly tribute due to the papacy and raised taxes on church revenues. When in 1372, Gregory XI— himself in dire financial straights—sought to levy a tax from English clergy of some £20,000, the government put its foot down and forbade any cleric to send English money to the French pope.[15]

In 1374, a diplomatic mission was dispatched to meet with papal representatives at Bourges in the hopes of settling the dispute. Wyclif held the second position in the delegation. Nothing is known of the results of the meeting, nor of Wyclif's part in it, except that he did not attend a subsequent mission the following year. Nevertheless, this is the first recorded instance of the Oxford don taking an active role in political policy. Besides this scant evidence, it can only be indirectly surmised that he had entered government employment at some point before he earned his Doctorate of Theology in 1372.[16] It seems likely that he did so under the patronage of the Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt.

Wyclif's connection to Gaunt has been the subject of much speculation and cynicism. Thomas Walsingham, who chronicled the history of fourteenth-century England in the early

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15. See McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity*, 25-45. McFarlane provides a fairly detailed account of this struggle between England and the papacy leading up to Wyclif's more outspoken years.

16. John Cunningham, in a polemical tract against Wyclif written sometime before 1372, makes an thinly veiled accusation that Wyclif had hidden himself in the protect of the "House of Herod," by which he has generally been understood to mean the patronage of John of Gaunt. See Thomas Netter, *Fasciculi Zizaniorum Magistri Johannis Wyclif Cum Tritico*, ed. Walter Waddington Shirley, (London: 1858), 14; Williell Thomson dates Wyclif's reply to Cunningham to 1372. See Thomson, *The Latin Writings of John Wyclyf*, 227.

fifteenth century, reported that Gaunt intended to use Wyclif's theories to seize power and the

crown for himself.[17] Similarly, Wyclif was accused of acting against the Church out of bitterness

that he'd been denied promised advancement, and of manufacturing a political and ecclesiastical

theology to justify the designs of his government supporters.[18] However, Gaunt displayed no

reluctance to abandon Wyclif when the former Oxford master turned his critiques to the

metaphysics of the Eucharist, a subject which would subsequently bring him even greater infamy

that his arguments regarding temporal dominion. Wyclif for his part does not seem to have

limited his critiques to those topics befitting Gaunt's interests, nor was his approach to the

problem of the relationship between church and state the most expedient for accomplishing any

designs Gaunt may have had.[19] Whatever Gaunt's motivation, his support of Wyclif gave the

reformer the political cover he needed to make a sustained and systematic attack on the structure

of the established Church.

2.3 WYCLIF'S THEOLOGY OF LORDSHIP

Wyclif builds his political theology on the concept of *dominium*, which he lays out in *De

Dominio Divinio*.[20] The first two of the three books comprising the treatise deal with the

metaphysical foundations of lordship. Like FitzRalph, Wyclif traces primeval lordship to God's

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17. E. M. Thompson, ed. *Chronicon Angliae: Ab Anno Domini 1328 Usque Ad Annum 1388; Auctore Monacho Quodam Sancti Albani* (London: 1874), 115.

18. McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity*, 54-57.

19. To the contrary of my own opinion, Joseph Duhmas has argued that there is reason to believe Gaunt or other powers in the English government did restrain Wyclif's polemics to a degree in the later 1370's. See Joseph H. Dahmus, "John Wyclif and the English Government," *Speculum* 35, no. 1 (1960).; On the other hand, Stephen Lahey has recently argued that Wyclif's general approach was poor suited to whatever ends Gaunt may have hoped to acheive; See Lahey, *Philosophy and Politics in the Thought of John Wyclif*, 2.

20. *De Dominio Divinio* was Wyclif's first foray into theological and political discourse and was written between 1373 and 1374. Chronologically, it stands between the body of Wyclif's metaphysical work—collectively referred to as his *Summa de Ente*—and his theological writings. See Thomson, *The Latin Writings of John Wyclyf*, 39.

act of creation as differentiated from his continued sustenance and governance of the world.[21] God began to be Lord only once he had created the world. Because *dominium* is contingent upon creation, the nature of the created order impacts the character of God's lordship. This opens the way by which Wyclif's metaphysical realism becomes important to his political theology.

For Wyclif, sensible reality is made up of a configuration of accidental and substantial predications adhering upon subjects. These predications—and hence reality itself—obtain their meaning via a chain of analogical correspondence to more generic truths rooted ultimately in the mind of God. In short, Aquinas has a mouth because humans have mouths because God has conceived of humanity as having a mouth. Wyclif's ontology is built to guarantee meaning, and the mechanism of this guarantee is the ontological precedent of more generic universal truths over particular ones. With respect to his theology of dominion, Wyclif is emphatic that God's lordship of universals is prior to his lordship of singular entities.[22] God is lord of humanity before he is lord of any particular man or woman. This is marked difference from FitzRalph, who did not share his staunch realism.

Wyclif's affirmation of God's prior lordship of universals shapes his understanding of the nature of human lordship. Divine *dominium* proceeds down Wyclif's hierarchy of being from the most general to the most specific. A specific being's highest level of being is its *ens intelligible*, which is its ideal being in the mind of God. Through its *ens intelligible* all of creation is essentially identical with God, so that God's first act of creation—and therefore of lordship—is the gift of his own essential being. In creating, God has given the totality of his being. This implies that divine lordship is not a composite sum of individual dominions over each respective

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21. Wyclif, *De Dominio Divino*, 8. "…it is evident that no lordship is simply eternal, the effect begins with the creation of the subservient creature…" and "…God's lordship is immediately and *per se* out of His creation, and not out of His governance or conservation…"

22. Ibid., 184.

created entity, but a single and universal lordship rooted in the ontology of everything that shares in being itself.

Wyclif begins to describe the practical import of his theoretical foundations in the third book of *De Dominio Divinio*. He deals specifically with three acts of divine lordship that are mirrored in human *dominium* relations: giving, receiving and lending. In giving creation over to humanity's stewardship, God has not surrendered his own lordship. This implies that one may surrender the use of some object without necessarily surrendering *dominium* over it. God's lordship over creation was complete, and this was the sort of lordship that he gave to humanity. From this Wyclif concludes that humanity retains the use of all creation, unless they lose it through sin. In receiving gifts from humanity, God only receives back that which was already his own. Because God gives without losing what is his, and receives without gaining what was not his own, receiving and giving are in fact only two aspects of the same act of lordship. This forms the theoretical basis by which Wyclif unites servanthood with lordship. The one who is most like the lord of all things is the one who is the servant of all. Similarly, human lending is only an expression of God's primeval endowment to humanity of the use and care of the creation. In all respects, ideal human lordship is to be a mirror of the divine.

Upon completing *De Dominio Divinio*, Wyclif immediately began composing *De Civili Dominio*, in which he spells out in more detail the implications of his *dominium* theology for civil life. The dependency of all lordship on divine grace having already been established in his previous work, the first section of *De Civili Dominio* deals with the implications that no one in a state of mortal sin may legitimately exercise any sort of lordship, and conversely that those in a state of grace are lords of all things.[23] Thereafter follow two sections in which Wyclif extols the

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23. The divisions of *De Civili Dominio* to which I refer herein are not marked in the original text, but are rough divisions of content delineated by R. L. Poole in his edition of Wyclif's treatise.

Gospel—the law of Gospel, as he puts it—as a completely sufficient law for the governance of society and briefly describes the role of secular government. Unsurprisingly, Wyclif sees government's proper function as facilitating the law of the Gospel by enforcing its precepts and bearing on behalf of the church the temporal encumbrances that could distract it from its mission.

The fourth section of *De Civili Dominio* is by far the most controversial; the opinions contained therein are most directly responsible for Wyclif's condemnation by Gregory XI in 1377. Here Wyclif deals with the thorny issue of ecclesiastical property, drawing on the framework of *dominium* he has constructed thus far to describe the mechanics of the relationship between a presumably righteous secular government and prelates of the church who have strayed into sin. He explains that the power of the clergy is limited to the declaration of those works already accomplished by God. When one says that the pope excommunicates someone, all one really means is that the pope declares that God has excommunicated that person. A prelate who has fallen out of grace has no right or power of his own to accomplish those acts that God alone can perform.[24] It follows that despite the inherent subordination of civil power to the spiritual, sinful clergy have no authority upon which to dispute the authority of civil lords over their lands. Similarly, laymen are under no obligation to pay their tithes to corrupt church officials. In fact, if a priest is neglecting his responsibility to distribute alms to the needy, his parishioners are within their rights to relieve the negligent cleric of his temporal possessions and distribute those goods among the poor themselves.

De Civili Dominio takes a clearly mistrustful stance with regard to the Established Church. The greater part of the text is aimed at justifying the right of secular authority to seize the

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24. Here Wyclif strays perilously close to Donatism. Wilks has argued that Wyclif is doing nothing more than restating the classical Augustinian distinction between the true and "mixed" Chruch. See Michael Wilks, "Predestination, Power and Property," in *Wyclif: Political Ideas and Practice*, ed. Anne Hudson (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2000), 19-23.

temporal possessions of a church corrupted by excessive wealth. Indeed, Wyclif identified the

endowment of the Church with temporal wealth to be the source of all ecclesiastical corruption.

What then was his ideal vision for the role of the Church in society? The penultimate chapter of

De Civili Dominio discusses the positive authority of the Church. Wyclif begins, as is his usual

practice, by linking his argument to his metaphysical substratum:

> In order to resolve this matter it is necessary to suppose one metaphysical truth, needed for
> the explanation of this proposition and of many senses of the Scriptures, namely, that the
> church catholic or apostolic is the corporate body of the predestined, of which some are
> dead, some are alive and some are yet to be born; and this church must be betrothed to a
> Head, who by reason of predestination and promise is not able to leave her.[25]

The Church is not to be identified with the ecclesiastical hierarchy of priests, bishops and the

pope, nor with all those baptized and regularly receiving communion, nor even with the virtuous

who follow God's law, but with the body of all those whom God has predestined from eternity to

salvation. With this metaphysical redefinition, Wyclif completely undercuts the hierarchy of the

established Church. The pope may sin, and thus his decrees may be invalid; the ecclesiastical

hierarchy in general in unnecessary for governance. Any human institution claiming to be a

church is one only inasmuch as God considers it to be. The Church having been thusly defined,

the basis for ecclesiastical authority now lay completely beyond what was humanly verifiable.

Wyclif later refined and sharpened his conception of the Church following Gregory XI's

condemnation of some of his conclusions. *De Ecclesia* was composed in 1378 and early 1379

and seems to have been a response to the crisis of ecclesiastical authority brought on by the

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25. John Wyclif, *Tractatus De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, ed. Reginald Lane Poole, (London: 1885), 358. Chapter 43. Lines 26-33. Pro solucione huius materie necesse est supponere unam veritatem metaphysicam, necessariam ad explanacionem propositi et multorum sensuum Scripturarum, scilicet, quod ecclesia catholica sive apostolica sit universitas predestinatorum, quorum aliqui sunt mortui, aliqui vivi, et aliqui generandi; et istam ecclesiam necesse est esse sponsam Capitis, qui racione preordinacionis ac promissionis not potest ipsam deserere.

Great Schism.[26] In this tract, Wyclif explains that all of humanity is comprised of two eternal bodies: the Church, predestined to salvation; and the foreknown, who are condemned to destruction. Among those predestined to salvation, a part have died, a part are yet to be born and a part are "traveling abroad" on the Earth. Wyclif explains that the foreknown are in no way to be considered a part of the Church: "However, the part of that church that sojourns [on the Earth] does not have alongside it another part of it that is foreknown, just as it does not have alongside the triumphant part, so long as it is this way, another part miserable or however polluted."[27] This effectively closes out any interpretation of "the Church" as a mere human institution. No human being can know with certainty whether they belong to the elect or to the foreknown. Thus the pope should not claim to be the head of the Church, for he cannot even be sure that he is a part of it.[28]

I will leave off for a moment a review of scholarly opinion on the ramifications of Wyclif's radical ecclesiology so that I might first summarize the most relevant points of his political theology: (1) God alone exercises true dominion over creation. Human lordship is called such analogically and follows from the divine lordship as an instance of a particular following its universal type. From this principle it follows that those in a state of mortal sin lose all earthly lordship, including their rights of possession. In Wyclif's view, it is the role of the king to

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26. Wyclif's disappointment with the papacy of Urban V visibly unfolds during his composition of *de Ecclesia*. Loserth notes in the introduction to his edition of Wyclif's tract that the first chapters hopefully extol the new pope's virtues, the latter refer to him derogatorily as a "pseudo monk." See Johann Loserth, ed. *Iohannis Wyclif Tractatvs De Ecclesia*, Wyclif's Latin Works (New York: Johnson, 1966), xxv.

27. Ista autem ecclesia secundum partem peregrinatem non habet aliquem prescitum partem sui, sicut non habet secundum partem triumphantem, dum est huiusmodi, aliquem miserum vel quomodolibet maculatum, In John Wyclif, *Tractatus De Ecclesia*, ed. Iohann Loserth, (London: 1886), 3-4.

28. "So then just as a human without special revelation does not assert without fear to be predestined, thus neither does he assert to be a member of the Church, and by consequence cannot claim to be its head." "Sicut igitur homo sine speciali revelacione non assereret sine formidine se esse predestinatum, sic nec asseret se esse membrum, et per consequens, non caput illius ecclesie." In ibid., 5.

administrate temporal holdings on behalf of God, and so also the king's prerogative to strip away the lands and wealth of apostate clergy. (2) God's lordship over universals is prior to his lordship over particular individuals. This implies that divine lordship in its truest sense is unitary and universal. Grace-founded human lordship inherits this characteristic. Thus the righteous are the lords of all creation. (3) Civil lordship is at best a shadowy counterpart to true lordship and has come into being only because of human sinfulness. It is therefore the responsibility of the pious magistrate to restrain sin. This responsibility extends even over the affairs of the institutional Church. (4) The ecclesiastical hierarchy is not necessarily connected with Christ's Church. Inasmuch as it is a temporal institution it wields only temporal authority, which it derives from the beneficence of civil rulers. The institutional Church corresponds more closely with the true Church when it is divested of all temporal authority and possessions, as these only encourage worldliness and abuse.

2.4 REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP

It is difficult to argue that Wyclif did not frame his political ideology in metaphysical terms, but that alone means not so much as one might be tempted to conclude. That an Oxford metaphysician wrote his politics in metaphysical language is little more surprising than discovering that Virgil wrote in Latin. In order to demonstrate the fluidity of Wyclif's progression from logician and metaphysician to theological rebel, one must demonstrate that the progression of Wyclif's writings is at no point significantly discontinuous from what came immediately before and after. The transition from the philosophical to the practical would be the most natural place to find such a discontinuity, and *dominium* is the central concept that bridges the different stages of work. It would seem likely then that a scholar's appraisal of the place of *dominium* in the larger context of Wyclif's writings will correspond to their appraisal of the

integrity of his thought as a whole. A brief review of recent scholarship will show that this has largely been the case. There is significant disagreement on the significance of *dominium* in the continuum of Wyclif's thought.

K. B. McFarlane emphasized Wyclif's political disappointment and resulting anger as motivational in his desire to see the institutional Church stripped of its temporal power and has painted the don as seeking mainly to please his government employers.[29] He has noted Wyclif's dependence on Giles and FitzRalph only to comment that "[w]hen Wycliffe needed a stick to beat not the friars but the ecclesiastical possessioners in general, he took over and elaborated FitzRalph's implied argument."[30] For McFarlane, Wyclif's story was a cautionary tale of an otherwise promising academic whose life was ruined by involvement in political dispute far larger than himself. He perceived no real continuity in Wyclif's writings, particularly with regard to his later and more vocal criticism of the established Church, and argued that it was a mistake to treat his individual works as though they "presented a coherent system of thought."[31] Having thus despaired of finding a unifying theme to Wyclif's writings, McFarlane told the story of the don's life as one of reaction to the machinations of forces beyond his comprehension and control.[32]

Gordon Leff acknowledged the dependence of Wyclif's political views upon his metaphysics, but does not consider the idea of *dominium* to be very important in their

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29. "Coming to the royal service after the anti-clerical victory of 1371, Wyclif learnt a dangerous lesson. He was by nature intemperate; now he was encouraged to think that he could best please his employers by fighting their battles with all the weapons at his command." McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity*, 46.

30. Ibid., 49.

31. Ibid., 73.

32. It should be noted that McFarlane wrote several decades before the publication of an edited version of Wyclif's *Tractatus De Universalibus*, which has shed considerable light on the overall integrity of Wyclif's thought.

development. Rather, Leff emphasized Wyclif's "penchant for reducing everything to its archetypical reality" and drew a line directly from Augustine's doctrine of the juxtaposition between heavenly and earthly kingdoms, to Wyclif's definition of the true Church.[33] The relevant aspect of Wyclif's metaphysics was simply that he took conceptual reality to be real to the exclusion of the physical. Having thus understood the Church in the traditional Augustinian fashion as the body of the elect, his philosophy allowed no place for an institutional Church that fell short of the ideal.

Leff likewise stressed the role of Wyclif's dependence on the authority of Scripture as set against the authority of the Church.[34] He argued that Wyclif's insistence on the supreme reality of the invisible Church completely undercut the spiritual authority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and left the Bible as the only physical guide to God's truth: Wyclif created "an alliance between the individual and the apostolic tradition against the present church hierarchy."[35]

Leff discounts the importance of Wyclif's use of *dominium* language for two general reasons. First, though Wyclif bases the right to civil lordship on an individual's standing in God's grace, he makes it impossible to ever determine who is among the elect and who is damned. The entire system is thereby rendered practically inapplicable.[36] Secondly, he seems to believe that civil lords are somehow exempt from the qualification he imposes on the Church that only the Elect may exercise *dominium*. Thus Wyclif seems to have been unforgivably inconsistent.[37] Underneath it all, Wyclif was a "militant moralist who was prepared to use force

33. Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, 517.

34. Ibid., 519.

35. Ibid., 524.

36. Ibid., 549.

37. Ibid., 545.

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to reform the church."[38] He was interested above all else in somehow remaking the established Church in the image of invisible reality. Thus, Leff has pointed out that, though Wyclif insisted repeatedly that it was impossible to know with certainty whether an individual was among the predestined or the foreknown, he also cited clerical misbehavior as evidence that those in the hierarchy were not truly a part of the Church. For Leff, *De Dominio Divinio* represents little more than a passing phase during which Wyclif articulated the ideas he genuinely cared about in traditional hierocratic language.

Herbert Workman, in his 1920 biography of Wyclif, did not find the don's theories of lordship to be unimportant in the later development of his political theology. To the contrary, he saw *De Dominio Divinio* as underlying all of Wyclif's later political works. Still, he cautioned the reader that Wyclif's theories on church and state were "not to be construed as if they were programmes of actual reconstruction", but rather a theoretical imagining of an ideal state.[39] Workman preserved the consistency of Wyclif's theories at the expense of their applicability, thus presaging Leff's critique.

Leff was not wrong about the difficulty in reconciling Wyclif's writings on *dominium* with the continuum of his thought. It is much easier to either denounce Wyclif as a reckless heretic or a political pawn, or else to consign him altogether to the ivory tower than to attempt to reconcile the two faces of his public life. His works on *dominium* posit a system whereby something inaccessible to human knowledge—the individual's state of grace—is supposed to have dramatic ramifications on the legitimacy of temporal power structures. Wyclif demands the

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38. Ibid., 527.

39. Workman, *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church*, 1:259.

union of the visible with the invisible, but gives very little direction about how such an agenda is to be carried out.

Howard Kaminsky attempted to bridge the gap by demonstrating that Wyclif's ideology could be considered a platform for revolution. For Kaminsky, the effect of Wyclif's subordination of the temporal authority of the Church to civil leadership was not the impoverishment of the Church, but the radical Christianization of the state. Wyclif drafted the whole of society into his vision of Christendom. By emphasizing the dependence of lordship on divine grace, Wyclif stressed the office of the king or lord rather than its occupant. The result of this was to expose "the secular order to all the forces of reform that were built into Western Christinity."[40] Thus Kaminsky argued that Wyclif's use of *dominium*—far from being inapplicable—was as threatening to the civil leadership as it was to the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Michael Wilks also addressed the issue of the apparent inapplicability of grace-founded *dominium*. He argued that Wyclif was well aware that his system of rightful lordship based on individual grace could never be practically implemented, and never intended for it to be. Though Wilks recognized Wyclif's dependence on Giles and FitzRalph, he argues that Wyclif's use of language was more typically associated with those who supported papal supremacy, and that it constituted a useful "smokescreen which enabled him to reconstruct the old lay ideal of theocratic monarchy and a proprietary church."[41] For Wilks, Wyclif's use of the concept of *dominium* is central to his practical goals. The Oxford don simply substitutes one divinely sanctioned hierarchy with another. If the pope claimed to be the Vicar of Christ, Wyclif made an equally strong claim that the king is the Vicar of God within the confines of his domain.

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40. Howard Kaminsky, "Wycliffism as Ideology of Revolution," *Church History* 32, no. 1 (1963): 69.

41. Wilks, "Predestination, Power and Property," 16.

Within the last decade, Stephen Lahey has argued persuasively that the concept of *dominium* is an integral component of Wyclif's theology of politics. While the degree of similarity has led some to conclude that Wyclif simply appropriated FitzRalph's concept for his own uses, Lahey demonstrates that despite the formal similarities between their conceptual frameworks, Wyclif and FitzRalph came up with far different applications.[42] FitzRalph wrote to shore up the Church's rights of private property ownership against the claim of the friars minor that apostolic poverty was the purest form of Christianity. Wyclif applied the same paradigm of grace-favored lordship and came to the conclusion that the Church's possession of temporal holdings was the root of all its corruption.

For Lahey, the concept of *dominium* is central in connecting Wyclif's realism with his radical political ideology. Divine *dominium* constitutes the only real *dominium* in the world. Civil dominion follows from the divine as a particular instantiation of the universal.[43] This extends beyond the mere idea of that divine lordship is the archetype of human lordship, but implies that God's *dominium* over creation is a universal by causality with respect to all instances in which humans participate in *dominium*.[44] Therefore, there is no instance of human lordship that is not also an instance of the divine. It follows that because God is never unjust, no unjust person can ever exercise lordship.

Lahey agrees with Wilks that Wyclif did not intend for his readers to be able to distinguish between the predestined—who were the proper lords of all creation—and the foreknown who were excluded from ever exercising just lordship. For Lahey, however, Wyclif's

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42. Lahey, *Philosophy and Politics in the Thought of John Wyclif*, 53.

43. Stephen E Lahey, *John Wyclif*, Great Medieval Thinkers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 199.

44. Ibid., 204.

appropriation of *dominium* was no mere smokescreen. Rather, grace founded *dominium* entails a radical reordering of society, which Wyclif would have very much like to have seen implemented. Lahey explains that for Wyclif, the Church was intended to represent a purer sort of evangelical poverty even than that which the Franciscans sought to achieve through the divestment of worldly goods.[45] The Church was to exemplify the primeval lordship that humanity enjoyed before the fall, in which private property was unknown and the riches of the world could be enjoyed according to whomever might have need of them. Mere poverty for the sake of poverty had never been the goal, but rather a life characterized by grace and the administration of the world in congruity with the manner of God's own lordship. Lahey points out that Wyclif advocated the general divestment of private church property because he felt the idea of private property had been borne out of original sin. Private possessions were inherently corrupting, and the Church ought to be protected from having to deal with them. The task of their administration fell properly to the king, whose responsibility it was to bear the burden of civil lordship necessitated by the fallen state of humanity.[46]

Thus Lahey also answers Leff's second objection, that Wyclif was inconsistent in denying lordship to reprobate clergy, but happy to hand their wealth over to secular authority. Denying or endorsing the lordship of individuals had never been Wyclif's point. Rather, his metaphysics dictated a radical new structure of society in which the role of the ecclesiastical hierarchy was most commensurate with apostolic poverty, and the role of the king was to ensure the Church was able to carry out its mission by administering civil matters justly.

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45. Ibid., 214.

46. Ibid., 216.

2.5 ANALYSIS

Prior to the publication of the critical edition of Wyclif's *Tractatus De Universalibis* in 1984, Wyclif scholarship was lacking a clear articulation of the centrality of universals in the Oxford Master's thought. Lacking that piece of the puzzle, Wyclif's description of the eternal separation of the predestined from the foreknown coupled with his insistence that those lacking grace are ineligible for the exercise of any sort of lordship does seem stillborn. Without any clear means of distinguishing the saved from the damned, one is invited to guess at an individual's state of grace with a view toward judging their eligibility for civil or ecclesiastical office. From there it is easy to imagine—like McFarlane—Wyclif's political theology was a means to some other end, and to go searching into the scant biographical details of the don's life for clues as to what it may have been.

Lahey's work in the last decade has been invaluable for its presentation of Wyclif's political thought as consistent with his metaphysical work. In some respects he has rehabilitated the intellectual integrity the father of English non-conformity. That being said, I do not think Leff was wrong to trace a line from Wyclif's use of Scripture to his radical ecclesiology. There is no question that Wyclif saw the Bible as the ultimate guide to truth, and as his interaction with the ecclesiastical hierarchy turned increasingly sour, he more often juxtaposed the teachings and practice of the institutional Church with Scripture.

In my next chapter I will examine the relationship between Wyclif's concept of Scripture and his realist metaphysic, although one already begins to see that the influence is not one-way. Leff pointed out that Wyclif used Scripture to make an end-run around the hierarchy of the Church because he believed the true Church to be an eternal reality to which the Bible directly referred. At the same time his concept of the true Church was taken from Augustine, whom he

revered above all other Fathers because of his reliance upon Scripture. There is circularity to Wyclif's thought. The circle's arcs span between the polarities of his respect for the Bible, and his confidence that philosophical realism was best suited to its correct interpretation.

Wyclif's political theology was a direct outgrowth of prior metaphysical work, albeit adapted for the circumstances of his life. He interpreted and responded to the great struggles of his time through the lens of his philosophical realism. His application of the doctrine of *dominium* was similar to FitzRalph's or Gile's only on a superficial level. Prompted by circumstance to articulate a vision for the ideal of human power relations, Wyclif—like many before him—began by examining God's relationship with creation. Unlike his predecessors, Wyclif's metaphysical realism led him to recommend what amounted to a complete remaking of medieval society.

CHAPTER 3 – SCRIPTURE

John Wyclif's involvement in the translation of the Latin Bible into vernacular English has been perhaps his most enduring claim to fame. Although the exact nature of his participation in the process of translation remains vague, two things are clear.[1] Firstly, Scripture was for Wyclif the ultimate authority on all issues of Christianity. Having been persuaded that the Bible endorsed a particular truth or doctrine, he was willing to insist upon the necessity of accepting its truth in the face of all popular opinion and rational argument to the contrary.[2] Secondly, he felt it imperative that both laity and clergy be instructed in its precepts. This did not necessarily mean he envisioned all peasants reading their Bible. Indeed, most peasants were illiterate and books were too expensive to mass-produce. Rather, Wyclif envisioned that those who were of the proper character and training to interpret faithfully would disseminate the truths of Holy Scripture to the masses.

Wyclif's emphasis on the authority of Scripture has prompted his comparison to later reformers such as Calvin and Luther.[3] This comparison is at once evocative and misleading. Wyclif was not so much a man ahead of his time as one born too late. In his day he was a champion of an antiquated metaphysic decidedly behind the times. On the basis of that metaphysic he managed to articulate a theology of Scripture whose praxis did indeed resemble the reformers whom he preceded by nearly a century and a half. However, the resemblance is

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1. Michael Wilks, "Misleading Manuscripts: Wyclif and the Non-Wycliffite Bible," *Studies in Church History* 11, (1975).

2. For example, Wyclif was one of very few proponents of a minority view that time and space were composed ultimately of discrete quanta instead of being continually divisible as was almost universally accepted at the time. See Norman Kretzmann, "Continua, Indivisibles, and Change in Wyclif's Logic of Scripture," in *Wyclif in His Times*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Clarendon Press, 1986). Kretzmann makes the case that Wyclif persisted in arguing this unpopular viewpoint in the face of logical problems he himself was unable to reconcile primarily because he was convinced it was the view endorsed by Scripture.

3. Workman, *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church*, 2:150.

easily overstated. Wyclif's view of Scripture is in many ways in continuity with the accepted practices of his times. To those points on which he is most original, he appears to have been led by his realist metaphysic, which had a long history stretching back to the earliest Christian theologians.

It is erroneous to assume that Wyclif was responding to a world of theologians who did not take the Bible seriously, or who questioned its status as the supremely authoritative source of Christian faith. On the contrary, the scholastic tradition assumed that the Bible was the basis for ecclesiastical practice and tradition. Gordan Leff notes that "theologians as diverse as St. Bonaventure, St. Thomas, William of Ockham, Bradwardine and Gregory of Remini, to say nothing of St. Anselm and Hugh of St. Victor, had all seen the Bible as the source of Christian revelation, the yardstick by which all that pertained to faith was to be judged."[4]

What seems to have angered Wyclif was not that his opponents ignored Scripture, but that in his estimation they misused it. He was convinced that philosophical error—such as those the nominalists made concerning the nature of universals—would inevitably lead to misinterpretations of the Bible and to heresy. He seems to have been particularly incensed with a practice of the schools of playing word games with the text and drawing out supposed contradictions. For example, Matthew 12:27 contains the statement, "This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons." Taken in a strictly literal sense, Scripture contains the proposition that Jesus casts out demons by the power of Satan. Obviously, this must be false. So, it was claimed, one must admit that the Bible contains false propositions. As already noted, real propositions for Wyclif did not subsist in arrangements of words, but in the state of reality itself. To say that something was untrue was to deny its very existence. Hence Wyclif saw the

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4. Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, 511.

nominalist's misunderstanding of the propositional nature of reality as resulting in their misapprehension of the truth of Scripture. The claim that Scripture contained falsehood was an attempt to destroy its basis for authority.

Wyclif was no different from the mainstream of scholastics in that he took Scripture to be fundamentally authoritative, but his understanding of the nature of Scripture was qualitatively distinct.[5] His realist metaphysic not only colored his interpretation of the Bible, but determined the fundamental categories of its being. Indeed, Wyclif describes a proper education in philosophy as a necessary prerequisite for the correct interpretation of Scripture.[6] In response to his opponents he writes, "Some object that it is not unfitting for Holy Scripture to be false. And this should come as no surprise, for if Scripture is nothing but the manuscripts of writers who were themselves usually false, then it stands to reason that the works which they produced would also be exceptionally false."[7] The problem was not so much that nominalists misunderstood the texts, as it was that they misunderstood what the texts truly were.

3.1 THE METAPHYSICAL REALITY OF SCRIPTURE

The parallel between Wyclif's description of the nature of Scripture and his descriptions of universals has long been recognized. In his landmark 1961 survey of Wyclif's metaphysical system, Robson references the don's "belief that the Word of Scripture was God Himself, an emanation of the Supreme Being 'transposed into writing.'"[8] Most scholars have agreed with this

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5. Ibid.

6. David L. Jeffrey, "John Wyclif and the Hermeneutics of Reader Response," *Interpretation* 39, no. 3 (1985): 272-274.

7. John Wyclif, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, ed., trans. Ian Chistopher Levy (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 91.

8. Robson, *Wyclif and the Oxford Schools*, 146.

assessment.[9] Indeed, Wyclif appears only minimally interested in dealing with Scripture as a text.[10]

3.1.1 Universal Scripture

Wyclif offers his readers five levels or senses in which the term 'Scripture' may be understood. These correspond roughly to the five levels of being outline in *De Universalibus*.[11] In the first and highest it is the eternal Book of Life. In the second sense, it is the set of truths contained therein. These truths are formally but not essentially distinct from the Book of Life itself. The third sense describes these truths as "they are to be believed according to their respective natures." The fourth describes the parallel sense in which these truths are written naturally in the soul of humanity. Wyclif considered the written manuscripts themselves to be Scripture only in the equivocal sense. These occupy the fifth and lowest rung in Wyclif's hierarchy of being and are mere "sounds and artificial signs" are designed to bring the reader into awareness of the higher senses of Scripture, ultimately to the Book of Life itself.[12]

That highest sense of Scripture Wyclif identified with Christ the Word, who was sent into the world. He cited John 10:35 as evidence that Christ understood Himself in this manner.[13] Just as Scripture was sent into the world to save it, Christ was sent by the Father in order to redeem

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9. For examples, see Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, 515; J. I. Catto, "Wyclif and Wycliffism at Oxford: 1356-1430," in *The History of the University of Oxford*, ed. J. I. Catto and Ralph Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 196; Lahey, *John Wyclif*, 137.

10. A. J. Minnis, ""Authorial Intention" and "Literal Sense" in the Exegetical Theories of Richard Fitzralph and John Wyclif: An Essay in the Medieval History of Biblical Hermeneutics," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* (1975).

11. Wyclif, *De Universalibus*, 13.

12. Wyclif, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, 92.

13. si illos dixit deos ad quos sermo Dei factus est et non potest solvi scriptura, quem Pater sanctificavit et misit in mundum vos dicitis quia "blasphemas quia dixi: Filius Dei sum?" (John 10:35, Vulgate) Wyclif goes to far as to claim that "the Holy Spirit ordained the correct manuscripts with the pronoun "who" and not "which." ibid.

humanity. The parallel was no happenstance. The Second Person, in whom humanity and divinity are hypostatically united, is the true Scripture. The incarnation of the Word means that the eternal Truth of God has been sent forth into the world. This is the Book whom Wyclif wanted everyone to know, because knowledge of it is the salvation of the world.

I will set aside the second and third senses of Scripture for the moment, noting only that they describe a being that is coeternal with God. The second sense is analogous to Wyclif's universal exemplars that are essentially identical to—but formally distinct from—the divine essence. In the third sense Scripture consists of those truths that have a real, common existence in truths "that are to be believed." That is to say that in this sense the truths of Scripture exist commonly in truths the intellect recognizes, but that they have an independent existence that is logically prior to human recognition. Like the real existence of universal forms, the truth of Scripture is objectively present to be believed whether anyone recognizes it or not.[14]

Wyclif's fourth sense of Scripture parallels the third, but its ground of being is the human soul and its presence depends on human intellection. Scripture in this sense is the impression made in the human person by the eternal truths of God's word that are to be believed. Inasmuch as this sense of Scripture is resident within the soul, it is dependent upon human faculties by which it is constructed. Owing to the limitations of those faculties, this sense of Scripture is corruptible. That is to say, it is possible for a person to misunderstand the truth of Scripture.

As already noted, the fifth sense of Scripture references only the arbitrary signs resident in books and parchment that are meant to indicate the eternal truths of what is truly Scripture. This sort of "Scripture" is more easily corrupted, able to be defaced by something as simple as

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14. Ian Christopher Levy, "John Wyclif's Neoplatonic View of Scripture in Its Christological Context," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 11, (2003).

the slip of a scribe's pen. It is therefore called "Scripture" only equivocally. It is holy only in the sense that it points the way to what is truly holy.

The fourth and fifth senses Wyclif describes somewhat pejoratively as being no more intrinsically worthy to be called Scripture than the "the lines on the hand discerned in palm-reading" or the "configuration of points for prognosticating from the Earth."[15] These are harsh words indeed, but Wyclif is trying to make the point that it is the eternal and indestructible reality of Scripture toward which the signs point that is infinitely more precious than any mere arrangement of symbols. It is on these grounds that he critiques "the modern generation" for devoting their attention exclusively to these two inferior senses of Holy Scripture.[16] Wyclif is not opposed to scholarly studies of texts, commentaries, or allegorical readings. Rather he opposes those who would stare forever at signposts without any desire to arrive at a destination.

It is important for a proper understanding of the relationship between these different senses of Scripture that one not confuse logical with metaphysical priority. The letters and words written on manuscripts are logically prior to the idea a person forms upon reading them, just as those ideas logically precede the common, eternal realities that reside in them. However, from a metaphysical standpoint the relationship is exactly reversed. The eternal exemplar ideas inscribed in the Book of Life are the causes of the eternal truths that are to be understood. Those in turn are the causes of their parallel objects of human understanding, which are reflected in the written word copied by scribes. Metaphysically, the chain of causality proceeds down the

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15. Wyclif, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, 102.

16. Ibid.

hierarchy of being from greatest to least. Logically, human reason is led to the Eternal Truth from the least to the greatest.[17]

The idea of indestructibility permeates Wyclif's explanation of the five-fold sense of Scripture. Again and again he is at pains to demonstrate the eternality and immutability of Holy Scripture. When he identifies the highest sense of Scripture with Person of Christ, he invokes the insolubility of the hypostatic union as evidence that the Book of Life can never be destroyed.[18] He argues that if Scripture were merely a sign it might be "torn apart by a dog, or corrected by a buffoon."[19] If Scripture were subject to corruption in this way, it could not be authoritative. Hence, for Wyclif, the truth of Scripture is prerequisite to all proper reasoning. In fact, he offers a definition of Scripture as that truth which nothing can be truer than.[20] This Supreme Truth is the Person of Christ, who is the Book of Life. Symbols that represent eternal truths and the ideas formed by interpreting them are subject to the frailty of human faculties, but true Scripture must be beyond all corruption. Wyclif's metaphysics, which give real being to what the nominalists would relegate to mere abstraction, demands that some such inviolably true entity occupy the place of Holy Scripture, or there can be no Holy Scripture at all.

3.1.2   Eternal Scripture

Wyclif's views on the nature of time are of particular importance with regard to his views of Scripture. As already described, Wyclif believes in two fundamentally different types of time.

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17. Lahey, *Philosophy and Politics in the Thought of John Wyclif*. Lahey makes the same distinction by way of explaining the relationship between Wyclif's metaphysics and his conception of divine dominion as the universal exemplar for human dominion. I have applied the same reasoning in my interpretation of Wyclif's ideal for individuals' induction into the eternal truth of Scripture.

18. Wyclif, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, 98.

19. Ibid., 99.

20. Ibid., 100.

Tempus is the sort of sequential time that human beings experience. *Duratio* is the eternal time in which all events exist in a continual present tense before God. A major corollary of Wyclif's identification of the highest sense of Scripture with the Person of Christ is that Scripture in the ultimate sense becomes a timeless expression of eternal truth—a primeval statement of everything that exists spoken in the present tense.

Beryl Smalley made a case that Wyclif's insistence upon the timelessness of Scripture was provoked by what he perceived as a creeping skepticism among the sophists, who apparently enjoyed raising objections to articles of faith on the ground of grammatical inconsistency. Hence they challenged the practice of petitionary prayer offered on the basis of the merit of the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection on the basis that these events belonged properly to the past and could not be invoked as though it existed in the present.[21] Wyclif's extension of time into timelessness rendered such objections meaningless and protected the practice of faith. Around the time of his elevation to Doctor of Divinity in 1372, Wyclif was involved in a protracted series of debates with John Kenningham, a Carmelite friar and critic of Wyclif's view on the nature of time. Kenningham objected that Wyclif's insistence on the timelessness of Scripture destroyed the ability to interpret some passages. As example, he offered the text in which the prophet Amos replies that he is "not a prophet." If Scripture consisted only of timeless truths, Amos' admission juxtaposed with his obvious occupation could only lead to the contradiction that he both was and was not a prophet. Thus the veracity of Scripture seemed in this case to imply a temporal succession of states. Wyclif replied, somewhat awkwardly, that Amos' denial of his prophetic status should only be taken as evidence that he was not operating

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21. Beryl Smalley, *Studies in Medieval Thought and Learning from Abelard to Wyclif*, History Series, vol. v. 6 (London: Hambledon Press, 1981), 402. Smalley describes this reference and seems to imply that their objection revolved around the grammatical construction of the petition.

in a prophet capacity in the moment that he spoke. Thus he may be habitually described as a prophet while still making the true statement that he is not a prophet in the given moment. Such an argument strains both the credulity of Wyclif's system of time and the limits of a literal interpretation of the text.

Still, Kenningham's argument seems to be a *reductio ad absurdam* designed around an assumption that Wyclif's view of Scripture seeks to make an eternal truth out of the most literal possible reading of any portion of a text. This was not in fact true. Wyclif was in the habit of distinguishing different modes of speaking in which a text could be taken. He differentiated between texts that should be interpreted *de vis vocis* from those that ought to be understood as speaking *de vis sermonis*. While *de vis vocis* referred to the most literal sense of the individual propositions of Scripture, *de vis sermonis* allowed for an interpretation based on the context of the passage.[22] Thus Amos' admission that he was not a prophet understood *de vis sermonis* does consider the individual context in which he was speaking. This context becomes, in effect, a part of the eternal proposition that the Scripture reflects.

3.2 THE PARTICULAR LOGIC OF SCRIPTURE

While Wyclif considered an education in philosophy to be a necessary prerequisite to the proper understanding of Scripture, he did not consider Scripture to be limited to the ordinary rules of logical discourse. He was fond of saying that Scripture had its own, higher logic. Those who studied and taught Scripture should learn to speak as Scripture speaks and reason as Scripture reasons.[23] It helps to recall that at the time logic and metaphysics were essentially

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22. Minnis, ""Authorial Intention" and "Literal Sense" in the Exegetical Theories of Richard Fitzralph and John Wyclif: An Essay in the Medieval History of Biblical Hermeneutics."

23. Wyclif, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, 41.

prerequisites to the study of theology. Wyclif was a logician for many years before he was a theologian. It was after he spent some time studying conventional Aristotelian logic that he undertook the task of articulating Scripture's particular logic.[24] The logic he developed—or rather observed from study—served as the basis of his Scriptural exposition throughout the rest of his life.

What is the nature of Scripture's intrinsic logic? Above all else, it is predicated on an understanding that every passage must be considered as part of a consistent whole. The Bible, as a book, signifies those truths that are eternally present in the mind of God. Those same truths are to be inscribed on the human heart. To subject a particular passage to the vulgarity of human logic is to attempt to fragment the Word of God. Wyclif is insistent that this cannot be a part of faithful interpretation.[25] By way of demonstrating the contrast, he offers the example that the logic of Scripture may even run counter to the principle of non-contradiction.[26] In the Gospels we learn that death may indeed be life. Contrary to all human reasoning, God has used the death of his Son to bring life to the world.

Also commonly cited is Wyclif's exposition of the expression "Christ is a lion." We learn from Scripture that Christ is a lion, but we also learn that Satan is a lion. Certainly they cannot both be lions in the same sense. Equivocation is the key to unravelling Scripture's logic. God is equivocally like a lion by virtue of the context of the passage that so describes Him. Likewise, Satan's likeness to a lion is to be understood within its own context. It would be clearly improper

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24. "*Motus sum per quosdam legis dei amicos certum tractatum ad declarandam logicam sacre scripture compilare*." "I have been prompted by certain friends of the law of God to compile a tract declaring the logic of Sacred Scripture." John Wyclif, *Tractatus De Logica*, ed. Michael Henry Dziewicki, (London: 1893), 69.

25. Jeffrey, "John Wyclif and the Hermeneutics of Reader Response."

26. The law of non-contradiction states that no element may belong both to a set and the complement of that set. X cannot be both an 'A' and a 'not-A.'

to infer a similarity between Christ and Satan by assuming that they must share some trait expressed in "lionness." All language about spiritual reality is figurative in the strictest sense. It would be improper to say that God is literally a lion. Evans explains that for Wyclif, statements that would be improper if spoken by a human become proper in Scripture by virtue of divine authorship.[27] God's usage is able to override the normal rules of grammar. This is why it necessary to understand the internal logic of Scripture.

3.3: HERMENEUTIC IMPLICATIONS

Wyclif has the reputation of having been a literalist. His insistence on the inner consistency and complete veracity of all parts of Scripture makes it easy to imagine him as a sort of proto-fundamentalist. However, such a categorization would be misguided. The terms "literal" and "figurative" have evolved with the understanding of human language. Wyclif's preference for the literal sense must be understood in the context of his time. His response to what he saw as the abuse of Scripture draws our attention to the very narrow sense of the word "literal" at late fourteenth-century Oxford.

It was commonly accepted among medieval theologians that a text of Scripture could be interpreted on several different levels. The literal sense of the text was merely one of at least four, and it was generally considered as having the least spiritual significance. Commentators were more concerned with the allegorical, moral and anagogical senses of the text. The allegorical sense answered the question, "How do I apply this principle to my current place and time?" The moral sense addressed truths about morality. The anagogical dealt with prophecy and eternal, heavenly realities. These non-literal senses may be referred to collectively as

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27. G. R. Evans, "Wyclif on the Literal and the Metaphorical," in *From Ockham to Wyclif*, ed. Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks, Studies in Church History (Basil Blackwell Inc., 1987).

"metaphorical." Metaphorical interpretations of Scripture have a long-standing history that dates back to Jewish commentators of the Old Testament. Early Christian writers had learned these techniques from teachers such as Philo. The metaphorical senses held a particular preeminence among Neoplatonic theologians. Augustine had interpreted Scripture allegorically. Origin had gone so far as to deny that all texts even had a literal sense.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed a shift in priorities owing to an increased emphasis on the philosophical analysis of language. The literal sense of Scripture began to be considered the primary and most important. [28] Increased technical fastidiousness and a preoccupation with the literal sense brought attention to contradictions in the Scriptural text that strikes contemporary sensibilities as pedantic. For example, Jesus is recorded in the Gospel of Luke as declaring that any who followed after Him must hate his father, mother, wife and children. It was pointed out that Adam and Eve had no father or mother while those who were celibate had neither wife no children. None of these would then be capable of following Christ.[29]

Wyclif's realism furnished ready answers to these objections. When time is extended into the eternal present and the human race is comprehended as a whole, it can be seen that everyone has brothers and sisters, since all are children of Adam and Eve. The entire human race is ontologically present in the *duratio* of God's perception. What would otherwise be a figurative commandment to put the service of Christ above whatever else might compete for one's loyalty may not be interpreted literally, even in the case of the individual who lacks immediate family.

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28. See Minnis, ""Authorial Intention" and "Literal Sense" in the Exegetical Theories of Richard Fitzralph and John Wyclif: An Essay in the Medieval History of Biblical Hermeneutics," 16. and Evans, "Wyclif on the Literal and the Metaphorical," 261. Minnis describes how the metaphorical senses of Scripture had fallen out of favor among Aristotelians of the 13th century. The literal sense thus became a popular intellectual current of the 14th. These fortunes were later to reverse as literalism came to be associated with heresy.

29. Smalley, *Studies in Medieval Thought and Learning from Abelard to Wyclif*, 403.

That Wyclif deems it necessary to answer these apparently weak objections at all reveals that he felt the force of arguments from the literal sense of the text. It is possible that these arguments upset him so much because he felt there was a half-truth in such efforts to approach Scripture from the standpoint of its own internal logic. Certainly Wyclif's own hermeneutic relied on a correct understanding of the reality of Scripture, but it relied on Scripture alone. Wyclif would not appeal to councils or commentaries in his refutation of this sophistry. Instead he invoked a metaphysical objection.

Evans argues that Wyclif effectively enlarged the scope of what was considered literal interpretation.[30] Wyclif gives three ways in which a scripture can be considered literally true beyond the plainest interpretation of the passage. The passage may be an allegory, a parable or fictitious speech that "sometimes signifies truth." It seems consistent that the real issue is one of signification. What we would call a different type of figure of speech was for Wyclif only a variation in a symbol pointing toward immutable truth. The truth of Scripture does not reside in the grammatical particularities of a sentence on a page. Truth is instead a fact of the Eternal Word. Whether speech is plain or allegorical it still depends on this basic correspondence with eternal verities to be "literally" true. The ontological preeminence of eternal realities allows for a redefinition of the word "literal" to include cases that would have to be considered metaphorical from the perspective of human speech.

The issue at stake here may be understood either linguistically or metaphysically. Wyclif belonged to a time whose views on the nature of language were markedly different than those of the present. Christopher Ocker comments that later biblical exegetes began to understand that "what, in the twelfth century, was described as a quality of thought beyond speech in fact was a

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30. Evans, "Wyclif on the Literal and the Metaphorical," 266.

quality of speech."[31] When Christ states that He "is the vine" he is plainly using a metaphor. Contemporary linguists consider this an act of speech, and a literal reading of the text would plainly take that into account. When ancient commentators argued that some passages of Scripture had no literal sense, they were referring to examples like this. What we understand as a speech act within the text, they would see as a metaphorical interpretation. Wyclif, for his part, was upset about the abuses of interpretation that stemmed from attempting to take figurative speech as strictly literal. He lived in a time that elevated literal interpretation, and was a proponent of its use. His metaphysical position allowed him to see that figurative speech acts embedded in the text could be interpreted literally without contradiction. He saw it not from the standpoint of linguistic analysis, but from an expanded metaphysical reality. In that reality the truth of language depended not so much on the correspondence between words and the objects they signify as on the fact that those objects are representative of an ontologically prior reality that is necessarily true.[32]

Wyclif went beyond an insistence upon the theological preeminence of the Bible. More than being the final authority of matters of faith, Scripture was within itself completely sufficient as a revelation of truth. It did not require the addition of canon laws to complete or explain its revelation. It was the sum and source of all that could be revealed. Nor did the scope of its authority extend only to matters of faith. Wyclif considered Scripture an expression of all the wisdom of God, and as such it contained within itself all of the secular arts.[33]

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31. Christopher Ocker, "Medieval Exegesis and the Origin of Hermeneutics.," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52, no. 3 (1999): 328.

32. Ibid.

33. William Mallard, "John Wyclif and the Tradition of Biblical Authority," *Church History* 30, no. 1 (1961): 52.

Having observed Wyclif's unique insistence on the sufficiency of Scripture, it is easy to understand why he became a hero to later Protestant theologians. It is easy to see his views as a species of the *sola scriptura* approach championed by the later reformers. However, Wyclif's reliance on the authority of Scripture was not unique. Nor did he imagine that the Bible was so easily understood that any peasant should be able to discern its truth when presented with the text. Scripture contained all truth and when approached correctly was a reliable guide to every issue pertaining to the faith, but the proper approach was critically important.

Wyclif's metaphysical presuppositions—which he presumed requisite for proper understanding of Scripture—were far too complex to be explained in Gospel tracts distributed amongst the populace. Indeed, extant Lollard materials that were circulated demonstrate that these versions of Wyclif's teaching for popular consumption were much simplified from their originals.[34] He advocated biblical training for every priest and argued that every Christian was a theologian, but he did not thereby mean that every Christian should be teaching theology.[35] What he seems to have had in mind was that a well-trained group of theologians would faithfully guide the education of those who lacked the tools to approach written Scripture directly. Certainly he felt it imperative that every Christian should be Scripturally trained, but he did not imagine every individual alone with a Bible.

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34. Anne Hudson, "Lollard Compilation and the Dissemination of Wycliffite Thought.," *Journal of Theological Studies* 23, no. 1 (1972).

35. Wyclif, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, 300.

Wyclif's criticisms, though extreme, were provoked by the extraordinary character of the time in which he lived. He saw a church leaderless and adrift in confusion. Priests squabbled with one another over rights to alms. Bishops were absent from their sees. Theologians bickered with one another in games of logical pedantry. Holy Scripture was the one source of authority that could not be bribed or corrupted. The written word led the faithful student into all truth. Scripture was the eternal touchstone of revealed truth that provided continuity with the faithful in ages past. Wyclif's defense and elevation of the Bible is not then to be seen as an attempt to destroy the Church and its authority. Rather he was trying to protect the True Church, which he recognized as eternally extant in the mind of God. He saw the problems of his day through the lens of his metaphysical convictions, and it was from those presuppositions that he prescribed the cure.

Having observed the degree to which Wyclif's metaphysics influenced his conception of Scripture, one is in a better position to appreciate the forces that led him to critique the contemporary doctrine of the Eucharist. Much of his criticism was on based on thoroughly philosophical ground, but the zeal with which he doggedly repeated his own unpopular opinion flowed from his captivation with the truth of Scripture. That captivity was itself partially a product of metaphysical conviction. Thus one finds repeatedly in Wyclif the example of philosophy inextricably linked with practical advocacy. In my final chapter I consider what I believe to be the clearest example of this synthesis: Wyclif's theology of the Eucharistic miracle.

CHAPTER 4 - EUCHARIST

None of Wyclif's distinctive theologies was more expressive of his characteristic philosophy than his critique of transubstantiation. It was his challenge to accepted explanations of the Eucharist that led most directly to his official condemnation in 1382. Wyclif had struggled for some time with the standard scholastic explanation of transubstantiation, but was always careful to submit his speculation to the official teachings of the Church during the early part of his career. Gordon Leff argues that Wyclif's eventual conclusions on the nature of the sacrament could have been reached anytime after he had laid his metaphysical groundwork in his *De Logica* in 1364.[1] In earlier works in which Wyclif considers the implications of his realism on the doctrine of transubstantiation, he points out many of the problems that would later comprise his mature critique, but stops short of overtly denying official doctrine. That he held off as long as he did from drawing conclusions that even his scholastic contemporaries considered inevitable is evidence of his internal struggle with the authority of ecclesiastical governance.

Perhaps Wyclif's relative success in his conflicts with ecclesiastic authorities in 1378 left him feeling secure enough to publish critiques openly of Eucharistic theology he had previously withheld. By 1379 he had finally articulated his views loudly enough that they began to be noticed beyond the halls of Oxford. They were not well received. Wyclif's attack on official Eucharistic doctrine cost him much of the political support he had previously enjoyed and provided his opponents with the *habeas corpus* they needed to have his teachings officially condemned.[2]

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1. Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, 550.

2. Workman, *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church*, 2:119.

In retrospect, a critique of the nature of the sacrament seems to have been a serious tactical mistake for the Oxford don. That he ventured into such dangerous theological territory at all is evidence of the strength of his conviction in the importance of a theological conclusion based entirely on metaphysical consistency. Wyclif's critique of transubstantiation is therefore an excellent laboratory in which to examine the strength of the connection between his metaphysics and his theology. It is my contention that metaphysical realism was the lens through which he initially perceived serious difficulties with the standard explanations of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In the first section of this chapter, I will outline his main objections to other scholastic explanations of transubstantiation. Though it is easy to cite passages in Wyclif's earliest extant writings that foreshadow his eventual disavowal of transubstantiation, there was a change in the late 1370's after which he seems to have felt no motivation to submit his speculations to ecclesiastical correction. The motivation for this change is the subject of some scholarly disagreement. In the second section I will present and analyze a minority viewpoint that sees the shift in his tone as a product of his biblical studies and anger at ecclesiastical abuse. After making a definitive break from the bounds of ecclesiastical oversight, Wyclif included sections dealing with the Eucharist in most of his writings. He wrote one complete treatise, *De Eucharistia*, specifically on the subject. Throughout these works, he is never quite as precise about the metaphysical mechanics with which he desires to replace the standard explanation as he is in his critiques. In the third section of this chapter, I will examine his positive characterization of Eucharistic doctrine, looking specifically at what connections exist between his realist metaphysics and the analogies he drew upon in describing the manner of Christ's real presence in the sacrament of the altar.

Christian theologians since apostolic times have written about the special presence of Christ during communion. Over the centuries, the Church came to teach that the bread and wine used the celebration of the Eucharist were physically transformed into the body and blood of Christ. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council undertook to describe the nature of the transformation more precisely. The council endorsed the use of the word *transubstantiation* and specified only that the body and blood of Christ were "contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine."[3] These words left room for metaphysical speculation into the mechanics of the transformation. Stephen Lahey generalizes three interpretations that were left available under the specifications of Lateran IV: (1) The substantial essences of the bread and wine were annihilated and replaced by the substances of Christ's physical person. (2) The substances of the bread and wine underwent transubstantiation and were converted into the body and blood of Christ without being destroyed. (3) The substances of the bread and wine remained, and began to exist *consubstantially* with the physical body of Christ.[4] This third option came to be considered incompatible with the Church's teachings, even though many found it more philosophically satisfying. Aquinas was concerned that consubstantiation described a circumstance wherein communicants would be unavoidably directing their adoration toward created objects—the bread and wine—as they focused their attention on the body of Christ.

If the idea that the elements might remain after the consecration was theologically problematic, describing their conversion or annihilation was philosophically troubling. Having been taught that the bread and wine no longer exist substantially, inquisitive communicants were

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3. Cannon 1 of the Fourth Lateran Council

4. Lahey, *John Wyclif*, 106.

forced to wonder why their eyes and mouths continued to experience them as such. Different theologians offered various explanations. Aquinas suggested that the accidental natures of the elements remained and continued to be supported, not by their no-longer-extant substances, or by the body and blood of Christ themselves, but by a sort of naked property of spacial extension he referred to as *quantity*. Ockham formulated a differentiation of presence whereby the accidental natures of the elements could be supported by the substance of Christ's body. Scotus ascribed the perseverance of accidental natures without and nature as an ongoing manifestation of God's sovereign power. The accidents remained because God willed them to remain. Such explanations of the Eucharist as these were standard in the fourteenth century.

4.2 METAPHYSICAL OBJECTIONS TO TRANSUBSTANTIATION

Wyclif offered multiple critiques of the traditional explanations of Christ's presence in the sacrament. (1) Annihilation of a substance was impossible within Wyclif's metaphysical world, thus he opposed any explanation that described the substances of the bread and wine as ceasing to exist altogether.[5] (2) The idea that accidents should exist without a real substance to support them was a contradiction in terms. A hypothetical sacrament constituted by such a contradiction could be nothing but an absurdity.[6] (3) The physical presence of Christ's body in

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5. "It remains to add other arguments against the young doctors on behalf of the opinion of the ancient church beginning with this: that it is not of God to destroy His own work by blessing the ecclesiastical sacrament; but thus he does according that newly devised opinion, therefore it is irrational." "Restat superaddere alia argumenta contra doctores novellos pro antique ecclesie sentencia et primo per hoc quod non est Dei destruere suam fabricam in auctorisando ecclesiastica sacramenta; sed sic faceret iuxta sentenciam istam noviter adinventam, ergo ipsa est irracionabilis." John Wyclif, *De Eucharistia Tractatus Maior*, ed. Iohann Loserth, (London: 1892), 5.

6. "It is argued concerning the account of the accidental nature: for the whole accidental nature is nothing unless it is true that the substance is accidentally of such a manner, in order for that accidental nature to be supported, but no such thing is able to be true with God, therefore no such aggregate of accidents without subjects may be the consecrated host." "Secundo principaliter arguitur de racione accidentis: nam omne accidens formaliter inherens substancie non est nisi veritas que est substanciam esse accidentaliter alicuius modi, ut hic supponitur, sed nulla talis veritas potest esse sine Deo, ergo non est cumulus talium accidencium sine subiecto que sit hostia consecrata." Ibid., 63.

the sacrament entails a number of logical problems in contradiction, which I will treat collectively. (4) Because Wyclif rejected both the physical presence of Christ's body within the sacrament and the annihilation or transubstantiation of the elements themselves, he was left with the conclusion that the priesthood was advocating idolatry under the guise of devotion. In his view, the Church was teaching the laity to adore a piece of bread as their Lord.[7] (5) Wyclif's view that space and time consisted of discrete atomic units, rather than continua, may have provided additional motivation for his rejection of transubstantiation. I will consider the metaphysical underpinnings of each of Wyclif's objections in turn.

The degree to which the annihilation is anathema to Wyclif cannot be over-emphasized. Within Wyclif's metaphysical worldview, reality is a complex tapestry of interwoven being. The destruction of a single thread entails the destruction of the whole. Every individual entity is fundamentally a complex arrangement of substantial and accidental universals. The entity considered as a whole is the subject, and the arrangement of constituent parts composing the entity is an ontologically real predicate. Every thing that really exists does so because it shares jointly in *being*-ness with the rest of the universe. Properly considered, *being* is a singular universal whose predication upon particular entities is fundamental to their individual ontologies. Ultimately, God *is*, and other entities *are* only inasmuch as they share in being with God. Being in this proper sense is a metaphysical component of the substantial natures of the bread and wine. In order to destroy the metaphysical complex that is the substance of the bread, God would have

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7. "For the apostle says in Romans 3:8, "May it be far from us that we should do evil in order that good may happen" May it be far from us that we should comitt idolatry, in order that from false things and unfaithful devotions the greater number of the people may be led away, because actually a small little was believed vividly by the people, because the cup in which is the blood of Christ and the Cross though which is worshiped are really our God." "Apostolus dicit Rom. III, 8: Absit ut faciamus mala ut eveniant bona, ergo multo magis fidelis diceret: Absit ut committamus ydolatriam, ut ex falsa et infideli devocione populus amplius seducatur, quia revera paulo minus evidenter crederetur a populo, quod calix in quo est sanguis Christi et lignum per quod colitur sunt realiter Deus noster." Ibid., 14-15.

to destroy being itself. This would entail the destruction of all creation and, ultimately, Himself. Thus, the annihilation of any substance is an impossibility within the scope of Wyclif's realism. What is cannot be made not to be, because all creation has its ultimate being in the mind of God.

The notion that accidents can exist independently of a particular substance is a mere contradiction in Wyclif's view. In his first extant writing that deals with the subject of the Eucharist, the don goes so far as to posit some sort of "mathematical body" that serves as the subject of the accidents of the bread and wine after their consecration.[8] He offers no elaboration of what sort of thing an "abstract mathematical body" might be, and his future writings on the subject employ different explanations, but it is clear that Wyclif is uncomfortable with the notion of accidents without some kind of subject. Accidental forms do not have being apart from the substances in which they inhere. To posit an accident without substance is simply to posit a non-being. Furthermore, to imagine that the sensory apparition of bread and wine is the proper predicate of nothing at all is to undercut the trustworthiness of perception itself. Real prediction guarantees that the appearance of reality is a reflection of its underlying nature. Only a true book can serve the function of a book. Only real bread can have all the circumstantial attributes of bread.

Similarly, the physical presence of Christ's body entails various spatio-temporal contradictions. Theorizing that Christ's body is somehow physically present in the sacrament makes nonsense out of spatial language. How is it possible that Christ's body is physically present in multiple, non-contiguous spaces on multiple altars across the world at the same time? How can one expect to speak meaningfully about location at all when Christ is physically located

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8. "And as to what remains of the transubstantiated elements, I am accustomed to say that they are not annihilated or corrupted because of the force of the change, but a body remains and serves as subject to the accidents of the bread, which I called an abstract mathematical body." "et quo ad permanenciam correspondentis transsubstanciati soleo dicere quod non anichilatur vel corrumpitur ex vi conversionis, sed manet unum corpus subiectans accidencia panis, quod voco corpus mathematicum in abstractum." See Wyclif, *De Logica*, 137.

to the East of Himself? Likewise Wyclif considers the explanation that Christ is spatially present to every point in the Eucharist and then imagines that the communion wafer were broken in half, in which case it would have to be said that Christ was both above and below Himself.[9] There is no use in appealing to mystery to justify a sheer contradiction. Inasmuch as Christ has a human nature, that nature is subject to the same limitations as any human nature. Certainly God can exceed the boundaries of the natural world, but He cannot make the natural itself to become supernatural without destroying the fundamental distinction between the two. Wyclif was also concerned that the physical presence of Christ's body in the consecrated sacrament necessarily entails the subjection of the risen Lord to earthly corruption. A mouse could nibble the transubstantiated host. Christ's blood might be spilled on the floor of the chapel by a careless priest and trampled by communicants.[10] Wyclif's theology could not admit the possibility that the daily practice of the Christian faith might subject the body of the risen Lord to such desecration.

In rejecting both the annihilation of substances and the physical presence of Christ's body in the consecrated sacrament, Wyclif had effectively eliminated transubstantiation and consubstantiation. He was left with the firm conviction that host was bread both before and after the priests blessing, and that it was improper to ever consider the host as being the physical body of Christ. This led him the unavoidable conclusion that the rank and file of devoted Christians were being led into idolatry as they were instructed to direct their adoration toward the sacrament of the altar. Thus, a substantial portion of Wyclif's rhetoric in *De Eucharistia*, *De Blasphemia*,

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9. "For concerning the discontinuous parts of that host, or without movement of location, the body of Christ exists totally below and above;" "Nam discontinuatis partibus illius hostie, vel sine motu locali, corpus Christi foret totaliter sub et supra;" John Wyclif, *Tractatus De Blasphemia*, ed. Michael Henry Dziewicki, (London: 1893), 28.

10. This possibility was sometimes used as an argument for withholding the consecrated wine from the laity.

De Apostasia and his later polemics is directed against the doctrine of transubstantiation and the priesthood's role in perpetuating the ignorance of the laity.[11] Wyclif advocated understanding Christ as *figuratively* present in the sacrament.[12] In terms of his realism, this meant a habitudinal predication of Christ upon the sacrament, wherein Christ Himself underwent no change, but the bread became a proper sign of His body. So long as the sacrament is understood as a sign and not as Christ Himself, there is no danger of idolatry.

Recently, Stephen Lahey has expounded upon a position originally set forth by S. H. Thomson, that Wyclif's metaphysical atomism played an important role in his rejection of transubstantiation.[13] Wyclif espoused what was in his time an unpopular view on the nature of space and time known as *indivisibilism*. Put simply, he did not believe time and space could be infinitely subdivided, but that there must exist both a smallest possible distance and a shortest possible duration. Thomson averred that when the metaphysics of transubstantiation are considered from an indivisibilist's perspective, one must understand the change from bread and wine into body and blood to happen instantaneously. That is, there can be no intermediate moment of duration in between the moment in which the sacrament of the altar is still ordinary bread, and the moment in which it has become the body of Christ. Lahey has investigated the

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11. "Under the disguise of holiness is heresy and idolatry at the same time. In the sacrament of the altar people worship the creature as God. It is plain that as many of the clergy as the people are idolaters: when many believe in and adore the host (which in fact is bread in nature and the body of Christ figuratively." "Quantam ad tercium patet quod pars anticristi tot habet complices, quorum quidam subtilius et quidam expressius sunt contrarii legi Christi; ut in sacramento sub pallio santitatis sunt hereses et ydolatrie simulate, ut patet de sacramento altaris. In qua materia si ydolatre sunt quicunque qui adorant creaturam non deum tamquam deum, patet quod tam de clero quam populo multi sunt idolatre: cum multi credunt et adorant hostiam (que de facto est panis in natura et corpus Christi in figura)" Wyclif, *De Blasphemia*, 28.

12. "In the sacramental words, it is seen that Christ speaks figuratively or tropically" "Quantum ad verba sacramentalia, videtur quod Christus in illis loquitur figurative vel tropice." Wyclif, *De Eucharistia*, 83.

13. Samuel Harrison Thomson, "The Philosophical Basis of Wyclif's Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 11, no. 86-116 (1931): 112.

possible metaphysical mechanics behind this argument.[14] He argues that if it is true that the bread "ceases to be bread and begins to be the body of Christ," then there must be a moment in time in which both "ceases to be bread" and "begins to be Christ" can be really predicated of some subject. No such moment exists, because one subject ceases to be before the next has yet begun. As Lahey puts it, "instantaneous change is only possible if there is an underlying substance to experience the change." No substance underlies the duration of the transubstantiation. There is never a moment in which anything is *being* transubstantiated, and therefore transubstantiation does not occur. One might suggest that the appearances of the bread and wine endure the transformation, but accidental natures cannot serve as the subjects of real predication. By definition such accidents are predicates.

4.3 COUNTERPOINT - WYCLIF'S OTHER MOTIVATIONS FOR OBJECTING TO TRANSUBSTANTIATION

Scholars have generally agreed that Wyclif's metaphysics was the main driving force in his denial of transubstantiation.[15] Recently, Maurice Keen has argued that their consensus has been simplistic in describing Wyclif's critique as a sole function of his dogged philosophical consistency. Keen traces his motivation instead to anger at the sorts of clerical abuses he had targeted when working as a royal polemicist in the mid-1370's. The transformative force that carried Wyclif over the threshold from submission to rebellion was evangelical zeal, which had been roused by the completion of his Bible commentary and his treatise *De Veritate Sacre*

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14. Stephen E Lahey, *John Wyclif*, Great Medieval Thinkers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1870-1878.

15. This was argued in S. H. Harrison's 1931. See Thomson, "The Philosophical Basis of Wyclif's Theology." Gordon Leff expounds upon the "ineluctability" of the connection in Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*.

Scripture.[16] This course of study had persuaded him that Holy Scripture spoke with its own logic, which was both separate from and superior to the common logic of the universities. This higher logic moved Wyclif to speak against the rampant abuses perceived in the established Church. This, Keen argues, is why his arguments against transubstantiation were often grouped together with attacks on the mendicant orders and abuses of papal power. Wyclif employed his metaphysical argument against "accidents without substance" because he believed his case was so easily made that his opponents would appear foolish in contrast.[17] Metaphysics was not the root of his objection so much as a convenient means of exposing his opponents.

There are several points in favor of Keen's position. First, it answers one of the more difficult questions involved in explaining Wyclif's Eucharistic critiques: the time lapse of nearly fifteen years between what might be termed his "exploratory and cautious" dissent in *De Logica* and his open denial of the doctrine of transubstantiation in 1379. The delay is more explicable if Wyclif's dissent were motivated by anger at concrete events. When such debacles as the Great Schism were set against the backdrop of the image of the true Church that Wyclif was developing in his biblical studies, his willingness to submit himself to ecclesiastical oversight might quickly have waned. One therefore need not search the development of his realist metaphysics for explanations as to why he waited so long to draw conclusions that were obvious even to his opponents in 1371.

Moreover, Keen believes that considering Scripture as the central motivation in Wyclif's break with tradition helps to explain why he never constructed a metaphysically sophisticated explanation of Eucharist himself, but spent so much time picking apart his opponents' logic.

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16. Wyclif's *Postilla Super Totam Biblam* was based on lectures his lectures given between 1371 and 1376. Thomson, *The Latin Writings of John Wyclyf*, 193.

17. Maurice Keen, "Wyclif, the Bible and Transubstantiation," in *Wyclif in His Times*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Clarendon Press, 1986), 11.

Indeed it is difficult not to notice that for all the complexity of Wyclif's critiques, his positive affirmations of Christ's real presence in the sacrament generally take the form of analogies, Scriptural references and citations of ancient authorities. Keen takes this as an indication that Wyclif had come to consider Scripture as a self-authenticating sourcebook for God's truth, and felt no great need to justify the Bible with scholastic reasoning. Among Wyclif's writings on the Eucharist, *De Apostasia* seems to bear out this view the most. His arguments against transubstantiation therein revolve around contradictions between Scripture and ecclesiastical authorities, whom by this point he simply calls antichrists.[18]

While I agree with Keen that Wyclif's Scriptural exposition was an important transformative event in his life, I do not see that the observation undermines the existing consensus of the influence of his realist metaphysics on his developing critique of transubstantiation. His doubts on the philosophical consistency of the Church's position were present before his Scriptural commentary and were very evidently rooted in his metaphysics.[19] These doubts were reiterated in a similar pattern throughout his works written in the 1370's. The metaphysical objections never disappear or even recede. His extended treatise on the sacrament, *De Eucharistia*, expresses his metaphysical objections in a highly technical format, and his final extant writing, *Opus Evangelicum*, restates his objections based on the impossibility of the annihilation of substance.[20] It is true that Wyclif's arguments in *De Apostasia* rely heavily on citations of contradictions between doctrine and Scripture, but the manner in which those contradictions are observed evidences a view of Scripture that is heavily influenced by his realism. In other words, metaphysical realism was never far from Wyclif's mind and heart. He

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18. John Wyclif, *Tractatus De Apostasia*, ed. Michael Henry Dziewicki, (London: 1889), 46.

19. Wyclif, *De Logica*, 137.

20. John Wyclif, *Opus Evangelicum*, ed. Iohann Loserth, (London: 1895), 401.

explicitly linked morality and proper church governance with correct philosophical understanding, and therefore it is no wonder that one discovers the concepts intermixed throughout his writings.[21]

<h2 style="text-align:center">4.4 WYCLIF'S DESCRIPTION OF THE EUCHARIST</h2>

With regard to Wyclif's positive description of Eucharistic doctrine, there is no question that he was less specific as to what he thought the sacrament was than to what it was not. As stated, he relied on analogies and references to authoritative sources in his attempts to characterize the nature of the consecrated elements. His favorite analogy describes Christ's presence in the Eucharist as similar to the presence of an image in a mirror:

> But in a mirror he sees distinctly an arrangement of the mirror that he calls an image. And thus he sees a mirror confusedly with respect to its color and shape, but distinctly with respect to the image and errantly with respect to place. Just like this therefore is Christ's body sensibly present in the Eucharist, and not extensively. And for that reason it is not necessary for it to be moved, but rather multiplied, in order to be there.[22]

This explanation occurs again and again in some form whenever he alights on the subject of the Eucharist in most writings between *De Logica* in 1364 and *De Eucharistica* in 1381. It spans his career from an orthodox logician to an embittered would-be reformer. Though scholarship has traditionally glossed over this significance of these repeated optical analogies, there is evidence that they may encapsulate a deeper metaphysical schema than has traditionally been recognized.

Heather Phillips has highlighted repeated references to the science of optics throughout Wyclif's works as they relate to his explanation of the Eucharist. She argues that Wyclif

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21. Wyclif, *De Universalibus*.

22. "Sed in speculo videt distincte disposicionem speculi quam vocat ymago. Et sic videt speculum confuse quo ad eius colorem vel figuram, sed distincte quo ad ista et erranter quo ad situm. Tali ergo sensibili modo est corpus Cristi in Eukaristia, et non extensive. Et ideo non oportet ipsum moveri, sed multiplicari, ut sit ibi." in Wyclif, *De Logica*, 138.

maintained an interest in optics throughout his life, and that his conception of the presence of Christ in the consecrated sacrament is modeled around his understanding of the method by which the intellect is able to visually recognize an entity's specific nature.[23] Recalling his hierarchy of being, one notices that each order of being imprints itself on to the level below it. Eternal ideas in the mind of God give rise to the circumstances and immediate causes by which a particular entity comes into existence. Each lower level is a faithful representation of the level above it. Similarly, that entity in a given accidental circumstance is the immediate cause of an act of intellection in the mind of some observer. Wyclif would say that the species of the entity is multiplied in the mind of the observer when it is understood. This replication of species is much more like a carbon copy of the entity's particular being than it is an approximate reconstruction generated by the mind of the observer. It is likewise a faithful representation of some portion of the entity's being. The multiplication of the entity's species often occurs visually through the medium of light. Hence the medieval science of optics is properly concerned with the method and means of visual intellection. For Wyclif, we are able to understand the world around us because there is something in the nature of its being that intrinsically communicates itself to our minds. Light is the mediator of our understanding. Understood this way, a mirror—or rather the act of perceiving an image that appears in a mirror—is an analogy for anything that transmits its being indirectly, and by means of some other agent. Thus it is understandable that Wyclif found mirrors such a facile means of explaining his views on the Eucharist. Invoking this analogy allowed him to say what he wanted to say about the real presence of Christ in the sacrament while avoiding many of the pitfalls he perceived in others' explanations.

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23. Heather Phillips, "John Wyclif and the Optics of the Eucharist," in *From Ockham to Wyclif*, ed. Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks, Studies in Church History (Oxford: Published for the Ecclesiastical History Society by B. Blackwell, 1987), 253.

First, the mirror analogy admits a sense in which an entity—the object of reflection—may be said to have being within the mirror, without that being's needing to be located at any certain point in the mirror. A given reflection is equally present at all points within the mirror wherein it resides, and should the glass be shattered, the reflection continues to be wholly present within each of the resulting shards. The optical analogy thereby avoids the difficulty of explaining how the body of Christ can be wholly present in multiple sacraments on thousands of altars across Christendom.

Second, the mirror analogy allows for a type of presence whereby a body is *multiplied* instead of being *moved* when it begins to be in a place it had not previously been. Wyclif first describes this kind of *multiplication* of being in his *De Logica*.[24] An entity that can be multiplied is able to be in multiple places simultaneously. Such a multiplication of being entails the habitudinal predication of a new location upon the entity. The entity itself experiences no real change in circumstance, yet the new location to which it is multiplied begins to really be predicated upon the entity. Similarly, Christ's body may be multiplied within the mirror of the Eucharist so that it begins to be really present on the altar, even as physically it remains unmoved in heaven.[25] This avoids the logical contradictions involved in Christ's simultaneously being in multiple places at once, and ensures that Christ's body is not the subject of any change that should befall the sacrament itself. Thus, one need not worry about spilling consecrated wine on the chapel floor, or keeping rodents away from the consecrated bread.

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24. Wyclif, *De Logica*, 150.

25. Wyclif, *De Eucharistia*, 299-300. Wyclif here describes the manner by which the body of Christ begins to be present on the altar without having become discontinuous from its location in heaven. Phillips points out this and other passages in *De Eucharistia* where Wyclif is clearly thinking of the Christ's presence in the Eucharist in terms of optics.

Third, the analogy of the mirror describes a kind of sensible presence that is non-physical. Wyclif borrowed from Grosseteste the idea that the soul was more truly located with the object of its desires than in the body it inhabited.[26] Christ's body is perceived by faith to be present in the Eucharist, but is not physically present therein. The souls of the faithful are thereby drawn into Christ's real presence, but Christ's body is not subject to any indignities that might befall the bread or wine. There is no question of whether a rodent would be really consuming the body of Christ if it were to eat the consecrated sacrament; there is no unpleasant question of whether priests are physically breaking Christ whenever they offer the Eucharist.[27]

Lahey says of Wyclif's optical analogy that "one could be forgiven for supposing that Wyclif has formulated a clear philosophical explanation for the Eucharist to counter transubstantiation."[28] However, he points out that though Wyclif's optical analogy makes for a compelling illustration, it does not really replace the sophisticated metaphysical explanations of the Eucharist that he was attempting to correct. Offering an analogy is not the same thing as describing how a process works itself, and that by the parameters of Wyclif's mirror analogy, there is nothing to differentiate the manner by which Christ is present in the Eucharist from the manner in which Abraham Lincoln is present in his portrait. Lahey believes that Wyclif was

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26. "Whence, following Grosseteste, the soul is more truly with that which it desires than its own body; and in that way philosophers say that the power of sight (and others) immediately go out and are present with their object." Unde, secundum Lincolniensem, anima est verius cum illo cui afficitur quam ubi informat; et illo modo dicunt philosophi virtutem visivam (et alias) subito egredi et esse cum sentitis: quod sane intellectum non habet calumpnian. See Wyclif, *De Logica*, 138.

27. "[W]hen such beasts eat the consecrated host, they eat the bare sacrament and not the body and blood of Christ." cum tales bestie possunt comedere hostiam consecratam que est nudum sacramentum et non corpus Christi vel sanguis. DE 11.18-20 "[W]hen we break the sacrament or the consecrated host, we do not break the body of Christ, when it is divided" cum frangimus sacramentum vel hostiam consecratem, non autem corpus Christi, cum distinguuntur DE 12 7-10.

28. Lahey, "John Wyclif."

aware that his attempts to describe the sacrament of the altar fell short of a complete explanation, and that perhaps he died before he was able to complete the explanation he envisioned.[29]

While I agree that Wyclif's analogy falls short of a replacement for metaphysical explanations of transubstantiation, I am not at all sure that he was attempting to provide one, or even believed that such could be accomplished. Wyclif's metaphysics in many places lean toward the descriptive rather than the prescriptive. For example, his *De Universalibus* describes so many types of identities that may exist between two entities that one is tempted to ask whether there exist any two entities that are truly distinct from one another. If it may be truly said that humanity is an animal and that a donkey is an animal, does it not follow that a donkey is essentially a human? Wyclif himself seems to be aware of this critique and addresses the question of why it cannot be truly said, "A donkey is a human" in the opening chapter of his treatise on universals.[30] Ultimately, a donkey is not a human because there exists no entity in which the two are essentially united, and not because some clause of his metaphysical rulebook forbids the identity. Wyclif believes that correct metaphysics will enable the student to perceive clearly both Scripture and creation, but does not imagine that the philosopher is able to dictate the terms of what might be experienced. This is why there is a close relationship between Wyclif's application of optical analogies and the figurative sense in which he wishes to say that Christ is present in the sacrament. Analogy is not a figment of human imagination that suitable only until the learner is able to replace figures with real truth. Rather, relationships of analogy are instances of real habitudinal predication. These predications are founded in the ontological structure of reality itself. Analogy is a real identity between entities. Thus, when Wyclif says that

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29. Ibid.

30. Wyclif, *De Universalibus*, 5.

the Eucharist is a mirror, he means it as concretely as do any of his opponents who say that the consecrated sacrament has become the body of the Lord.

4.5 ANALYSIS

It is clear that Wyclif did believe Christ to be somehow especially present in the elements of communion, though it is very easy to misread his critiques with post-Zwinglian eyes and conclude that he really considered the bread and wine to be mere symbols of Christ's body. The problem with such an interpretation is that for Wyclif there is no such thing as a *mere* symbol. Signification is the fundamental principal by which reality is bound together. If the Eucharist is *only* a sign of the body and blood of the Lord, then the priest holding it aloft is only—in the best case scenario—a symbol of a true priest. His real problem with the *doctores signorum* was not that they focused exclusively on signs, but that they made them out to be arbitrary referents to underlying reality. Wyclif's metaphysics admits no room for *mere* signs. His theory of real predication implies that a sign is in some manner identical with its significant.

Wyclif's metaphysics could not abide the idea of a phantasmal appearance of bread and wine associated with what was truly the body of Christ; it was evident that he had problems with the contemporary explanations of the Eucharist long before he made any moves toward rebellion against the Church. After his rebellion was more definitive, he insisted that the substances of the bread and wine remained after the consecration of the elements. It would not be correct to summarize that Wyclif thought the elements of communion to be mere symbols of the body and blood of Christ. He believed that Christ was really and especially present during the Mass, and would have agreed that it was appropriate to describe Christ as being really present in the

sacrament of the altar.[31] On the other hand, he could not accept on philosophical grounds what he considered to be an error and innovation of modern theologians: that the bread and wine had ceased to exist while their appearance remained. Furthermore, he perceived the ecclesiastical hierarchy to be actively exploiting the laity's misunderstanding of reality of the sacrament. In his view, metaphysical error was inextricably bound to moral deficiency. By exposing the mistakes in his opponents' philosophy, he sought to expose the depravity of those in ecclesiastical authority whom he believed to be "antichrists."

At issue for Wyclif is the relationship between the visible world and divine realities. From his perspective, the divine and eternal are not only more glorious than the temporal, but more real. Eternal things are the causes and types of temporal realities. The visible temporalities in which we live are actually signs that signify eternal truth. Thus signification is not mere mental abstraction for Wyclif, but a reality woven into the definition of being. The question of the nature of the sacrament becomes the question of whether a philosophical contradiction is a more worthy sign of Christ than is the real bread and wine.

Wyclif was guided by his metaphysical convictions throughout his struggle to articulate his critique of Eucharistic doctrine. It was his realist metaphysic that originally presented him with the problems endemic in the contemporary explanations. It was his understanding of the optical sciences that allowed him to imagine an explanation that avoided the problems he perceived. It was his theory of real predication upon which he established the validity of his explanations-by-analogy. Certainly he was angry at what he understood to be rampant abuse of clerical power and the exploitation of the devotion of the laity, but even this anger he interpreted

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31. Aston, "John Wycliffe's Reformation Reputation," 42.

through a metaphysical lens. Thus Wyclif's Eucharistic theology is perhaps the purest expression of his philosophy influencing his theology.

CONCLUSION

Wyclif's metaphysical realism was the major formative influence in the development of his theological radicalism. Not only was his critique of the contemporary Church stated in the language of discourse of the schools, but also the scholastic method was embedded in the manner of his analysis in such a way as to render his philosophical system inextricable from his practical doctrine. Any attempt to separate his theology from its late-medieval scholastic context will make it seem like something it was not. When taken in isolation, Wyclif's political views make him seem like a revolutionary. In his reliance on the truth of Scripture he sounds at times like a sixteenth-century reformer. His sacramental theology considered in itself appears alternatively as a revival of the Donatist emphasis on the spiritual health of the priest, or else prototype of the much later Protestant emphasis on underlying spiritual reality. However, none of these are accurate characterizations of even the controversial portion of his career.

Wyclif was a realist metaphysician who firmly believed that a proper understanding of the reality of universal forms was integral to the construction of a sound theological system. He perceived the nominalist critique of traditional Augustinian realism as an affront to the truth of Scripture. He saw in the contemporary ecclesiastical hierarchy a corruption resulting from years of systematic neglect of the knowledge of the ideal Church. His response was philosophically inspired and philosophically stated.

Truth was the overarching concern of Wyclif's metaphysical platform. Reality itself he fundamentally defined as those truths known by God. Human language—including the verbal sense of Scripture—could be considered true because of an analogical ordering of correspondences rooted ultimately in God's infallible concept of creation. To deny the existence of universals forms was to sever the correspondence between the sensible world and God's ideal

creation. Such a severance resulted in a world devoid of meaning, in which no one had any hope of knowing truly, and thus, no hope of knowing God. Without a proper philosophical basis, theologians were left to play mere games with signs. Writing endless treatises rooted in nothing, he perceived nominalists as blind guides leading the blind. In this way, Wyclif described ignorance of the reality of universals as the root of all sin.

With regard to politics and the relation between church and state, Wyclif's realism implied that the true Church was that which was eternally known by God, and pure of the contamination of sin. The foundation of lordship on God's dominion over creation meant that the manner of God's governance and sustenance of the world must serve as a model for anyone who meant to claim any sort of authority. For the Church, this meant the perpetual self-divestment of all temporal possessions and a preeminent concern with the care of the poor. For civil authorities, it meant the righteous stewardship of the wealth of the realm in a manner concomitant with the recognition that there was no true lordship other than God's. The revolutionary implications of the temporal divestment of the Church notwithstanding, Wyclif's primary aim was to preserve the correspondence between the visible Church and eternal Church of which it was significant.

Scripture was an important influence on the development and articulation of Wyclif's theology, and yet it cannot be considered independently from his metaphysics. Through the lens of Wyclif's hierarchy of being, Scripture became the primary significant of the eternal truths that were essentially identical with the mind of God. The plain texts of the Bible had no weight when considered in abstraction from their correspondence with the higher sense of Scripture. Indeed, this was the primary mistake of Wyclif's nominalist opponents, whom he perceived as manipulating the texts of Scriptures in a subtle attempt to discredit the truth to which they corresponded. For Wyclif, Scripture had its own, internal logic that was not restricted to the

limitations of the analysis of human language, and the proper interpretation of Scripture required both a philosophical training in the nature of that logic, and the moral character to interpret faithfully.

Wyclif's doctrine of the Eucharist, which caused him so much trouble and cost him the political support he had enjoyed theretofore, is the single best example of the depth of his faithfulness to his own philosophical presuppositions. His belief in the reality of universals by community informed him that the annihilation of any substance must necessarily entail unmaking of all creation. Similarly, his insistence on the efficacy of signs led him to argue that God must not lie in presenting the substantial essence of Christ's own body under the accidental qualities of bread and wine. His appreciation of and fascination with nascent science of optics inspired him to articulate an analogical explanation of the presence of Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist in a manner he believed to be consistent with metaphysical reality. Though he did not articulate his Eucharistic doctrine openly until the end of his career, the rudiments of his teachings were present in his earliest logical writings to the extent that some of his opponents attacked him on the grounds that they must eventually lead to unorthodox opinions. Indeed, Wyclif remained consistent with his unpopular doctrine until the end of his life.

I have not emphasized the metaphysical basis of Wyclif's theology in an attempt to discredit the more romantic notions of the fourteenth-century Oxford scholar as a proto-reformer and political rebel. Rather, I have sought to show that abstract philosophy articulated in the ivory tower of academia can have important practical repercussions. In this way, the life of the mind—even in the highly formalized atmosphere of the late medieval schools—can be understood to be of a continuous whole with the remainder of human existence. As Wyclif himself implied, it is

the purpose of the speculative to be subordinated to the practical, so that by means of reflection

we might learn how to be better Christians.

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